

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-10-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 16:16-25

Additional Bible Reading: Matthew 12:22-30

Persecution on freeing the slave girl

Introduction

Following the conversion of Lydia, an independent, successful, God-fearing businesswoman of reputable character, we read of someone from the opposite end of the social scale being delivered. This was an unfortunate, demon-possessed slave girl, owned by unscrupulous men and exploited for her weakness and infirmity for material profit.

This story introduces a familiar theme – the opposition aroused by the Gospel, when men's beliefs, way of life, habits and pockets are likely to be affected. This had already happened in Jerusalem, Cyprus and Turkey, and now it happened in Greece. The Gospel was counter to the religious convictions of the Jews, the personal interests of the Greeks, and the national interests of the Romans.

There is always a reaction to the Gospel. We should not be surprised when it happens. We are going to consider the occasion of persecution, the nature of that persecution, and the result of it.

The occasion of persecution

Paul and the others were on their way to the place of prayer when they met the slave girl. She had the spirit of a python, i.e. she was possessed a spirit by which she predicted the future (NIV), or a spirit of divination (AV). It was believed that the Greek god Apollo was embodied in a snake or python. Therefore it was his spirit that inspired the woman with clairvoyance, they claimed. This was not trickery; it was devilish and supernatural evil. This girl was believed to be able to give oracles to direct people about the future, and she also appeared to be mad. The ancient world had a queer respect for mad people because they believed the gods had taken away their wits and put the minds of gods into them. Evil men had got hold of the girl as they saw she was an easy way to make money.

No doubt her fortune-telling business was patronised by business people, those interested in marriage, leaders looking for advise on political matters. There is still the same fascination today with wanting to know the future – hence the horoscopes in the newspaper, and astrologers on TV. The girl would not be aware of what she was saying because she was possessed by evil powers. But she was a lucrative asset for the men owning her body and soul.

The slave girl proclaimed Paul and his companions to be the servants of the Most High God, telling the people the way to be saved (Acts 16:17). It is not surprising that an evil spirit recognised who these men were, after all, demons in Jesus' day had recognised Him as the Son of God and the Holy One of God (Luke 4:34,41; 8:28).

The girls crying, screaming and shouting went on for many days. Finally Paul faced the problem head on. He made a bold frontal attack on the power and kingdom of Satan. He could not stand by and do nothing in the presence of evil, Satanism and sin. **He turned around 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** (Acts 16:18). This was exorcism, the devil and evil being driven out. Jesus and His disciples had done the same thing in Matthew 8:16, Matthew 10:1 and Luke 10:20.

Then on the Cross of Calvary Jesus defeated the power of Satan supremely. When Jesus was describing the Cross, He used the phrase; **the prince of this world will be driven out** (John 12:31). Paul explained, **having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross** (Colossians 2:15). This is a very important aspect of Salvation. By His Cross, the Lord dealt with all the problems we know about sin and evil. There is an emphasis on deliverance from guilt and condemnation of sin by His work of Salvation. Jesus took on the power of evil and Satan, and defeated it in the Cross and Resurrection.

*“Jesus, the name high over all’
In hell or earth or sky.
Angels and men before it fall
And devils fear and fly.”*

*“He breaks the power of cancelled sin.
He sets the prisoner free.”*

In Jesus there is forgiveness, life, liberty and deliverance. People scoff at the idea of the Devil and the personal power of evil. But we should believe in it – because Jesus did. We should be aware as Christians and churches that we are under attack. Sometimes things go wrong, and it is our own silly fault. But other problems are obviously not our doing. Upsets, trials, the work being undermined, malevolent evil personal intelligence purposing to wear us out and discourage us and bring us down and make us fall. Before preaching or praying, many evil thoughts, blasphemous and filthy, fill the mind and are on the tip of the tongue. We must not be cowed or frightened or discouraged. Put on the armour of God. Stand in Christ’s strength and resist the Devil, confidently and expectantly. **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith** (1 Peter 5:8,9). **Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you** (James 4:7).

The nature of persecution

Paul soon discovered that in exorcising the devil and freeing the slave girl he won himself no favours from the girl’s master. They were not concerned with her healing; in fact they were alarmed by it. It hit their pockets, and that was their main concern. Her well-being was unimportant.

So the missionaries were manhandled and brought before the authorities. Carefully worded accusations were made against them. The accusers did not mention the real cause of their anger, but instead made false accusations about them being Jews and teaching customs unacceptable to the Romans. It was a clever move to play on the

anti-Jewish feeling. Mention a Jew, and at once people would side with the other person. So the magistrates had the missionaries' clothes torn off them, and had them severely beaten by public attendants. Then they were thrown into prison – in fact the inner prison, or the dungeon, the place usually used for those who were going to be executed. Their feet were kept fast in the stocks, probably with legs wide apart to cause excruciating pain.

The whole thing was based on false charges. The men were totally innocent. Their rights as Roman citizens had been forgotten. Mob rule had taken over. Gross injustice satisfied the greed of a few selfish men.

The Gospel with its exposure of sin and proclamation of God's will and authority always arouses opposition. Vested interests soon oppose it, because it touches people's sins, habits, money and lifestyle. (A similar thing happened in Ephesus – riots resulted when the Gospel affected the silver image industry.) Consider the opposition to the Reformers of the sixteenth century, the opposition to Christians seeking to abolish the slave trade, the opposition to revival when publicans and purveyors of vice found their takings were affected. Consider the reactions of the drug-dealers and pornographers, who are not interested in people's well-being, health, purity or truth, but only in their personal wealth and power over people. They use lies, ridicule, opposition and misrepresentation to get rid of the threat to themselves.

When the Christian is facing persecution, it is not his own fault or because of foolish words or unwise actions. Do not be surprised by it. When the Gospel is faithfully preached – people will react.

In our turn, when people make us angry, or a book or sermon makes us angry, we need to make sure that the real reason for our anger isn't just that our conscience has been touched and we don't like what we have been confronted with. In that case, our objections are not real reasons, but they are indicative of sin in our lives.

Reaction to persecution

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25), backs bleeding and feet twisted in stocks. What a time, what a place, and what a condition! How often God's people sing in adversity and profitably find themselves employed in jail. Some of Paul's letters were penned from the prison cell. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was written in Bedford jail. Samuel Rutherford had great experiences of Christ in Aberdeen jail, which he recorded in letters, and were an inspiration to many generations. Men before the firing squad have been known to sing praise to God until the moment they were shot.

What was their secret? How could they rejoice and be steadfast in adversity? **In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:37-39).

Conclusion

This is a message which reminds us of the extent and effectiveness of Christ's salvation. We are not just saved from the guilt of sin, but from the very power of evil itself. Do you know that deliverance in your life?

The truth always brings a reaction – people either submit to it or they kick against it. This explains the opposition we may expect. We should not be surprised when we are rejected because our message is more than people can take. When adversity comes, we are never forsaken by God. We are more than conquerors through Him that loves us – and that is our privilege.