

An End to Slavery

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me this morning to Acts chapter 16 and from verse 16 to 24. If there is one thing we are learning, it is that people everywhere are basically the same.

You can call it globalization if you want to, but it goes deeper than that. It always has. Human beings, whether they are from America or Europe or Asia or Africa, are basically the same. We have the same desires and the same problems, the same reactions and the same needs, the same delights. We all want to be secure and to be valued, to feel loved, to belong. We can talk as much as we like about multiculturalism, but at its most basic level, whatever color our skins, whatever languages we speak, whatever countries we come from, we are but one culture.

Conflict between people groups often arise from fear of one another. That's what we call xenophobia, fear of strangers.

[1 : 18] And yet, if we realize that though we might all look and speak different, we are basically the same on the inside. It pulls the rug from under the feet of hatred.

If it's true that we all have the same basic problems, then we all need the same basic solution. If we all have the same basic desire, then it follows that only one thing will truly satisfy all of us.

And that one thing we know is not a thing at all. It's a person, Jesus Christ. For Scottish or Saudi Arabian, for Indian or Indonesian, for Kenyan or Canadian, Jesus Christ and his gospel is the answer to the basic human problem.

Well, here in Acts chapter 16, verses 16 through 24, Paul and his companions, having traveled to the European district of Macedonia and its chief city, Philippi, are confronted by scenes which are a million miles removed from Puyper Yard in 21st century Scotland.

There's slavery. There's demonic possession. There's overt religious persecution. There is torture. It all seems so very different from anything we're used to today.

[2 : 43] And yet, this story here is designed to remind us that all people everywhere are basically the same. The same in today's Scotland as in 1st century AD Philippi.

The same basic problems. The same basic desires. The same actions and reactions. The same needs. The same delights. And Jesus Christ and his gospel is the same answer to our basic human condition.

Now, we see this working in our passage in three ways, briefly. Captivity. The basic problem every human being faces. Liberty.

The solution Jesus and his gospel provides us with. And hostility. The basic human reaction to Jesus and his gospel. So, here then in these verses, we're not just studying 1st century Philippi and its culture.

But we are casting light on every culture. And we're showing how Jesus and his gospel is the same answer to our basic human problem. Whoever we are.

[3 : 54] First of all then, in verses 16 and 17, we have slavery. Slavery. These verses contain much of what is repellent to us.

That is gender inequality. That is slavery. Demonic possession. That is exploitation. Take the demonic possession out of it. And I'm afraid we're still left with the remnants of this girl's problem in modern society.

We call it modern day slavery. Girls are kidnapped from their homeland and they are forced into coming here. And rather than making their masters money by telling fortunes, they do so by selling their bodies.

But it's no less slavery than that we read here. It's no less deplorable, humiliating, and disgusting. She's a slave.

We don't know anything about her. Where she's from. What kind of person she was. Rather, she is dominated by these three characteristics. She is a slave.

[4 : 59] She is possessed. And she lives to make money for her master by telling fortunes. And so she's a slave in more ways than one. Because not only is she a slave to her masters.

But she's a slave to the evil spirit who is within her. This picture is fairly clear. This is a girl who is completely dominated by others.

She's not free to decide what to say or to whom she says it. She exists to bring profit to others.

She's not free to do what she wants to do.

Because the evil spirit within her is mercilessly driving her. The NIV translates, she had a spirit by which she predicted the future.

The original Greek word here is that from which we get the name of the constrictor snake, python.

The python, it slides, it slithers around the human body, then squeezes until the victim is dead.

[6 : 04] This is a horrific picture of human slavery at its worst. That the evil spirit was like a python round her heart and mind. And that she was utterly powerless to get out of its grip.

She must do what it says, lest it squeeze her even tighter. She's bizarre and she's weird. And all because she's been dehumanized by the spirit of python.

But before we consign her to the annals of history, let me tell you a wee story. A few years ago, myself and my family went to the Christmas market in Princess Street Gardens in Edinburgh.

Skating rink and the big wheel. And there were stalls selling burgers and bratwurst. There was one stall at which there was a queue nearly 50 meters long.

Was it the beer stall? No. Was it Santa's grotto? No. It was the fortune teller's tent.

[7 : 10] And 50 meters worth of people were lining up to get their fortunes told. This is not first century Greece. It's 21st century Edinburgh.

It would seem, you know, that the spirit of python is alive and well in today's Scotland. But the thing is, she's not the only one possessed in this passage.

The slave girl might be possessed by the spirit of python. But her masters are possessed by the spirit of pounds. We read in verse 16, she earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling.

And then once she'd lost the ability to tell fortunes, we read in verse 19 that when her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas.

The spirit of python coiled around the slave girl's heart and mind. But the spirit of pounds coiled around her master's hearts and minds.

[8 : 10] And they are no less enslaved than she is. And they are no less dehumanized because of their obsession with money. Makes them do ridiculous things, not just to themselves but to others.

There's nothing they won't do just to make more money. The great Frenchman, John Calvin, writes in his Institutes, The human heart is a factory of idols.

The human heart is a factory of idols. We could talk about this all day. But what I want us to realize is that whatever idols our hearts are worshipping will eventually enslave us.

They stop being our servants. We become their slaves. So for example, we shall set up an idol of popularity. I want to be the most popular kid in my class.

I want to be the most popular child in my class. So we train every effort of our minds, hearts and bodies to achieve this goal. We mercilessly condition our bodies to get rid of every vestige of fat or unsightly spots.

[9 : 24] No plukes here. We make ourselves feel like absolute rubbish because we really want to be the most popular kid in our class. But what's happened?

We have become slaves to the opinions of others. The idol we worship has enslaved us just as the spirit of Python and of Pounds enslaved these people here. We are entirely as enslaved as they are.

Trust me, modern day slavery is alive and well here. Not just in the sordid, criminal, disgusting sex trade, but in the heart of every human being who makes an idol of money, career or popularity.

And the insidious thing about this form of modern day slavery is that it masquerades as freedom.

The most successful form of slavery is when people don't realize they are slaves.

And that's what our materialistic secular society has achieved for us. That's what globalization is increasingly achieving for us. All human beings, whoever they are, wherever they're from, are caught in this trap and have the same basic problem.

[10 : 37] We're slaves. From Australia to Yemen, from Japan to America, from Chile to Greenland, every human being has a python around their hearts, squeezing the life out of them.

For some, it might be religion. For others, it might be money. For others, it might be reputation. For others, it might be sexual freedom. For others, victory.

But whatever it is, the idols of their hearts are no less destructive and enslaving than what enslaved this poor girl. What I'm saying is not Houston.

We have a problem. But humanity. We have a problem. Second, verse 18. Liberty. Liberty.

Liberty. If it is true that the basic problem of every human being is the same, then it also follows that the basic solution for every human being is the same.

[11 : 39] Whereas before there was slavery, idolatry, and entrapment, the solution is freedom, true worship, and liberty. And that is what the Apostle Paul gives to this girl.

And she's following them around and she's crying out on top of her voice, These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. Why is she saying these words?

I can only conjecture. Are they the sarcastic comments of the demon within her? Or are they the forced confession of the demon within her? Or are they the words of the girl herself pleading with Paul and his companions to set her free from the chains of her possession?

One thing's for sure. This girl, possessed as she is by the spirit of Python by which she tells fortunes, recognizes that she has met a superior power in these men.

That the power of the gospel is greater than the power of that evil spirit. As reformed Christians, we tend to shy away from spiritual warfare with good reason.

[12 : 45] But make no mistake. There is a devil. And he is actively at work against God's gospel and God's people. There is spiritual conflict whether we choose to recognize it or not.

There are times, thankfully, very infrequent when the darkness of spiritual evil spills over. And we meet an otherworldly malevolence.

I've experienced it only once. I never want to again. And yet, the darkness of that cold, spiritual evil, snowmatch for the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The sound of the name and the voice of Jesus, the demons must flee. And at the dawning of the light, the darkness ends. Paul, now recognizing that the crying of that girl is harming the cause of the gospel, turns to her and addresses the spirit of Python within her.

He says, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her. Words. What importance or significance are words?

[14 : 02] Much, especially if spoken in the name of Jesus Christ. Because, you see, the source of this exorcism did not come from Paul. It came from the risen power of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ in whose name he spoke.

In the name of Jesus, worlds are created and planets set in orbit around their suns. In the name of Jesus, the light shines and the darkness is cast out.

At the name of Jesus, the evil spirit leaves this girl. The coils of the python are wrenched from around her heart. And for the first time in years, she's free. That's the impact of the word of the gospel.

It liberates. It emancipates. The word of Jesus gives freedom to the captive. Like I say, the source of this miracle did not come from Paul.

It came from Jesus. This is an incredibly important event in the book of Acts and the mission of the early church. Because it shows that the power of Jesus Christ is entirely as operative in Europe as it is in Asia.

[15 : 10] That Jesus is Lord not just in Jerusalem or in Antioch, but in Macedonia also. Remember, the people of Philippi engaged in a religious mixture of emperor worship and the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis.

We saw that last week. But look, King Jesus reigns in mainland Europe, even as he does everyone else. When we talk of King Jesus, we're talking of the global Lord, the Lord of the universe.

Wherever his name is spoken, the power of his spirit is at work in the hearts of ordinary men and women. Bringing them to the realization of their sin and women and women and women and women and women and women.

As the powerful key to their freedom. If we did not believe this, then we would never as a church engage in any mission. But Acts 16 teaches us that Jesus Christ is Lord over the whole earth and all its peoples.

And that his power is entirely as mighty in Australia as in Yemen, in Chile as in Greenland, in Japan as in America and everywhere else between.

[16:23] When this gospel is preached, there is no power and force which can resist it. No darkness which can overcome it.

No evil which can corrupt it. But from every nation, people and tribe, people will come in faith and find freedom in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

See what we're saying is if the basic human problem is the same for everyone, then it follows the same basic solution. It's the same for everyone. Jesus Christ.

He himself said in John 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. He said of himself in John chapter 8, I am the light of the world.

Whoever walks in me will never walk in darkness. And what do we sing? We sing the glorious words of Isaac Watts. Jesus shall reign whatever the sun doth its successive.

[17:24] Ages run. His kingdom stretch from shore to shore. Till moon shall wax and wane no more. And again, what do we sing? But in verse 4 of that hymn, Blessings abound wherever he reigns.

The prisoners leap to lose their chains. The weary find eternal rest. And all who suffer want are blessed. Well, I'm pretty sure this slave girl, after she'd been spoken to by Paul, could have written that hymn herself.

Or at least could have added her hearty amen. At the name of Jesus, she was liberated. At the name of Jesus, she was emancipated. At the name of Jesus, she was freed from a slavery deeper than anything this world can provide us with.

And I'm asking today whether there are any among us who know that we are slaves in need of freedom. Slaves to pounds.

Slaves to popularity. Slaves to status. Whatever laglet is that our hearts have devised for us to worship, but has in reality enslaved us.

[18:36] And dehumanized us. Are there any here whose drive to become the most popular kid in the class has left them empty, cold, and dark?

In the name of Jesus Christ, I promise you that if you shall come to him in faith and trust, he can crush that idol into dust. And liberate you to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Liberty. Liberty. And then finally, and very briefly, from verse 19 to 24, we have hostility. Hostility. Every human being, the same basic problem. Every human being, the same basic solution. Jesus Christ. One more thing we see in this passage, which is the most common response to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ.

Namely, hostility. Why did Paul and his companions experience such hostility at the hands of the Philippians? It's obvious from verse 19, isn't it?

[19:43] When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace to face the authorities.

These girls weren't, these people were not interested in the welfare of that slave girl. But now she's free. She's herself.

All they're interested in is the prosperity of their pockets. And we learn something here which is vital for our mission as Christians today. Namely, listen up very carefully to this.

The spirit of Python is far less powerful an enemy than the spirit of Pounds. The greatest foe the church of Jesus Christ faces is materialism and secularism.

And whereas the slave girl has been liberated, her masters are still subject to the same captivity. Their wallets. In the interest of self-gain, they react to the name of Jesus Christ with hostility and force.

[20:54] Their objections are not intellectual. There are no intellectual objections given in this passage to the gospel. There never are. Ultimately, they seize Paul and Silas because the gospel they are preaching is a threat to their way of life.

That's what stands behind every vestige of hostility to the gospel in our world today. That's why we have mass riots in Pakistan to protest against Christians.

That's why governors in Nepal pass laws to prohibit Christian evangelism. That's why rulers in the so-called Christian West form legislation which makes it difficult for the church to preach the gospel in all its freedom and beauty.

But it's no different from wherever you're from. It's self-gain which moves the hand of hostility against Jesus Christ. It's the question, what do I stand to lose?

And that idol of power or pleasure or sexual freedom or popularity rages against the gospel of Jesus Christ which promises freedom for the enslaved.

[22 : 07] Was it not self-gain which drove the Pharisees and leaders of Israel to crucify the Lord Jesus in the first place? They didn't want to lose their power. Their religious status.

Their kudos among the people. And so for reasons of self-gain they crucified the Messiah. And now such a thing is also happening to Christ's disciples here.

When having liberated a slave girl, false charges are drummed up against them. And they are stripped and severely beaten and thrown into prison, their feet fastened in the stocks. And what exactly had Paul and his companions done to deserve such a fate?

What had they done? Answer, they had spoken in the name of Jesus and they had liberated a poor soul from her hellish captivity. Such a thing is happening all over our world today just as it always has.

A couple of years ago, Catherine and myself were privileged to spend a weekend in the beautiful city of Prague in the Czech Republic. Go there if you've not been. It's wonderful. Even there we saw signs of this truth.

[23 : 15] For it was in Prague the 15th century reformer Jan Hus was burned at the stake for his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here in our own land of Scotland, the southern hills are filled with monuments to our covenanting fathers who gave their lives for the freedom of the church, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In our world today, millions of Christians, as highlighted by Jeremy Hunt, are being mercilessly persecuted for no other crime than that they bear witness to the liberating, loving power of Jesus Christ.

The power of the name of Jesus overthrew and cast out the spirit of the python. What shall the power of the name of Jesus do now with its messengers imprisoned and their feet fastened in the stocks?

Well, you'll have to come next week or in two weeks time to find out. But if the death of Jesus is anything to go by, the whole story's not yet been told.

The hostility of men which led to the crucifixion of Jesus was in the wisdom and power of God. Turned to his own purposes and freedom was won by Jesus on the cross and by his resurrection.

[24 : 39] We have forgiveness and transforming grace and liberty. That's what everyone among us here desperately needs and in your heart of hearts wants today.

Forgiveness, transforming grace, liberty, belonging through Jesus and his world-changing gospel. Because you see all human beings everywhere are basically the same, our greatest need is freedom from the idols our hearts have created.

Which enslave us and hold us in tighter stocks than any prison sell. God's solution for every human being is the gospel of his son, Jesus Christ.

Do you want to be free today? Free from the fear of death. Free from guilt. Free from sin. Free from idolatry. Free from that relentless desire to be the most popular kid in the class.

Free from the pressure to conform to our society. Then it's time by faith to cry out to Jesus for his mercy and grace.

[25 : 54] Because there in his mercy you'll find liberty. And there in his grace you'll be transformed. And God's people shall shout all the louder. The song of his wonderful grace.

Jesus shall reign. Whatever the sun doth its successive journeys run. From shore to shore. From east to west. Till moons shall wax and wane.

No more. Let us pray. Lord we thank you that the gospel is a multifaceted diamond. And one of these wonderful faces that we see is that of freedom for the captive.

How this girl was freed. From the spirit which enslaved her. And Lord we pray today that you would show us the liberating power of the gospel afresh.

And that there may even be just one person in this place who for the first time realizes that they are captive. The idols that they thought were their friends but actually are not.

[27 : 00] They're their masters enslaving them. And that turning to Jesus Christ did find liberty and freedom. We ask these things in Jesus name.

Amen.