

The Unstoppable Gospel of the Upside-Down Kingdom

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[0 : 00] that Taylor Swift and Luke the evangelist can agree on, it's that haters gonna hate, hate, hate. Luke here is writing the history of the early church. He's laying down what ministry looked like for the first followers of Jesus, and he shows us time and again that there are a lot of haters. Imagine you're one of Luke's first readers. You're a first century Christian, and the Jewish leaders are constantly trying to undermine your sect as just that, a rogue sect. And now the Roman authorities are increasingly turning the heat up. Is this how it's meant to be? If so, what do you do?

As Luke tracks the gospel going to the ends of the earth, does he agree with Swiftly that we should just shake it off? I promise that's the last reference. All of this and more we see in our exciting passage. One that's not just exciting because our boy Silas is such a key player, but because of the acts that Jesus does through his people. There are points on the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful. Our first point, the unstoppable gospel of the suffering Savior.

Paul and Silas and co arrive in Thessalonica, and as always, he seeks to go into the synagogue to tell the Jews the good news that their Messiah, the Messiah, has come. We're in the synagogue, and the scriptures are opened. That's the Torah, the books of Moses, as well as the Psalms and the prophets. Have a look at verse 3 with me. What Paul does is he explains and proves that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. How might he have done that? Well, he might have looked at Leviticus 16, where the Day of Atonement shows the great deal of blood that is needed to be shed in order to cleanse God's people. Paul may have pointed out that the priestly system was inefficient as it needed to happen again and again. He might have gone to Psalm 22, written by David, God's anointed king, whose whole life points to the Messiah Christ. In Psalm 22, this anointed king sings of being stricken by God, being mocked and insulted. The psalm speaks of garments divided and pierced hands and feet.

And with many such examples, Paul might explain and prove that the Messiah had to suffer. But that psalm doesn't end there. The king writes that all the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord and bow down before the anointed one, declaring he has done it. And so we see that the scriptures are clear in the vindication and resurrection of the Messiah. If I were a betting man, I'd place a larger mountain that Paul also went to Isaiah 53, the suffering servant who is afflicted and punished by God, pierced for our transgressions. And yet this servant too is promised that after he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. Yes, the Messiah must suffer and then he must rise.

The great conquering king conquers by dying. The Christian gospel is upside down. We see this through the life of Jesus. The son of God incarnate is not born in a palace, but a feeding trough, surrounded by mere shepherds. Power nor wealth impress him. Instead, Jesus continually attracts the outcasts and forgotten of society. He preaches that the first must be last and that he came to be a servant of all. The king of kings dies the shameful death of a criminal, naked, abandoned, and in agony.

[3 : 53] The whole thing is upside down. And yet Paul preaches that this is the good news, the gospel. He says in verse 3 that this Jesus is the Messiah. Now the first century believer would have taken great comfort in learning that Paul here is preaching the exact same gospel that Peter preached back in chapter 3. In chapter 3 verse 18 of Acts, Peter preaches, God fulfilled what he has foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. The unstoppable gospel has always been that of a suffering savior. And that's what Jesus himself preached. At the end of his gospel, Luke records the newly risen Jesus walking with two unnamed disciples, explaining to them an identical message. For he opens the scriptures and demonstrates that the Messiah had to suffer these things and then enter his glory. Have no doubt, my friends, the Messiah had to suffer. And that Messiah, the Messiah, is Jesus. And in verse 4 we see the fruit of this opening of the scriptures. Just as we saw in Antioch and

Lystra and Philippi, when the truth about Jesus is shared, many come to faith. See in verse 4, some Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. We've got Jew and Gentile men and women, rich and poor. Christ suffered for all kinds of people. But as expected, like in every other town, the response is not all positive.

Our second point, the unstoppable gospel subverts society. The Jewish people, verse 5, are jealous. They're on the losing side. They don't want to admit they're wrong, and so they're jealous of Paul and Silas, who have swanned in and now receive all this attention and followers. Of course, we know that it is not Paul receiving followers, but the Jesus that he proclaims. But from this Jewish perspective, Paul's a problem. They had their thing going, and it was all nice and fine. Why ruin a perfectly good thing?

And so, out of their genuine and heartfelt complaint, they do the only sensible thing and round up a bunch of local thugs. Or as the old KJV puts it, lewd fellows of a baser sort, who are convinced to form a mob and start a riot. An action that clearly displays that they are in the right. Well, not exactly, does it?

Hypocritical, to say the least. The mob can't find Paul and Silas, who have presumably been hidden, but it seems well known that Jacev has been accommodating the apostles. And so, Jacev and other believers are rounded up and dragged to the town center. It's an ugly sight. I don't know what you're picturing, but I'm picturing a recent, if anachronistic version, with a row of nooses or guillotines in the corner of the square that looms over the whole scene. So, what do we know about this Jason? Well, not much. He's just Jason, an ordinary believer. It's clear that in verse 7 that he has said that Jesus is king, but that's all normal, every believer stuff. And yet here he is on trial for the gospel. And I think Luke's reminding us of something simple. Everyone on Team Jesus faces persecution for siding with him. It's not just the apostles, Paul and Silas, who face the mob. Here we have an ordinary believer in front of the governing authorities. The pattern this passage lays down for gospel ministry is a subverting one. We all have a part to play, maybe hospitality like Jason, maybe to explain like Paul. But notice that Paul, Silas, and Jason have all suffered, and they have all done word ministry.

[8 : 03] They've all said that there is a king called Jesus. Just saying that Jesus is the Messiah has meant severe suffering for countless believers over the last 2,000 years, not just the big-name leaders.

Currently, it's fine to be a Christian in this country, but maybe in 30 or, well, maybe even in 10 years, it could be a lot harder. And don't just expect Martin or Amy or Jonathan to be on the firing line.

Even today, it is entirely possible that your employer hears you're a member of St. Silas and digs into this church and clicks from one link to another, and it doesn't take long before they deem your views hateful. Because you believe God when he says that everyone is a sinner. Or you believe in the final judgment of all people on the last day. Normal believers face persecution.

And see the accusations against just Jason and his friends in verse 6. These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus. Troublemakers, false accusations. Paul and Silas were reasoning and explaining and proving they've not been troublemaking and defying Caesar. Their message isn't trying to supplant the emperor.

That's unnecessary. Well, I started this evening with some Taylor Swift lyrics, because you may have heard that the global megastar is in the Murrayfield Stadium this weekend. In fact, as I speak, I think she's performing. Now compare that to some local musician. On the one hand, we have Swifty, a big deal.

[9 : 52] She's performing in front of tens of thousands, night after night. The tour is massive. It's not really comparable with our man in the pub playing for 20. And they don't threaten each other. Our man isn't losing out to her because they're on a different league. And that's the case with comparing Caesar to Jesus. The emperor of the Roman Empire measures diddly squat compared to the rule of the Messiah.

Jesus' kingdom is so much faster that he has no need to depose Caesar. The believer's aim is never to defy Caesar. They've got much bigger things going on. And yet here they are on trial. In fact, it's a reminder of Jesus' own unjust trial. He too was in a crowd who had been riled up by religious leaders.

He too was accused of being rebellious and trying to usurp Caesar. Luke recorded women as witnesses there too, something not normal in his day. There are echoes everywhere. And so it is no surprise that believers end up accused. We follow Jesus. Therefore, being treated like him shouldn't be a shock to us.

In fact, it's exactly what the church should expect. We follow him through his trial all the way to the cross. And yet there is actually a hint of truth in these accusations.

The phrase that is translated here as causing trouble at Jesus' own trial is translated subverted. And other translations, verse 6 says, In fact, Jesus does turn the world upside down. Therefore, the normal church member, like Jason, is preaching an upside down world. And this does undermine Caesar in some ways.

[11 : 53] Our friend playing at the Murrayfield pub isn't directly threatened by Taylor Swift's concert, even though it's down the road. But incidentally, from quick research, it appears not many local Edinburgh pubs had live music this weekend. They were just wanting lots of post-concert fans.

Big things affect everything. Everything in Edinburgh was slightly different this weekend. I'm reliably informed that the trains on Friday afternoon from Glasgow to Edinburgh would make you think we had a national uniform with every passenger dressed up, ready for the gig.

And so, yes, if Jesus is the king and he's come bringing this upside down kingdom, then the world is not the same place. The missionaries have much loftier goals than subverting society.

But that is what happens nonetheless. It has to. The gospel of grace changes everything. But just as the world hated Jesus, the life giver, so we live cross-shaped lives and share the gospel of grace. When we do that, we too are hated by the world.

For Jason and his fellow new believers, how do you think they feel as the apostles flee the town? They send them away in verse 10, but I doubt they're confident. Here have come these men with not just life-changing, but world-changing news.

[13 : 16] And you have realized it's true, and so you commit your life to follow it, and then almost instantly, you've got the authorities breathing down your neck. Where do they go now?

Do you think they've been given enough to persevere for a life? If you here tonight are someone that's sitting on the fence about Jesus, then what do you make of this?

Some of you have only this year decided to put your faith in Jesus and follow his way. How are you feeling about that decision, seeing what it might cost?

Sure, Jason is released on bail here, but that won't always be the case. The church subverts society, and society doesn't like it.

Expect persecution. And so, as Paul and Silas escape to Berea, we move to our third point. The unstoppable gospel stands up to scrutiny.

[14 : 18] From verse 10, we see that Paul and Silas are undeterred by having to escape Thessalonica in the night. And they continue, as before, preaching the news of Christ crucified anyway.

So, they go to the synagogue, as usual, and again explain that the Messiah had to suffer, had to rise, and that the Messiah is Jesus. Now, the response here is amazing.

Have a look at verse 11. Now, the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica. For they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

As a result, many of them believed. The Bereans are described as noble. Now, this is purely about character. It's nothing to do with having any royalty or titles in their bloodline.

What Luke says makes a man or woman noble is how they respond to the gospel. Patrick Schreiner, in his commentary, notes that those who oppose the gospel must find their allies in the riffraff.

[15 : 25] While those who accept Paul's message are noble. The bad characters in Thessalonica formed a mob and resisted the gospel being spread. Here, however, we have reception of the message with great eagerness.

Is that what you most value in your friends? It's great to have friends who support and build you up. People who make you laugh are important. But the finest and highest quality a member of the human race can have is the nobility to eagerly receive the message of Christ crucified.

And in this eagerness, they don't just blindly accept what Paul and Silas teach. No, they investigate. Now, as some of you may know, I studied maths at uni. And verifying whether a statement was true was a key part of those studies.

And while an algebraic proof isn't the same as investigating the scriptures, the key process is the same, just with less polynomials. Now, explaining the scripture means reading them closely.

Checking that if A is true, then B is true. Or actually, given the literacy rates at the time, it probably meant they were quizzing Paul on his claims. And as they questioned Paul on the gospel, they believe his claims.

[16 : 37] They believe that God always justified by faith. That he was always planning on sending his son as the sacrifice needed to redeem us. The gospel stands up to scrutiny.

Christians shouldn't have this reputation that our heads are in the cloud seeking to escape reality. We have a faith built on the solid foundation. Not on the word of some ancient nutters, but built on the very word of God.

Martin, our lead minister, likes to ask at guest events here, Have you ever read the Bible for yourself as an adult? I think that's a great question. Because most people reject Jesus without ever reading what he said in the gospels.

Never mind the other 62 books of the Bible that are also about him. Your friends, like the Bereans, can examine the word of God and find that it's consistent, it's reliable, and that it is the greatest story ever told.

It's so great that I think you're on shaky ground if you think anyone other than the creator and ruler of the entire universe could have written it. And so if you have never examined the scriptures for yourself as an adult, why not do that?

[17 : 49] I think you might be surprised. That goes for those of you who already follow Jesus too. Why not in your eager response to the gospel examine the scriptures every day?

You too might be surprised at the depth that's in there. Don't be ashamed of the Bible. Get your friends to read it. Tricky bits and all.

We can have these reasoned debates like Paul has. Anyone can teach from the word. And see the result of their scrutiny in verse 12. Many people believe.

Once again, we have a diverse group now, brothers and sisters. And yet, as before, as the gospel is preached, so those who preach it are persecuted.

Our final point. The unstoppable gospel doesn't stop. See verse 13. But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

[18 : 54] We've already seen how relentless the opposition is, as it saw even ordinary believers. And despite claiming moral superiority, this opposition was willing to bring alongside some local thugs.

And now we see that their jealousy is so great that this mob have come over a day's travel, some 45 miles, to continue their pursuit here. Throughout the centuries, there have been a wide variety of motives for this kind of persecution.

We have religious and political leaders disliking the lessened grip that they have on Jesus' followers. You've also got those who feel judged on their sin when the Christians won't join in with their behavior.

As the gospel comes, it also shuts down injustice. We saw that last week with the freedom of the slave girl. Her owners are outraged that they can't continue exploiting her.

But the heart of all these reasons, the heart of the reason that people hate gospel ministry, is because they hate the gospel. The world will hate you for following Jesus because it hates Jesus.

[19 : 59] And in that sense, it's simple. Jesus lived the cross-shaped life of his upside-down kingdom. Right from his incarnation, as he humbly took on human nature, Jesus did the unthinkable and came to live on this deeply broken and rebellious world.

And he went all the way to the cross. The king of kings dying to save those who would try and usurp him. Jesus isn't usurping Caesar. It's every one of us that's been trying to usurp Jesus.

Yet he paid the price for us. Jesus suffered and now lives seated in heaven. And so we follow him.

We live a cross-shaped life. We live upside down, loving those who hate us and giving to those who don't give back. Jesus' people suffer. The world hates them because it hates their king.

But they follow him anyway. So don't be surprised if the heat turns up on the church and you find yourself with a gun to your head at work.

[21 : 02] Don't be surprised that as you share a suffering Savior that you suffer too. I asked earlier how you newer Christians are feeling. You've just started to follow Jesus.

And now you're hearing that it's going to be a life of suffering and persecution. That those who live by truth as citizens of the upside down kingdom are trampled on by those who live in this world of lies.

Why bother? How are these fledgling churches going to continue growing if this is the rocky start they had? A small encouragement and a big one.

The end of the passage gives the small one. We see in verse 14 that Paul is separated from Silas and Timothy. They stay put but Paul continues to Athens which we'll hear more about next week.

The dream team split up. The circumstances are far from ideal. And yet the gospel hasn't stopped. Luke doesn't record any particular tragedy here.

[22 : 01] Both Paul and Silas continue. And the gospel continues to the ends of the earth. Already in just a few decades the news of Jesus has gone from Jerusalem through Judah and Samaria.

And is now in Greece. It's already crossed continents. Unstoppable gospel doesn't stop. Despite appearances. Despite the mounting pressure. Team Jesus is the winning team.

Furthermore the big encouragement to keep going. For the first century Christian and 21st century Christian alike. It's not only that the gospel is winning here today.

But that it ultimately triumphs. The most upside down thing of all is that Jesus' death was not the end. Death itself flipped on its head.

Death died. Death died. And so as we follow Christ crucified. We have the hope that he bought for us. We follow him through the grave and out the other side.

[23 : 01] Jesus Christ is the suffering Messiah. And so if we follow him then we preach that simple gospel. All of us cause others to repent and believe. And we do that knowing that in one way or another we'll suffer too.

Expect that. Ordinary believers sharing Jesus in ordinary ways is what we do. But expect resistance. They crucified our king.

They won't leave us unharmed. My friends we don't just follow the cross but we live the cross. But remember the Messiah. Jesus.

He rose. He won. So while we don't just shake off the haters. We also don't despair at the suffering. Instead we fight the battle with hope.

Because we know the gospel will make it to the ends of the earth. Preach the cross. Live the cross. Preach the cross. Live the cross. Let me pray to close.

[24 : 06] Heavenly Father we thank you for the cross. We thank you for our suffering saviour. Lord we ask that you would give us boldness in going out into the world.

And preaching. Jesus Christ. Crucified for us. And Lord we ask that as. As we tell others. As we face resistance.

Lord we ask that you would help us. To persevere through suffering. Knowing that we are following our king. In his name we pray. Amen. Come stand with us as we sing to respond.

Thank you. Thank you. You