

Portraits Of Two Women

Introduction. The last few decades have witnessed the rise of many so-called liberation movements. Their goal is to free people from oppression and inequality, and elevate them to higher status. Only then, proponents argue, can people be fulfilled.

Like all other social movements, liberation movements ultimately fall far short of their promise. No movement that rearranges people's social status, while leaving their hearts untransformed, is truly liberating. There is only one way to experience genuine freedom, and that is to have a heart set free from the bondage of sin and death (John 8:32). This kind of freedom does not come through human effort (Jeremiah 13:23). The radical transformation from spiritual death to eternal life comes only to those who are born of God (John 1:13).

The women's liberation movement is an example of a social effort that promises freedom and cannot deliver anything but bondage to sin. There are only two types of people in the world: those who are free (Romans 8:2) and those who are slaves (2 Peter 2:19). In the portraits of the two women found in Acts 16:11-18, we find examples of both freedom and bondage. Lydia, the first recorded Gentile convert in Europe, was a truly liberated woman. The nameless, demon-possessed slave girl typified those enslaved to sin and Satan.

I. *The Liberated Woman*

- A. Philip II of Macedon established a large Greek colony at Philippi in 356 B.C. With the subjugation of the Macedonians by Rome in 167 B.C., Philippi became part of the Roman Empire. In 42 B.C., the city was designated a Roman colony, meaning that its government was responsible directly to the emperor and not to the provincial administration. Although eight other cities known to be Roman colonies appear in Acts, Philippi is the only one Luke refers to as a colony.
- B. It was Paul's custom in each city he visited to preach first in the synagogue (Acts 17:1-2). As a rabbi and a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), Paul could be confident of being heard.
 1. A synagogue required the presence of ten Jewish men who were heads of households. Evidently Philippi's Jewish community was too small to form a synagogue.
 2. In such cases, a place of prayer was secured under the open sky and near a river or the sea. Lacking a man to lead them, these women met to pray, read from the Old Testament, and discuss what they had read. To be taught by a traveling rabbi such as Paul was no doubt a rare privilege.

3. Lydia, being a seller of purple fabric and having a house large enough to accommodate Paul and his companions, was probably quite wealthy.
- C. Three sequential aspects of Lydia's conversion stand out in the narrative.
1. She was a worshiper of God. Lydia's seeking was the first step of her spiritual liberation (John 6:37).
 2. She was listening to the message. Many hear the sound of the wonderful message without really listening to it (Matthew 13:11-17; cf. John 8:43-45).
 3. The Lord opened her heart to respond to the message.
 - a) When she heard the gospel, she learned that there were certain commands which she was required to attend to (believe, repent, confess, and be immersed). To attend to them means to do them. That immersion was included in what Luke refers to by this term is evident from the manner in which he introduces vs. 15: "And when she was baptized ...".
 - b) Her heart had been contracted by the narrowness of Jewish prejudices, and they were obstacles to the reception of the gospel. But she was a "worshiper of God," which led her to do whatever she learned from the will of God.
 - c) When the gospel is listened to by one who is already a sincere worshiper of God, as Lydia was, the heart may be expanded by the word and respond to the teachings of faith and obedience (cf. Luke 24:27, 31-32, 45).
- D. Salvation does not depend on clever evangelistic strategies, or the skill of the preacher, or a masterful presentation (1 Corinthians 2:1-4; 3:6-7). Although an accomplished scholar, adept at handling the scriptures, Paul recognized that mere human persuasiveness saves no one. Many in our day foolishly act as though God is completely dependent on them to reach the lost.
- E. In concluding the account, Luke adds that she believed the gospel and then acted upon it, and the result was the saving of her and her household.

II. ***The Enslaved Woman***

- A. As the church took root in Philippi, Satan moved to attack it. Here, as in Samaria and in Cyprus, was the clash of light and darkness. He sought to infiltrate the church or to crush it with persecution. Both avenues of attack would prove unsuccessful.
- B. The original text describing the woman literally reads "a python spirit." Apollo, the god of prophecy, called by the Greeks Pythian Apollo

because he was supposed to have killed the snake that guarded the Delphic Oracle.

- C. In modern terms, she was a medium in contact with demons, and was very profitable for fortunetelling. Greeks and Romans put great stock in divination. No commander would set out on a major military campaign nor would an emperor make an important decree without first consulting an oracle to see how their endeavor might turn out. A slave girl with this "gift" was a gold mine for her owners.
- D. This worker of Satan kept following Paul and crying out. This was a subtle and dangerous attack, a deadly tare among the wheat (Matthew 13:25), because what the demon-possessed girl was saying was true.
 - 1. The demon even used biblical terminology. The term "Most High God" was an Old Testament designation of the God of Israel (Psalm 78:35; Daniel 5:18). She also spoke of the "way of salvation" (Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).
 - 2. The father of lies speaks the truth when it suits his purposes, disguising himself and his workers as angels of light (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). Since she was agreeing with the preachers, the natural assumption would be that she was part of their group.
- E. Paul could only take so much, and he then commanded the demon to come out of her. In obedience to Paul's authority, the demon came out at that very moment. The ability to cast out demons marked Christ's apostles (Mark 3:13-15; 2 Corinthians 12:12). That and the other miraculous gifts confirmed that the apostles were God's spokesmen. Despite the claims of many today, no person has direct authority to command demons to obey him.
- F. Although we know that demon possession does not occur today (1 John 4:4; 5:18), we can still be slaves to sin in a real sense (John 8:34; 2 Timothy 2:26; Titus 3:3).
 - 1. If someone is going to be truly free, they cannot voluntarily give themselves over to serving sin. A servant of sin will obey sin, no matter what the consequences.
 - 2. So Christians have to turn away from all the vileness found in today's society: cheating, profanity, immodest dress, drinking, sexual immorality. These sins cannot be named among someone who is a faithful child of God.

Conclusion. These two women typify all of humanity. Everyone is either liberated by Jesus Christ or enslaved by Satan. The only path to freedom is that followed by Lydia -- of seeking God, listening to the gospel, and having a heart opened to respond by the Lord. Those who do so will not be disappointed (Jeremiah 29:13).