

Liberating Grace

Acts 16:6-40

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortunetelling. **17** She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." **18** And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. **20** And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. **21** They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." **22** The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. **23** And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. **24** Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The Philippian Jailer Converted

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, **26** and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. **27** When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. **28** But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." **29** And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. **30** Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" **31** And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." **32** And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. **33** And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. **34** Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

35 But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." **36** And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." **37** But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." **38** The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. **39** So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. **40** So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Sermon Notes

This is a familiar passage of Scripture to us because the central portion of it (vv. 25,26) inspired one of our most beloved hymns, *And Can it Be*:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night; thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray; I woke the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee. Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

It seems to me that these two verses graphically describe the release of the two spiritual prisoners we find at the beginning and end of the passage—the slave girl and the jailer. The irony at the middle of the text is that the freest men in the whole story are Paul and Silas enchained in a maximum-security prison cell! The good news of the Gospel is that if Christ sets you free you shall be free indeed and no one can imprison you. The key to living happily in Christ is recognizing his deep compassion and great delight in setting us free from our prison houses of sin.

I. Demons (16-24)

Christ delights to set us free from the oppression of the Evil One. The Savior's compassion is moving as he delivers someone no one else would have cared for. She was both a woman and a slave, meaning she was marginalized in her society. But Christ saw her as one created in God's image who was being selfishly used by men and gradually destroyed by the devil. He loved her and set her free. And he can do the same for you regardless of what evil torments you, whether it is the direct influence of demons or the indirect result of a fallen world manifested in emotional or psychological scarring.

A. Believe their reality

In the last couple of years, I have become more keenly aware of the devil's hatred of human beings than I have ever been before. Because of the scientific age we live in, most of us tend to think first of physiological or chemical explanations for the disruptions around us or in us rather than attributing it to demonic forces. As C. S. Lewis famously remarked, the devil is just as happy with being ignored as he is with being worshiped:

Disbelief in personal demonic activity (or an inordinate fear of demons) is further evidence of the static that Satan perpetrates in our minds to distort the truth. In the classic Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis wrote: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe and feel an unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

The Church Fathers believed just as much in the reality of the demonic world as did the Apostles. A new convert to Christianity was required to renounce all connections to evil before baptism, something we might view as archaic. Tertullian writes:

Mock as you like, but get the demons if you can to join you in your mocking; let them deny that Christ is coming to judge every human soul. . . . Let them deny that, for their wickedness condemned already, they are kept for that very judgment day, with all their worshipers and their works. Why, all the authority and power we have over them is from our naming the name of Christ, and recalling to their memory the woes with which God threatens them. . . . Fearing Christ in God, and God in Christ, they become subject to the servants of God and Christ. So at our touch and breathing, overwhelmed by the thought and realization of those judgment fires, they leave at our command the bodies they have entered, unwilling and distressed.

B. Bravely Confront

The Greek is more vivid than our English text, identifying this demon as pythona. Not far from Philippi was shrine to the Pythian Apollo. While it is unclear what Apollo's exact relationship with the snake was in that cult, it is at least possible to say that the idea was that he spoke through the snake to predict the future. What is more interesting is what the spirit says about

the Lord. Here is proof that the devil believes in God and shudders. The spirit is forced to speak truth, that Paul and Silas serve God and preach the way of salvation. Jim Boice made an interesting observation about the way the spirit identifies God as the “Most High.” This was a common name for God in the Old Testament, communicating his absolute sovereignty over the universe (cf. Ge. 14:18,19). But it was precisely this position that the devil resented and wished to occupy himself. So Isaiah quotes the devil’s remarks when he led his rebellion against God, “I will make myself like the Most High” (14:14). The spirit was speaking begrudgingly that Paul and Silas were servants of the Lord who occupied the position his master always desired. The comfort of this part of the narrative is that we need not be afraid of the devil when we are serving the Lord because the one in us is greater and more powerful and keeps the evil one at bay.

C. Boldly Pray

I have one final word on this topic and that is prayer is key to breaking the power of evil. About fifteen years ago, a rather controversial book came out by Neil Anderson called *The Bondage Breaker*. At the time, Anderson was a professor at Talbot School of Theology in California. Anderson related his experiences with confronting demons which rocked some people’s world. But Anderson’s focus was not to relate chilling stories, but rather exclaim that Jesus is the bondage breaker and desires for people to live freely and confidently in their identity as a child of God. I read through that book quickly the other day and this is what struck me: on almost every page, Anderson encourages us to pray. He does not prescribe exotic ceremonies or dramatic words of confrontation. In effect he is saying this: Jesus loves people and wants them to be free from the destruction of evil. Pray and he will deliver. My friends, use that weapon. Use it in your own life against besetting sin or painful memories of the past.

God has given us the means of grace as our primary weapons against evil forces. We (myself included) are sometimes tempted to underestimate the power of the reading of scripture and of prayer, but they are powerful and they work. In my own experience encountering people oppressed by demonic forces, I have called on a network of pastors for their help in helping those under my care. Their exhortation to me has always been: “read scripture and pray, commanding the demon to leave not in your power but in the power of the name of Jesus!”

As Christians, we must not underestimate the power of the means of grace God has given us.

D. Background

Finally, this passage should encourage us because of the care God shows to people no matter their background. In the culture in which these events took place, one’s status in life was determined by their status at birth far more than it is now. More than that, those in privileged positions were able to take advantage of and abuse those of weaker positions at their will.

When we realize this context, we see the tender love and care of our savior. In this passage, we see his care for someone who would have been near or at the bottom of the hierarchy of her day. Women in this day were only given certain privileges if they were of high status. Secondly, this girl was a slave, so she was at the disposal of her owners. And finally, she brought a special benefit to her owners because of the demonic “spirit of divination” she possessed, so she was routinely being exploited for the financial gain she could bring them. If there was ever a person in bondage both physically and spiritually, this slave girl was it!

But God in his liberating grace, through the power of his word and prayer, delivers this slave girl from her oppression to show us that he is powerful enough to save the most hopeless of circumstances and to demonstrate for us the way that we must believe in his liberating power

for those to whom we seek to serve.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you too can be liberated from whatever evil holds you captive!