

The Glory of Christ in the Face of Opposition Acts 17:1-9

We have been looking at this opening paragraph of chapter 17 for a couple of weeks. We see that the missionaries come into the city of Thessalonica and they do as they normally do and that is enter into the synagogue and begin to preach and teach and show that Jesus really is the hope and the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And we see that there is a response both positively and negatively. We see positively many believe, and these are taken from all different people from the Jews, to the Greeks to even prominent women. And we also see that it was the Holy Spirit that convinced or persuaded them of these truth, and that their conversion was confirmed by their identifying with the apostles of Paul and Silas. They numbered themselves with them. They broke off their old associations and began to walk with them no matter what the cost. They have come to not only believe on Christ but to love him. Their salvation and true salvation is something internal that has to come out externally.

But we also saw last time there was opposition. Some of the Jews in the synagogue were frustrated by this faith in Christ. They were driven by jealousy. We are not told what they were jealous of. It could have been people were following Paul and Silas rather than them. It could be that they loved their position and they were zealous of keeping it. The one thing they were not zealous of was the truth of Scripture. And just like faith in Christ, whatever is inside of a person will come out. And here it was hostility. They go down to the agora and they find men of wicked character and they begin a riot against Paul and Silas, but it really is against Jesus Christ. And they arrive at Jason's house demanding and trying to force them to come out. The problem is that Paul and Silas are not there by the providence of our great God.

And that is where we ended last time we were together. And I like us to look further into this passage and see what took place and the actions taken by the mob, and in particular by the Jews who led this group. It is amazing to look at passages like this through the eyes of faith because there is a sense where the meaning of this passage is so plain. We see that people who love darkness hate the light, and want to destroy the light the moment that light starts to reveal their darkness and their need of Jesus Christ. They make accusations against those who are in the light, and those accusations are not based on truth but based on their anger and their desire to destroy any trust or reliance on Christ, and end any announcement or preaching about the hope we have in Christ. We see those excuses in us. Our sin is apparent.

That aspect is so easy to see. The other part, the part we see as believers in Christ in the face of opposition is our hope in Christ. You see this so often with the contrasts that are in the text as we look at the hatred and the animosity of others. And it causes us to do a couple of things. One is as we look at the opposition against believers here, we see the hand of God. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 commands us, **“give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** Why? Because he has ordained all we are going through. It actually causes us to praise him and glorify Him. Our God is in this text and all over these events that take place. He is not absent but the very present Lord. He truly is our stronghold, refuge, and protector. The other thing we begin to see is that this God is not just in the struggles and difficulties of people in the Word of God, but he is with us in the struggles and

opposition we go through. And what these passages cause us to do and see our trials and difficulties through the eyes of faith. And where people might enter our lives or trials in general would seem to point away from God, they do the exact opposite. They point us to this God of all hope. They cause us to have a more vibrant peace and trust in Christ. Whoever thought that opposition and trials could do that?

So think of what you are going through today. Think of the trials, difficulties, pain and heartache, the opposition that you have in living for Christ. Here is the question — do you see the hand of God? Do you see the glory of his work in your life and others? It is never more evident than when we go through these deep waters in our life. And some of the deepest waters are caused by others. What I want us to see is the glorious hand of God in these trials and my hope is that it will encourage us to live for Christ in whatever we are going through today. I want us to look at the passage, understand the passage and then seek to make some observations and see some contrasts in this passage. May God's grace truly challenge and encourage us today.

1. We need to understand the passage. Vv. 4-9

We looked at the contrast between those who believe and those who reject the gospel. And one of the things that should pop of out these texts is that Christianity was just a fabrication of the apostles, if the Old Testament Scriptures really do not point to Christ, then why not just show that from the Scriptures? If Jesus is not the Messiah than just open up the word, but right from the beginning with the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem there is never any meaningful dialogue or discourse given, but the one thing we see over and over is this physical threat and opposition — the desire to silence. Jesus is either Lord or Jesus is either a fraud. Remember these men come with no arms or power. They really are not a threat to anyone. But the person who is the greatest threat to them is Jesus. And maybe for some here today Jesus is a threat. You would like nothing better than to be rid of him. And it is incredible when the opportunities are available what heights people will go in their rejection of Christ.

And you can see that in the passage. Let's look at some of the details here in the passage. Look at verse 6, **“And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.’”** So Paul and Silas are somewhere else. It is hard to believe that if they were there they would not have come out to protect the other believers that were in the house. No doubt they were busy doing gospel work but also absent here in the providence of God. So often in the providence of God he protects us more than we know. We are not in this place or we do not have this conversion when it could turn so much worse. Just as God ordains trials and tribulations, he also saves us from so many trials and tribulations. He knows our disposition what we need and what we don't need. He is our all good God.

But they are not at the house, so they haul Jason and the others in the house out. We are not told anything about Jason but he was probably a man of some wealth. This is where Paul and Silas probably stayed and it might be where the early church in that city met. They knew where to find them. And they drag them, which means they take them by force and they would have handled them quite roughly. And they bring them before the city authorities. And this was a council of men who were appointed and their whole goal was to keep the peace and they had the power to hand out

punishment. They had a loyalty to Rome, and they ruled and judged in a way that would keep the Roman authorities out of the city. So the accusation or the charges brought against these individuals in light that Paul and Silas were not there are quite serious, and could lead to the death penalty.

And the accusations are two. One is — **“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.”** Now this was not a complement. The meaning of turning the world upside down is going against the social order — creating unnecessary havoc or disturbances in society, causing others to go against the law. And these were serious charges because one of the things that Rome demanded was social order and peace. And here were men who were disturbing that very social order. And this is an hyperbole or an over exaggeration. Paul has not even been to many of the major cities of the Roman Empire yet, but no doubt word has spread of what happened at Philippi, and now doubt word had spread of what happened in many of the major cities of Galatia, and how these men wherever they go were forced out of one city after another. They are disturbing the peace. And for city officials who feared Rome, even if this is an exaggeration they would have taken it very serious.

Now look at the next charged levelled against them, **“and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”** Jason has received them — it is incredible that if people cannot vent and attack those who are directly responsible them they go to their followers. And there is a real sense that we are just messengers of Jesus. People do not first and foremost have a hatred for the believer but the one whom they represent. This really is not a rejection of the Christian but a rejection and hostility against the Christ. Because where is our first and foremost loyalty? Where is our allegiance and love? It is to our Lord, Master and King. He is our sovereign. And although we are peaceful and law-abiding citizens our allegiance is to another. And you have this accusation even though Christians have been model citizens come up time and time again.

So why does it come up? Because it was so serious. A rival king to Caesar was nothing short of rebellion. And the penalty for rebellion was nothing short of death. Think of what they want for Paul and Silas, and any other who would dare broadcast the gospel of Christ — that you can have peace with God, forgiveness of sins through simple faith in Christ — they wanted them obliterated from the face of the earth. And you can imagine the hostility of the mob led by the Jews before these judges — all because of Jesus. If you want to see the doctrine of total depravity it is right here. If you want to see what God has delivered us from it is right here.

Now look how the paragraph ends, **“And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”** There are a couple of things here. One is the deep distress hearing of these things. Again, remember the fear they had of Rome — a rival king! You can imagine the thoughts of Rome coming to end this rebellion in this city. All of these officials would also lose their positions. But the part that I find amazing is how little action is taken against Jason and the other believers. Here in the providence of God it could have been so much worse. They could have been easily stoned with mob violence like Stephen in Jerusalem, or like Paul at Lystra, but instead they have to pay this security, and no doubt were warned against these

activities. The other interesting thing is that these believers, as is so often are never given an opportunity to defend themselves. And again, don't you see that so often today. People are not interested in knowing about Christ or why we have put our hope in him but just terminating the message and the person of the message. But this action taken by the magistrates seemed to have quelled the crowd.

Paul and Silas are forced to leave this city not just for personal protection but for the protection of believers in the city. But it is amazing to see the level of hostility against Christianity today. But here is the question — do you see anything of the hand of God and the work of God in that opposition?

2. We need to see the hand of God in everything we face.

There are a number of interesting things you see here. One of the ways that we see the hand of God is through the accusations that are so often levelled against those who publish the good news of Jesus Christ. There is so much being written against true and authentic Christianity today. And in all those accusations there is such a paradox. A paradox is something that looks one way but it is really another. Paul and Silas and the other believers are here accused of wrecking havoc on the social order and the peace in that society. They are rebel rousers. But when you look into the passage. They are not only the ones spreading the gospel of peace, but also it is the very enemies that accuse them of turning society upside down, disturbing the peace, who were turning the social order upside down. They went down to the agora. They influence men of questionable character. They began this riot. They want to disturb the society and even have innocent men killed. The very thing they accuse Paul and Silas of they are guilty, and they seem to be so blind to their guilt. It is incredible what a jealous and wicked heart will do.

And don't we see the same today. You call out sin or expose sin and watch out. If you defend what the Scriptures say about marriage, or condemn same sex marriage, or about the biggest problem in life is not your relationships or other people or your job but it is your sin before a holy God, and watch out because the anger and the hatred is going to come out. You are the most unloving and judgmental person that I have ever known. And how does a person communicate that? Through the most unloving and judgmental way. They are guilty of the very sin they are accusing the believer of. And here is the contrast. And God wants us to see this. The most loving and caring individuals are people who speak the truth. They speak it compassionately, gently, patiently but they speak it in love. Who are the most loving people in this passage? Paul and Silas, Jason and the others who are hauled off. When you hear accusation made against believers, and maybe even made against yourself, if it is because of your faith — look past those accusations. Usually it is said with such heat because it is not only not true but the opposite is true. It is because of your witness to the glorious love of God found in Christ alone.

The other thing I find amazing in this passage is that specific charge that is brought up against Paul and Silas, **“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.”** Now we realize they meant causing social unrest. But in all the accusations they have taken a truth and turned it on its head. They have taken something in reality and made it a negative. We see that in the accusation of a rival king. Our King actually makes us better citizens rather than usurpers of society. We

want to obey the laws so that we can carry on the work of Gospel and seek that Jesus might be trusted and glorified. But there is truth. We are inspired to live and function not by loyalty to the government or threat of of the government by our God, our Lord, our Jesus. So in many of the accusations that are made they are trying to take something positive and make it a negative.

And right here Paul and Silas and other believers are accused of turning the world upside down. And really if we have a heart for Jesus and we are seeking to follow and make much of Jesus and seeking to obey him, this is such a complement and observation made by those who are enemies. Because isn't it true? Again, these statements should cause us to glory in the great work of God even though people mean it in a different sense. Because the world has been turned upside down in two senses through the gospel. One is that your world when you became a believer in Jesus Christ was totally turned upside down. When I look back at my life before and after conversion it is simply shocking. Is this the same person? Is this the same life. This Jesus changed my world. The things that I prized and lived for, the things that brought both joy and sorrow have all changed. It is like what Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."** Old things in my life — pastimes or goals, even friendships and places where we would go to carouse, even the way I talked and thought were all turned on its head. My whole world was turned upside down by Jesus, and where people could say that and mourn, my heart could do nothing else but look to the one in such joy and gratitude and anticipation — all of this is from God. He's changed, she's changed is what so often people say, and they might mean it in a derogatory way but for the believer he has delightfully and wonderfully turned our world upside down.

Yes, you are facing opposition, yes you are having trials and sorrows and things that bring you to tears in your life, yes you have struggles, but are you amazed at how different you are in the midst of them? Charles Spurgeon has a whole sermon on this very verse. And he likens our world being turned upside down by just looking how earth shattering and contrary are the be-attitudes in our lives. Think of what you thought and what the world thinks of the most blessed life. It is more of this life. But Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed the meek or humble, blessed are those who humble and thirst after righteousness. Think of what you used to hunger after. Blessed are the merciful? People are to conquer or ignore. Blessed are the pure in heart? We wanted more sin rather than less sin. Blessed are the peace makers? We were so content in causing war, and justifying that hatred toward others. But now are hearts are rule by the great Peacemaker.

Yes, the work of sanctification still continues in you. We do not handle the trials and opposition in our lives perfectly but we are different people. Our world has been radically turned on its head and it will never be turned back. Now there is that aspect, but there is also the public aspect that this really does change life and does change society. Our world would never measure success or power or influence or what would bring necessary change by the be-attitudes. But can you imagine a whole community of believers living it out, committed to humility and meekness and mercy and peace-making? Can you imagine people saying this is not normal? Can you imagine how that

kind of life changes relationships and even society as a whole? It really does disturb the social order, but not in the way the Jews here accuse the missionaries of changing. Can you imagine because that is the witness that we are truly to have in this world. In fact Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:16, **“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** Some will turn and say that this is not good and make it to mean something that it was not like in Thessalonica. But others will say this is not normal. It is not normal to live this way, what is the source? And the source is the One who is at the centre of our message — Jesus Christ.

So what are you going through today, what suffering, what accusations are being hurled at you? It is tough and can be exhausting. But is the only thing you see are the trials? Do you see that God is giving you an opportunity to live, respond and speak in a way that turns this world upside down? People don't respond to opposition by loving their enemies. People do not respond by joy in Christ during tribulations. People do not respond by casting all your anxieties on Christ. People do not respond by making known the very message that others are opposing. People do not respond by truly celebrating our Lord and Saviour. See the hand of God in all that you are going through. He is really giving you an opportunity to live upside down life, which in reality is right side up. God in his goodness is up to the highest good. We all want to be radical witnesses of Christ and he is giving us the opportunities in this upside down world. Trust him and look to him — he will really change your world.