

The Gospel that Offends

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[0 : 00] I'm still tearing up from the baptism event. Every time someone turns to Jesus, the whole of heaven rejoices and the whole of the body of Christ rejoices.

Well, in his book, *Dominion*, agnostic historian Tom Holland says, Christianity was so subversive and disruptive back then in the first century, it completely came to saturate the mindset of the Western mind.

And curiously, in a West that is often doubtful of religion's claims, so many of its instincts remained, for good and ill, thoroughly Christian.

Well, in this passage, we see how the message of Christianity began to disrupt the society and later even influenced it.

But Luke prepares his readers by setting the scene in verse 21 to 22. Here in these verses, Paul feels called to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

[1 : 16] Well, although Rome is a very nice place now, and Jerusalem is a very nice place, we should not think that he wanted to go there for a holiday. Rome was the seat of the Roman Empire, the very government that was against Christianity back then.

So by wanting to go there, Paul was thinking of getting into the dragon's lair. And indeed, at the very 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 is brought to Rome as a prisoner. And then he will be killed there. So why would he want to go there?

Well, the word *decided*, highlighted there on the screen in verse 21, literally means resolved in the Spirit. It is God's Holy Spirit that pulls him towards Jerusalem and then to Rome.

We might see a shadow of Jesus here. We might see Paul participating in Christ's suffering as Christ too, you know, in the Gospels, was shown to be under a divine necessity to go to Jerusalem towards his death.

[2 : 39] And so, by opening the scene like this, Luke prepares the readers for the coming opposition. And indeed, the whole passage, the rest of the passage, shows increased opposition to the Gospel from society and authority.

So, 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, the term, *the way*, in the book of Acts, is a name for Christianity. You know, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. The great disturbance was caused by the Gospel of Jesus.

And so, in verses 24 to 27, we see how that happened. We see a silversmith named Demetrius gathering people to start a riot against the Christians because they were losing business as people left idol worship to embrace the way of Jesus.

And specifically in verse 25, we see that the first cause of the disturbance was Paul's proclamation that the ancient Romans, the ancient Roman gods were nothing.

[4 : 05] This echoes our first reading in 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 in Acts 17 about the uselessness of their gods.

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 as they are convinced that their idols were nothing and Jesus was the only way.

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, you know, Aries and others.

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

[5 : 30] American writer David Foster Wallace, who, by the way, was not a Christian, he said, here is something that's 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 worships. 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 tap your 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.

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

[6 : 50] These ancient gods 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, for all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. He's the only God who said, This is my body which is broken for you, and this is my blood which is poured out for you.

Other gods say the opposite. Break your bodies for me. Pour out your blood for me. Jesus is the only one, the only God who gives himself up for us to enjoy.

He's the only one who genuinely wants to have a relationship with us and to satisfy us. This is called lapis legit.

[8 : 15] No, that doesn't say legit. It's not read that way. It's lapis legit. 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 legit from this random store in another town, and it cost about four times more than a normal lapis legit.

But it was so worth it. It's still the best lapis legit I've ever had in my life. Lapis legit, and that was an eye-opening experience for me.

Suddenly, I felt like I had been lied to my entire life. Lapis legit was not supposed to taste like how I had tasted it in my childhood.

It's supposed to taste like this. And after that time, every time I buy another kind of lapis legit, it's never as enjoyable anymore.

[9 : 30] I've tasted the best, and the others become meh. I'm sure you've experienced that. Now, when we've tasted the best, others become bad tasting, or at least meh.

And in this case, it's not only that Jesus proves to be the most good tasting, well, he's the only one that we can taste, because he's the only one that says, here's my body, which is given for you. Well, not only that, he's the only one that is true, genuine. As the Bible says, the others are fake gods, replicas made of wood and gold and silver.

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, and Artemis was the Greek goddess of fertility. And the city itself, the city of Ephesus, was the guardian of Artemis' worship. So people from all over the Roman Empire came and visited Ephesus to worship Artemis in that temple.

[10 : 52] So the city got a lot of money from that religious tourism. And here, Demetrius made silver shrines to be sold to Artemis' followers.

And because of that, Paul's evangelism 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, and not only the greatest, but also the only true one, that gospel is offensive.

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, and that's why they try hard to suppress it. In places like Syria and Afghanistan, the gospel still continues to offend Islamic powers.

[12:07] But even here, in free Australia, the gospel still offends different cultures. I remember one person that I helped baptize a few years ago, and just one week after baptism, she was invited by her non-Christian family to do the Chinese ritual of ancestral worship.

And I remember she was struggling so much. We had several difficult conversations. But she knew that she had to say no. And that was offensive to her whole family.

And the gospel offends different political positions. It offends some in the left because it dismantles their ideology of self-importance and self-actualization.

But it also offends some in the right who fight for their rights and liberties because, well, the gospel demands for them to lay down their rights and liberties as Christ did.

If you are a Christian, be ready to offend. Now, don't get me wrong. We're not called to intentionally offend people.

[13:29] Every time we speak about the gospel, we have to be very careful not to offend people. Paul says in Romans 12, if it is possible as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

We're not called to offend people, but the nature of the gospel is such that it has the potential to offend. And if we hold the gospel in our hands, we must be ready for that.

We must be ready when our friends say to us, how dare you say that Jesus is the only way to salvation? That's a bit arrogant, isn't it? That's a bit offensive.

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 in verse 28 to 29.

The whole city came to an uproar and they caught Paul's companions. And upon hearing this in verse 30 to 31, Paul planned to appear before the crowd, before the riot, but his plan was hindered by his disciples and his friends who were officials of the province.

[15:02] Now, the fact that Paul had friends in high places shows to us that by this time the gospel had reached almost all levels of society, which is amazing.

But it also gives us a hint of God's providence, which is touched over and over again in the book of Acts. When the disciples faced a danger that jeopardized the gospel, God intervened, 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. Verse 32 portrays the riot being in confusion.

Some shouted one thing and others another. Some did not even know why they were there. Classic riot. In verse 33, the Jews were scared of what this riot would mean for them.

So in verse 33, the Jews pushed someone to be their spokesman to defend them. Because during that time, Christianity was identified as a Jewish sect, so they were afraid.

[16:35] What does this mean? If they're angry with the Christians, they might be angry at us as well. But, you know, like in any riots, no one listened.

So, 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.

It seems that 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 their situation.

And this is worth reading. So, in verse 35, 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?

Everybody knows this. 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 or the statue of Artemis in that city fell from heaven, which made them believe that it was a real god.

[18:04] So, basically, what the city clerk was saying is, everyone, go back to your own idolatry. We know that this statue is legit, and in fact, everyone knows that.

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.

[19 : 05] They placed this advertisement on buses saying, there's probably no god, now stop worrying and enjoy your life. But here in this passage, Luke 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 even today, millions of people can testify how Jesus still works mightily in their lives every day. And we know that Jesus is true because he did come down here in history from heaven, not as a statue, but as a man who lived among people, who touched him, who heard him speaking, who saw him, and he died in front of witnesses, and he came back to life in front of witnesses.

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

people. But the city clerk also does something right here in verse 37 to 39.

[20 : 40] He encourages the people to use legal means if they think that Paul and his companions have committed a crime. Well, it's obvious in verse 40 that he does this out of perhaps selfish motivation because he's afraid of bad reports being sent to Rome and he might be held accountable as the city clerk.

But nonetheless, it resolves the situation and in verse 41, this is again used by God to save his servants before it's their time.

Just as God used Paul's friends to stop him from being arrested before his time, here he used the city clerk's probably selfish motivation to protect Christians until the time comes.

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 with us, 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 because it's his fire, it's his gospel. As 18th century preacher George Whitfield said, we are immortal until our work on earth is done.

[22 : 23] We can't be harmed, we can't be killed until Jesus, until God says so. And when our work on earth is done, even if we die, we're sure that the gospel of Jesus will still prevail without us because he is sovereign.

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 other people, trusting that you are always with us as you have promised.

In your name we pray. Amen.