

Chapter 41: Our Prowling and Roaring Adversary

Acts 16:16–24

In the beginning of the work in Philippi, the gospel ministry seemed simple. At the gentle place of prayer, Paul and his companions discovered some worshipers of God, and one of them trusted Christ for salvation. This was clean, straightforward, and encouraging. But, not all ministry will be so simple. Upon trying to return to this place, Paul is harassed by a slave-girl oppressed by a demon. In casting out this demon, the apostles experience the wrath of the devil through the people of Philippi. This story illustrates a pattern that God's people have experienced throughout the history of the church, in both the Old and New Testaments: *Jesus' power over demons provokes demonic rage.*

Jesus' Power over Demons (Acts 16:16–18)

Luke opens this new section with a very clear link to the “place of prayer” where they had previously met Lydia: “As we were going to the place of prayer...” (v. 16a; see Acts 16:13).¹ Yet, on there way there they meet a girl who is utterly unlike Lydia, who had been “a worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14): “...we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling” (v. 16b). Bruce notes that these two women, along with the jailer they will meet in the next section, “differ so much one from another that he might be thought to have deliberately selected them in order to show how the saving name of Jesus proved its power in the lives of the most diverse types of men and women.”²

The word for the “divination” this girl practiced was “Python,” and it “originally designated the mythical serpent or dragon that dwelt in the region of Pytho at the foot of the Parnassus in Phocis and was said to have guarded the oracle at Delphi until it was slain by the god Apollo. Then the word became the appellation for those who professed to reveal future events such as those associated with the Delphic oracle.”³ Polhill notes that “Greeks and Romans put great stock on augury and divination. No commander would set out on a major military campaign nor would an emperor make an important decree without first consulting an oracle to see how things might turn out. A slave girl with a clairvoyant gift was thus a veritable gold mine for her owners.”⁴ Lenski makes a sad, but true, observation: “The world has not changed in this respect. Girls are still exploited—just so money can be made through them, no matter what becomes of their souls or their bodies.”⁵

Luke continues, narrating that this girl “Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation’” (v. 17). This demonic effort made the work of the missionaries difficult in a few different ways. To begin, these words were unclear and even misleading to those who would have heard them:

¹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 463.

² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 332.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 662.

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 351.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 663.

None of this would have been very clear to Gentiles. The term “God most high” was a common Old Testament term for God, but the same term was equally common in the Gentile world and was particularly applied to Zeus. Neither would “way of salvation” be immediately clear to a Gentile. The Greco-Roman world was full of “saviors.” Savior/deliverer, salvation/deliverance were favorite terms. The emperor dubbed himself “savior” of the people. All of which is to show why Paul finally became irritated with the girl’s constant acclamations.⁶

More than that, her cries insidiously suggested that this demon-possessed girl was on the same side as the apostles, so that “there should have been no longer any difference between the wholesome doctrine of Christ and the mocks of Satan.”⁷ Even the noisy, forward demeanor of this girl toward the missionaries would have raised all kinds of questions about them so as to overshadow their message with unearned doubt and concern.⁸ Worse still, this girl “kept doing [this] for many days” (v. 18a). Nothing about this harassment resembled “Lydia’s quiet turning in heart to the Lord.”⁹

Finally, after many days of this demonic harassment, Luke writes that “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” (v. 18b). Luke does not explain why Paul did not act sooner to cast the demon out of this girl, and in the absence of information it is important to avoid speculation. To begin, it is important to remember that “Miracles are never wrought at the discretion of the human agent,” so that Paul had to wait for the Lord’s direction.¹⁰ Why, then, did the *Lord* delay in casting out this demon? In avoiding speculation, two answers seem strongest. First, as Calvin notes, the long conflict ensured that more people came to understand that the girl was not endorsing the missionaries, but that she was actually their enemy.¹¹ Second, Lenski observes that “We may venture to say that the Lord let it continue as long as he did because he wanted Paul to finish his work in Philippi; for after he drove out the spirit Paul had to leave the city (v. 39, 40).”¹²

Demonic Rage against Jesus (Acts 16:19–24)

The transitional phrase into the next sentence involves wordplay: “But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone...” (v. 19a). The word translated as “gone” comes from the same Greek word that had described how the demon “came out” of the girl: “With the spirit the owners’ prospects for further profit also exited.”¹³ In line with the proverb that no good deed goes unpunished, the slave girl’s owners “seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers” (v. 19b). Subtly, the “we” that had involved Luke and Timothy (see Acts 16:3, 10–15) has now shifted back to “they.” Yet, “The fact that they were absent was providential, for they thereby escaped being compelled to leave the city. The Lord’s hand ruled even in

⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 351.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:108.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 665.

⁹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 333.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 665.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:111.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 666.

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 351.

apparent disaster.”¹⁴

Calvin draws an important lesson from this scene, teaching that here “we are taught that we must not rashly condemn things which are well done, and that which is taken in hand at the commandment of God, though an unhappy success follow.”¹⁵ Sometimes even believers are tempted to criticize and condemn other Christians who encounter troubles and tribulations, thinking to ourselves, “They brought that upon themselves.” The Scriptures urge us to much greater caution concerning such attitudes and suspicions toward our fellow believers.

In bringing the missionaries before the magistrates, their accusations are vague, but inflammatory: “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (vv. 20–21). By remaining vague, the owners do not name the real event (or the covetousness that it provoked) for opposing the missionaries.¹⁶ Yet, they claim that the men were “advocat[ing] customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice,” without naming any specific practice.¹⁷ These charges (and the underlying covetousness) echo the ancient slander of Haman to King Ahasuerus in Persia (Esth. 3:8–9).

Apparently, these vague, but strategic, charges were enough to achieve the men’s desired effects: “The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods” (v. 22). Like their Master Jesus, the defendants were given no justice but treated as though they had committed the most heinous crimes, in spite of their innocence.¹⁸ After abusing these holy men as much as they desired, they committed them to prison: “And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks” (vv. 23–24). The word “safely” does not suggest a sudden concern for the missionaries; rather, it means that the jailer “was held responsible with his own life for their safekeeping as were the guards that kept Peter in 12:4, who lost their lives after his escape.”¹⁹ In response, the jailer put them in the maximum security area (“the inner prison”) and treated them cruelly (“fastened their feet in the stocks”).

Here we see one more figure in this chapter about the mission in Philippi, altogether different from both Lydia and the slave girl. As Bruce writes, “it took an earthquake and imminent danger of death to make him take thought for his salvation; yet it was the same gospel as had blessed these two women that now brought blessing to him.”²⁰ As the gospel spread through previous persecutions, so the gospel will spread in maximum security prison.

Discussion Questions

1. Where was “the place of prayer” (v. 16; see Acts 16:13)? Whom had Paul and his companions met

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 667.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:112.

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 353.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 669.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:115.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 672.

²⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 336–37.

there previously (Acts 16:14)? What had characterized Lydia's conversion (Acts 16:14–15)? Whom does Paul and his companions meet on the present trip (v. 16)? What is "divination" (v. 16)? How did people practice divination in the Old and New Testaments? How might people practice divination today? Why is divination an abomination to the Lord?

2. What characterizes her interactions with Paul and the others (v. 17)? What were her statements about the identity and mission of these missionaries calculated to do in the eyes of the others living in Philippi? Why do you think that Paul waited so long to cast out this demon from this girl (v. 18a)? What happens when Paul rebukes the unclean spirit (v. 18b)? How does this exorcism compare to the exorcisms that Jesus performed in the Gospels?

3. Why were the owners of the fortune telling girl upset with Paul and Silas (v. 19)? Why did they say that they were upset with Paul and Silas (vv. 20–21)? How do their words compare with the accusations of Haman against the Jews in the Old Testament (Esth. 3:8–9)? What do their accusations stir up the city to do against Paul and Silas (v. 22)? What does the jailer add to the mistreatment of these missionaries (vv. 23–24)?

4. Why does the devil rage against Christ and Christ's people (Rev. 12:12)? How do we see here an example of how the devil both prowls and roars (1 Pet. 5:8)? Why must we be watchful for the harassment and violence of the devil and those influenced by him? To what degree are you aware of the prowling devil in the world? How does Jesus' death and resurrection provide us with hope against the devil's rage (Heb. 2:14–15)?