

Pythons & Prison Songs
(*Trusting God in difficult circumstances*)
Acts 16:16-40 on July 11, 2021
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Please read Acts 16:16-40 before going further in this transcript.

Today's sermon title is "Pythons & Prison Songs." The Scripture reading clearly records the "Prison Songs," but you may be wondering WHERE are the "Pythons!?"¹ If we read between the lines a little, Pythons do actually show up in our text this morning; they're right in Acts 16:16, "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." This spirit was actually "A demonic 'python' spirit."² The *ESV* translates this as "a spirit of divination." But this could be translated more "literally 'a python spirit.'"³ The origin story for the "python spirit" comes from the legend of the Greek & Roman god Apollo. Supposedly he defeated a snake, or some might say a dragon, that once inhabited Delphi. Delphi is located SW of Philippi, down near Athens, which we'll get to in Acts 17. These python beliefs had spread to places like Philippi. The priestesses of this "python spirit" were said to be overpowered by it, which then enabled them to foretell the future.

Now, one scholar notes the unwise reluctance of Christians today, "to see ANYTHING as demonic or being influenced by [evil] spiritual forces."⁴ Too many of us Christ-followers, quickly dismiss this kind of thing as a bunch of "spiritual mumbo jumbo." However, it's worth pointing out that there are still plenty of people in our world today, who are being deceived into thinking that things like Tarot cards and other forms of divination are good ways to determine their future and to make choices. The mystery and immediacy of these things can be quite alluring! Just to be clear, any kind of divination or seeking guidance from secret powers is a sin against god.⁵ Therefore, it should be removed from our lives and avoided in every way. In fact, a few chapters later Acts 19:17-19 reveals that, "...the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly...." The reality of these kinds of pagan practices, sets the scene for the kind of belief systems that the gospel, and the Early Church, were up against. But the "python spirit" was just ONE of the MANY belief systems that people in Paul's day subscribed

¹ And, we don't have any plans to practice snake handling or anything like that! Consider Mark 16:17-18 and Acts 28:1-6.

² "...The python was a mythical snake worshipped at Delphi and associated with the Delphic oracle. The term 'python' came to be used of the persons through whom the python spirit supposedly spoke. Since such persons spoke involuntarily, the term 'ventriloquist' was used to describe them. To what extent she actually predicted the future is not known." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1859 footnote on Acts 16:16.

³ "...The python symbolized the oracle at Delphi in central Greece, where a priestess in a trance-like state represented the god Apollo and predicted the future. The python terminology is sometimes also associated with ventriloquism, since the priestess would speak involuntarily with the voice of the god. Both Greeks and Romans put great stock in divination." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:16.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock citing Fernando, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 537.

⁵ Consider Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8; and Isaiah 8:19-20.

to. The fact is, the gospel was continually facing head-to-head encounters with a wide variety of competing religious ideas. Ideas including: > The spirit world, > Emperor worship, and > a whole pantheon of multiple Roman & Greek gods. However, despite this challenging arena of religious ideas and opinions, Christianity was more than able to stand its ground!⁶

Please turn or click in your Bible to Acts 16:17. Today we're continuing to learn about Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey. Last Sunday we walked along with Paul, Silas, and Timothy as they traveled mostly west and a little north, all the way to Philippi. Now that they are in Philippi, things get pretty interesting! First of all, they encounter a slave girl with a python spirit through which she supposedly could predict the future. Acts 16:17-18 tells us, "She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God,⁷ who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became SO annoyed that 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." Verse 18 does not portray Paul in a very flattering light. Here we have this deeply troubled woman, who is possessed by an evil, python spirit, and he finds her ANNOYING! To be fair though, it is the evil spirit that he finds annoying. From Paul's perspective, this spirit was disrupting their gospel ministry with its CONSTANT shouting, day after day.⁸ Because she's possessed by an evil spirit, this slave's behavior was serving to harass God's messenger.⁹

This exorcism has two important distinctions that we should note. First of all, 1) It demonstrates Jesus' authority over evil spirits. This was NOT a demonstration of Paul's power, but the power of Jesus. Second of all, 2) It spotlights Jesus as the central message of the gospel. After this miracle is performed "in the name of Jesus Christ," there is little room left for confusion, about who Paul and Silas were proclaiming.¹⁰ People would not only want to know what power was great enough to cast out this spirit, but also what message these men were proclaiming. We can only imagine how quickly the word spread all throughout Philippi!

Be that as it may, casting this spirit out must have certainly come as a HUGE personal blessing and relief to this slave woman. Even though it was admittedly prompted by Paul's own annoyance, this was nonetheless an act of kindness. However, rather than earning him a thank you note or a word of affirmation, it earned him and Silas a severe beating and a night in jail. Acts 16:19 tells us, "When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 530.

⁷ MOST high God seems to indicate most high above the many gods, i.e. polytheism vs. monotheism, not that she necessarily understood that Yahweh was the one true God. See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 536.

⁸ See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:18.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 535.

¹⁰ See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 537.

and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.”¹¹ In other words, “Money [was] more important to them than salvation.”¹² You see, these slave owners had just been direct eyewitnesses to the power of Jesus Christ. They could have responded in awe and repentance, eagerly desiring to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this society that worshipped SO many different gods, this was their own unique opportunity to recognize which god was the One TRUE God. They could have turned to Him in faith and found salvation and new life in Christ that very day. Instead, they dragged Paul and Silas into court!^{13 14}

Acts 16:22-24 goes on, “The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods.”¹⁵ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” These rods were actually a visual symbol of Roman justice; they stood as a public warning to everyone, that they better behave, or be ready to face the consequences.¹⁶ We later learn in 2 Corinthians 3:5, that Paul will endure this kind of beating, at least 3 different times during his ministry.¹⁷ Verse 23 says that after being “severely flogged, they were thrown into prison. Verse 24 reports that their feet were fastened in the stocks.

¹¹ **There’s an interesting word play here in Acts 16:18-19**, “She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that 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. 19 When her owners realized that their hope of making money **was gone**, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.” **In other words, Paul told the spirit to “come out” and the spirit “went out” (left) and then their hope of making money “went out” (was gone).** The point that Luke, the author of Acts is making, is that “both the demon and the owner’s hope of profit” were gone, they left. “The girl’s owners do not care about her well-being but only about losing their profit.” (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:17-19.) However, you’ll notice that in verses 20-21, they put an entirely different spin on their complaint in order to receive a hearing from the authorities. They point to Paul and Silas’ Jewish ethnicity and their disturbance of the peace as though that was really the issue at hand for them. (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:20.)

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 537.

¹³ By the way, it’s not clear where Timothy is at this point. Perhaps he’s simply too young to be brought to trial, or perhaps Paul urged him to slip away in the crowd, or maybe he was simply not deemed as that much of a threat since he didn’t have as much of an upfront, visible role. See comments by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 538.

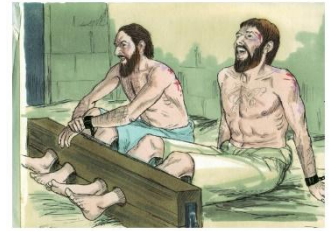
¹⁴ This is similar to the time when Jesus drove the demons out of the pigs, back in Mark’s Gospel, chapter 5. (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 538.) Rather than being drawn to Jesus’ compassion for the demon-possessed man, or being drawn to Jesus’ power to heal him, they actually “plead with Jesus to leave their region.” You can read the full story in Mark 5:1-20.

¹⁵ To be clear, this particular beating was with rods, not with a scourge like they used on Jesus. With Jesus, they used a whip made of leather that had chunks of bone and lead tied to the ends. (See notes in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1691 footnote on Mark 15:15 and pp. 1871-1872 footnote on Acts 22:24.) Here, in Acts 16, Paul and Silas had their clothes stripped off and were beaten with rods. Nonetheless, verse 23 makes it clear, that they were “SEVERELY flogged.” So none of this is to say this beating was easy or somehow not incredibly painful.

¹⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 539.

¹⁷ See also 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Paul understood the consequences of following Jesus better than most, but that didn’t stop him from faithfully proclaiming the gospel.

This picture is one artist's rendition of what this might have looked like.¹⁸ I'll let you decide which one you think is Paul and which one is Silas.¹⁹ So, there they were: sitting on a dirty prison floor, with their backs still raw and bloody, and their feet uncomfortably fastened in the stocks. I summarize these details, not just to be sensational, but rather to contrast just how amazing their response is. We might expect to find them sitting there, complaining and moaning in pain and agony, but we don't. Acts 16:25 says, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." I think we'd all agree that the beating that they'd had earlier that day, had certainly not worn off by this point. In fact, the bruising and swelling was probably much worse by this point, maybe even starting to become a little infected. And yet, they respond by worshipping God, the same God who'd allowed them to undergo this suffering for His name.²⁰ They reach out to Him in prayer, entrusting themselves fully to His sovereign will. In other words, they don't waste their suffering. In fact, God uses it, MIGHTILY, as a powerful witness to all of the other prisoners. Verse 25 mentions, "the other prisoners who were listening to them." Their fellow prisoners were now eyewitnesses to the genuine, compelling Christian Faith of Paul and Silas.



Right in the midst of their singing, an earthquake comes! Acts 16:26-27 says, "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. 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." You see, back then, "If a prisoner escaped, the life of the guard was demanded in his place."²¹ The jailer was well aware of the wrath of his superiors, so he took his job incredibly seriously. Fortunately for this particular jailer, Paul and Silas weren't particularly good at this jailbreak thing! After all, God sends an earthquake to open all the doors, but they don't leave. In fact, interestingly enough, NONE of the prisoners leave, which reveals that God is truly at work in a marvelous way.²² What this story reveals then, is that "the purpose of the earthquake is NOT to physically save Paul and Silas...BUT

¹⁸ Distant Shores Media/Sweet Publishing, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

¹⁹ Verse 24 clarifies that they were given "the inner cell" for their overnight accommodations. Perhaps the jailer thought that this would be the most secure location, but, in God's economy, it apparently had some of the best acoustics....

²⁰ Consider Romans 5:3; James 1:2; and 1 Peter 1:6, 4:13.

²¹ We saw this back in Acts 12:19. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1859 footnote on Acts 16:27.

²² As a kid, we used to play a game called Capture the Flag. (*Have you ever played?*) It was an incredible feeling to be the one who snuck across enemy lines without getting caught, and then captured the enemy flag, and then ran it ALL the way back across to the other side. SUCH an incredible feeling! At least... that's what my friends told me. I guess I wouldn't really know... since I'm not sure if I ever actually captured the flag. It was exceptionally HARD to capture the flag, because the other team guarded the flag SO heavily. And all they had to do was tag you, and then you'd get thrown in jail. So actually, MY favorite thing to do, was to do a "Jail Break." The way a "Jail Break" works is that if anyone from the other team, made it to the jail where their teammates were being held, all they had to do was get into the jail without being tagged. Then, if they touched any of their fellow teammates who were in the jail, everyone would yell "JAIL BREAK!" and we'd all run for it! It was MUCH easier to do a "jailbreak," than to capture the flag. That's because most of the people who

to spiritually save the jailer.”²³ God uses the earthquake and a personal confrontation with death, to get this jailer’s ATTENTION!²⁴ You see, Paul and Silas’ fellow prisoners were not the only ones who’d been listening to them singing to God and praying. Acts 16:29-31 says, “The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.’” The jailer had heard enough to recognize his need for salvation. Paul keeps it short and sweet, “Believe in the Lord Jesus!” Then verse 32 clarifies, they go on to share a little more detail about Jesus, not only with this jailer, but also with his entire household. You see, just as God had opened the door of Lydia’s heart earlier in Acts 16, He had now literally opened the doors of this prison. But more importantly, God opened the door of the jailer’s heart, and the doors of the hearts of his entire family. Praise the Lord!

This begs the question, what will it take for God to get YOUR attention? You don’t need to wait for a literal earthquake, or for the jail doors to swing open, you can place your faith in Jesus right now. Right where you are as you are reading this transcript. If God has gotten your attention today, I hope you’ll carefully consider the words of verse 31: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Acts 16:33 presents us with an interesting comparison between physical cleansing and spiritual cleansing, “At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized.” In other words, even as the jailer cleanses the bloody wounds on their backs, he himself is cleansed by the wounds of Christ. Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”²⁵ Baptism is a picture of our spiritual cleansing through the wounds of Christ – it’s His blood that makes us clean.

I absolutely LOVE what Luke records for us next in Acts 16:34, “he was filled with JOY because he had come to believe in God.” The footnote in my study Bible says that JOY is “the consistent consequence of conversion.”^{26 27} You see, becoming a Christ-follower doesn’t just help us avoid going to hell, or just help us get into heaven one day. Becoming a Christ-follower fill us with JOY, in the here and now. Our sins are forgiven, we are spiritually made clean, and we enter into a genuine relationship with the God who created us and loves us. JOY is the consistent consequence of choosing to believe in God.²⁸

were guarding the jail, tended to be the people who didn’t really want to play the game. They didn’t care too much if the prisoners escaped or not.

²³ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2254 footnote on Acts 16:30-31.

²⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, Rev.*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 315.

²⁵ “The jailer may have washed the prisoners’ wounds, but he himself received a better washing.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 542.

²⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1860 footnote on Acts 16:34.

²⁷ In fact, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “the word ‘joy’ in its various forms occurs some 16 times.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1997 introduction to Philippians.

²⁸ See Acts 2:28; 8:8; and 13:52.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, Paul and Silas are pretty terrible at this whole “jail break” thing. After the magistrates send a message to the jailer, that Paul and Silas can go free, but they REFUSE to go! Acts 16:37 tells us, “But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us PUBLICLY without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us QUIETLY? NO! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”²⁹ At first, Paul comes across as being a little demanding here, or perhaps even pushing his luck. “Paul, what are you doing!? Take the ‘get out of jail free card’ and be thankful!” Actually though, Paul and Silas were ready to head on to the next town with the gospel, but FIRST they wanted to make sure that things were favorable, for the newly forming church in Philippi. So Paul chooses to make a BIG deal out of their release, in order to make sure that the watching PUBLIC eye, would spread the word about the legitimacy of the Christian Faith. The PUBLIC persecution of the Christians, was now being PUBLICLY proclaimed as unjust.³⁰ In other words, this public display of apology by the magistrates, would help protect the future safety of the other believers in Philippi and cause the magistrates to “be more careful in the future.”^{31 32}

Let’s wrap up this transcript today by doing something a little different. I’d like to invite you to use your imagination, and to put yourself in the sandals of Paul and Silas. If you had just been beaten with rods, thrown into prison, and then had your feet fastened in the stocks, what “Prison Song” would YOU sing?³³ Maybe it would be a hymn like this: “Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but thou art mighty – hold me with thy powerful hand.” OR maybe it would be a song like this: “Your promise still stands. Great is Your faithfulness, faithfulness. I’m still in Your hands. This is my confidence. You’ve never failed me yet.”

Choose your Prison Song and then play it or sing it as your prayer today. Sing it as though you were singing it right along with Paul and Silas. Imagine yourself in prison next to them, for the sake of the gospel, but still choosing to worship God in a spirit of prayerful trust. As fully devoted followers of Jesus, God calls us to trust Him, even in our most difficult circumstances. Brother or Sister in Christ, do you have your “Prison Songs” ready? Either for the day when you may actually be thrown in jail for your faith,

²⁹ Verse 38 makes sense since “It was contrary to Roman law to beat Roman citizens without trial, so the magistrates are justifiably alarmed.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2254 footnote on Acts 16:37-38.

³⁰ “they were establishing their innocence for the sake of the church in Philippi and its future.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1860 footnote on Acts 16:37.

³¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 545.

³² “Paul’s insistence on an apology may seem arrogant, but in a first-century culture of honor and shame, public vindication was essential to legitimize Paul and the church he established. The church was founded not by shady Jewish itinerants who slunk out of town but by esteemed Roman citizens. Luke takes pains throughout Acts to show that Christianity is legally innocent.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2254 footnote on Acts 16:37-38.

³³ Here’s one that came to mind for me personally: “His eye is on the sparrow” by Civilla Durfee Martin. “Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart feel lonely? And long for heaven and home? When Jesus is my portion. A constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches over me. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me! I sing because I’m happy! I sing because I’m free! His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me!”

or for the day when you're going through some other difficult circumstance? Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." Brother or sister in Christ, this week, make sure that you have your "Prison Songs" ready!