

Lord of Demons

Psalm 103, Acts 16:16–24

There is a lot in this section; consequently, we will divide it into two parts. We will look at the first part today, and the second part next week. The first part records an incident that happened; the second part is the aftermath. In the first part a demon-possessed slave girl is healed and delivered; in the second part her deliverers are beaten and imprisoned. We will look at that part next week. But today, let's concentrate on the demon-possessed girl.

Last time we considered the conversion of Lydia. She was a wealthy businesswoman, a seller of purple, a cloth associated with royalty. She was either widowed or unmarried. She was the head of a household. When she became a convert and was baptized, her household—consisting of her children and servants—was baptized along with her. Lydia ran a successful business. She had a large enough house to host Paul and his missionary team, which included four adult men—Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke—and there could have been others. Hosting such a large group was very unusual at a time when many women were very poor.

As Luke records the church's advance into the European continent he highlights three conversions: those of Lydia, a demon-possessed slave girl, and the Philippian jailer. The contrast between Lydia and the demon-possessed girl couldn't be greater. Lydia is wealthy; the demon-possessed girl is poor. Lydia is independent and free; the demon-possessed girl is a slave beholden to earthly masters. Yet both lives are transformed by the gospel. As Paul will later write, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be *bond* or *free*" (1 Cor. 12:13). Yes, the gospel has the power to transform both slave and free. No matter what your situation, no matter where you are in life, the gospel can transform your life. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Is your life a mess? The gospel has the power to transform you. "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Look with me this morning at the story of the slave girl.

1. Our plight

Our text begins, "Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling."

"As we went to prayer" apparently refers to the place by the riverside, where the Jewish women gathered for prayer (cf. v. 13). Since Paul and his fellow missionaries had found receptivity to the gospel there, they returned to that place to continue their evangelism. On one of their trips there, a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met them. The girl's name is not given, but she is described as having a "spirit of divination." The Greek has "the spirit of Python." Ellicott

explains that “the Python was the serpent worshipped at Delphi, as the symbol of wisdom.”¹ Here was a woman with a spirit of divination, who could convince gullible people that she had the ability to foretell the future. She was good at it, and brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling.

Perhaps you recall that in 1 Samuel 28 King Saul tells his servants, “Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and inquire of her.” The prophet Samuel has died, and Saul was facing a huge army of the Philistines. He wanted to know what he should do, and rather than seek the face of God, he sought a familiar spirit. It is a great sin to consult a medium or fortune-teller rather than the God of heaven.

People who do not know Christ are given to superstition. Paul will make reference to this later in the next chapter, where he will say, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious.” No one but God knows the future, but many people consult horoscopes and so-called fortune-tellers to try to discern their future and give them an advantage. The Proverbs plainly states, “thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). As humans, we cannot know what will happen on any given day; God alone knows that. Our job is not to try to predict the future but rather to depend upon our sovereign God, who at every moment is “working all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11). Our Christian faith tells us that the Lord of heaven and earth is totally dependable. We can trust him to provide us with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil he sends upon us in this vale of tears, he *will* turn to our good; for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father.² We do not know what will happen tomorrow—it may be happy or it may be sad—but we know him who is sovereign over *all* tomorrows, who watches over us as a faithful Father, who always has our best interest at heart, who will *never* let us down. Christian, stop worrying and put your trust in God. Your faith teaches you that your future is secure in his hands. All your days were planned by him before even one of them came to be. Your covenant God is to be trusted.

In our Acts text an unnamed slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination met up with Paul’s missionary team. She is called a παιδίσκη, the diminutive of παῖς, maid or servant-girl, female slave—a diminutive of a diminutive. It is kind of like the word *chicklet*. A *chick* is a little chicken; a *chicklet* is even littler. So it was with this slave girl. She was a diminutive of a diminutive. She was not recognized for her potential as a human being, only for her money-making value to her masters.

¹ Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/16-16.htm>

² Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 9, <https://all-of-grace.org/heidelberg.html>

She was a human-trafficking victim. Her masters had convinced her that her only option was to remain in bondage.

Liberty is a basic human right. God himself gave us the power to choose. He says, “I have set before you life and death; therefore, choose life!” (Deut. 30:19). But Satan is the great enslaver. The Bible tells us that the wicked are “taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26). Here is a picture of our human condition. It is not flattering, but it is true. We have inherited the guilt and nature of our forefather Adam. Adam—his name means *man*—was created to be God’s vice-ruler over the earth. He was charged to take dominion over all the earth (Gen. 1:26). The same word for “dominion” is used of the exalted Christ in Psalm 72:8: “He shall have *dominion* also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.” How degrading for creatures that were to rule as kings to be enslaved to sinful passions, taken captive by the devil! And this is the lot of the whole human race apart from Christ. Only in Christ does man attain to the dominion that was to have been his lot. In Christ, by his Spirit, we can rule our families, our businesses, our own bodies, appropriately. Though we fancy ourselves to be free—to be the masters of our own fate—apart from Christ we are in fact slaves to sin. What hope is there for us? Only Christ the Lord! He tells us, “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). If you don’t submit to Jesus Christ—if you don’t submit yourself to his lordship—you may think that you will have *more* freedom, but it is an illusion. Only the person who submits himself to Christ is free indeed—free from enslaving habits, free from unnecessary worries, free to achieve full human potential, free to serve God. If we are servants of God, then we are truly free.

But here in our text the παιδίσκη—the servant girl—was *not* free. She was a slave, and she was demon-possessed. She was a human-trafficking victim. She had no future, and no hope. She would die in her degraded state. Here is our human plight as well: we are slaves of sin. But secondly consider

2. Our hope

Luke records that “this girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, ‘These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.’” The servant girl didn’t just try to entice one of the missionaries over into a shadowy doorway to tell him his future for a fee. Rather, she made a nuisance of herself. She “cried out” in words loud enough for onlookers to hear, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.” Amazing! Here she was, telling the *truth* about the missionaries: “These men are servants of the Most High God.”

The word for “servants” means *bond-servants*. The Bible warns us about borrowing money. It tells us that “the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22:7). If you owe money, you are in a form of indentured servitude. Devoid of a

moral compass, politicians in Washington mortgage our future to enrich themselves at taxpayers' expense. Just this week Congress approved forty billion dollars for Ukraine—money that Washington doesn't have. We will be borrowing the money from China, turning ourselves, our children and grandchildren into serfs, obligated to pay it back. Brace yourself! We will pay immediately in higher prices for food and energy. Truly this was a bipartisan effort to destroy the economic wellbeing of ordinary Americans, making us poorer, turning us into bondservants.

But there's another kind of bondservant, and that is a man or woman who voluntarily becomes the servant of the Most High God. There is no more noble service! Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke were men who had voluntarily committed themselves to God's service. They presented their bodies as a living sacrifice. They dedicated their lives to serve the living God. God will be no man's debtor. Those who serve him will be amply rewarded on the final day.

But this servant girl had more to say. Listen again to what she cried out: "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." She did not realize it, but she paid the missionaries a high compliment. They were *proclaimers*. Their job was to proclaim. What were they to proclaim? The way of salvation. There is only *one* way of salvation, and that is Christ. Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Bible doesn't have multiple ways of salvation. It doesn't have one way of salvation for the Old Testament and another for the New. It doesn't have one way of salvation for the Jews and another for Gentiles. Some churches hold that children too young to understand right from wrong and die before the "age of accountability" are innocent of sin. If they are innocent, then they don't need a Savior; they can get to heaven without Christ. But Jesus said that "*no man* cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Here is the job of the Christian ministry: to proclaim the way of salvation. And here, too, is the privilege of everyday Christians: to tell people about their Savior. Christianity is not a self-help religion, telling people how to make their lives better if they will only do this or that. It is a divine-help religion, telling people the truth that Christ is their only hope.

So the servant girl cried out, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." Now why did the servant girl say this? Gill answers that "whether she said this of her own accord, or was obliged to it by divine impulse," it is certain that "what she said was truth; and sometimes the devil himself, the father of lies, is obliged to speak it."³

³ John Gill, commentary, Acts 16:17 (PocketBible)

And so it will be for every human being. Citing Isaiah 45, Paul writes, “As I live, says the Lord, *every* knee shall bow to Me, and *every* tongue shall confess to God” (Rom. 14:11). Again, he says in Philippians 2, “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that *every* tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Be forewarned! If you are not inclined to confess Christ now, you *will* do it at the final day. Far better to do it voluntarily now than involuntarily at the final day, just before you hear the words of Christ, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire” (Matt. 25:41). Confess him now, while it is the day of salvation. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13). Here, then, is our plight (we, like the servant girl, are slaves of sin) and our hope (the gospel, the message of Christ); thirdly,

3. Our salvation

The servant girl kept following Paul around, telling everyone that Paul and his co-workers were God’s servants who were proclaiming the way of salvation. She kept this up for many days. Paul was annoyed, but didn’t try to stop her initially. But finally he’d had enough. The servant girl was distracting people from focusing on the apostolic message. Our text tells us that “Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And he [that is, *it*—the evil spirit] came out that very hour.”

Sometimes we wish we could shake some sense into another person—perhaps a person destroying his life by bad choices. It’s very apparent to us what’s going on; our friend is destroying his life. So maybe we offer advice. Sadly, that advice is not heeded, and the individual keeps on making bad choices. And there are times that we wish we could convert a person who is resistant to the gospel. We’ve told him about Christ. We’ve shown him how his life would be so much better with Christ, how that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). But we have to realize that *we* cannot change another person. Only the blessed Holy Spirit of God can change a heart. And he does this! God promises, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put *My Spirit* within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezek. 36:25–27). Knowledge that only the Spirit of God can change a heart keeps us from becoming busybodies. It also keeps us focused on prayer. We must constantly beg God to change the hearts of our friends and loved ones, for *God* is their only hope.

But notice what happens here. Paul turns and says to the unclean spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And the spirit obeys! It comes out immediately—“that very hour.” This is a clear miracle. The apostle Paul would be the first to admit that he did not do this by his own power. This was a miracle wrought by the power of God—the God who said, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

God’s people are to pray for the salvation of their loved ones, friends and neighbors. God is powerful. He is sovereign. He can do all his holy will. But he operates on his own timetable. Sometimes he waits a long time before changing a hardened heart. But he will save every one of his elect in his own good time.

Augustine’s mother, Monica, a devout Christian, faithfully prayed for many years for his conversion. Augustine, addicted to sexual pleasure, wasted many a year until awakened by the Spirit. So, in the case of our friends and loved ones, God wants us to faithfully pray and not give up. He will change the hearts of his elect in his good time. “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Ps. 110:3).

In the case of this unnamed servant girl, God changed her heart. The evil spirit left her, and the Spirit of God came in. Not only were Paul and his co-workers spared of an annoyance, but a παιδίσκη was ushered into the household of faith, becoming a charter member of the church at Philippi. Her masters, though, were livid; their hope of profit was gone. They were human traffickers—men who thought that precious men and women made in God’s own image are people to be used and abused. They seized Paul and Silas and had them thrown into prison. (We’ll have more to say about this next week.)

God gives nobody the right to traffic in human beings. Human trafficking is an affront against the image of God in man, and a capital crime. “He that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death” (Ex. 21:6). All human are required to love God supremely, to become his worshipers, and to love their neighbor in a Christlike manner. To fail to do this is to sin, and come under his wrath.

The deliverance of the unnamed servant girl in Acts 16 is a great miracle performed by the Spirit of God. It is a picture of us all: apart from Christ we are slaves of sin, being used and abused by the devil. We are comfortable in our sins. We will not come to Christ that we might have life (John 5:40). We will not have the Spirit of God rule over us. And we can do nothing about our condition. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot raise ourselves from spiritual death. We cannot deliver ourselves from spiritual bondage.

Here, then, is (1) our plight: we, like the demon-possessed servant girl, are slaves of sin, taken captive by the devil to do his will; (2) our hope: the Most High God has sent his Son, the Lord Jesus, to die for our sins (the gospel): this is to be

preached by his faithful ministers; (3) our salvation: what we could not do, our faithful Savior has done; he reached down from heaven to deliver a poor servant girl, and he will deliver us as well.

Flee to Jesus. Give him your heart. Ask for his Spirit to subdue your heart and draw it to himself. Christ is sovereign over wicked spirits. He is the Lord of demons. Amen.