

Why Do the Heathen Rage? Acts 4:25-26

We have been going through this fascinating chapter looking at the rise of persecution of the church. We saw Peter and John through the power of Christ healed the man at the gate beautiful, preached Christ, were arrested and spent the night in jail, put on trial, preached Christ again, then threatened and released. And it is amazing to look how hard sin and unbelief exists in an individual. And we saw that last time we were together. There is a bias against anything to do with the true God of heaven and his Son Jesus Christ. We saw the defiance and even how irrational the rejection of Christ was and is. The man who was lame since birth is in his forties and standing before them, but they still reject Christ. It is not that the message does not make sense or there is just not enough proof about Jesus. Unbelief chooses the irrationality of unbelief.

But last time we also saw what saving faith does in an individual. We are new creatures in Christ, and because of that new life there is a certain response to opposition. So what does real and authentic faith in Christ do when there's opposition and suffering in our lives? They have been imprisoned and now threatened. A death sentence hangs over their heads if they continue. Again, the Sanhedrin are the individuals that put Jesus on trial and condemned him. What would the apostles do? We know what false belief or unbelief does in this situation because we are told by the Lord in the Parable of the Four Soils. Jesus says in Matthew 13:20-21, **“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”** The litmus test of whether our faith is real and authentic is the trials of life. How do we respond?

Here they are basically told to end anything to do with Jesus Christ. What do they do? They do what believers do. They go out and find other believers. They identify with Christ and find their comfort not with the people of the world but fellow believers. These are our brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in the faith. Here is where we come for comfort. They also prayed to God. God is real and therefore hears our prayers and responds to his children. They truly have dependant hearts on him. And notice they are one accord. They are praying that he might be magnified and glorified and their faith might not fail. They know their need of him.

And the third thing they do is reflect on Scripture. Scripture is our guide and our strength. God communicates with us through his sufficient Word. And it is incredible how many believers have lost that conviction that God's Word is sufficient for life and godliness. God has given all the direction I will ever need for any battle, suffering, opposition or trial that I will ever face in his inerrant and all sufficient Word. Believers in the midst of suffering today, look for some secret message or special revelation from God. In their estimation God's Word is not enough. I need a fresh message for these difficulties. God speak to me in a still small voice. Others look at modern day psychology to give them the deepest answers to the human soul. I have met believer after believer who thinks their problems and trials and struggles are just too deep to be

answered by the Scriptures. I need other experts. I need doctors or therapists that do not know God to diagnose my problems and give direction and hope.

Many have lost their confidence in God's Word. It's all true and inspired by God, but it is just not enough for me. It is amazing how these early believers didn't look for a sign from heaven, or pray for extra revelation or seek out worldly philosophers, but came back to the Scriptures to explain what they were going through. They relied on what God had already said, and they only had the Old Testament. But that was enough. They sought to understand their world and their struggles through the Scriptures. And how about you? You live in this fallen world. Are you seeking to understand your struggles and trials, and even God in the midst of those struggles through God's sufficient Word? This is where these believers turned for hope and strength. And this is where we need to turn. And I want to see a couple of things this morning. One is I want us to understand our world, and I want us to understand why it is in the state it is in.

1. We need to see the state of the world? V. 25.

We are people who question. We try to understand. And right from an early age we ask the question "why?" Why do the lights go on when I turn the switch upward? Why does the sun come up in the morning? Why did she say those mean and nasty things? Why is life so hard? Why would I ever have to go through the things I have to go through? Why is my life such a struggle? And the thing that is amazing is not that we ask questions, but we never try to find the answers out from the Scriptures.

Think of it: why is there a war going on in the Ukraine? Why is North Korea flexing their muscles and threatening to drop nuclear weapons? Why do despotic leaders starve their citizens? The world asks those questions all the time, and they cannot answer those questions. People even ask those questions of their own lives, and all the problems and difficulties. I read a Facebook post of one young man, who just had one question, "Why is life so hard?" Have you notice how depressed and hopeless people all around you feel. Do I have some mental defect or disease? What is wrong with me and what is wrong with my world? So many see no reason for life with all of its problems, and that life is just aimless suffering.

But here even in these questions from Psalm 2 we see something of the enormity of the problem and that God is aware and describes perfectly the world we live in. And he gives answers. He gives answers why these early believers are being persecuted for their faith in Christ. And Psalm 2 is considered a Messianic Psalm even though King David is writing, and he certainly had people and nations that opposed his rule. It was considered even by early believers to be a Messianic Psalm, and you can see that because right after the quote you have the application in verses 27-28, "**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, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.**"

And Psalm 2 has twelve verses, and it is not hard to outline. The outline is four parts with three verses in each. The first is the rebellion of the nations, the next section is the absolute sovereign rule of God. The third is the triumph of the Son, and the

fourth is a call to repentance. Here in verse 25 you have verse 1 of the Psalm quoted. And let me give the reading in Psalm 2, **“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”** It is almost word for word. But it has two parts. One is notice the question: why do the nations rage? Literally why do the heathen rage? Nations, Gentiles and heathen are all terms for people who are not the people of God. And in the context it is the leaders of those nations that represent the people. And any time you read the news isn't this what you see? You see exactly what is written here. Anger and defiance and hatred, and wars and threats on the international front. The word “rage,” is very picturesque. It is something that is fomenting, something out of control. If you have ever seen the sea and the huge waves during a storm. They churn up water and debris from the bottom and it is just thrown wildly and violently. And can you think of a more apt description of what we see today? At the centre of this raging is sin - sin that is out of control. Sin that is raging that it does not matter who gets in the way, this is what I want. It is the exact opposite of peace. Peace comes with our relationship with God. It causes us to relate to one another, to care for one another, to love one another even if others do not deserve it. That is not what you see, but you see rage and anger and violence and every kind of vice imaginable.

But look how he goes on and describes the world that he lives in, **“and the people plot in vain?”** Now the meaning of “plot” is to think and imagine and seek out to get. There is a plot or goal or plan with an end in mind, something that they want and what it ends up is in vain, in other words - empty. Have you ever looked at the goals of individuals and seen how empty they really are? Even if they are able to reach them, they cannot keep anything in this world, and everything in this world can never satisfy. You can have all the money or sex and free time you would like but it will never satisfy. It always leaves you with a feeling of want or as our culture says, “needing more.” People are needy. People try to find life apart from God, but how does it end? Nothing, empty, vain, and more needy.

And it is a good lesson for us to realize and recognize the world that we live in. This is a world that argues. This is a world that has made things preeminent that are empty. And it is important for us that we see the world accurately because we can live as if our hope is here. We can live for things that are futile and empty. We can even rage when we do not get them. We can think like the ungodly that we are in control and we can make our future, and as people say, you can be anything you want. This is the world and as the people of God we are not part of the world.

But here is the question: why do the nations and the people of the world rage and plot vain things? Because God doesn't just describe the world and the events of the world but diagnoses the problem. And that brings us to our second point.

2. We need to see rebellion against God. V. 26.

This was true in David's time, it was true around Jesus' crucifixion, and it is true in what the disciples are now experiencing. They understand the times and seasons, and the struggles and opposition through the Scriptures, and that leads not to a defeatist attitude but one of triumph, one of trust. As you read Psalm 2 there is a great message, and you know what it is? Not only is God ultimately in control, but Jesus wins. He triumphs over every obstacle and every enemy. God has sent us on a mission that cannot fail. Do you recognize that?

Yes there is people who oppose us. There are individuals who will cause you to suffer as a believer. But look at the reason for that here in verse 26, **“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed”** This is explaining who people rage and plot things that come to nothing. Notice the language that is being used, “The kings,” in other words the rulers of this age. They are again, representative of the people. The “set themselves”, the language here is in opposition. Again, they are not seeking to know God or know truth, but right from the start they are setting themselves against God. Notice he says the “rulers are gathered together.” The meaning here is not in the United Nations kind of way. Nations rage against nations, but here is where all the nations are gathered together, **“against the Lord and against his Anointed,”** Against the Father and against Jesus Christ. And we will see that in the following verses that the Jews hated the Romans and the Romans hated the Jews, but they were all against God. They all hated and had a bias against Christ.

These couple of verses explain everything we see today. World peace and harmony in one sense is not that difficult. If you look at the Ten Commandments, and every person was committed, if every nation was committed to carrying out the Ten Commandments then there would be no war, there would be no envy or raging and plotting against one another. Imagine a world where every single person sought to honour God, and that spilled over to his relations with one another. Listen to the second table in Exodus 20:12-17, **“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”** Imagine a world where families loved one another, no one lied, or sought lustful sin, or stole and was content with whatever God had given them. Peace and harmony in one sense is not all that difficult. Just be committed to following God and his revelation.

So what is the problem? People, ruler, nations, individuals set themselves against God and against His Anointed. Listen to the problem as Paul says it in Romans 8:7, **“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”** There is a natural hostility to God. They do not want to please him and they cannot please him. And this is what we see. We see that in the next verse. This is why all the major categories of people were lined up against Jesus, and each of them for their own reasons. And this is also why the disciples were being treated and threatened the way they were at this time. It is why persecution would increase. It is why we have seen persecution of believers in the last two thousand years. Generation after generation has known this opposition - this rage of the nations.

So this quote from Psalm 2 helps to understand what they are experiencing. This is nothing new and should be expected. But it also, explains the why. The why of opposition and even increased opposition is not because of anything faulty in the message or in God or in the work of Christ. It is because of the natural rebellious heart of man. He has set his face against God.

So what can we glean from this passage of Scripture? Let me give a few. One is that we can remember and live in light this is the world we live in. We should not be surprised when we face opposition in serving and delighting in Christ. We should not be shocked when the government passes laws that impede the progress or the preaching of the gospel. We should not be surprised when individuals call us narrow or unloving or even ungodly. They in their rebellion will call good evil, and evil good. Peter will say about this later in 1 Peter 4:12-14, **“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. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”** Why are we so angry and frustrated by the opposition in the world today? Why do we spend so much time even raging against the government? We are blessed. This is a sign we are believers in Christ. We do not go looking for opposition but if we are living for Christ opposition and trials will find us. This is the world we live in. The Scriptures diagnose accurately what the problem is. It is rebellion against God.

But the second observation is: how do we respond? We need to realize what individuals, what those who live in rebellion and sin need most, and also how God is going to be gloried most. And we will talk about this more when we get to verse 29, but look at it right now, **“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”** I am amazed they are not asking for fire to come down from heaven or God to execute swift judgment, but praying that they might be bold enough and brave enough and loving enough to preach Jesus Christ. This is so different because when someone rages against someone else, what is the natural response? It is to rage against them. Here the disciples pray they might not only obey God and the commission he has given, but also they realize the greatest need that lost and dying people have.

And trials in our lives either sharpen that focus and bring into clarity what is truly important; or we get so caught up in the trial and how hard and seemly unfair it is that we fight the wrong battle. God not only indicates what we can expect as believers, but also how we are to respond. We are respond by carrying out his known will in love for God and others. Have you forgotten the gospel and his commission? Is there still a commitment to proclaim and make much of him? Do we pray for those who could be rightly categorized as our enemy? We pray for our own hearts that we will not stray away from him and his purposes.

And there is a third observation: and that is ultimately the whole point of Psalm 2. And that is God is all powerful. He is the great ruler - not man. He is in control. Even though they rebel and shake their fists at God, just like the religious leaders did here. In fact listen to Psalm 2:4-6, **“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’”** This is the only passage in Scripture where we have God laugh. He laughs at the puny power of man thinking they can somehow thwart his purposes and his will. And God will come in his time and wrath. And here is the amazing thing, the King will sit - in other words - be enthroned on his holy hill in Jerusalem. He will reign and rule. Not the ruler of this

world. Christ will reign and rule. Do you realize with all the opposition we face daily that we have a cause, we have a faith, we have a mission that cannot fail? Do you realize we are on the winning side of history?

In a day and age, where many Christians think the Scriptures are somehow deficient or are just not enough, these early believers turned to them for strength and guidance and direction. This Book describes the world I live in. It describes why we are in the state we are in. But also indicates the end. And the end gives so much light in how we are to live and function today. The mission continues to our Lord comes back. Won't you join me, regardless of the cost of seeking to proclaim Christ, of going into all the corners of our world and community to make and mature disciples for the glory of our God? It is a mission that cannot fail!