

The Gospel that Offends

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Please send your Bibles back to Acts 19.

But the text will be on the screen so that you can follow. Well, in his book, Agnostic Historian Tom Holland says, Christianity back then in the first century was so subversive and disruptive, it completely came to saturate the mindset of the Western mind.

And curiously, in a West that is often doubtful of religious claims, so many of its instincts remain, for good and ill, thoroughly Christian. Well, in this passage, we see how the message of Christianity began to disrupt society and later on even influenced it.

But Luke prepares his readers by setting the scene in verse 21 to 22. So here in these verses, we see Paul feeling called to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

Well, although Rome is a very nice place now, we should not think that he wanted to go to Rome for a holiday. Rome was the seat of the Roman Empire, and it was the very government that was against the Christians back then.

[1 : 44] So by wanting to go there, Paul was thinking of basically getting into the dragon's lair. And indeed, at the end of the book of Acts, Paul does get to Jerusalem and then to Rome, but not as a free man.

He gets captured in Jerusalem and then he's brought to Rome as a prisoner. So why would he want to go there? Well, the word decided, highlighted there on the screen, in verse 21, it literally means resolved in the spirit.

I'm not sure why the NIV doesn't include the Holy Spirit, but it means that, literally. He resolved in the spirit to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

It's God's Holy Spirit that pulls him towards Jerusalem and then to Rome. We might see Paul participating in Christ's suffering here, as Christ, too, was shown to be under a divine necessity to go to Jerusalem towards his death.

And so by opening the scene like this, Luke prepares the readers for the coming opposition. And indeed, the whole passage shows increased opposition to the gospel from society and authority.

[3 : 16] So we continue the story. While Paul was planning his journey, a great disturbance happened in Ephesus.

In verse 23, about that time, there arose a great disturbance about the way. Well, in the book of Acts, the way is a name for Christianity.

The great disturbance was caused by the way of Jesus, Jesus being the way, the truth, and the life. It was caused by the gospel of Jesus. And so in verse 24 to 27, we see a silversmith named Demetrius gathering people to start a riot against the Christians in that city because they were losing business as people left idol worship to embrace the way of Jesus.

They had heard the evangelism of Paul, and they thought, oh yeah, we don't want the idols anymore, we want Jesus. And so Demetrius and his other friends lost businesses.

And in verse 26, we see that the first cause of the disturbance was Paul's proclamation that the ancient Roman gods were nothing.

[4 : 41] This echoes our first reading of Jeremiah, where it says that the other gods are just dead statues made of wood and gold and silver.

And we might remember Paul arguing with people in Athens, you know, in Acts 17, that their gods were useless.

So it seems that by this time, Paul had moved people from all over the province of Asia to change from idol worship to Christianity. Now, perhaps this is a good time to apply this to our modern times because these ancient gods still remain, don't they?

They're not called Zeus or Apollo or Athena or Artemis anymore, but they're still here. Those people back then were worshipping the god of prosperity, the goddess of wisdom, the goddess of beauty and sexuality, the god of power and war and others.

These things still remain, don't they? Prosperity, intellect, beauty, sexuality, and power still entice people to worship them.

[6 : 03] American writer David Foster Wallace, who was not a Christian, he was an atheist, he said, here's something that is weird but true.

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worshipped.

Keep in mind that these are the words of an atheist. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things, if they are where you have real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth.

Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

[7 : 12] On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, cliches, epigrams, parables, the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

I find it really interesting that an atheist could think of such a thing. Now, this ancient god still entice us to worship them. But they can never truly satisfy.

All of them demand. Like Paul says in Galatians 4, they enslave us. But none of them satisfies. Jesus is the only one who came and said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon me and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Jesus is the only god who said, This is my body, which is broken for you.

This is my blood, which is poured out for you. What other gods have said that? No, they say the opposite. No, you break your body.

[8 : 33] You pour out your blood for me. Jesus is the only god who gives himself up for us to enjoy.

He is the only one who genuinely wants to have a relationship with us and to satisfy us. This is called Lapis Ligid.

It's not legit. It's Ligid. It's an Indonesian cake made of multiple layers of buttery goodness, topped with either almond or plum.

It's a cake that I grew up with. I ate it many times growing up, and I loved it, until when I was around 20 years old.

My parents bought this Lapis Ligid from a random store in another town. It cost about four times more than a normal Lapis Ligid, but it was so worth it.

- [9 : 42] It's still the best Lapis Ligid I've ever had in my life. And that was an eye-opening experience for me. Suddenly, I felt like I had been lied to my entire life.
- Lapis Ligid wasn't supposed to taste like how I tasted it in my childhood. It's supposed to taste like this. And after that time, every time I buy another kind of Lapis Ligid from another store, it's never as enjoyable anymore.
- I've tasted the best. The others become meh. You see, when we've tasted the best, others become bad tasting, or meh.
- And in this case, it's not only that Jesus proves to be the most good tasting, but, as the Bible says, He's the only one that is true, genuine.
- The others, the other gods, are fake gods. Replicas made of wood, and gold, and silver. They can't even walk, just like Jeremiah says.
- [10 : 54] They can't walk, they can't talk. And that's when the gospel becomes offensive. And this passage shows that clearly.
- The ancient city of Ephesus had the great temple of Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility. And the city itself was the guardian of Artemis' worship.
- So people from all over the Roman Empire came and visited Ephesus to worship Artemis in that temple. So the city got a lot of money from that religious tourism.
- And here, Demetrius made silver shrines to be sold to Artemis' followers. So, Paul's evangelism, that said that all the other gods, including Artemis, were nothing, harmed everything they had built their lives on.
- The city culture, their society, and their economy. You see, the gospel that says that Jesus is the greatest God for reasons that I've outlined, and not only the greatest, but the only true one, that gospel offends.
- [12 : 19] The gospel offends idolatry and idolatrous businesses and idolatrous social and cultural practices. And the gospel still continues to offend in various places and societies, even now.
- In China, the gospel continues to offend the absolute claims of the communist government. That's why they try hard to suppress it.
- In places like Syria and Afghanistan, the gospel still continues to offend Islamic powers. But even here, in free Australia, the gospel still offends different cultures.
- I remember one person that I helped baptize a few years ago. Just one week after her baptism, she was invited by her non-Christian family to do the Chinese ritual of ancestral worship.
- And she struggled so much. We had a few difficult conversations, but she knew that she had to say no. And that was offensive to her whole family, basically.
- [13 : 29] The gospel offends different political positions. It offends some in the left because it dismantles their ideology of self-importance and self-actualization.
- It offends some in the right who fight for their rights and liberties because the gospel demands for them to lay down their rights and liberties just as Christ did.
- If you are a Christian, be ready to offend. Don't get me wrong.
- We're not called to intentionally offend people. Paul says in Romans 12, if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
- No, we're not called to offend people. Every time we talk about the gospel, we have to be careful not to offend people. But the nature of the gospel is such that it has the potential to offend.

[14 : 36] And if we hold the gospel in our hands, we must be ready for that. We must be ready for our friends to push back and say, what do you mean that Jesus is the only way to salvation?

That's offensive, isn't it? But when the gospel does offend, we can trust that God is sovereign, which we see in the rest of the passage.

So the rest of the passage outlines in detail what happens during the riot. So in verse 28 to 29, the whole city came to an uproar, and they caught Paul's companions.

And then, upon hearing this, in verse 30 to 31, Paul planned to appear before the riot, to appear before the crowd, but his plan was hindered by his disciples and his friends who were officials of the province.

Now, the fact that Paul had friends in high places shows to us that the gospel had reached almost all levels of society by now, by that stage.

[15 : 53] But it also gives us a hint of God's providence, which is touched over and over again throughout the book of Acts. When the disciples faced a danger that jeopardized the gospel, God intervened, and he used means, either by getting them out of persecution so that they can continue spreading the gospel, or by allowing persecution to happen, like early in the book of Acts, so that the disciples don't grow comfortable and they can move on and spread the gospel further.

in this case, God provides help through Paul's friends and disciples. God allows them to stop him because it's not his time yet to be captured.

So, verse 32 portrays the riots being in confusion. Some shouted one thing and others another. Some did not even know why they were there.

typical riot, right? And in verse 33, the Jews were scared of what this riot would mean for them because during that time, Christianity was identified as a Jewish sect, so they were afraid that this riot would affect them.

So the Jews pushed someone to be their spokesman to defend them, but in a riot, no one listens. So in verse 34, in verse 34, despite their confusion and their inability to actually find a unified reason to be there, for two hours they shouted in unison, great is Artemis of the Ephesians for two hours.

[17 : 45] It seems that their only unity, even though they were confused and they had different motivations to be there, their only unity revolved around their idolatrous worship to Artemis.

And so in verse 35 to 36, the city clerk had to step up and resolve the situation, and this is worth reading.

The city clerk quieted the crowd and said, fellow Ephesians, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image which fell from heaven.

Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to come down and not do anything rash. So it seems that it was widely believed that the image, the statue of Artemis in that city fell from heaven.

Boom! Which made them believe that it was real God, or it was from God, at least. So basically what the city clerk was saying is, everyone go back to your own idolatry.

[18 : 59] We know that this statue is legit. Everything is fine. In 2021, the movie Don't Look Up was released on Netflix.

It's a satirical movie. It tells the story of two astronomers attempting to warn humanity about an approaching comet that will destroy Earth.

But in response, the whole population was told, don't look up, there's nothing there. Everything is fine, just go back to what you're doing.

This is basically what the city clerk is doing. And perhaps this is also similar to what the British atheists were doing back in 2008 and 2009.

They placed this advertisement on buses saying, there's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.

[20 : 04] But Luke here is trying to show that this is a mistaken claim. Because Paul's trip in Ephesus showed in the previous passage that Christ was displaying his power mightily against the other lousy gods.

And millions of people today can testify how Jesus still works mightily in their lives. And we know Jesus is true because he did come down here from heaven in history not as a statue, not as a man who lived among people, who touched him, who spoke with him, who lived with him, and he died in front of witnesses, and he came back to life in front of witnesses.

Jesus. In other words, do look up, do inquire, do ask questions about the legitimacy of your own gods and about the legitimacy of Jesus.

But the city clerk also does something right here. In verse 37 to 39, he encourages the people to use legal means if they think that Paul and his companions have committed a crime.

Although it's obvious in verse 40, it's obvious that he does this out of rather selfish motivation. He's afraid of bad reports being sent to Rome, and him being the city clerk might be held accountable.

[21 : 54] But nonetheless, in verse 41, the situation is resolved. This is again used by God to save his servants before it's their time.

So just as God used Paul's friends to stop him from being arrested before his time, here he used the city clerk's selfish, rather selfish motivation to protect Christians God's sovereignty.

He is sovereign. So let's trust in God's sovereignty. Even though we know that when we carry the gospel around, we are carrying fire.

The kind of fire that might save and heal and protect some, but also the kind of fire that might offend and attack others.

But we trust that God has everything in his control. It's his fire. It's his gospel. As an 18th century preacher George Whitefield said, we are immortal until our work on earth is done.

[23 : 11] done. And when our work on earth is done, even if we die, even if we get killed for the gospel, we are sure that the gospel of Jesus will still prevail without us.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Lord Jesus, give us courage in proclaiming your gospel through our lives and through our words and through our relationships with the people around us, trusting that you are with us always, as you have promised.

In your name we pray. Amen.