

The Sovereign Nature of God.  
Acts 17

Colossians 1:13-29

Isaiah 25

Responsive Ephesians 1:3-12

Today we will be starting out in chapter 17 of the book of Acts, where we will be continuing to follow Paul, Silas, and Timothy on their journey through the cities in which God brought them, as we read this account this morning keep in mind what we talked about last week, how God, through the Holy Spirit was guiding Paul and his party on their journey, bringing them to be exactly where they needed to be to reach exactly who God intended that they should. God used them to bring the gospel to those for whom he fore new, for as scripture says we were ordained, we were chosen by him, to be in him and he knew us before the foundation of the world. So as Paul is traveling from city to city, preaching the gospel...the message of Christ crucified and his Resurrection is being taught to the very people that God intends so that they may believe.

In all the things that happen, there is order, and there is purpose...it is God's order, and it is God's purpose. He is the one who gives it all meaning, even as we saw last week the suffering of Paul and Silas..to be beaten and thrown into the deepest parts of the prison, and the effect of that was to place them where God needed them to reach his chosen child, the jailer. It is no different than our text today. As we have seen throughout all of this book of Acts, God has chosen to use such things as persecution to bring about the spread of the gospel. In some ways I think that speaks a lot to who are as humans, we tend to grow complacent, we tend to like to be comfortable, and surround ourselves with that which is familiar, and safe. And there are many times where God blesses that, where he gives us those moments of mercy...but then it seems there is always something that comes along to shake up the status quo, and cause us to move again, He brings new people into our lives, new situations, or allows for times of trial and testing to prove out your faith, not only to yourself but to those around you.

God is working out a beautiful story of redemption in the lives of his people, he has chosen to use us, broken vessels which he has made whole and filled to be that which testifies of him. Through the foolishness of the preaching of the word as scripture says...God brings about a quickening within the soul of his elect, bringing a new birth, and creating out of the old a new creature who loves and worships him, and whose life stands as a witness to the redemptive power of his grace, for he takes that which is broken and makes it whole, he takes those who despise him and cause them to love. As scripture says, He has taken the base things of this world as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of this world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of this world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him, you are in Christ Jesus...( it is because of him, that you are a part of him) who became for us wisdom from God-and righteousness and sanctification and redemption- that, as it is written, he who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

For it is God who has worked all things in our lives to put us exactly where we needed to be to hear his word and believe. The situations, the people, the trials, the failures, and the ever presence sense of hopelessness and doubt...all of these things worked to draw us toward him. So that when the time was right, we would be made able to hear and believe the gospel, we would be given a new heart of belief, one which cries out to the father, not only for forgiveness, but also cries out in worship for he has loved the unlovable, and healed the incurable, and brought peace and comfort to the inconsolable.

So again, as we read this passage this morning, keep in mind God's working through all of these things, as we read this summary account, or as Jim put it last week, a section of this Highlight reel, for that is what this book is, a summary and highlight of the spreading of the gospel. There is so much more that has happened outside of what is recorded here, but this is a summary written by Luke, to show the spread of the word throughout the world, and how God had used a few, to reach so many...and by his grace, the gospel spread like wildfire throughout the land, and the more that those who were in opposition sought to oppose and stamp it out, the hotter it burned and the more it spread. So keeping all this in mind, turn with me to acts chapter 17, and we will read the entire chapter. ( read acts 17)

I am sure by now you have noticed a trend, or this circular nature as to which this book was written. Through every chapter it goes through the process, of Witness, belief, persecution, fleeing, to a new place, then witness, belief, persecution, and fleeing. As we have mentioned before God has seen fit to use persecution as a tool, a driving force to keep the gospel spreading across the world. And I am sure it was necessary for we humans by nature are complacent creatures, and without a driving force often times are pretty ok with the status quo. But God has used such threats to drive people out of Jerusalem initially into many parts of the world taking the gospel with them, just as he uses such threats making various cities inhospitable so that Paul leaves and goes to another.

As we see in our passage this morning, Paul and his party arrive in Thessalonica, and there they find a synagogue. It is implied that there was no synagogue or temple in some of the previously visited cities. As is customary with Paul he always stops first at the synagogue and preaches there to the Jews first before reaching out to the Gentiles in the area. We see in chapter 16, sort of reinforcing the lack of synagogue that they traveled out to the river which was an area that people were gathering to pray. Their journey has taken them further into Gentile territory where there has been less influence by the Jews. But here we see in Thessalonica that there is indeed a synagogue, a large presence of Jews who live in that city. So as verse 2 says, Paul spent 3 sabbaths there at the synagogue teaching and arguing with them over the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah who was foretold and the necessity of his suffering and resurrection. Much like how Jesus himself opened the scriptures to the disciples, showing them that everything in what we today call the old testament was written about him, and must be fulfilled. In particular how the prophets had told of the need for a Messiah to come and suffer and rise from the dead making repentance possible for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus taught that God's saving plan for humanity required his death and resurrection. And Paul in his ministry to the Jews at the synagogues had the same focus, to point out to them the necessity of a suffering Messiah which is the total opposite of what they had pictured as the coming Messiah. As we can see from their rejection of Christ throughout the gospels, they were looking for a king to rise and reestablish Israel as a dominate nation in the world, to rid them of the captivity of the Romans' and indeed in the spiritual sense, this is exactly what Christ did.

He came, not to save the physical descendants of Abraham from the oppression of the Romans, but true Israel, those who are the offspring of faith like Abraham to save them from the oppression of sin. He has come and established his kingdom, but it is not of this world, and nor are his children physical descendants, but his kingdom is spirit, as is his children. So therefore all who believe through faith, no matter lineage, background, race or creed, are one in Christ, we are a nation built up by him, to be holy, to be set apart, to stand as a great army against the world.

It is not hard to see the opposition that Paul would face from the Jewish world, telling them that the one that they had put to death as a false prophet was indeed the Messiah, the promised King who brings deliverance. And it was by his death, his kingdom was established, not by might, or by force, as was expected...but by pure humility, sacrifice, and love. But through such is a power beyond comprehension...for by his death we have been made right with God, by his death, he conquered..not an oppressing nation upon his people...but the oppression of sin itself, He did not conquer Rome as was hoped, but instead he conquered Satan by using the very means by which Satan sought to crush him, to bring about salvation to the world. Satan had plotted, and schemed his own demise, the death on the cross was Christ's coronation not his destruction, it was his elevation not his downfall, and in death, he brought life, and conquered sin, for us so that we may believe, snatching us from the snares of the devil, and holding us in his arms, where we may find peace and comfort in this life.

Though ultimately being defeated, hasn't stopped Satan from plotting, and from seeking to snatch all that he can from God. But the beautiful thing of it, is no matter how hard he tries, the reality is he is only fulfilling that which God has ordained. As we see with the crucifixion, what Satan meant for evil, God meant for good, and through the sinfulness of mankind, with the hatred of the Religious leaders in Jerusalem being stoked against Jesus, they plotted and schemed to have him killed, to be rid of him. Yet what they plotted and schemed for evil, God used for good...using their very plots and schemes as the vehicle to which Christ was crucified, fulfilling all that was said in the prophets, down to every last detail. Likewise it is the same that we see with Paul and the opposition that arises. It is nothing more than the carry over of the jealousy and hatred from before. Having believed that once Jesus was killed that his disciples would scatter, yet seeing that they have only grown bolder, and it seems even more are joining in following these Jesus whom they had killed, it feeds even more into their hatred and jealousy. As it says in verse 5, "The Jews who were not persuaded, became envious."

The preaching of Paul and those with him was causing people to leave the synagogue worship, It was causing the "god fearing" gentiles to cut their ties with the synagogue and instead meet in houses, or by rivers, and in fields to worship and hear the word of God. This would have an economic effect upon the Jewish leaders, and others at the synagogue, but also it becomes an issue of Pride, as they watched their authority over these people dwindle. So, they plotted to cause an uproar, in an attempt to prove that Paul was causing an uproar and problems within the city. Yet it was they who were causing it to bring about their own schemes. In a move of absolute desperation It was they who hired men in the marketplace to cause disruption and to rile up a mob against them, to cause this disruption to create a case against them before the rulers of the city. They had no power to wield on their own against Paul, but had to enlist the help of criminals. Even from the logical stand point, if you have to plot and scheme and manipulate...you are probably not doing something right, and are probably not on the right side of the issue.

I know I have been talking a lot about God's sovereignty and his working out his purpose and plan through suffering and persecution, and how God's plan in our own lives doesn't only include such moments of time, but has indeed been ordained by him, approved and chosen by him.

As is written in Proverbs 3 “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord. Nor detest his correction, For whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.” Did you get that kids? For those a father loves, they correct, the scold, they punish wrong behavior...and they do so out of love, for they desire that their children grow up to not be self indulged, arrogant, entitled adults, but rather moral, caring, and thoughtful.

Much in the same way God chastises his own children, but he does so because he desires that we learn from it, that we grow in our faith and understanding, and the reality is such moments drive us more toward him. But that isn't to say, all struggles, and all trials are a punishment as some may believe. So often we hear that we are suffering through something because we must have some unconfessed sin, or have done something wrong therefore God is punishing us. And sure, there may at times be truth to that, sometimes God allows the ramifications of our own sinful actions to work as a punishment...but that is not always the case for every trial, or time of suffering that he allows. For would you say that is the case of Paul? Is Paul suffering persecution, being beaten and imprisoned because of some sin he has committed? Of course not, such persecution is merely the result of speaking the truth of the gospel to a sin sick world. But even that God works for his own glory and purpose.

I think far too often we have too small of a view of God, and it isn't of course intentional, but it is merely the fact that we can not truly comprehend his sovereignty, or likewise even his love and mercy. This has been something that has been on my mind a lot recently for I recognize in myself this very thing. It manifests itself in doubts, or even fears, yet what is doubt and fear, it is nothing more than a lack of faith in the one who not only is able, is also willing to provide, who is not only able, but willing to comfort and guide. Not fully trusting in the provisional grace and mercy of God, not seeing the larger picture of his guiding hand even through hardships. He used persecution to drive his disciples across the world...something that was meant for evil, God used for the spreading of the very gospel that satan by the hands of these sinful men were seeking to crush. We don't grasp truly how sovereign this God is....that even satan is subject to him...and not only subject or limited in ability..but by acting out his own desires to crush and destroy all that which is holy, he is only enacting the very will of God to work out the very purpose of God not only in our own lives, but throughout the world.

Think upon that, as we look at the world right now, from a human short sighted perspective it seems that we are on a death spiral, the world has become upside down...right is now wrong, and wrong is right, sin seems to be reigning supreme in our society, for what was once seen only a few decades ago as a sinful, or at the very least divergent behaviour is now praised as brave, and even as righteous and holy, something to be lifted up and worshiped. The sinfulness of this world is being celebrated, and those who are standing to speak for truth are being canceled, silenced, having their ability to speak truth restricted and limited. There is an incredible rise of violence in our cities in the likes that has not been seen in decades, to the point now that people are fleeing those cities, and even businesses are closing their doors because of it. We have this war going on in Ukraine, and the atrocities being done there by both sides that we don't even know the half of I am sure. We have Putin threatening the use of nuclear weapons. All across Europe there is unrest, people have taken to the streets in protest against their governments policies which are impacting food production, and rising energy prices. In Canada they have expanded their assisted suicide program to include depression as a viable reason, what once was a program to ease the sick and dying has now been expanded into letting healthy young adults kill themselves. Then there is the issue of abortion, which has now grown to a frantic point where there are even those advocating for the ability to murder a child upwards to 4 weeks after birth.

If anyone spends even 5 minutes looking at these things, it is easy to become fearful of what the future may hold, yet...we must remember that even in these, God is sovereign...he not only knew, but ordained these times. Who are we, who have this God on our side to be afraid or doubt? Should we be afraid of Russia using Nukes? Should we be afraid of economic strife and troubles, should we be afraid of opposition of sinful man to the truth of the gospel? Of course we all know the answer to those questions is no, yet we are, yet we doubt because thought we know....we don't truly believe.

We don't truly grasp or understand how even all of this seeming chaos, is all being held within our fathers hand. He has drawn a line in the sand saying that all of this will go so far and no further, and he has done so for his own purpose, to work his own glory, and we can't see what the next hour will bring in our lives, let alone how God works his will through all of these things. It seems that we are in a time where Satan has risen up, where God has allowed him to wreck havoc across the world...yet we must always remember that not only is Satan limited in his power, just like with the death of Jesus on the cross.. these very things that he means for ill, in an attempt to hurt God and his people...God uses to enact his own plan. That's right....the reality is.. that even the works of Satan are a part of God's purpose and plan. Our God is so sovereign, he is so in control of every minute detail that there can be nothing out of place or he wouldn't be God....and this includes Satan himself. So what does this all mean? How should we as God's children react, or should we live?

We live in hope, we live not in fear and doubt, but in faith and confidence knowing that our God has a purpose and plan for all of these things. There is not one thing that happens outside of his will, there is not one thing that happens outside of his decree. And it is in that which we can rest, knowing that our God is a loving, merciful, gracious God, and that even these things which are meant for evil, God has intended for good. And that he is actively working his purpose, he is not a passive God merely observing, but is actively enacting his perfect purpose and will. I hope that this thought brings comfort this morning, that we serve the mighty God of creation, by who's own purpose and will chose you to be his.. but not only chose, desired, pursued, called and enabled, you to be set apart from this world as his holy witness. We can rest in him, we have no need to doubt, nor worry, for he has conquered even death for us his children. I challenge you all this morning, just as I have been challenging myself...to grow in faith and trust, to grow in understanding of God's truly sovereign nature, not only know, but to believe that he truly does love and care for us, that Satan, and this world really do have no power against us...that we truly are more then conquerors through Christ Jesus. That we can bring all of our doubts, our fears, our anxieties to him...and he not only listens, but provides, and we can rest in him, who is our hope, we can rest in the one who loved us so, that he suffered died for us...and if he has done that, will he not also be with us in all things?