

“How Jesus Changes Lives – Part 3”

Text | Acts 16:16-19

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 22, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** During the month of September we are looking at Acts chapter 16. We are looking at this chapter because it shows us *how* God brings the life-transforming news about Jesus to people living in cities.
 - We’ve seen that God does this by calling his people to go to the city and tell others the good news about Jesus. In Acts 16, Paul and his friends are called to go to the city of Philippi, which, like Victoria, is described in verse 12 as “a leading city” in its region.
 - Many people become Christians. This chapter tells us about three of them who could not be more different from each other. We are learning that Jesus can change your life no matter who you are.
- The first story is about Lydia who is an upper-class business woman. Her conversion made everything seem relatively simple.
 - Paul and his friends simply engage in a discussion with her, tell her about Jesus, and the Lord opens her heart to believe. It’s all very calm, rational, and unspectacular.
- The second story that we are looking at today reveals an entirely different side to what it means for us to bring the good news to a leading city like Victoria. This story takes us into strange and uncomfortable territory.
 - This story talks about the existence of dark *spiritual* powers that gain mastery over people and enslave them.
 - This story talks about dark *spiritual* powers that attack Christians who seek to preach the gospel in the city.
 - And this story talks about dark *human* powers that engage in human trafficking to enslave and exploit a vulnerable girl.
 - Cities like Philippi and Victoria are great cities but they are also filled with great darkness. This story brings us face to face with what it means to be a church that is in the city. But it also brings us face to face with the mighty power of Jesus, who sets people free. I’m praying that you would experience the power of Jesus to set you free today.
- I will develop this story in three parts: *Part 1: the dark masters who enslave us. Part 2: the dark masters who attack us. Part 3: the one master who sets us free.*
 - Then we are going to have the privilege of hearing a young woman named Beth share her testimony—a testimony that has some parallels with the story we are about to hear.

THE DARK MASTERS WHO ENSLAVE US

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2) Part 1: The dark masters who enslave us.**
 - Let’s get into the story. Look at verse 16. **READ 16 - *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 fortune-telling.***
 - Once again, Paul and his friends are going to this place of prayer where they had previously met Lydia. On this day they encounter a girl. We learn three things about her.
- First, *she is a girl, not an adult woman.*
 - She is likely in her early teens, maybe 12 or 13 years old.
- Second, we learn that *she is enslaved to a dark spiritual power.*

- We read that she had a “spirit of divination.” In the Greek it literally reads that she had “the spirit of the Python.” What is that? Ancient readers knew exactly what it meant. The python snake was the symbol of a famous woman called the Oracle of Delphi who foretold the future. The python also represented the god Apollo who enabled people to predict future events. So, when a person seemed to be able to predict the future they were said to have the spirit of the Python.
 - In fact, there was a word for such people. You will laugh when I tell it to you. These people were called “ventriloquists.” In our day a ventriloquist is a person who can speak in such a way that their voice seems to be coming from a puppet. In a similar manner, such women, would go into some sort of trance, behave in an erratic way, and the spirit of the Python would speak through her predicting the future.
- The average person in Roman society would not have seen this as an evil spirit but as neutral and even beneficial. But Luke, the author of the book of Acts, clearly sees it as an evil spirit. She is tormented by it and enslaved to it. She is psychologically unstable for, as we will see, goes around yelling all the time.
- Third, we learn that *she is enslaved to dark human powers*.
 - Individuals like this girl were highly prized because people would pay money to consult them before making a major decision. Apparently, some men saw a potential gold mine in this girl’s abilities. And so, they purchased her.
 - Was she sold by her parents? We don’t know but she becomes a slave to these men who exploit her and her abilities.
- What a contrast to Lydia.
 - Lydia is free. This girl is a slave.
 - Lydia controls her whole life. This girl controls nothing.
 - Lydia has a name and is well known. This girl has no name and is only known for what she can do.
 - Lydia earns money and spends it how she wants. This girl earns money and has to give it all to her masters.
 - Lydia could engage in rational discussion. This girl is psychologically unstable.
 - So, this 12-year-old girl is enslaved by a dark spiritual master and by dark human masters.

FORTUNE TELLING AND EVIL SPIRITS IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

- Now, perhaps you are sitting there thinking, **“Good grief! Fortune telling? Evil spirits? This is why I can’t accept Christianity. It’s so full of superstitions that we as educated, scientifically minded, urban people no longer accept.”**
 - Really? I would submit that this girl and the people in the city of Philippi fit perfectly with the city of Victoria.
- Let me show you what I mean: **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Here is a screenshot I took of an article from the CBC. It is an article on your horoscope for the next month. It was the lead article on the front page. And let’s be clear: the CBC is not some extremist underground news source. It is Canada’s largest news broadcaster.
 - The CBC made this their lead article because millions of Canadians believe that there are people who have the gift of being able interpret the zodiac and offer advice on your future. Many people make decisions based on these people’s advice.
- And that is just scratching the surface.
 - Before making decisions about money, career, or relationships, educated urban people in Victoria consult other people in our culture whom they believe have the spirit of the python. They consult people who:

- Do tarot card readings.
 - People who have the clairvoyant ability to read your aura.
 - People who understand the power of crystals.
 - People who go into trance like states in order to channel information from spiritual sources that are said to be goddesses, ascended masters, spirit guides, angels, and nature spirits.
 - People pay thousands of dollars to go to meditation retreats or read books from teachers like Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle.
- All of this is based on the idea that certain people have the ability to access the spiritual realm in ways you do not and so can help you with your future.
 - Like in Philippi, none of these people or their abilities are viewed as evil. They are viewed as neutral and beneficial. The spirit of the Python is alive and well among urban educated people living in the Pacific Northwest.
 - So, if we were to modernize this girl she is like a teenage girl who has been raised in Victoria on new age spirituality, who is proficient with things like tarot cards, channelling, and psychic readings. But she has been kicked out of her house. She's addicted to drugs and lives on the streets. All day she wanders around downtown talking to herself and yelling random things. She makes money with her skills but has to give it all to her drug dealers.
 - Such a girl needs more than a rational discussion about Jesus. She needs a power encounter. She needs outside help.

YOU GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY

- I have no doubt that there are many tricksters and charlatans among those who claim to be able to predict the future. But I also have no doubt that much of this is real. This girl's abilities seem to be real for after the spirit leaves her she can no longer make predictions about the future.
 - The Bible teaches that there is a spiritual realm. Just as God and angels exist, so evil spirits exist. We must be careful here for the Bible does not say evil spirits are behind every bush. It certainly does not teach that every person is possessed by an evil spirit. Even in the Bible, this is a rare thing.
 - However, the Bible does say that the whole world is enslaved by the evil one, that he is the god of this age, and that he blinds people's minds to their true condition. Some new age teachers are tricksters and charlatans but there are many who have come out of it and say they were truly led by spirits who guided their thoughts and enabled them to write books.
- But you might say, ***"I'm not into new age teaching. I'm not mastered by anything."*** We all want to believe we are free and totally in control of our lives. But we certainly know that some people are not. Think of drug addicts or alcoholics. They often have deep layers of denial and refuse to really admit they have a problem. That is why we families will often do an intervention. They try to break through the denial to say, ***"You are an addict. This alcohol has mastered you. You need help."***
 - The Bible says that spiritually speaking we are all addicts. We all want to believe we are free in and totally in control of our lives. But this is a deep layer of denial. Apart from Jesus we are slaves to all kinds of different masters.
- If what you want most is the approval of others then you will be a slave to the master of approval. If what you want most is power then you will serve this master and do whatever it takes to gain power. If what you want most is pleasure then you will always be giving yourself to this master.
 - The great problem though is that serving any master, other than Jesus, will ultimately destroy you.
 - If you devote yourself to the master of physical beauty you will ultimately end depressed when age eventually takes all your youthful beauty.

- The master of money will work you to the bone and leave you anxious and never satisfied.
 - If what really matters to you is looking like you have it all together then you will crush your spouse and children with expectations of perfection.
- Pastor Tim Keller tells the story of a woman in his church. Before Jesus changed her life, she said that she was basically an addict to men and to sex. She so needed male attention and love that she would give herself to men who abused her and then she would stay with them.
 - Do you know the old 1960's song "You're Nobody till Somebody Loves You"? That is how she felt.
 - I'll come back to her story in a few minutes but, for now, we see that she was enslaved to the masters of male approval and sexual pleasure.
- Think of all of this like Gollum and the ring. Gollum loves the ring. He refers to it as "my precious." It grants him long life and strength. But behind the ring stands a dark power that slowly enslaves him.
 - The Bible is saying that, apart from Jesus, we have all given ourselves to things that master us. Behind these things are dark powers that want to keep us from God. What is your precious? What is the thing you live for? If it is not God himself, it is a dark master.
 - Like addicts, we need outside help. Like the woman in Keller's story, we need outside help. Like this girl in Philippi, we need outside help.

THE DARK MASTERS WHO ATTACK US

- Before we talk about this help, there is a second thing this story teaches us about what it means to be a church that is seeking to bring the good news to the city. Secondly, this story also teaches us about **(SHOW SLIDE 4) the dark masters who attack us.**
 - Paul and his friends have just experienced great success in sharing the good news about Jesus with people like Lydia. It is not surprising then that there is a counter-attack from the dark spiritual forces of the city.
- Look at verses 17-18. **READ 17-18a - 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.**
 - When it says she was "crying out" it can mean to shout, to yell, or even to shriek or scream.
- Notice what she is shouting: **"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."** Now is there anything wrong with this? In one sense the answer is "no." Are Paul and his friends servants of God? Yes. The Most High God is a way of speaking of the one God who is above all. Is that accurate? Yes. God is referred to as "the Most High God" many times in the Old Testament.¹ Is their purpose in the city to proclaim the way of salvation? Yes. That is why they came to Philippi.
 - So isn't this spirit helping them? No. This is an attack. How so? The average person walking down Pandora Ave in Phillipi had no Judeo-Christian ideas in their mind at all. The average person would interpret this to mean that these men were servants of the highest God in the Greek pantheon, who is Zeus. This average person would think of the way of "salvation" to refer to being freed from the powers that determine human fate. It is all very misleading.
 - There is even more confusion because this announcement is coming from a girl who is psychologically unstable whom everyone knows is related to the god Apollo. She is yelling this and shrieking it. So, what would you think if you saw a drug addicted homeless girl on Pandora yelling at a bunch of men, saying, **"Hey! These men are servants of the God who is greater than all other gods. They will tell you how God can rescue you"?**

¹ Gen 14:18–20; Num 24:16; Dan 3:26; 4:32; 5:18, 21.

- Paul is annoyed by this because even though it attracts crowds and may start a conversation, it ultimately just causes confusion about who Jesus is.
- As we bring the good news to our city today, dark powers sow seeds of confusion among the truths about Jesus. On the one hand, most people today rightly believe that Jesus existed and was a loving man. But then so many other ideas are added that it confuses everything.
 - I had a friend who went to one of these expensive self-help weekend seminars. He went into a sweat lodge and says he received a spirit guide whose name is Jesus.
 - I spoke with a man at a pool who said he loved Jesus' teachings in the sermon on the mount but was appalled by the idea that Jesus is the Son of God.
 - I know many Mormons who believe in Jesus but they believe Jesus is the spirit brother of Lucifer who is a man that became a god.
- The scriptures teach that behind all of this confusion are dark spiritual powers that create confusion and blind the minds of people so they cannot see who Jesus is.
 - So we are called to go to the city and tell people about Jesus. But how can we do this when dark spiritual powers enslave people and attack the message?
 - These masters are too powerful. We need outside help.

THE ONE MASTER WHO SETS US FREE

- In the final place, let's talk about (**SHOW SLIDE 5**) **the one master who sets us free.**
 - Let's pick up the last part of the story in verse 18. **READ 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."***
- I love this. Paul is very human. He is patient for a while but he gets annoyed that this spirit is confusing people, discrediting the message, and tormenting the girl. And so he speaks, but notice he does not speak to the girl. She is not the problem. He speaks to the spirit of the Python within her.
 - He calls upon a power far greater than himself and far greater than the spirit. He calls upon "Jesus Christ." "Christ" means Messiah, or chosen one.
 - Way back in Genesis 3, God promised to send a man, a chosen one, a Messiah, who would do battle against the most powerful evil spirit, the devil, and he would crush this serpent's head. Paul is saying, the man named Jesus *is* the One, the Messiah. Jesus came to set us free. How?
- Jesus, the eternal Son of God, voluntarily set aside all the glory that he was entitled to in heaven. Philippians 2 says the Master became a slave. That is, he took on a human nature and served his creation. Do you want to know what kind of Master Jesus is? Look at him washing his disciples' feet. Look at him healing people from sickness. But most of all, look at him giving his life.
 - As this girl was sold for money and bound by powerful men, Jesus allowed himself to be sold for money and to be bound by powerful men. And then the Master who became a slave allowed himself to be crucified.
 - On the cross he screamed in agony and cried out in a loud voice to the Most High God. He was not just exploited; He was tortured. He was not just abused; He was murdered.
- It seemed like the way of salvation hit a dead end. The dark spiritual powers thought they had triumphed over him. But the cross was the instrument of their defeat.
 - They nailed him to a tree but they didn't know that their actions would free those who were bound in sin.
 - They gave him a cross but did not guess that he would turn it into a throne.
 - They thought they had maneuvered events to defeat the Master and but they did not know that it was the Master who had put them into checkmate.
 - The serpent struck Jesus' heel and killed him but the serpent did not see the boot coming down on his own head.

- For on the cross Jesus paid the price that enslaved people might go free. Therefore, God raised him from the dead and gave him authority over all things. The Master who became a slave has now become the Master over everything and will one day return to rule forever.
- It is this Jesus and his authority whom Paul calls upon. And what is the result? Is there a great battle between the spirit of the Python and Jesus? No. It is very anticlimactic.
 - We simply read, it came out that very hour, which is an idiomatic way of saying, “immediately.” As Charles Wesley wrote,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Jesus! The name high over all
In hell, or earth, or sky:
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly**
- This passage is teaching us that there are powers that are too great for us. Who or what can help me?
 - I don’t need a guru and I don’t need a self-help book. My need is far greater than that.
 - I don’t need crystals or horoscopes. I need something far more powerful.
 - I need someone who can free me dark spiritual powers. I need someone who can break the power of my sin. I need someone who can rescue me from death and save me from eternal judgement.
 - And here is the good news. There is one who can do this. He is the Son of the Most High God. He is the snake-crusher. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. His name is Jesus and he came to set us free.
- Have you called upon him to rescue you? He is ready, willing and able. You gotta serve somebody. Why not serve a Master who is so kind and gracious? He has proved that he has your best interests at heart. He became a slave for you.
 - Look at what he did for this girl. She was psychologically unstable, tormented, and in bondage to men and a spirit. But Jesus set her free and made her whole.
- Jesus did the same thing for the woman Tim Keller was talking to. After she had become a Christian, Keller asked her if she was ever tempted to go back to her old life.
 - She said, **“Of course. But if I see a good-looking guy there is a speech I say to myself. I say to him in my heart, ‘You’re kind of good looking. Maybe we’ll get together and even get married but you need to know one thing: you might become my husband but you will never be my life. Jesus Christ is my life.’”**
 - Do you see what she is doing? She is saying, **“If I make a man my master, I’ll destroy him and he’ll destroy me, because I’ll need him. No, I’ll never be a good wife unless Jesus is my master. I have to demote a man if I’m really going to love him for I can’t ask him to save me. Only Jesus can do that.”**
- It is the same for you and I. There is only one Master who will not destroy you in the end. There is only one Master who has your best interest at heart.
 - Jesus is the Master who became a slave in order to set you free. Bow your knee to him and give him your life. And then join us as we go to the city and tell people about this good news for as Luke writes earlier in the book of Acts: **“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”**