

The Slave Girl: Jesus Sovereign over the Powers of Darkness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 October 2019

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Okay, well do open your Bibles and we're going to read together from the book of Acts and Acts chapter 16. Paul's been taking us through this section of the book of Acts and last week we read the first part of chapter 16 where Paul and Silas, his colleague, were seeking to go to different places in modern day Turkey with the gospel and the Lord seemed to hem them in, preventing them from going here and preventing them from going there and then driving them across the water, across the Bosphorus, into the continent of mainland Europe.

The very first time the gospel came to Europe proper. And we read of the first contact that they had with a new convert, Lydia, who was touched in her heart.

Her heart opened to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and she became one of the first Christians there, opening her house, probably her household becoming one of the first house churches in Europe.

But now we're going to read from verse 16, a very different encounter, a very different person and something in a way much more dramatic, at least outwardly looking.

Paul says, Luke says rather, as we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. She brought her owners much gain by fortune telling.

[1 : 33] She followed Paul and us crying out, these men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation. And this she kept doing for many days.

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, greatly troubled, turned and said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.

And it came out of her that very hour. 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.

And when they brought them to the magistrates, they said, these men are Jews and they're disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.

And the crowd joined in attacking them. And the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they'd inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

[2 : 41] And having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. It'll be a great help to have that passage, which Willie read earlier for us open.

Acts chapter 16 and verses 16 to 24. And that's page 9 to 5. If you have one of the visitor Bibles there. Acts 16.

And this is the second of three portraits of salvation that we're looking at here in this chapter. Lydia, the merchant of Thyatira, the slave girl tonight, and then next week, the Philippian jailer.

So this is the middle of those three little stories. Now the great overarching message of the book of Acts is that the risen Lord Jesus is building his church.

[3 : 47] He is taking his gospel to the very ends of the earth, just as he said he would in chapter 1, verse 8. He is building his eternal people who will reign with him forever.

That is what the book of Acts is about. And Luke is writing so that we would have absolute certainty about that, about his building of the church and of it going to the ends of the earth.

And the key moments in the progress of the early church, those early decades, are sketched out for us here in Luke's account over this second part of his two volumes about the life and the work of Jesus.

The account begins in Jerusalem and we see the gospel taking hold and many people turning in repentance to the Lord, knowing forgiveness for sin and the certainty of everlasting life.

And from Jerusalem, the gospel goes out to Samaria, to Judea, and to the ends of the earth. And the book of Acts tracks that great progress of the gospel as it ripples out from Jerusalem.

[4 : 58] And this chapter, chapter 16, is a really crucial moment because here we see the gospel entering for the very first time, entering mainland Europe. This is what we'd now call northern Greece, this area of Macedonia.

Really significant events here in chapter 16. They take place in Philippi, a leading city in the area of Macedonia. And despite this huge gospel step as the gospel moves from Asia into Europe, despite that big picture, great strategic move, what does Luke focus on here in this chapter?

Well, he focuses on individuals. A huge strategic step forward, but the focus is on three individuals. Most of the narrative focuses in on these three people, three very different people, but three people for whom the Lord wonderfully works salvation.

And yes, as we read back, as we read this account from our perspective, we see how Luke is showing us how these events were indeed very significant, not just for these three people, but for the whole continent of Europe.

Without these events, you and I would likely not be here. But here on the ground, at the time, it was about individuals. It was about small beginnings.

[6 : 18] Lydia and her household. What a force that would prove in the long term for the furtherance of the gospel. So we're spending these three evenings looking at what appear, at a human level, to be repeated closed doors.

We saw that at the start of the chapter last week. Repeated closed doors and frustrations. But in fact, through all of it, God is sovereign. He is in control. So we're spending these three evenings looking at these three individuals from Philippi, seeing to learn what Luke is teaching us about God's sovereignty in his great mission work.

And we saw last week that the Lord is sovereign in salvation with the conversion of Lydia. He's sovereign over people's hearts. What was the key to her conversion?

It was there in verse 14. The Lord opened her heart. And she paid careful attention to what Paul was saying. The Lord opened her heart. It wasn't Paul. No human being can do that.

No human being can save anyone else. Only the risen Lord Jesus can do that. Only he can bring about the salvation of an individual. So tonight we'll think about the second, the next of these three individuals.

[7 : 32] The slave girl, the fortune teller. And we'll see in this section that the risen Lord Jesus is sovereign over the powers of darkness. Yes, he's sovereign in salvation, but he's also sovereign over the great opponent of the gospel.

And so we see there is nothing and no one who can ultimately stop the progress of his church. Nothing in this entire universe can stop Jesus building his church.

Not even the powers of darkness. It seems an apt passage to be looking at this weekend. We're about to head into Halloween. And of course, Halloween is not the greatest manifestation of evil in our society.

Not even close. It's a trivial celebration. There are far more evil things going on in our world than that. But it seems an apt passage to look at this weekend. So we'll look at it in first, we'll look at it in two parts.

First, we'll look at the story of the slave girl there in verses 16 and 18 and see her liberation from the terrible spirit within her. And then verses 19 to 24, the reaction to that, the reaction to her liberation from the slave girl's owners and then more widely from others in the city.

[8 : 51] So first, the slave girl's liberation and then her slave owner's litigation. So firstly then, look at verses 16 to 18. The slave girl's liberation.

We see here the sovereignty of the risen Lord Jesus over the powers of darkness. So these events happen after the great encouragement of Lydia and her whole household coming to faith.

And Paul and his small mission team, they're heading down to the river as they have been doing, the place of prayer, verse 16. And they continue to go day by day. And as they're heading down, they are met by this slave girl.

A real contrast to Lydia, the rich businesswoman. Here we have a young girl, a slave, making money for her owners.

Total opposite ends of the social spectrum. And Luke tells us that she had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune telling.

[9 : 57] She professed to be able to see into the future. And that was good business back then. People wanted to know. But this wasn't the sort of trivial horoscope that you find in the back of the newspaper.

There was something far more sinister going on here. Luke tells us that she had a spirit of divination within her. She was literally possessed by a python spirit.

It's a reference to the snake of classical mythology which guarded the temple of Apollo. And it was thought that Apollo would embody himself in a snake and would inspire his pythonesses around him to see into the future.

That was the sort of mythological background to this reference. Now Luke doesn't commit himself to that sort of superstition, does he? But he is clear that this is some sort of demonic possession.

Look at what happens in verse 18. Paul commands the spirit that possesses her to come out. And this sort of activity that she's engaged in, this divination, this fortune telling, is something expressly forbidden in the scriptures back in Deuteronomy.

[11 : 12] The Lord through Moses says that there should be no one among you who practices divination or telling fortunes or interpreting omens. this sort of activity was expressly forbidden.

But this is a very deeply troubled individual. A girl long trapped in bondage and not just physically, she had these slave owners who controlled her, who managed her, who made money from her.

Physically in bondage but also spiritually. She's in bondage with this terrible evil spirit. Let's not make the mistake of pushing what we read here, this possession.

Don't push this sort of thing into the realm of horror movies, into the realm of fiction. The spiritual world, the Bible affirms over and over and over, is a real one.

The spiritual world is real. This isn't primitive superstition. There is a real world of real spirits. There are angels.

[12 : 16] There are angels who are loyal to God and demons who are not. The Bible is very clear about that reality. The Bible doesn't veer into either speculation or superstition.

It's very clear. It shows us this sort of thing is a reality. And what we see here, it wasn't unique to Paul at this time, the Lord Jesus experienced this sort of thing as well, didn't he?

This was the experience of Jesus over and over. In fact, what we see Paul experiencing here is so very similar to some of the things that Jesus experienced himself.

Just look at what happens here with Paul. Verse 17, the girl follows Paul and the rest of his team. She cries out these words, these men are the servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation.

It's probably a better translation. A way. She kept this up for many days and Paul became deeply disturbed by it all and so turns to the Spirit and speaks.

[13 : 27] Now, it's not some sort of weird exorcist type ritual here. I just had someone come up to me after Queen's Park expressing concern about this sort of thing.

concerned about the sort of teaching this might lead to in the church when young children are possessed in the way that's talked about here.

But there's nothing in this at all that would cause you concern if you read it. This isn't a weird exorcist type ritual. This isn't abuse. This is liberation. Look at what he says.

Just a word. I command you in the name of Jesus to come out of her. And it came out that very hour. She was liberated. Freed from this terrible possession.

The Spirit that's within her recognizes who Paul is. The Spirit recognizes something of the message he's proclaiming. Strikingly similar to an episode with Jesus which Luke also records in his Gospel in his first volume.

[14 : 33] there in chapter 8 of Luke with the demon possessed man living amongst the tombs by Galilee. And likewise then the Spirit knows exactly who Jesus is.

And all the Gospel writers record this sort of thing that when Jesus was on earth evil spirits recognized him. They knew who he was. And they would publicly shout out things about him.

And invariably Jesus would silence them. He'd send the demon away. The person would be freed and the Spirit silenced. And that's what Paul does here.

He silences this demon. But why? Why silence this Spirit? They're saying some sort of vaguely true things after all.

These are men who are servants of the Most High God. They are speaking about salvation. Those are true statements. What's the problem?

[15 : 36] Well the problem is these words they were not coming from a place of repentance and faith were they? They were coming rather from a place of hostility. This was a Spirit that was vehemently against the Lord Jesus and his people and his mission.

So even though what was being said may have been true in part, for Paul to have accepted this testimony to leave it unchallenged, well it would have validated her form of spiritism in the eyes of all who heard her.

All those in Philippi saw this girl day after day. It would have given validity to all that she was doing wouldn't it? So Paul had to demonstrate publicly that the source of her words, this Spirit, was profoundly evil, hostile to Jesus and his message.

And he had to publicly demonstrate that. He couldn't just leave it unsaid or undealt with. the only way he could do that was to call out this power of darkness that had taken hold of it.

And he commands the Spirit out and in a very public and unmistakable demonstration of the authority and sovereignty of Jesus over the powers of darkness, the Spirit leaves.

[16 : 47] It obeys. Jesus' sovereignty is established here. The powers of darkness have no ultimate sway over him. Jesus is sovereign.

But it wasn't just to demonstrate that, was it? It wasn't just about demonstrating Jesus' authority, his sovereignty. Surely it was also to show compassion to this poor slave girl.

What a miserable existence it would have been for her. In every respect, she was in bondage, physically, emotionally, spiritually, in terrible bondage.

And wonderfully, she is free from this terrible demon spirit. Great compassion shown to her. Now, we don't know what else happens to this girl.

The last we see is the end of verse 18, the Spirit leaving her. We don't know for sure if she knew salvation in its fullest sense. Yes, she was freed.

[17 : 53] She was freed from this possession, but was she also freed from her sin? Did she turn to Christ? Or we're not told. But John Stott suggests that the very fact that her deliverance takes place between the conversion of Lydia and the conversion of the jailer, that leads us as readers at the very least to infer that she may too have become part of the early Philippian church.

We don't know for sure, but it seems quite possible. But the key thing that Luke is showing us here, as well as that compassion to that young girl, Luke is showing us here that the risen Lord Jesus continues to be sovereign over the powers of darkness.

He was clearly so during his earthly ministry, wasn't he? Again and again, he shows his power over evil spirits, over demons, over possessions. But he continues to do that.

He continues to reign. Now he's ascended. He is still reigning. He is still sovereign over even these evil opponents. It's in the name of Jesus Christ that Paul commands the spirit to come out.

It's in Jesus' name. The one who has ultimately finally dealt with the powers of sin at the cross. It's in his name that he casts out this demon. And because Jesus is sovereign, because he has in fact decisively dealt and defeated the powers of darkness, the spirit here has no option.

[19 : 25] It has to obey. It has to submit. It has to leave this girl. And Jesus continues today to be ultimately sovereign over the dark powers of evil.

The decisive victory has been won. If you belong to Christ, then you are on the victorious side. And you are on the victorious side. the reality is, the reality we so clearly see in these verses, the reality is that Jesus has defeated the dark powers.

So ironic with Halloween upon us. It's now very much a superficial, trivial celebration involving sweets and pumpkins. But the origins of it, of course, go back to All Hallows Eve, the Eve of All Saints Day, which traditionally the church would have celebrated Jesus' defeat over darkness.

And back in the day, Christians would dress up on All Hallows Eve to mock the evil side, which was clearly defeated. It was a mocking thing, putting it down.

It's sad that folk would choose to celebrate the losing side. But that is the reality. The evil powers of darkness are defeated. Jesus is victorious.

[20 : 52] The sunlight has swallowed up the darkness. The future is utterly futile for the dark forces of evil. And that is a great encouragement to us today.

Perhaps we do find ourselves facing real opposition to our Christian witness. Perhaps we are all too aware. darkness at work.

Perhaps in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, in our society at large. We feel the enemy. We feel it at work.

And the enemy's tactics may not be so brazen as they are here, with a demon-possessed girl shouting out things against God's gospel people. That still happens.

But the enemy's tactics, for us particularly living in the West, are to convince us that the spiritual realm is just non-existent. They're not even think it's there.

[21 : 59] He has to employ far more subtle tactics for us because we think we're beyond it. We think we're so much more enlightened. He is at work. the enemy is at work.

And so it is a real comfort to us, as those who belong to Jesus, it's a real comfort to know that those powers are defeated powers. He is sovereign over them.

And that's what we see here, these first verses in our section, 16 to 18, with the slave girl's liberation. We see that Jesus is sovereign. And he's sovereign in salvation, and sovereign over the powers of darkness.

Let's look on then to verses 19 to the end of our passage, the slave owner's litigation. And we see in this little section the sobering reality of persistent opposition from the powers of darkness.

So despite this exorcism of the spirit from the poor slave girl, despite her liberation, the reality of opposition to the gospel work and to the gospel messengers didn't suddenly vanish.

[23 : 15] We may be slightly perplexed and concerned, as I'm sure Paul and Silas felt to at least some degree, as to what happens next. We've just seen this very clear and emphatic demonstration of Jesus' authority, his sovereignty.

Why then do we get verses 19 to 24? It seems a bit puzzling at first, doesn't it? As with previous healings in the book of Acts, in chapter 3 and chapter 14, the intervention by God's servants in a sort of very public healing in this way, causes a public reaction which at first sight seems totally counterproductive to the gospel and to the progress of the gospel.

You wonder, what else is going on? Why is the Lord letting this happen? Things look at least initially very discouraging, by the end of the day, where are Paul and Silas? They're in stocks, they're in prison.

That's pretty discouraging. Jesus perhaps doesn't look quite as sovereign as he did at the start of the day. What are we to make of this? Well, even here, even in the face of this persistent opposition, despite the enemy powers experiencing and suffering this very public defeat with the slave girl's healing, even though the opposition raised its head again, even here the Lord Jesus is still sovereign.

As we'll see next week, with the conversion of the jailer, it was only through the imprisonment of Paul and Silas that the jailer was reached. There was no other way to reach that jailer right there in the jail.

[24 : 54] In the same way that the Lord moved Paul across continents to reach Lydia, he moved Paul and Silas to the very heart of the prison to see the jailer converted.

So even then, we see the Lord's sovereign hand. Even in the midst of mess, even in the midst of this unjust, corrupt judicial process, God was still ultimately calling the shots.

What we see here, this opening section of Acts 16 as the gospel goes to Europe, a very vivid illustration of what the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16 where he says that a wide door for effective work has opened up to me and there are many adversaries.

Yes, a door is opened for effective work and there are many adversaries. Yes, there is gospel progress as the gospel goes and gains a foothold in Europe.

This is a huge moment. a wide door was opening. But whilst that is true, there are many adversaries. We see that so very clearly here in Acts 16 and that remains the pattern today.

[26 : 12] Doors may open wide for the gospel, but as we step through, we are to expect opponents, difficulties, opposition.

people and will stop the work. It's a futile effort. That's the point of the passage.

It's futile. But it's one that we do really feel and experience. Paul and Silas really did feel the stocks around their feet. They did feel like they were in the midst of a jail.

And so we're seeing here that even then God is sovereign. Let's look a little bit more closely here. What's going on? Well, the slave girl is healed.

We've seen that. And the owners are outraged. You can see why they might be. Their lucrative assets has suddenly lost all value to them.

[27 : 08] The cash flow that she provided has suddenly dried up because the risen Lord Jesus has intervened and healed her. She can no longer foretell the future. That revenue stream has dried up.

It's gone. And you can understand they are angry. For those slave owners, Paul and Silas and of course the God they serve, well it posed a real threat to their bottom line, didn't it?

The gospel transformed her life and their business model collapsed. And the gospel transforms lives and it will undermine illicit business that trades on humanity's sinfulness.

Industries will go to great lengths and great expense to protect and preserve their business models that are threatened by the gospel. Gospel morality will undermine those sort of businesses that trade on humanity's sinfulness.

illness. In the USA, I was reading this week, Planned Parenthood, one of the major providers of abortion services in the country, over the last seven years they spent over \$50 million on elections and lobbying politicians.

[28 : 26] \$50 million. That's some considerable expense, isn't it, to protect their business model. And no doubt that spending has risen in recent months with lots of states across the US seem to restrict and restrain abortion in those states.

And likewise, here in Philippi, the slave owners, they take steps to protect their own interests. They conduct a bit of lobbying of their own. And so they go to the marketplace and they approach the magistrates.

Now, of course, their public argument is not to whinge about their dwindling profit margins. That wouldn't have gone down too well with the crowds, I don't think. Instead, what do they say?

Verse 20. They don't play the financial card, they play the race card. These men are Jews. They're disturbing our city. They advocate customs.

They're not law for us Romans. And that line seems to do the trick, doesn't it? The crowd is whipped up. Verse 22. As are the magistrates.

[29 : 33] No care is taken to investigate the claims, much to the later embarrassment, because Paul is in fact a Roman citizen. And what they do here, the sorts of punishments they inflict on Paul should never have been inflicted on a Roman citizen.

They couldn't do that. And so we see next week this great embarrassment for the magistrates because of the way they've treated Paul. No trial is granted. The magistrates lose their head. Due processes cast aside.

Now you could say that this behavior, although regrettable and illegal, was in a sense understandable. Here were these Jews newly arrived in town, they were upsetting local leading businessmen, they want the problem to go away.

And I want to say it is understandable but only understandable from the perspective of human nature that has been perverted by sin and actually manipulated by dark and evil powers.

As Ron writer put it, the dark physical prison into which they threw the messengers of Christ was a mirror image of the dominion of darkness in which they themselves were held blinded against the light of the gospel.

[30 : 46] They were living in darkness even though they didn't perhaps realize it. That was what was leading them to this end. And as God's gospel servants today, we must be prepared for this sobering reality.

There is an enemy. He is at work. And Christians will be treated unjustly just as Paul and Silas were. And the ultimate reason for it, the ultimate reason for our difficulties that we might face is because the great enemy, the great power of darkness is real.

Don't pretend him away. He prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour God's children. He is set on derailing the progress of the gospel. He is set on disrupting the building of the church, particularly when significant advances for the gospel are made.

And this is a huge step forward for the gospel here. As the gospel goes into Europe, of course the enemy is going to step in and step up his advance.

As James Philip put it this way, it is significant that there should have appeared at this juncture the girl with the evil spirit.

[32 : 02] For her presence signaled the reaction of the powers of darkness against the coming of the gospel of light to Europe. It is no wonder that Satan should resent the presence of the apostles in his, up to this point, undisputed territory.

He does not take kindly to the spoiling of his house. And that is, I think, the basic truth that lies behind both of these incidents, both the slave girl and the opposition to her liberation.

Satan was defending his territory. When the gospel came, great pushback. God, I think, the whole account of what we see here, which ended up with Paul in prison, was surely the evil one's attempt to destroy this whole venture once and for all, this whole European advance.

But as James Philip also says, those who challenge the kingdom of darkness may expect bleeding backs, those who challenge the kingdom of darkness may expect to suffer.

Now, we need to know that to expect it. As the gospel makes advances, as it breaks into new territory, and someone was saying to me the other day that they now classify Scotland as an unreached people group.

[33 : 29] Gospel witnesses really diminish. we are almost going to new territory. And so we can expect serious pushback. That was for the Lord Jesus, how it was for Paul and Silas, for his people all through history.

Wherever the gospel goes, wherever gospel seeds are sown, expect enemies, expect difficulties. Those who challenge the kingdom of darkness, they may expect bleeding back.

So perhaps you've started reading the word one-to-one with a colleague at work. Expect some sort of opposition from the enemy.

Start a new SU group in school. Expect some sort of opposition from the enemy. Take up responsibility for witnessing to the gospel on campus.

Expect some sort of opposition from the enemy. We've seen it over and over and over again through the book of Acts. Jesus reigns. Yes, he does. But that reign, it is a contested reign.

[34 : 42] And it will continue to be contested until Christ returns. The enemies of darkness will always contest his reign. enemy will do what he can to thwart the plans of God, to thwart the plans of his people.

But it is futile. It's a futile opposition. And that's what Luke is showing us here. God is sovereign through it all.

even though Paul and Silas ended up here in prison at the end of the section. That was not the end of the story, was it? Yes, Satan was trying to harm and destroy the work.

But in doing so, he unwittingly played into the hands of God. For the way God chose to reach the jailer was putting Paul and Silas right there in the prison. You see, Satan cannot work around God's sovereignty much as he might try.

Even when the enemy seems to be in the ascendancy, even as we look around our world and feel this is not going well, even though he seems to be in the ascendancy, he is only ever serving God's greater purposes.

[35 : 59] That's the case here. And it's always the case because God is sovereign. Jesus is sovereign over the powers of darkness. Luke is writing so that you and I would have certainty about that.

He wrote this chapter so that we would know that he's sovereign in salvation but also sovereign over the powers of darkness. And we can be sure no matter how things might look to be going, he is using it in the end to bring about his purposes, to bring about his gospel progress.

So we can take great comfort in knowing that we serve him. We are not on the losing side. Let me pray and then we'll sing. Amen. Father God, you know just how much we are a people tempted to walk by what we see.

it's so easy for us to walk by sight and be discouraged. But Lord, please help us to be a people that live by your words. And would these words this evening help us this week to live by faith and to know that you are the one who is sovereign.

Help us to believe that. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.