

September 22, 2024

“Resistance to the Gospel”
Acts 17:1-9

FCF: Naive about real world

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Left to itself, the world is resistant to the gospel.
(magnet) We need to know that as we go out.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

One ought not to be naive about the world. A news story from 2018 ([READ](#)):

An ISIS-inspired terrorist plowed into a group of seven bicyclists in Tajikistan on July 29, killing four of them. Two of the four killed were Americans, Jay Austin and Lauren Geoghegan, both 29, who had quit their jobs to embark on a biking tour of the world in July of 2017. Friends told the media that the couple wanted to meet new people and see new places, and that they had a strong belief in the goodness of human nature. “People, the narrative goes, are not to be trusted. People are bad. People are evil,” Austin wrote. “I don’t buy it.” He called evil “a make-believe concept.” According to a friend, Austin had ridden a scooter across America in 2013. He nicknamed the scooter Rousseau.

This misguided outlook led to a tragedy. Again, one ought not to be naive about the world.

We’re about to start a series in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Before we dive into these letters, it would help to consider the context of the planting of that church. So we’ll begin in Acts 17.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Acts 17:1-9](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

We have every reason to hear what we just read as recorded history. That’s how it was written. That’s how it was received from the earliest days of the church. And that’s how it has been verified by historical and archeological studies today. Let me give you a few examples. Thessalonica was a real place, Macedonia’s largest port, connected to Apollonia and Amphipolis by the Egnatian Way, a Roman highway of the time. The term used in v.8 for “city authorities” was virtually restricted to this province. And the context of their response to this crisis was the expulsion by Claudius Caesar of Jews from Rome because of riots connected to a “Chrestus.”

This is history. Why is that important? It happened. These things happened in space and time. And in this world - not another of our imagination but just a different time in this world. And if these things happened in this world, if we are simply further down the timeline path, then the events of that day reflect realities that hold in our own. That is, there is a commonality between then and now. What might that be? Partly this. There is a hostility and opposition to the gospel, to the news of a king who has come to make all things right and make us His own. Left to itself, the world is resistant to the gospel. And we need to know that as we go out.

What we need to know about this resistance? At least these three things. First, the source of this resistance. Second, the extent of the resistance. And third, the cause of this resistance.

I. THE SOURCE OF THE RESISTANCE

First, the source of the resistance. This might be surprising as you consider it.

A) Not from the Pagans

It did not come from the pagans of the city, from the marketplace or a temple.

1. Estranged from God

The average person in Thessalonica was an image bearer of God, worshipping images. That is, created by God for God but estranged from God and, therein, living for things that are not God.

2. But not from them

That said, the hostility and opposition, the resistance we read of here, did not come from them.

B) But from the Religious

It came from the religious people of the city, from the Jews of the local synagogue.

1. Not an isolated case

And this was hardly an isolated incident. If you go back and read through the Gospels, you will see time and again that Jesus' greatest staunchest enemies were the religious authorities in Israel.

2. Despite the benefits

Despite all the benefits that were theirs - their rich history, their beautiful torah, their close knit community. Jesus told several parables to make this point. His own would betray Him.

That's all reflected here. It's a bit shocking. Even more, it's terribly sobering.

Illustration:

Think of what we as human beings are capable of - architectural wonders, scientific breakthroughs, athletic feats, or just ordinary acts of kindness. We are capable of beautiful and admirable things. But awful horrible things as well - cruelty of speech, acts of injustice, crass dehumanization - often for petty ends. Including and at times especially from religious people.

Application:

Now, to be clear, we are all religious. We all, even the atheist, have an ultimate in which we hope and trust. We are all worshippers. But I mean "religious" in the traditional sense..

Throughout the history of the Old and New Testament, throughout history ever since, the record shows that some of the worst examples of hypocrisy, some of the harshest hostility to Jesus, can come from among people who are blind to their need for Jesus. They refuse to see it. And this ought not to surprise us. It should sadden us but it should never really surprise us.

For left to itself, the whole world is resistant to the gospel. We can see it in the source.

II. THE EXTENT OF THE RESISTANCE

So, first, we see the source of the resistance. Then there is the extent - how far it goes.

A) Refusing to Believe

It begins with simply refusing to believe. This is at the personal and private level.

1. Clear distinction made

A clear distinction is made (**READ Acts 17:2-5a**). "But the Jews..." This is not an anti-Semitic remark snuck in here. Paul was Jewish. Most of the early church was Jewish. Jesus is Jewish.

2. Hardened hearts

This is simply about the response of refusing to believe, stemming from hardened hearts

B) Rescuing Others

But it didn't stop there. That refusal spilled over into a felt need to rescue others.

1. Not an isolated case

(**READ Acts 17:5-6a**) Again, this was not an isolated incident. If you go back to Acts 13-14, you read of Paul and Barnabas, going to Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. And the Jews of Antioch decided to follow them, leading then to this (**READ Acts 14:19**). See how far this goes.

2. A zeal without knowledge

What's going on here? Paul would write about this a few years later in his letter to the church in Rome, referring to a "zeal without knowledge." A hot passion without a firm foundation.

And the word from the bruised apostle is that followers of Jesus should expect this.

Illustration:

That is, we should not be taken by surprise. We should not be as those who set their alarm at night and are surprised to be awakened in the morning. We should not be as one who dives into the water and is surprised she got wet. We should not be as the man who entered the ring and got punched in the face. We should expect this resistance in whatever form it comes.

Application:

Too often Christians are taken by surprise by the resistance of the world. And too often we end up taking it personally. And when we do this, we show we are confused about what is really going on. What was going on in Thessalonica? This wasn't about Paul. And it isn't about us. The resistance is to the Master. It's but a mark of His followers to experience this - being overlooked, left out, misunderstood, mocked. We ought not to seek or want it. But to expect it.

For left to itself, the world is resistant to the gospel. We need to know the extent of this.

III. THE CAUSE FOR THE RESISTANCE

So we see the source and the extent of this resistance. And we also see the cause.

A) The Message Itself

We know part of the reason for the resistance is the message itself, what is conveyed.

1. Unexpected

(**READ Acts 17:2-3**) The message Paul was relaying was unexpected by the Jews of the city. Despite what the prophets had said, despite the symbols of the temple, they had no categories for a suffering messiah, no concept of a dying king. They were looking for a lion, not a lamb.

2. Unwanted

They were looking for one to rout the Romans, to restore the glory of Israel. They saw their greatest need as a political one. And so they saw their greatest solution along those lines as well.

B) The Reception

Which sets the tone for their response to the reception they saw (**READ Acts 17:4-5a**).

1. "Jealous"

They were jealous, moved with envy. As they saw the shifting of hearts and minds, as they saw their synagogue membership shrink, they sensed their influence waning, their power fading.

2. Unwilling

And when it came right down to it, that was what was important to them. That was what their worship was about and directed towards. And they were unwilling to let anything threaten that.

Put another way, there's a lot more going on in the resistance we face than we can see.

Illustration:

There's always more going on than we can see, even in the simplest things. I got to thinking about this the other day simply with earthworms. How many are down there? (**READ**):

In an acre of good soil, researchers have found more than 1 million worms and 1,200 miles of earthworm holes or burrows. One-million earthworms per acre is about 25 earthworms per square foot of soil.

Application:

There's always more going on than we can see. Put another way, think of what it takes to believe the gospel. Think of the metaphysical claims - a spiritual realm, unseen to the eye. Then think of the moral claims - the reality of sin, the bankruptcy of our hearts, the need of a Savior. There's an understandable offense here that can only be overcome by a supernatural work.

Left to itself, the world is resistant to the gospel. And we need to know the cause.

CONCLUSION:

Sebastian Junger's book, *The Perfect Storm*, sets forth the coming together of several weather patterns that created a meteorological nightmare in the North Atlantic for any boat in the area (and their rescuers). It's a great read later made into a major film starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg. The closing scene of the film captures the images of a fishing boat, the *Andrea Gail*, sinking with her captain and then of the first mate floating on the surface, bobbing in the swells, miles from anywhere. Left to himself, he would surely perish. And he did.

That's the world of Acts 17, the world we live in now. Knowing this, what impact might that have on us? The answer may surprise you. It need not be hopeless pessimism but genuine gospel realism. Consider Paul and his response. As we read through Acts and his letters, what do we see in him? Engagement. A persistent perseverance. A steadfast obedience to the Lord. A humble dependence upon the Lord. And a real compassion for other people, including the very people who were so stridently hostile and stubbornly resistant to the Lord and His servants.

But how? What enabled Paul to respond this way? A Spirit-driven memory of his own experience. Paul had been in their place. He had been in their place and had not forgotten. He knew the hostility and felt an affinity. So he stood not above them but beside them. We need the same - a humbled memory coupled with a sobered joyful sense of what Jesus has done for us.

The world is resistant to the gospel. It needs Jesus. And so do we as we go out.

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