



## The Adventure of Faith - The Power of Worship Acts 16:16-24 Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018

T.Yacomeni

### Acts 16:16-34 Paul and Silas in prison

One of the greatest privileges of being a Christian in our day and age is that God's Word the bible is freely available for each and every one of us to read and study whenever we like. If you have ever read the story of Brother Andrew in God's smuggler, it certainly opens your eyes to the fact that only a few decades ago Christians in many countries behind the iron curtain and other oppressive countries today would give their right arm to get hold of just a few more pages of the scriptures to feed them spiritually. So it is a total privilege to look at the scriptures and hear the Lord's voice speaking to us as we open our hearts to listen. As it says in Revelation 'Let him who has ears to hear, hear what the spirit says to the churches'.

As we have continued studying the book of Acts in our sermon series 'The adventure of faith' I have been amazed how much God has spoken to me through Luke's account of the life and activities of the Apostle Paul. Last week we saw how after seeing a vision of a man beckoning them to 'come over and help us' Paul and his companions sailed from Troas to Macedonia and headed for the commercial centre of Philippi. Instead of preaching to crowds as they might have hoped, the team ended up chatting to a few women at a riverside prayer spot and there a business woman called Lydia became the first European convert to Christianity. You never know what God is doing behind the scenes because as well as being baptised, Lydia's response to the love of Christ was to offer hospitality, so her home became a bridgehead for the church in Europe and the city of Philippi.

I love the story of Lydia because it very much echoes the story of our church planting teams working in West Wick and Haywood Village. Little by little, one person at a time, the Kingdom of God is surely coming to those two communities. Ellie Gray is now running a weekly small group meeting at the home of Simon and Caroline Williams on West Wick. Fiona Mayne has now moved into Haywood village and just like Lydia, she is wanting to open up her home for a weekly life group and church to get established in Haywood Village. These are bridgeheads for the Kingdom in those communities and it is so exciting to see what the Lord is doing there.

But whenever there is a strategic Kingdom advance, you often encounter spiritual opposition. And today's passage of scripture describes the spiritual backlash that affected Paul and Silas.

I shared at the weekend away that over the past couple of weeks I have had several dreams which seem to be explicitly about spiritual attack.

The first was of being attacked and pinned down by a wolf. Instead of being killed by it, I was simply pinned down, unable to move until I felt really sleepy.

The second dream was of Mims and I driving up a wooded mountain road, only to meet an angry strongman at the top who proceeded to push us all the way back down to the bottom.

Then on Thursday night I had a third dream, of being stuck in a room with a huge snake that was trying to coil itself around me.

All three images are clear biblical pictures of evil at work— a wolf, a strongman and a snake all represent the devil. The devil does not like it when the kingdom is advancing and I believe I was given the dreams

as a warning from the Lord to be on our guard, to stand firm and resist the devil opposition to the good work happening in Locking Castle and in Weston.

If Jesus was not immune from spiritual attack from Satan, and if Paul found himself directly opposed from time to time, then as Christians we need to make sure we are not unaware of the devil's schemes and instead, prepare and be ready to take action.

Thankfully today's reading gives us some real clear teaching on some of the signs of Spiritual attack and how we can overcome it together.

### **Acts 16:16-34**

*<sup>16</sup> Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' <sup>18</sup> She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned round and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her. <sup>19</sup> When her owners realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place to face the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought them before the magistrates and said, 'These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar <sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise.' <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. <sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' <sup>31</sup> They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.' <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptised. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household.*

So let's just set the scene for a moment. Paul and Silas have been staying at Lydia's house, and they made it their habit to go to the 'proseuche' – an informal place of prayer which was situated by the riverside outside the city. There weren't enough Jews living in the city to form a formal synagogue and no new religions were legally allowed inside the city walls, so they had to make do with meeting informally down by the river.

Then a woman starts following them, shouting out 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' Now at first glance it looks like she is simply being truthful, but it is clear to Paul that something is not right. The King James version says she was a 'damsel possessed by a spirit of divination.' More literally the Greek says she was a 'slave-girl with a Python-spirit'.

In Greek mythology, Python was the serpent, guardian of underworld who was slain by Apollo, but the name Pythia remained as the title of an Oracle whose prophetic powers came from the depths of the earth via Apollo himself.

Whatever the source of her powers of divination, this kind of state sanctioned soothsaying was big business at the time. But how exactly did this Python-spirit attack Paul and Silas?

First – it created a **distraction** and hindered them from going to the place of prayer. The text says the girl was shouting or shrieking at them – really hard to ignore.

Second – it stirred up unhelpful dissension and **division** in the community, causing trouble, bad publicity and even legal challenges for Paul and Silas.

Third – it sowed prophetic **confusion**. When the girl said ‘These men are servants of the Most High God’ the Citizens of Philippi would have naturally thought ‘the Most High God’ she was referring to was Zeus or Apollo rather than Yahweh of the Judeo-Christian faith. In other words twisting truth and reframing the Gospel as one path amongst many. Twisted half truths are a deception tactic of the enemy.

Jesus tells us that the Devil is the father of lies, who comes to steal, kill and destroy and he is at work through his powers and principalities today.

So how do you know if you are coming under spiritual attack?

Well maybe you are finding yourself continually distracted away from your peaceful place of prayer. Maybe your circumstances are shrieking at you. Crisis after crisis which robs your peace, and prevents you from quietening your soul and entering into God’s presence. Maybe there people are stirring up trouble for you. Even mounting legal challenges against you, seemingly out of nowhere. Perhaps there are unjust and destructive divisions within families or in the community – particularly about money. That is the devil at work. Maybe you find yourself confused by people speaking half-truths that present a distorted picture of reality. Perhaps they are proclaiming different Gospel – where the truth about Jesus is twisted and distorted, where even the plain words of scripture are somehow misinterpreted or undermined or misrepresented.

**Distraction, division, confusion.** Classic signs of spiritual attack.

So Paul comes against the evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ and casts it out of the girl. There is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain and bondage. This girl was freed from her frantic shrieking, able to find peace again and pursue the truth. But the spirit of python was not finished yet. Paul and Silas ended up in prison, locked up in total darkness, behind bars, restrained and restricted. Perhaps you feel restricted and chained, locked up by circumstances beyond your control. It could be spiritual attack pressing down on you wanting you to give up and quit the spiritual fight. But thankfully Paul and Silas show us exactly how to fight back, and grab the keys to freedom from Spiritual attack.

And like a great Baptist preach they all begin with the letter P.

The first P is **partnership**. Paul and Silas were together in the prison. And they were able to encourage one another spiritually. Sometimes we need just a helping hand to keep our eyes above the water-line. If you are under attack ask someone to take a stand with you in the fight.

Second and third Ps. **Prayer** and **Praise**. They sang hymns and prayed together. If you are under spiritual attack never underestimate the power of worship, ask someone to pray with you and seek out opportunities to sing God's praise. As they prayed and sang hymns together, an earthquake hit and all the doors flung open. Prayer and worship didn't just bring freedom for Paul and Silas but for everyone in the prison cells! The others might have been guilty criminals for all we know, but God' grace brings freedom for all as we pray and worship the Lord.

The Philippian jailer was terrified that his life would be forfeit for letting the prisoners escape. He was about to commit suicide when Paul cried out 'don't worry – we are all here!! The Jailer falls trembling before them begging them 'Sirs , What must I do to be saved?' – As NT Wright says, he wasn't just thinking about his eternal destiny when he asked this – he wanted to know what to do to be saved from this current mess and his suicidal thoughts!

Paul shows us the final key to freedom – the Final P: **Proclaim** the Gospel.

Whether it's eternal security or rescue from the current mess and circumstances of our lives that concerns us, the answer is the same. Paul tells the Philippian jailer: *Believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved – you and your whole household.* Paul didn't say 'strike a deal with me and I will protect you,' he didn't say 'commit right now to stand up for love and justice' he told him the true essence of the gospel: *Believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved – you and your whole household.* Are you in deep trouble today? *Believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!*

So here's what I want you to do. Hold up three fingers. Pray like mad, praise the Lord and proclaim the Gospel. That's how we fight.

And the doors to the prison flew open, by the power of Almighty God.