

Part 31: Faithfulness and Futility

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You don't have to be very old to have already heard of, "the next big thing." Steve Jobs once invested in an experimental technology which he is rumored to have said, "It would be as big a deal as the P.C." Another venture capitalist who funded the innovations personally, is similarly believed it would be the fastest company to a billion dollars in sales and that it would be of greater influence than the internet itself.

That next big thing? The Segway scooter. Despite the fanfare—it gained little traction outside of mall cops and tourists. So much so, that the company eventually discontinued the model in 2020.

These kind of things rise and fall all the time—but their rise, and their fall—generally have very little impact on our day to day lives. They hardly turned the world upside down.

But today, our story in the book of Acts show us that whether you believe Jesus is who he claims to be or not—we cannot remain unaffected by the claims on the gospel. What's ironic about today's story in Acts 17 is that it's the ones who don't believe Jesus did anything worthwhile that are most affected by the claims of Jesus. Believe it or not, their lives are affected by it.

That's because Christianity is not an invention, it's a discovery. Inventions might make life easier, they might get all the headlines—but ultimately inventions come and go and are either improved on and passed up, or neglected and cast aside. But discoveries remain—they are constants explaining the way things are.

You don't need to think about gravity to be affected by it, you just are. When you learn about it, you can realize the way it explains everything and you can use it to help improve everything around you. But you can also hear about it, rejected, and spend your life ignoring it only to find yourself further and further from the reality you actually hoped for.

Our story today takes place nearly two decades after Jesus' death—and despite that distance—Jesus is still at work. The revelation of God in Scripture does things to us even today. Jesus is still at work. But we have the privilege of this account of two towns—each of which reveal something about the nature of the gospel, and something else about our own hearts. What we are really seeing today is a battle of influence and authority—whose claims do we believe—why should we believe it—and what fruit do we see from it?

In this way we see our main idea this morning: **Scripture reveals the faithfulness of God and the futility of everything else.**

The author of Hebrews says the word of God is living and active, and it pierces and divides us. We see Scripture doing this by revealing two things this morning: **What Scripture reveals about the Gospel**, and **What the Gospel reveals about our hearts.**

Last week, Paul, Silas and Timothy landed in Philippi. Today, they leave Philippi and travel west on a massive trade road called, the “Via Egnatia,” and **Acts 17:1** tells us they came to a town called Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a free city in the Roman Empire—and it was also the capital city of Macedonia.

Paul continues his typical form of evangelism and heads to the Jewish synagogue to preach Christ from the Old Testament. **Acts 17:2** tells us “And Paul went in as was his custom and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”

Here we can begin our first point: **What the Scriptures reveal about the gospel.**

Notice how Paul was reasoned with these Jews for over three weeks—but we also see what Paul’s evangelistic reasoning looked like.

This is important because, I’ve never met a Christian content with their level of evangelism. For many of us, we often feel unskilled, uneducated and underequipped to do that. We often think of evangelists as the extroverts, or maybe, the intellectuals. Or maybe you think of pastors, televangelists, or even historic heroes like George Whitfield. George Whitfield was an evangelist in both England and the American colonies and it’s reported that he preached to over 10,000,000 people during his ministry.

But, Paul’s evangelism ministry was certainly greater. Paul’s missionary life really only spanned 13 years. And in those thirteen years he pioneered at least 14 church plants in cultures where there were no churches, he did so across two continents, in over 60 cities, and did so with such fervency that Acts 19 tells us that through his ministry, “All of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

If you want the secret to investing, go and listen to Warren Buffet. If you want the secret on 3 point-shooting, go and listen to Steph Curry. If you want the secret to evangelism listen to Paul. And here we see it: **Acts 17:2-3**, “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”

While we will need to adapt our presentation and our awareness to the people who we love and are sharing the gospel with—what’s necessary for evangelism is simple: a heart for the lost, and the ability to share Jesus from the Bible. That’s it. You don’t have to be a worldview expert. You don’t have to have a PhD in communications. You have to love people, love God’s word, and trust that God’s word will lead people to see his love for them in Jesus Christ.

If you wonder what that might look like, I’d commend to you the very passage many of us are memorizing right now: Ephesians 2:1-10. Read that today after lunch and discuss with your family or friends how that passage helps us present the good news of all that Jesus did to save sinners and restore us to God. The Bible points us to Jesus.

To help encourage us here—notice a few assumptions Paul makes about the gospel that shape our evangelism.

First, notice how **the gospel is reasonable**. Paul reasoned with them from Scripture. Christianity believes miraculous things, but they aren’t unreasonable things. It is unreasonable that humans would fly—that is unless you begin to assume forces like gravity, lift, and force. If you accept these—it’s not only

reasonable—it's possible. So too, the dead rising, God becoming man, all of it unreasonable. Unless you begin to assume what the Bible says about a sovereign creator God.

Christianity is intellectually consistent within its own claims. It is powerfully simple but it is also intellectually serious. But the reality of faith is that God's revelation, not human reason, is king. We must reasonably take to understand God's revelation of himself in his word—but at the end of the day we must either submit ourselves to what reason alone cannot explain—or we look for another source to explain it. We will talk more about that next week.

Second, notice how ***the gospel is required***. We will touch more on this in a moment—but Paul's urgency was to show that whatever Jesus did was, in **verse 3**, "necessary." Jesus didn't come on accident. The gospel is not God making the best of a bum situation. The work of Jesus is the necessary work of God if sinners are to be saved. There is salvation in no one else. The Jews loved God—but they wouldn't accept that God would save them in this way.

Fellow believers, we too might want to find God's comfort and God's acceptance in all sorts of things. But at the end of the day—we must find those in Jesus Christ and his work to take our sins and give us his righteousness. That's the one thing that changes everything.

Third, ***the gospel is ridiculous***. It is ridiculous because the work of Christ seems opposite to what our eyes would want to see in a hero. Paul says in **verse 3**, "that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead." If you want to lose all emotional integrity—try to tell someone that suffering is not always bad. If you want to lose all intellectual integrity—try and tell someone that dead people will rise again.

The Jews didn't want a suffering Messiah because that would threaten their comfort. If the Messiah's primary goal was an earthly kingdom—a suffering king meant a suffering kingdom. That's why they hated who Jesus spent his time with while he was alive. That's why they found death on a criminal's cross repulsive. But the gospel shows us that the life we want is found only in Jesus—John tells us—he is eternal life. The gospel claims that this world cannot satisfy and will not save. Therefore, as Jim Eliot says, the Christian is content to lose what it cannot keep to gain what it cannot lose. And if that's true—this is ridiculously good news.

And lastly, ***the gospel is revolutionary***. The gospel isn't boasting a new thing—it's boasting a new *King*. That's why Paul says this: **Acts 17:3**, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ."

We don't proclaim mere facts. A proclamation, especially in the Greek, is a statement of force. Think of it this way: I can make a statement of fact. Those two people are married. But when I stand with them at a wedding ceremony and say, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," the facts are the same—but the force is different. One requires a response—a response that is either to be rejected or accepted.

Paul's proclamation is that Jesus is the Christ. That word, "Christ," means he is God's messiah—that is to say he is God's king. Zechariah 14 would tell us that he is the one King over the whole world. This proclamation affects anyone who hears it. And it's this statement that Paul claims is the thrust of the whole Bible.

When we hear the gospel it reveals to us the reality of rebellion that was already present—and you can't do nothing. It's like sitting down in a chair only to have someone come and say, "Wait a minute, I was

sitting there.” That claim has to be resolved. It won’t go away on its own. When the gospel says Christ is King—you’ve got to wrestle with it one way or the other.

Here we see our second point this morning: **What the Gospel reveals about our hearts.**

As we look at the contrasts between Thessalonica and Berea, pay attention not only to how they respond to Scripture—but pay attention to the hearts and their lives.

Let's start by focusing on the unbelief and the hearts of the Jews in Thessalonica. And here we will see ***The unrest of rejection.***

After Paul's message of Christ was preached for three Sabbaths we read this: **Acts 17:4-9**, "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting 'These man who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money a security from Jason and the rest, they let them go."

Let's be warned before we move on here. Remember the Jews were God's people. They were given the Old Testament Scriptures, to them were given the covenants and promises. These people would have been the conservative family value people, they would have been on the board of the civic society, they would have been organizing neighborhood pick-ups, they would have been hosting marriage conferences and promoting church attendance.

And yet here we see that you cannot pick and choose which pieces of Christian morality or Scripture that you like. If you reject the message of Jesus Christ, if his suffering is offensive to you, then it doesn't matter what else you believe. You've rejected God.

Augustine once said that "If you pick and choose what you believe about the gospel it's not the Bible you believe, but yourself." And we are woefully conflicted people.

We see this irony on display with the Jews. Remember they hated Jesus because he failed to liberate them from Rome. Rome, in their mind was the real problem. And because Jesus died on a Roman cross, he was no savior. But in an attempt to rid themselves of Jesus—who do they turn to? Rome.

Why? Well, we see why. **Verse 5** tells us they became jealous. Jealous of what? Probably jealous that even though they rejected Jesus—others—even women and Greeks—were accepting it. This was supposed to be their hope—and here they couldn't handle others joining it even if they themselves thought it was a sham.

This is often how our own conscience condemns us. And it produces in us a desire to soothe our own conscience. For these Jews, they stir up a mob. They go to the loafers in the marketplace, and they say, "Hey, let's start an outrage." It's not too far removed from how our modern social media works today. Social media tries to convince us that those who scream the loudest are right—our mobs are less messy—but they are no less forceful.

The claims of the gospel can make moralists into mobsters pretty quickly. We want the morals that Bible claims to present. We like what God says about love. We want the culture Jesus commended when he spoke of the mercy, the kindness, the goodwill, the brotherly love, the peace, and the beauty of God.

But when we read the Bible and when we look at Jesus—it seems those things are impossibly hidden from us. For the Jews, it was hidden by suffering of Jesus. How could a forever king die? And if he rose, why would he leave? Maybe for you it's the idea of love. You want it, you desire it, but when we read that the Bible withholds sexual love exclusively in the confines of one man and one woman in marriage—you say, “That can’t be.” Maybe it's the idea that discipling our own kids, prioritizing weekly church attendance and service is of greater importance than vacations, sports practice and summer camps? We want to be good parents, but how is that good?

And when we refuse to trust the paradoxical promises of God--what happens? We see it in this text don't we? Frustrated because we don't trust Jesus' heavenly promise—we turn to the source of our worldly problems.

The Jews wanted Caesar to give them rest, but they didn't want Caesar to give them rules. But when we try to fight fire with fire we get burned. So we try and put up boundaries—taking from the world what we like—but trying to avoid what we don't.

We don't want to fully give into the idea of rampant consumerism and commercialism--but we also want the comfort that money seems to offer. So we try and find enough comfort in the money we think is appropriate to spend on ourselves while trying to not spend too much on ourselves. We don't want to go so far as to say that anyone can have sex with anyone they want, after all, incest and pedophilia is wrong even if consensual. But we want to have sex with who we want to. So we try and find lines and justifications for why this is ok, and that's ok, but this isn't.

This exhausts us as we play whack-a-mole, trying to take from the world what we want while trying to avoid what we don't want. George MacDonald once wrote, “There’s nothing so deadening to the divine as a habitual dealing with the outside of holy things...” We are so easily captive with the external characteristics of God: love, holiness, patience, kindness, mercy. But we fail to see those things only exist purely and without compromise in God himself. To turn away from the promise of God's word to the promise of the world is like a thirsty man who is annoyed at the bubbling sound of the spring. In stopping it up he satisfies his ear—but never his thirst.

I often ask my kids a question after they threw a temper tantrum about something. I say, "You did what you wanted to do--but how do you feel? Do you feel like you thought you would?" Never once have I had a kid say, "I feel so much better now that I didn't do what you asked me to."

It's in those moments I realize how often I refuse to see how I treat God the same way. Like dog that returns to his vomit—we try to find in the world what is hidden only in Jesus.

Do you see the irony in this text? Those who claimed the Christians were turning the world upside down, they turned an entire city into rebellion. Those who wanted peace started a riot. Those who wanted freedom fought for Rome's honor.

If I could be a bit bold here--I would say this: Everything the world wants is found only and truly in the gospel. And every attempt the world has made to find those qualities apart from God has only caused the inverse to be true. Sex is everywhere--but we've never been more sex hungry. In America, money is everywhere. In fact, one study in 2010 discovered that if the poorest 20% of American households were its own nation its average consumption would be greater than the entire countries of Canada, Greece, the UK, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, and Japan. Yet no one has enough money.

But the witness of the Christian church--that crazy group of people who follows a suffering and yet resurrected savior--have been a global witness to an unshakable joy. Remember the Queen of Sheba when she visited Solomon saw his wealth but was struck most significantly by the happiness of those who obeyed God's law: **1 Kings 10:8**, "Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom."

If you read through history books, you'll see that when Christians are burned at the stake--they sing. In the absence of everything but Christ--the Christian has proved to be the most content. Yet in having everything--doesn't the world act as if it has nothing?

The world in totality is unsatisfying and its ideas unending. You can weary yourself attempting to create and find salvation on its terms, or your own, but you might also find you only obtain the opposite of what you hoped for.

Meanwhile, notice in brief contrast, ***The resilience of belief.***

The Thessalonians refused to believe that God was able to provide what he said he would and instead they got everything they wanted, but none of what they hoped for. Meanwhile, the gospel goes to a new set of people in Berea and this is what we see: **Acts 17:10-14**, "The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that they word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. The brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed."

I want to again pause, because this text is really astounding if we consider it in light of our values today. Look at the words associated with those who refused to believe God's word--jealous, causing and uproar, attacking, dragging, shouting, disturbed, agitated, stirring up.

Meanwhile it was the believers who had reasonable words of persuasion, it was the believers who suffered mistreatment on behalf of others, it was believers who used their own resources to care for and transport others, it was believers here who added among them a diverse group of people: women, Greeks, influential people and ordinary people.

I heard an interview a while back with an author who was not a Christian. Yet when talking about Christianity he went out of his way to say that contrary to how they are often portrayed in public--his travels have shown that there is hardly a community more diverse than the Christian church.

And notice also how Luke says these Jews were more "noble" than the others. That word can also be translated as "open-minded." It is Christianity, which is the most open minded of all worldviews. How so? Because it's only Christianity that assumes stupid-mindedness.

It was our wants, and our desires, and our wills, our rejection of counsel that caused sin in the first place. Therefore the root of Christianity, and here of Christian nobility, is not our own wisdom or insight--but a submission to God's wisdom and insight.

Notice how these believers received the word with eagerness--but not with empty-mindedness. John Stott said it this way: "They believed in doctrine, but not in indoctrination." They heard the message of the gospel--but they weren't convinced because Paul spoke with authority--they were convinced because the Bible spoke with authority.

They heard the revolutionary and reorienting message of the gospel--and they believed it but wanted to believe it with greater certainty. So they examined the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

The gospel, as we discussed earlier, is ridiculous to human eyes. But the Bible gives us God's eyes. If we examine Christianity only in regards to what is in the world, we might find some answers--but never with enough clarity to move us. But if we examine the gospel claims in light of God's word in scripture we will find all the confidence we have ever needed.

Skepticism often appears humble, but it can often veil dangerous pride. There are times where genuine believers and converts wrestle with doubt. It is reasonable to doubt God's goodness when it seems everything has gone wrong. That is a remarkably human response. But when we examine God's word and we see that we follow a crucified savior, who entrusted himself to a good God even when things weren't good--we find our own faith a little more reasonable.

Would you consider not only this text, but perhaps even your own heart? Those who tried to find an authority to explain things apart from God found none of what they wanted, and everything they hoped to avoid. Meanwhile those who sincerely submitted themselves to study God's word—found hostility—but hope and resilience in the midst of it.

Don't leave here today without assessing your heart in light of God's revelation—would you humbly come and wrestle with these claims and see the beauty of life in Christ?