

When Democracy Fails

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- [0 : 00] What's going on over at the art gallery? Was that the BC Federation of Labor?
- Insurrection. Insurrection. Insurrection. Why is there always bagpipes playing where there's insurrection?
- This passage is a kind of...
- I hope it's a kind of answer to what are we doing here anyway. Somebody phoned me last week and asked me if I'd speak on a particular passage of scripture that had to do with gifts.
- And expressed some discontent that you people don't get along well with each other. And that you should try and work hard at it and try and get along better. So I can't talk to you about it now.
- [1 : 05] But it's a strange kind of reality, our coming here. And I thought doing this again, this passage, which I think we've been through before, but doing it again, maybe helped to remind us of what it is that we are here for.
- The title is When Democracy Fails. And I'd like to put these words in front of you just because they're all sort of apparently cognates of some kind.
- They all sing in the etymological dictionary. They all go together. And that...
- Excuse this last one. But democracy is strange. You remember that Churchill's famous statement that democracy was the worst possible form of government except for any other.
- And I thought that was, you know, kind of sums it up. And the...
- [2 : 21] That this word up here, demon and demos means the... I mean, it's not really a very flattering term. It's a term that refers to lower class people, the demos.
- You know, it's in contrast to being ruled by the plutocracy, which are the rich people, or the aristocracy, which are the high-bred people. Instead, it's being ruled by the demos, or the people from the lower classes, and that they have to have a voice.
- And that... I mean, it's considered in our world right now, generally speaking, that that's where we have missed, and that's what we have to discover. That's where the truth for human...
- For the future of humanity rests, is on the exercise of democracy. So you have that strange kind of combination, because, I mean, there's...
- It's very close to the word demon, where things go wrong. But demons were, in a sense, petty rulers in the kingdom of evil.
- [3 : 38] So, yeah, there's some connection to the word time, which sometimes seems demonic, because it disappears when you want it.
- And then that the whole thing is a kind of strange combination of words. And the reason I brought it up in connection with this passage is that you have in Athens the city which of Aristotle and Socrates and the Epicureans and the Stoics, and apparently there's other schools of philosophy.

In other words, you have, in a sense, the city which achieves the highest level of human understanding of any city of the ancient world.

The highest level of thought and of reason and of logic and of argument. All of this was hammered out in Athens. And yet, when it came to putting all the people together to say, where does it all lead, where it all led to, as you look in this passage, you can see, it led to an unknown God.

That's where all the philosophy ended up, with an unknown God. They couldn't handle it. Now watch how it developed, because you look at the passage, you'll see Paul is waiting for them in Athens.

[5 : 23] He seems to have been a tourist of sorts. He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. And the distress was a kind of an anguish of despair.

It's, you know how, I mean, it's not hard to go through the city and to see what's wrong and say, this shouldn't be happening, and this shouldn't be happening, and God help us when we have a city like that.

And you see all the things in the city that are depressing and discouraging and create anxiety and create tension. It makes you think that the demons are, in fact, in charge.

And Paul was acutely distressed when he was in the city. And that's what it's greatly distressed, it says in verse 16.

And he was greatly distressed because the city was a jungle of idols. You know, that it was in every direction.

[6 : 42] Forms of, you know, focuses for the work, because religion was important. And I'm convinced that one of the strange things about a city like Vancouver is that we think that we are a-religious.

But I think a city is, by definition, a very religious place, always and everywhere. It's where people live, and people are profoundly religious.

But the direction or form that their religion takes may be very weird and wonderful, but the city is still a profoundly religious place.

And I think doctors are forced to be religious, and lawyers are forced to be religious. They all, everybody is involved at some level or another with the problems of religion.

But you see it going in a thousand directions. That's what Paul saw here. It was, for all the philosophy and all the wisdom and all the intellectual understanding, it was still going in a thousand directions.

[7 : 51] So, that's the situation. Somebody remind me, what, why can I put my glasses on? There they are, yeah, okay.

I worry about me. I worry about me. All right. So, you have this thing.

Now, look at how Paul handles it. You see, and this is what I pray that this place may be in some way or other for all of us. He started to reason his way through it.

Paul set himself up as a kind of Christian Aristotle. To go into the streets and debate with people and reason with them and talk with them and try and see what he could do in the city.

And he did a great deal. And you've got to remember that Paul was, I mean, Paul is one of the huge people in the whole history of the world. Because he's unfortunately identified with the Christian faith and therefore dismissed by much of the world.

[9 : 15] He shouldn't take away from your understanding of him that he was a man of enormous intellectual capacity. He was a wise and intelligent man far beyond anything that probably any of you have ever met.

And when you remember that the scriptures are made up of men like Paul and David and Moses and Solomon and Abraham.

And that they are our teachers. You can see why Paul went into the streets prepared to reason with people.

Well, who did he reason with? He dialogued and debated. And, you know, I think that one of the things that occurs to me, and I don't know how you feel about this, but our job as believers in Jesus Christ, if that's what you want, I think our job is not to achieve political tyranny over this God-forsaken city.

Our job is not to build a temple that is bigger than any of the great skyscrapers of the multinational corporations by which we are surrounded. Our job is simply to keep the debate going so that people at every level of the society are confronted with the revelation that God has made of himself in Jesus Christ.

[10 : 49] That's primarily what we have to do. We don't necessarily, we're not going to be able to necessarily to take over the universities. We're not going to be able to take over the educational systems.

We're not going to be able to do any of those things. But what Paul does is seems to be able to, what he did, and I think Christians got power hungry after this and started to go beyond what they were called to do.

Paul opens and maintains the debate, and watch how he does it in this passage. Who does he debate with? Who does he reason with? With the Jews.

I just wish with all my heart that Christians and Jews could be hammering at each other every day in this city. Because some of the best Jews are Christians. And it may be even that some of the best Christians are Jews.

I don't know. I don't know that side of it. But we are so interlocked with them historically and scripturally and in every other way.

[11 : 59] And should I think be... I mean, I don't... I know this hurts and confuses me because, you know, the Christians are accused of being the generators of anti-Semitism all the way through history.

And God help us if that's true. But somehow the Jews, we need to hear from them. We need to be in debate with them.

We need to be able to argue with them. I've got a wonderful one that lives opposite me. And we have little bits of arguments. But, you know, it would be a wonderful thing if we could do it.

The wonderful thing about what is that I suspect by such an argument or such a debate, you would become aware of a riches in your faith far beyond anything you've ever known.

You know, the depth and the quality and the history of it all. You would be enormously enriched if in a city like this such a debate could go on. So there are...

[13 : 10] He's argued with the Jews. Then he argued with the God-fearing Greeks, many of whom had attached themselves to the synagogues because that's where this debate took place.

And it's like arguing... It's like trying to preach the gospel in a church. It's hard work. And...

Because churches are full of God-fearing people. And... Yet often people who don't understand about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

But as God-fearing people, they are regular in church and supportive of it and back it up in lots of ways. But the argument needs to be maintained there. If you go on from there, you see that he opened up the argument.

That was what he did on the Sabbath day. On every day, he was out in the marketplace arguing with people just on the street.

[14 : 17] Because people were used to that. They could handle that. The great symbol of that for me in this great city of Vancouver is that guy that plays chess with anybody who comes along up by the other side of the art gallery.

I wish that we as Christians could sort of stay. I mean, he's apparently a master chess player. And your chances of beating him are probably quite minimal.

But there he is, ready to take on anybody. And I wish that, in a sense, we had access to the street so that we could take on people and argue at street level, so to speak, about the nature of the faith.

And in addition to that, and influencing that, are the Epicureans and the Stoics. You see in verse 18, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with them.

The debate begins to gain momentum, you see. The Epicureans were the people who were very rational about their religion. And in our kind of culture and society, there's no doubt that many of them would be in church.

[15 : 30] Even though what they believed was that God or the gods were infinitely remote beyond any immediate concern of anybody who has three score years and ten to live down here on earth.

The gods are something infinitely removed. Those were the Epicureans, that they regarded the world as a world of pure chance, which is an underlying philosophy of our culture, I think.

That they were very matter-of-fact, that there was no survival of death, that there was no judgment, and that the best life consisted in the pursuit of pleasure, that serene contentment was the best you could get out of life.

Now, you know that those are all active principles in the culture and society to which we belong. That God is remote, that the world is one of chance, that there is no ultimate judgment, that the only thing from which you can gain anything is the pursuit of pleasure, the serene contentment of, to find a place like that.

I mean, that's, I don't know. Maybe that's watching the Grey Cup on TV. I don't know whether you call that serene contentment or not.

[17 : 13] But it's looking for it. And then what you've got to achieve is contentment and not allow yourself to be dominated by pain, by passion, or by fear.

Now, that's a creed that lots and lots of people in this city would hold to. And remember that that led to the monument to the unknown God.

And then the Stoics, who were the other school, they had much more of a sense that God was a kind of world soul. You know how those religions come along in which God is a great, undefinable, unknowable reality which affects all of our lives.

And we can give you access to him through a certain combination that we have by way of getting access to him. And if you'll send us \$5 in the mail, we'll show you how to do it. That kind of sense of God that people have, remote and undefinable.

The Stoics wanted to submit to fate. They wanted to pursue duty. They wanted to live in harmony with nature. They were good environmentalists.

[18 : 31] And with reason. And they wanted to have the capacity to endure pain and to develop self-sufficiency. So those were the kind of arguments that Paul came up against.

And the arguments that led to a monument to the unknown God. You know. That the great reality was an unknowingness. Now, you've got to have a lot of sympathy with that.

Because in terms of what can be known, we in fact know very little. And one of the marks of a Christian, I think, should be a tremendous awareness of how little we know.

Even though Christians are thought of as those who say, I know what you don't know. But the reality of the Christian experience is to be aware that there is a tremendous amount more to be known than we know anything about.

So that's the context in which he was arguing. He was arguing in the synagogue, in the marketplace. And finally, by reason of his arguments on the street, he was invited to go and speak in the Areopagus, which was the sort of supreme council in Athens.

[19 : 46] And it was a great honor and a great dignity. How did they hear Paul? Well, if you go through the passage, you will find that some of them considered him an ignorant plagiarist.

A babbler. And that he picked up a little idea there and a little idea there and a little idea there and a little idea there and a little idea and put them all together to make an argument out of them. And that's how they dismissed him.

That he didn't really understand what the profound issues were. I find this very embarrassing. Because I think that's what I am. You know, that I get very excited by the wisdom of other people.

And I'm very dependent upon other people who are really clever and understand things and can put them down. And I just, I mean, I could never give you this talk without John Stott's commentary on X.

It's, it's, it's that sort of, you know, that's part of it. They thought of Paul like that. And that was the wrong way to think about Paul.

[20 : 53] They didn't understand him. Because he was a very original thinker. But they thought of him as that. They thought of him as an advocate of foreign demons.

You know, of gods that were aliens of the pantheon that they already had constructed. And that they were, they were, they hated gods that were beyond the gods that they already knew.

They, their familiar gods they could put up with. But strange for foreign gods, they thought Paul was advocating. They thought that he was talking about one particular foreign god whose name was Jesus.

And who was married to Anastasis. You know how you get wonderful ideas like that from various people. Because, and they think that may have been the case.

Because Anastasis, which means resurrection, is, is a female word. And, and they think that that's how the, how, how the, the Greeks of Athens heard what Paul was saying.

[22 : 05] That he was talking about a foreign god, Jesus. And the woman who was his consort, who was the resurrection. That's the way they understood it. Now, there's something, I think, to be learned from that.

And that is, when you go out on the street and try and tell people what the gospel is. They come up with some very weird and wonderful ideas of what it is you're talking about. Because they have only their own sort of receiver system to pick it up.

And they have to understand it in terms of what they already know. And that was what, that was their religious awareness. Trying to interpret what Paul was saying about Jesus. And, and that, I, I think is, is a wonderful example of how, how people try and interpret Jesus.

Not in terms of who he is, as presented through the testimony of the scriptures in the New Testament. But who he is in terms of my idea of who he might be.

And you get all sorts of things like that happening. And that's what happened to them. They had a culturally conditioned understanding. They accused Paul of bringing in a new teaching.

[23 : 19] Now, no, nobody, nobody like the Jews have carefully recorded what it is they have taught and what they have believed. Going back and back and back.

And Paul wouldn't even begin to, to speak about Jesus. Apart from the, the depth of history that was behind what he was saying in the scriptures of the Old Testament.

But they said, this is a new teaching and a strange ideas to our ears. What do these ideas mean? And so that's why they brought Paul into the Areopagus in order to, to question him.

And he was, he was, he was the advocate of a kind of, they were the advocates of a kind of brand X concept of God.

You know, sort of generic God rather than a specific God. And when this, this one was coming in and saying something very particular and very personal. And they wanted a, a no name brand of God to suit him.

[24 : 29] And so Paul went to them and he made a proclamation to them to tell them what you see in the last verses there. When he says, men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

Which means that you are, you are reverent and devout. And, you know, and I, I really, I've, I've been working on this, trying to figure out how you can say it so that it's meaningful.

But, but, I think possibly you could say that the Christian community in Vancouver should be the least religious community there is.

You see what I mean? And I think, I think that's because human beings are profoundly religious in their, in their basic orientation.

And that Christians are in some way relieved of that responsibility. They don't, that's not the way they live. It's not adherence to a religion.

[25 : 46] It's faith in a person. And so, uh, you have that, that statement that the, that the men of Athens were very religious.

And among them was this, among the objects of worship. And it, it may have been just a statue without a name on it because they didn't know what the name was. They had a concept of God without a name.

And lots of people have a concept of God without a name. So that was, that was where it ended up. Well, Paul went on from there.

I was, I was very disturbed by the great cup game as I told him. Uh, only because, I mean, the thing that disturbed me about it was that I think it demonstrated in Canada a profound spiritual hunger.

And, uh, and the great cup game for all that it means and for all the, all that is good about it and all that is healthy about it.

[26 : 59] No, it was not, it wasn't, it wasn't the game itself, but it was, it was that there are millions of people in our country who are dying for lack of some meaning and some direction.

And the great cup game gave them that for one Sunday afternoon, you know, something we could cheer for, something we could get behind because we desperately need it and we haven't got it.

And you see, I think that's where this whole thing applies to, to, to Canada. Because Canada somehow doesn't want to debate things.

They don't want to argue about things. They don't want to work on it. I, I, I quoted this to you before, but there was that brilliant article in, in, uh, in, uh, one of the magazines, which says that what, what a great sports event like the gray cup does for you is to fend off for one afternoon, the brute facts of existence.

It temporarily arrests the sadness of life. It briefly. It briefly shrouds the inevitability of death. And it provides the happy illusion of meaning.

[28 : 19] And, uh, you know, I mean, that's, that's the thing that, that really frightens me is that, that, that, that we as a country are desperately in need of something.

To take away the brute facts of existence. To take away the brute facts of existence. To temporarily arrest the sadness of our lives. To shroud the inevitability of death.

And to provide the happy illusion of meaning. And that sort of contest, uh, allowed that, allowed us that. For, uh, for a brief interlude on, on, and, and I'm not, I, I, it's probably good.

I mean, when, when, when on Tuesday you got into a more serious debate between Macmillan, Bloedel, and the federation of, the BC Federation of Labor, uh, it doesn't look like it's going to have a happy ending for anybody.

But it will prove, I guess, in a way, where the, where the, where the demos is. Where the, uh, the people are.

[29 : 27] You know, and, and, and prove whether the unions are, are now plutocrats or even aristocrats in our society. Or whether they really speak for the people of the country.

Who are the people? And how does, how does democracy survive? And, and, and you get, uh, you get the same kind of thing in Canada where people want to debate about the separation of Quebec.

And, and to make a classical issue of that. I'm not sure at the level of the people. The, the demos. The people who formed the democracy.

Uh, whether, whether that is the issue that, that the politicians want to make it. Or whether, at the, at this level. And you see what, what Paul is saying here.

And the thing that I, I think is, is wonderful. About this passage. Is he saying that at the level. Of the common people.

[30 : 25] Of a country. There needs to be. An awareness. Of. God. And so Paul stands up at the end of this passage and says.

You know, the God who created heaven and earth. The God who will judge the world. The God who has given judgment into the hands of a man whom he has raised from the dead.

That's, uh. That's what the people need to know. That's what needs to be grasped by the people of a country. The people in the synagogues.

The God hearers. The Epicureans. The Stoics. Uh, the people in the, the casual passersby in the marketplace. And the leaders up in the Areopagus.

They need to know. That God has spoken. And that's why Paul declares it to them. And what, what is our responsibility, I think, as Canadians.

[31 : 29] Is to know that the, the BC Federation of Labor is not the ultimate issue. And the Grey Cop is not the ultimate issue. And separatism is not the ultimate issue.

The ultimate issue is. That God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. And our world really depends on what our response to that is.

That's the issue that God has made with us. And is the primary and underlying issue. And it's the issue that the, that the demons, the, uh, has to get hold of.

And to understand that that's it. And that's where, and, uh, you see, the failure of Athens was. That when they elected God.

The God they elected was unknown to them. He was just a concept of the mind. And, uh. Paul goes to them and says.

[32 : 37] Declares to them. That the God. In whom you are to believe. Is the God who has. Raised from the dead.

The man by whom you will. Be judged. And whom you will ultimately face. And it would be in your best interests.

Face him. Right now. And to be aware that that's, that's where your life. Has meaning. And to be aware. If I can go over again.

It's to live in a world where. We want to hide from the brute facts of existence. To arrest the sadness of life. To shroud the inevitability of death.

And provide the. The reality. Of meaning. We need to know. The God. Who has.

[33 : 34] Confronted us. In Jesus Christ. Let me pray. Father. Thank you for the dynamics. Of this city.

Thank you for the. Clash and clamor. Of contending parties. Within a context of. Law and order. Thank you for the longings.

And aspirations. Of the human heart. For meaning. Thank you for the desire. We have to understand. In the chaos and confusion. Of our world.

But take from us. The arrogance. And the pride. To prevent us. From acknowledging. Jesus Christ. We ask this.

In his name. Amen. Amen.