

A Stormy Start

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[0 : 00] Well, he was a man who was full of passion, and all through his life he'd been incredibly zealous, that zeal had been misplaced.

But as he fell to the ground, as he was temporarily blinded, his whole life was turned upside down. And he finally started to see, from that moment, Saul had his zeal redirected.

And he had it redirected at one aim, the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. The man who became the Apostle Paul, from that moment, had one great longing for men and women, boys and girls, to encounter the person he'd met on the road to Damascus.

His desire was that they would have the kind of life-changing experience he had. And this led him to boldly go where no man had gone before.

He was willing to take the gospel to hard places, places that had never been, places like Thessalonica. Now, your minister and his wife, they're about to have a second baby, aren't they, at some point?

[1 : 14] Or have I just given away a state secret? I can't remember when the baby is coming. I hope that's not the case. I think Acts chapter 17, verses 1 to 9, they are like taking a trip to the maternity ward.

They're like taking a trip to the maternity ward because they describe the birth of a church. And like all births, it was sudden, it was painful, it was dramatic.

And as we look at it together this morning, I hope, I pray that this passage will show us the power of the gospel. As we look at it, there's three things I want, I hope, we'll see as this church is born.

Firstly, notice with me, notice with me the scriptures that form it. The scriptures that form it. As this church is born, notice the scriptures that form it.

Now, before we look at these verses, I want you to quickly turn back with me to Acts chapter 1. Acts chapter 1, or listen as I read some verses from there.

[2 : 24] Acts chapter 1, the Lord Jesus is about to return to heaven. And the disciples were perplexed. Look at their question in verse 6 of Acts chapter 1.

And Lord, are you at this time, they say, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Look at the answer Jesus gives in verse 7.

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power, and the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In many ways, that verse, verse 8, is like the theme of the book of Acts. As we read through the book of Acts, we see that promise coming true.

We see the gospel spreading from Pentecost. It's like somebody throwing a stone into a pond and ripples going out. And by chapter 17, the gospel has come to Thessalonica.

[3 : 30] As we turn back to our chapter, we see that. And I wonder if we see Paul's approach in Acts 17. Where does Paul go? And what does Paul do?

Paul goes to the synagogue, and Paul starts to preach. As was his custom, verse 2, Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures.

Now, when you think about it, in many ways, this made perfect sense. I wonder if you can see just how his approach in this one city, how it mirrors what we read in Acts chapter 1, verse 8.

Just as the church begins in Jerusalem, and then spreads out the whole church, what Paul does when he goes to this city, he goes to the place in it where there would have been the most familiarity with his message.

It goes to the place where people would have had categories to understand what he was telling them about. They knew of God. They knew of God's covenant.

[4 : 36] They knew the Scriptures. Look at the verbs used to describe what Paul did. He reasoned. He explained. He proved. He proclaimed. Who was his focus?

Paul's focus, he says, is on this Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, the fact that he is the Messiah. Paul's telling these people that the Scriptures that they knew, that they claimed to love, that they'd studied since childhood, that they pointed to this one individual, this one person he had met on the road to Damascus.

Notice what Paul spells out about Jesus. He says it was necessary that he suffer, but also that he rise from the dead.

I don't know about you. I wonder if we always think about those two things together as being in the Old Testament. We're used to passages like Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, that speak of the suffering of Jesus.

But there are also passages in the Old Testament that promise the Messiah who would come would rise. Psalm 16 is just one example. You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, or let your faithful ones see decay.

[5 : 55] Paul must have talked about that psalm in the synagogue. What Paul was doing was exactly what Jesus had done on the road to Emmaus.

Luke tells us that beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself. Friends, what's the application of that this morning to us?

I think it's this. The whole of the Old Testament, the whole of the Old Testament points to the Lord Jesus Christ. If we read the Old Testament and miss him, well, we've missed everything.

He's the main character, isn't he, in the Old Testament. Paul's teaching of Jesus in this way, it was what helped birth the church in Thessalonica.

So this church, it didn't begin because Paul had a really magnetic personality. This church in Thessalonica didn't begin because Paul was a very impressive preacher.

[7 : 03] It didn't begin because Paul had some great vision. And I think today, those are the kind of things you and I, we can be very, very tempted to put our confidence in as Christians.

We can think if we get the right leader, if we have the right strategy, then what God will do is God will just inevitably get on board with what we want him to do.

But the church in Thessalonica began in a different way. The God who spoke creation into being, he spoke in this city. He used the faithful preaching of God's word to bring new life.

This is always the way that God works in the world. In Isaiah 55, God's word, it's compared to the rain and the snow that fall from heaven and bring new life.

God says, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire. Or listen to our friend Martin Luther.

[8 : 14] He's writing about his experience of the Reformation. Listen to what he said. He said, I simply taught and preached God's word. Otherwise, I did nothing.

And then when I slept or drank Wittenberg beer, the word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it.

I did nothing, he said. I did nothing. The word of God did it all. Friends, this morning, we need to have confidence in the word of God.

It's living, it's active, it's powerful. And if you have a friend and you give them a gospel, so much more is going on in that moment than if you pass on to them a novel that you've read and that you enjoyed.

There is going to be a response to that gospel. We see it in verses four and five. As the word goes out, there are some people who read it, who hear it, who are persuaded. There are some people who start to persecute.

[9 : 31] That takes me to a second theme this morning. As we see this church being born, we don't just see the scripture that forms it. We see the suffering that threatens it.

The suffering that threatens it. Now, in every sermon, there are lots of details in a passage that we don't have time to go into.

We could spend a long time this morning pointing out the diversity of this church. We see that in verse four. As the gospel spreads in the city, it crosses natural divides of gender and background. It came to the Jews first, but also to the Greeks. The gospel still does that today. We could speak about the importance of persuasion. It's a big theme in the book of Acts.

And maybe this morning we're reassured by the fact that as the Jews Paul spoke to heard of Jesus, they didn't have the kind of dramatic conversion experience that Paul had.

[10:33] Maybe that reassures some of us this morning. Instead, they were persuaded. They heard what he said and they thought, that seems to make sense.

We could spend a sermon talking about that, how reasonable Christianity is. But instead, in this second point, what I want us to see is the opposition.

I want us to see the opposition that this new church faced. There is no honeymoon period, is there? Almost immediately, the moment this church begins, a great wall goes up in the city of Thessalonica.

Like the Berlin Wall, there's a division. Some people are persuaded by what Paul says, by this message. Some people start to persecute.

And this is something that the gospel always does today. I quoted Isaiah 55 earlier. God's word always does what God wills. And what seems to happen so often is that when God's word goes out, well, here's how somebody has put it.

[11:46] The same sun that melts wax hardens clay. The same sun that melts wax hardens clay.

God's word is not a neutral thing. God's word provokes a response. God's word is doing that even this morning in this room. And we need to realize that or we'll be discouraged or we'll be tempted to compromise the message of the gospel.

Look at verse 5. And I wonder if you can spot a surprising word. I think the word jealous stands out, doesn't it? What motivated many of the Jews in Thessalonica as they saw the gospel coming to their town was jealousy.

Jealousy. In Acts chapter 7, Stephen uses the same word to describe the actions of Joseph's brothers as they sold him into slavery.

What were they jealous of? I don't really know the answer to that question. But jealousy is like that, isn't it?

[13:00] Jealousy doesn't really make sense. And this jealousy, it causes these people to act in a senseless way.

I wonder if you can see with me, can you see how utterly disproportionate their response is? Here are people who turn on their fellow Jews, turn on people from a similar religious, cultural background to them, simply because they now view the scriptures in a different way.

Instead of debating with them, instead of arguing it out with them, they respond with violence. Luke tells us that they take wicked men, bad characters, the NIV translates it, and they cause a riot.

They cause an uproar in the city. It's crazy, isn't it? Friends, I think this teaches us something this morning. If you want this in a sentence, here it is.

A reasonable gospel is met so often with an unreasonable response. A reasonable gospel so often is met with a totally unreasonable response.

[14:23] We should never be taken aback when Jesus, who is so full of grace, who says, come to me, I'm gentle, I'm lowly in heart, he is met with anger.

You start talking about him and people get angry quickly. And sometimes in certain situations even threaten violence.

We should never be surprised when some of the most ardent opposition to the gospel comes from very, very religious people. We've seen that in Scotland, in this city, in the past decade or so, haven't we?

In a small way, compared to some of the opposition our brothers and sisters face today, but it's real. And as so often happens in situations like this, one person becomes a bit of a scapegoat.

Can you see him in the passage? Jason. It tells us that people go to his house, they go looking for Paul and Silas.

[15:32] If you look at verse 10, Paul and Silas have to kind of flee under the cover of darkness. And when they can't be found, Jason and others are dragged out, verse 6.

Friends, we should never be surprised by this kind of thing. This is what happened to the Lord Jesus Christ. Religious authority and civil authority combine in opposition against him.

Same thing happens today. Civil authority, religious authority combine in opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the gospel.

Why do they do that? I think the end of verse 6, it gives us the answer. The ESV translates it this way. It says, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.

These men who have turned the world upside down. It's a wonderful phrase, isn't it? During the English Civil War, when Charles I was executed, everything changed so fast.

[16:47] That phrase seemed to sum up for people what everyone felt. The world had been turned upside down. And I think the Jews in verse 6, they speak this way because they're afraid.

This is what happens when people start to break away from another person's control. People don't like it when a system that they've invested in starts to feel like it's fraying at the edges.

And the Jews here, they recognize that the message of the gospel was countercultural. They saw that it was radical. It was revolutionary.

They were starting to see that the gospel was disruptive. And they seem to have viewed this church, they seem to have viewed them as a kind of threat to the civil authority, the stability of their city.

These people had totally misunderstood the gospel Paul proclaimed. I don't see any evidence in this passage that these new Christians were going to be disruptive.

[17:57] As God people, you and I are called to follow Christ. We're called to live at peace with our neighbors. We're called to honor those in authority. There's no sign in these verses, I don't see it, maybe you do, there's no sign here that they're willing to cause big trouble.

And yet they're met with great opposition, aren't they? In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he says this. He says that their goal, here's a goal for us, their goal should be to live a quiet life, to mind their own business, to work with their hands, so that they might win the respect of outsiders. I just wonder this morning if there's a challenge for us today. Are we willing to be wronged as God's people? Are we willing this morning to be misunderstood as Jesus was?

Are we willing to be maligned for being Christians? Are we willing for this church to have unpleasant things said about it in this city?

Because we love Jesus. We need to have that attitude if we're going to follow him faithfully.

[19:19] It's not easy. It's not easy in the office. It's not easy in the playground. It's not easy at the family dinner table. That's why we need each other as Christians.

That's why we need to love and pray for each other. But it will always be the way, this way for God's people. We follow a savior who experienced this kind of opposition and hatred and hostility.

Even when we seek to be faithful to him, even when we pose no real threat to the culture around us, we need to accept the fact that we will be viewed with suspicion.

A reasonable gospel, a life-changing gospel, it will often be met with an unreasonable response.

That's why our final theme is so important this morning. As this church began, we don't just see the scripture that formed it, the suffering that marked it. No, there's a third thing.

[20:30] We see the sovereign who holds it. The sovereign who holds it. Now, you don't need me to tell you that the monarchy has loomed quite large, hasn't it, in all our minds for, I was going to say, good, bad, and ugly reasons.

That's true, though, isn't it? On February the 6th, Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to celebrate a platinum jubilee to mark the anniversary. All kinds of events took place, didn't they? And yet, just three months later, she had died.

One of the things many people spoke about after she had died, even people who didn't share her Christian faith themselves, they spoke about the impact her faith had made on her.

She'd discovered there was another king. She'd come to realize she owed her allegiance to him.

This is what the Thessalonians discovered as well.

They heard Paul speaking from the Old Testament Scriptures. The Lord Jesus Christ became real to them. They recognized that he was the king of kings.

[21:47] They began to see that they had been brought into his realm. They were his subjects.

And to borrow from their opponents, I think they started to see that one of the things they saw about his kingdom is that it turns human ideas of kingship on their head.

The kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. The kingdom of Jesus is an upside-down kingdom.

Here's what Jesus said to two of his disciples.

Many of you will know these words well. But as they craved a throne, listen to what Jesus said to them. You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

He said, not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[23 : 03] That's the kind of king Jesus is. Jesus is the king who served. Jesus is the king who washed his disciples' feet, even the feet of the betrayer.

even the feet of the one who would commit treason against him. Jesus is the king who was willing to go to the cross, as we'll remember in a moment, pay the penalty for all our sins.

And friends, this is what draws people to Jesus so often. They see clearly that he is a ruler, that Jesus does not use his rule to harm people.

He doesn't use his rule to manipulate people. Instead, he uses his rule to help, to love, to pay the penalty that we deserve to pay.

His kingdom is a different kind of kingdom. Today, his kingdom is growing all over this world. And his subjects are called to be different too.

[24 : 27] Here's how someone has put it. Lord, let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, heart, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that the valley is the place of vision.

Friends, those are not the values of our world, are they? broken heartedness, getting low before him, bearing a cross instead of a crown.

And this morning, if you hear words like that and you say, however tentatively, I want that, I see that that is the kind of life God wants for me.

Well, friends, be encouraged this morning. God has begun a good work in you. God will bring that work to completion. You are already held by him.

He already is your king. Paul tells us elsewhere, he has delivered us from the dominion of darkness. He's transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, forgiveness of sins.

[26 : 08] This morning, Jesus speaks to us and Jesus births the church. This morning, Jesus calls us to join him in suffering for his sake.

And this morning, Jesus reminds us that he is the king, a different kind of king, but he still reigns. He still reigns forever and ever.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word today.

We thank you that it confronts us. It shows us a reality today. Thank you that Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not stand against it.

And we thank you so much that all over the world, even in this corner of your world, the gospel has come, the gospel has spread. Thank you that Jesus is our king.

[27 : 19] We thank you that he came as a king who served. Lord, you thank you that you bless us, you would help us to take up our cross and follow him.

We ask it in his name and for his sake. Amen.