

Who's in Charge? Acts 4:27-28

We have been looking at this section of Scripture where the religious leaders demand that Peter and John stop preaching in the name of Jesus or face the consequences. And then we see what believers do in the face of adversity and persecution. And that is they sought out other believers. They kept going and persevering. They also reminded themselves of the Scripture and they prayer together. And last time we were together we began to look at their prayer - how they prayed and what they asked of God, which I think is so instructional for us. They prayed the scripture.

And we saw that they quoted a very well known Psalm - Psalm 2:1-2, and this Psalm really explains why they are suffering. And that is the people along with their rulers set themselves against God. They hate the gospel of God. But it is amazing to see in that Psalm that ultimately, even though people seem powerful and sovereign they are no match for the all-powerful God who laughs and mocks at them. Ultimately what will come to pass is none other than the will of God.

And then they pray the gospel or the application of that text in verses 27-28. And the question we should ask is why do they pray the gospel? It is amazing how central the gospel is throughout this book. Peter preaches the gospel on the day of Pentecost. They make it known after the healing of the man who was lame from birth at the Gate Beautiful. And we see after their arrest, their defence is the gospel before the Sanhedrin. And right here, we have it again. And the answer is not hard. It is because what we see taught in Psalm 2 is exactly what we see happen in the life of Jesus. We see the leaders of this world rage and fume against God and his anointed one, but what comes to pass is exactly what God wants to come to pass. His will is perfectly and finally accomplished. And in times of anguish and hardship and opposition we need to be reminded of God's glory and goodness. We can so easily forget the gospel. It is the most relevant message in our lives.

But there is another reason why they pray the gospel and that is because it does explain why they are suffering. Just like God said that this is what will happen to God's anointed one, we realize that it happened to them the early followers of Christ. It is the same hatred, rejection and persecution they are facing. We are often surprised by opposition to the gospel and ministry of Christ. Listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12-13, "**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.**" We share in Jesus' suffering in that they reject us the same way they rejected him. This is not unusual but should be expected.

But verses 27-28 are also important because it indicates to us what the church thought of the gospel of Jesus, how it interpreted the events of the cross. There is so much debate at what happened at the cross, who is to blame for the death of Christ, and even who is to blame for ultimately all of the trials and adversity we face. And let me say these two verses give us what the early church believed and what we need to believe about the gospel of Christ and God's ultimate sovereignty. Where does God come into the picture? What is man's role in the cross of Christ? How do you reconcile

both man and God as we look at the cross? And as we dwell on this text here this morning what we end up seeing two things. One is such a greater understanding of the meaning and purpose of the cross. We see why these early believers were so excited and staunch in making know Jesus Christ and him crucified. And the second thing this passage causes is a greater confidence in our God because he becomes so much bigger and grander in all of our adversity and trials. So let us look and increase our knowledge and love of Christ through his gospel.

1. The responsibility of people. V.27.

One of the things that makes the gospel so necessary and impactful is we realize people are responsible and culpable before a holy God. They can never blame their sin on others or on God. And therefore one day they will have to answer for the things they have done in this life. We read of the fearful future judgment in Revelation 20:11-12, **“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”** Does anyone know who is the One who is sitting on the Great White Throne of judgment? It is Jesus Christ. He is the one who judges every person according to their deeds. And he is the one who will cast all those who have never trusted him into the Lake of Fire. It is a fearful text that makes no sense if individuals are not responsible for what is written in that book, and it makes God unrighteous and cruel if people are not responsible.

When you look at the actions that people freely do, and the sin and the hardship they even bring in our lives, one of the things that brings empathy is that one day they will answer for that very sin before the fearful and awesome judge - Jesus Christ. The books will be opened. There is nothing that is done against God or his children where Jesus and his people will be vindicated at this judgment.

And what is written on every heart is the moral law of God, many times called the prescriptive will of God. We know it, and people know it. It is wrong to murder or bear false witness or covet or lust or use and abuse people. And every single person, whether they admit it or not know there is a God. They will try and suppress that knowledge but it is there. None will be able to claim ignorance at the end.

And you can see that in our text. And this is what can make life so difficult and trying and even fearful is that people have the potential of freely choosing to do all kinds of evil against us just because they want and choose to. And that is what you see in our text. Let us read it again, and I want you to take notice of the various people who are arrayed against Jesus, because it really is emblematic of the whole world, **“for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.”** This is what we see as the fulfillment of Psalm 2. And again, this is in a real sense of the most terrible act in all of human history. It is the deepest and most degrading and disgusting and lowest of all sin. Can you think of any greater sin than taking the Lord’s anointed and doing what these men did to him?

And it is amazing because it is so easy to be tough on them, but there are a few things we need to point out here. And one is look at the opening phrase of that verse, **“for truly in this city there were gathered together.”** One is the city here is Jerusalem of course. They are still in that city. It was here where we have Jesus say, you will start to be my witnesses and it will extend to the far corners of the world. And if you ever want to see the depth of grace in the gospel all you have to do is look where it began. It began where these people conspired together to kill and murder and butcher Jesus. It challenges us because we want to give up on people but God wants to extend his grace to them. 2 Peter 3:9, **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”** This is why we preach and proclaim Christ because God’s known and moral will is none perish, not even these ones in Jerusalem.

The other observation of this opening phrase is notice that they were **“gathered together.”** Now here is the question: how do you get people to gather together who hate and despise one another? And you can get them to gather together when you have something that they hate in common more than their hatred of one another. You see this in our world. Various political factions will come together against the government of the day. They might have different philosophies of life and agendas, and might even have nothing to do with one another, but they have something that they hate even more—the government. And you can see that in our text, and even in our society that there is something of a greater hatred, and that is against God’s anointed. This is what will happen before Jesus sets up his ultimate kingdom. The people and rulers of this world, who you look at today are divided and even warring against one another will join together to war against the Lamb.

And the third observation is something we pointed out just a few moments ago - this list of people and persons is emblematic of the world. And the reason why I point that out is if we were there we would have not done anything different. I think we often think we are more moral or more worthy than we are. And we were dead in trespasses and sins, and therefore would have willfully and enthusiastically rejected Jesus just like this list of people here because we are included in that list. And they are gathered against the Lord’s anointed Jesus. This is God’s chosen and sent one. And the amazing thing, first of all we see the two leaders and then we see the people in the text. We have Herod who was known as king in a very limited way who wanted Jesus after he had been beaten to perform for him, but he had the power to let him go but didn’t. And of course Pilate knew of his innocence but did nothing to free Jesus. And then we read of the Gentiles. This would have been the soldiers that made sport of torturing Jesus then finally executing him. And the Jews are the religious leaders who conspired against him, along with the people who cried out “crucify him, crucify him!”

And it seems like the whole world is gathered against Jesus still. We feel that rise of opposition against Jesus in our society, in the political realm or in the entertainment field or wherever. In many places of the world Christianity is outlawed. Can you imagine the message about salvation in Christ that causes people to live in freedom, to love and forgive their fellow man and actually become better citizens of their countries actually is hated and outlawed? Nothing has changed. And again, remember, we would be in this group who willfully and enthusiastically rejected Jesus if

it were not for God's grace. And also remember, there is coming a day of accountability. And if there is a day of accountability then who is responsible for the death of Jesus? And the answer is any and all who were gathered against Jesus and are still gathered against him. But that is not the end of the matter. That is not the end of the story. Because as we look at this text, we realize there is someone else who rises to claim responsibility for the death of Jesus. There is someone else who is at the helm of history and whose will always comes to pass.

2. We see the sovereignty of God. V.28.

Now there are a couple of things we have to keep in mind. One is: can God sin? And the answer to that question is no? Can God be charged with the sins of others and be held culpable for the things that they do? And the answer is no. Listen to James 1:13-15, **"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."** God doesn't tempt any. We are responsible for the things we do. But here is the amazing thing, and I hope we can accept there is mystery here. God is sovereign over everything. His will always comes to pass. Listen to how Job describes all the things that happen to him even the things that Satan did in Job 42:2, **"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."** No purpose of God can be thwarted. Psalm 115:3 expresses God's absolute will and sovereignty, **"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."**

So what we see as we look here in verse 28 is none other than the sovereign will of God come to pass. So when we look at the wickedness and sin and evil of the cross it is not evil men and their will ultimately coming to pass and triumphing over God and Jesus, but what we see is what is always in play, and that is the triumph of God's will. And let me say something that is very difficult and something that we have to accept, and something that the early church taught and believed. And that is there is two wills in God. The one we talked about, and that is the will of God made known to all. It is his will in commands and precepts. It is the will where we read — do this and do not do this. The individuals mentioned in verse 27 knew that it was wrong to murder and hate and conspire to do evil. They are responsible and culpable, and will be held culpable unless they repent and trust in Jesus. We are responsible. We know it and he is God.

But here is the second will of God, many times called his sovereign will or ordained will or secret will because we do not it until it comes to pass. And here is the difficult part: God many times ordains what he does not prescribe. He many times plans what he did not command in his commandments. Yet at the same time he is never culpable for the evil that is done. He has the highest and most glorious reasons for planning these things to come to pass. And the greatest example of that is found right here in the cross. Because think of all the evil decisions that each of these individuals are making all on their own and for their own sinful and selfish reasons, but we read, **"to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."** Now look at that opening phrase and meditate on it, "to do whatever." "To do" is talking about their actions and planning and malice that was done against Jesus. And

the “whatever” means that it takes in whatever they did. The mocking, scorning, rejection by Jesus, the hypocritical and illegal court case in the middle of the night, the mock worship of Jesus by the soldiers, the flogging of Jesus, his dying between two thieves, the timing of his death on the cross, the fleeing of the disciples, the three denials of Peter, all the events that led Pilate to fear the Jews and agitating them that they might complain to Rome if he does not execute Jesus, to the choosing of Barabbas to be released rather than Jesus, to all the taunts when Jesus hung on the cross. There is not one aspect of this terrible moment in human history and rebellion and sin and evil that was not planned out by our God.

So what comes to pass, “**whatever your hand and your plan predestined to take place.**” Now what does “predestined” mean? It means that it was ordained and preplanned by God. The millions of decisions and sins that made them put Jesus on the cross were ordained by God. And let me ask you if you believe that? Listen to this prophecy made centuries before the event of Jesus’ crucifixion took place in Isaiah 53:10, “**Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.**” No one has a problem with the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. We realize we are here today because of the will of God. He has provided that salvation. We are the prosperity of the Lord. He has provided us with salvation. The part we forget about or we might even struggle with is the first part of that verse, “**It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.**” What came to pass was the will of God. And so many people, trying to discern all the events will say something like. Well, God didn’t do that, but God just allowed it to happen. He was passive, not active.

And that brings momentary people comfort when they are going through trials or maybe the evil from others. Because an all-good God would not have planned this, but he allowed it to happen. There are a couple of problems with this view. The first is: how is that of any comfort? In fact, it is worse. If God has the power to stop that car going through the red light and does not do it, what does that say about God? Is he any less responsible? Is he uncaring? The other problem is that God has said that what comes to pass comes to pass because that is what he planned to come to pass. It is absolutely his will. He takes responsibility in ultimate crushing the Son. We read that all these evil and wicked people did exactly what God planned to take place. The cross was not just allowed to happen but every free act and intentional act of man was planned out through the sovereign control and direction of God. Here is the comfort, God always has the highest and best purposes in mind in all that he has planned. As Joseph said to his brothers there is a difference in intent, “**you meant it for evil but God meant it for good.**” You are I are hear this morning because of that good, singing about the good and glorious intentions and will of God. The gospel is not something that just happened but this is God’s gospel - his plan, his mercy, his grace conceived before the creation of the world.

Who determines what comes to pass? Who is the Prime Director and Mover in our lives? Who has set the boundaries of our existence and established the relationships and obstacles and difficulties in our lives? Who has established when we were born and when we shall die and everything in between? It is none other than our

sovereign God. And the gospel as we preach it to ourselves, and pray it back to God gives us certainty of our salvation. This is God's will and God's plan, but it also helps us understand life. Why do we have difficulties, trials and opposition. Why do evil people devise and even celebrate the evil done against us? Are they in ultimate control? And the answer is no. And here is the assurance, not that we can know what God is doing, but God always has the best and highest intentions in my life. If he planned all the wickedness around the cross to bring about my highest good, then with all the perplexities and stresses that I have, I know he has good purposes and I can trust in him. Preach this gospel to yourself. This is God's gospel - God's plan. My life is under his control. It is his plan. I can trust in him.