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Jailhouse Rock

Text: Acts 16:16-34

I have had, over the years, a few groupies. There have been a few people who have appreciated what I do to such an extent that they have followed me, physically and online. It’s very gratifying...unless that following becomes scary and turns into stalking or hero worship or infatuation.

That’s a little of what’s going on in this text. An unnamed slave girl starts following Paul and the rest of the team (v.16-17). At first glance, it appears that the anonymous slave girl is simply affirming the ministry of Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke (17). Rather than being *encouraged* by the groupie-like attention, Paul is *annoyed* and performs an exorcism right there (v. 18).

The anonymous slave girl/fortune-teller was a goose that laid golden eggs for her handlers. The Greek text describes her as having “a spirit of a python”. Another use of the word for *divination* was *ventriloquism.* She was a cash cow, spinning off significant revenue every week, for her masters.

**Illus.**

She reminds me of the Britney Spears drama that is being played out in entertainment news these days. A popular singer has a net worth of $60-$70 million, being handled, until recently, by her father and other handlers/conservators. Britney told a court in June 2021, “I want to be able to get married and have a baby. I was told right now in the conservatorship I am not able to get married and have a baby”. The conservators have insisted Britney Spears remain on birth control. They have also, she alleges, forced her to go on tour. Britney Spears, like the unnamed slave girl in verse 16, brings her “masters” much profit.

There is a similar situation described in Acts 19:23-27. Paul is preaching the kind of gospel that threatens those who make and sell silver shrines. Paul is messing with their livelihood!

Paul and Silas and their team are dragged into the marketplace and brought before the authorities *because* they have interfered with the economic engine that the anonymous slave girl represented.

Now, with feet fastened and possibly hands as well, Paul and Silas are in a Philippian jail. I have seen that prison house. It is not cushy and amenity filled as some places of incarceration are today. It would have been easy for these preachers to spend all their time in the jailhouse, complaining that God had not treated them “fairly”. They had stood for the gospel. They had proclaimed Jesus to anyone who would listen, including the jailer in the prison in which they are being held. They performed exorcisms. Now, they are suffering *for/because* of that same gospel.

I explored the earlier part of this chapter in a sermon titled, *When God Says, “No”.*

The God whom they have faithfully proclaimed has told them “no” and has forbidden them to go to their first and second choices (v. 6-7). Yet, Paul and Silas are found singing hymns to God and praying! (v.25). Let’s pause here. I greatly admire, and am indicted by, a duo that does their ministry despite their disappointment. Some of us would not have fared well in this setting. We would have quoted the psalter and reminded God that He was to preserve us from all evil (Psalm 121:7). We would have continued reciting the 121st psalm and we might have gently hinted to Yahweh that He was under obligation to preserve our going out and our coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore. (Psalm 121:8). However, out of Paul and Silas’ possible disappointment that they were in Phillipi, the jailhouse is rocking with the words of the gospel bouncing off the walls of that small, confined area. Out of God’s “no” came the jailer’s becoming a believer. He and his family received the word of the Lord and were baptized (v. 27-33)

**Illus***.*

 In Judges 7 you will read the story of Gideon, a man of valor, a leader in Israel. The Midianites have threatened the Israelites. Gideon wants to show strength to his enemies. God tells Gideon that Gideon’s army is too large. Essentially, God looks at Gideon’s plan and says, “no” (Judges 7:2, 4, 7) and sets Gideon on an alternative path. The army is reduced from 32,000 to 10,000, then to 300 (v. 3, 7). God says “no” and yet Gideon’s people prevail (v.28).

In the Garden of Gethsemane our Lord prays that if it be possible, He would like to bypass the cup of bitterness, the cup of suffering. God said, “no” (Matthew 26:39), setting Jesus on an alternative path to the one He had hinted at. When God sends us, when God uses us as instruments of proclamation and deliverance, the places in which we do our ministry will often be transformed by that ministry. The bars are loosed. The chains fall off. Darkness is replaced by light. Chaos is replaced by order. The places are rocking!!! That Philippian jail was never the same after that midnight worship service. Paul and Silas were never the same. The jailer was never the same. The jailer’s family was never the same. When you and I walk in obedience to the God who calls us, *we* are never the same. Perhaps our best work is done when we go into the jail planning to make it rock. We go into places of ministry intending to leave an indelible mark. Beloved, rock those jailhouses where you work. Rock those places where you pray and where you have holy conversations, where you mentor and where you serve! How do we make the jailhouse rock? In the same way Paul and Silas did. They worshiped; they prayed; they sang. The way to dramatic upset of the status quo is through the portal of prison prayer and midnight singing. So, beloved, sing! Pray! Rock that house!

Amen.