

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 16:16-34

^{16:16} One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Commentary

This young girl with a “spirit of divination” literally meant in Greek, “a python spirit” (receiving powers from a serpent associated with the practice of a pagan faith). Paul was upset by the exploitation of this slave girl for the material gain of her owners, so he exorcised the spirit. Her powers of divination were silenced, thereby ruining their business. Traditionally, interpreters point to this story as Luke’s indication that Jesus’ power had been continued in Paul just as it was in the twelve apostles. Luke reports four main events in Paul’s activity in Philippi that demonstrate the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit: the conversion of Lydia, this healing of the possessed slave girl, the conversion of the jailer (16:24-34) and Paul’s public vindication. It is unclear what customs Paul and Silas violated—perhaps overtly proselytizing Roman citizens or somehow disturbing the Roman peace. This is Luke’s first recorded account of Roman resistance in the Christian movement.

Reflection

What are some similar situations in our day which helping the oppressed offends and angers those who are exploiting them? (Consider: boycotts of products in Third World sweatshops, efforts to help sex workers find productive employment, providing microcredit to small farmers and businesses so they can avoid paying exorbitant interest rates to lending companies, etc.)

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

^{22:12} "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." ¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

^{22:16} "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

^{22:20} The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! ²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Commentary

One of the major conclusions of the vision of John is that when the new age arrives, some will be rewarded, and the others judged. People’s actions and commitments will have a price. Those who “wash their robes” will be blessed; that is, those who have remained faithful and kept witnessing to the Gospel despite persecution from the “beast” (the power of the devil) will be rewarded. They will have the right to the tree of life and will be welcomed into the new

Jerusalem. On the other hand, those who follow the ways of evil will be rejected and denied entry into the heavenly city. For John, the beast was Rome, but for us, it might be the “ways of the world,” such as individualism, materialism, greed, corporate crime, violence, racism, ageism, sexism, and destruction of the environment. Above all that is presented in this passage, Jesus identifies Himself—emphasizing His messianic status and universal sovereignty.

Reflection

John’s revelation emphasized reward for the faithful and judgment for the unfaithful when God’s plan for the world is finally implemented. Why was this an important message for a persecuted Christian minority to hear?

John 17:20-26

^{17:20} "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Commentary

Ancient farewell speeches of dying persons usually concluded with prayer. However, this is not a typical farewell prayer. Jesus’ whole farewell discourse had been not only about his death but also about His resurrection and ascension (his “hour”). Thus this is a prayer of one who is about to give His life away willingly out of love for His followers, bringing His work to completion. Several themes may be discerned in John’s recording of this prayer: Jesus intercedes with God on behalf of the faith community; Jesus is on intimate, loving terms with God; and believers are promised a future, eternal life with God.

Reflection

How might the reminder that Jesus is praying for the protection, unity, and mission of the faith community change the way we conduct ourselves in the church today?

- ^{97:1} The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
- ² **Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.**
- ³ Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
- ⁴ **His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.**
- ⁵ The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.
- ⁶ **The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
and all the peoples behold his glory.**
- ⁷ All worshipers of images are put to shame,
those who make their boast in worthless idols;
all gods bow down before him.
- ⁸ **Zion hears and is glad,
and the towns of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O God.**
- ⁹ For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
- ¹⁰ **The LORD loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.**
- ¹¹ Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart.
- ¹² **Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.