

Do Not be Surprised at Opposition to the Gospel

The Bible tells us that we can expect it

The Bible tells us that the Lord controls it

A while ago, I was at the Kwik Trip in Saukville. As I entered the store, another fellow was coming out and his arms were full of food. We could not fit through the door at the same time. He motioned that I should come through first. I replied, "Please, you go first. Your arms are full." He replied by cussing me. I did not expect that. Being rejected by people you are trying to help is surprising and sad. This morning, we are reminded not to be surprised at opposition to the gospel. The Bible tells us that we can expect it, and that the Lord controls it.

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Acts 3 tells us that, shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter and John went to the temple to pray one afternoon. They saw a 40-year-old man who could not walk. Peter healed him and the man could instantly walk and skip and dance for joy. A crowd gathered to see what happened. Peter took the opportunity to share God's Word. He told the people about Jesus who had the power, not just to heal a cripple, but to raise the dead. The Jewish leaders did not want people hearing about Jesus so they arrested Peter and John and put them in prison for the night. The next day, they were on trial in front of the same High Priests and leaders who abused and condemned Jesus. The Jewish leaders did not want anyone talking about Jesus, but the whole city was already buzzing about the cripple who was healed. They could not deny what happened. Finally, they decided to release Peter and John and warn that if they kept talking about Jesus, they would get into trouble. Peter, however, told them that he was going to keep on sharing God's Word.

That brings us to our Second Lesson for the day from Acts 4. On their release, Peter and John went back to the Christians and told them what happened. The response of the Christians was to pray. They talked to God and essentially said, "Lord, you told us this would happen and you were right." They quoted Psalm 2 which predicted that nations and kings and rulers would join together to oppose Jesus. That certainly happened as Herod and Pontius Pilate, who had been enemies, became friends and each had a role in Jesus' death.

One of the phrases in their prayer was (:28), "**[Herod and Pilate] did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.**" I'd like to explain that phrase a bit because it would be easy to get the impression that

Herod and Pilate were innocent puppets that God used to kill Jesus. No. God did not make Herod and Pilate do such a wicked thing. They made their own decisions about Jesus, but God used their wicked work to serve his saving purpose. You kind of have to chuckle at that. The devil misled and tempted those leaders to reject Jesus and get him killed. The devil and the Jewish leaders laughed as Jesus slowly suffered on the cross. But then the Lord used Jesus' death to undo Satan's plans. He used Jesus' death to forgive the sins of the world so that the devil can not drag believers into hell with him. Like Snidely Whiplash in the Bullwinkle cartoon in the early 1960's, the devil, must have seethed, "Curses! Foiled again!"

But, just like Snidely Whiplash, the Devil keeps on trying. Those early Christians in Jerusalem expected opposition to the gospel. As soon as Adam & Eve sinned, the Lord promised to send a Savior. He spoke to the devil and said that there would be enmity, or hatred, (Genesis 23:15), "**between your offspring** [those who follow the Devil] **and her offspring** [those who follow the pattern of Eve and are brought to faith]."

What was true in the Garden of Eden and in First Century Jerusalem is still true today. Jesus was rejected, even by his hometown friends, so it's no surprise that that we who follow him should also be rejected. It might seem surprising to us that people would oppose the gospel which they need to avoid hell and enjoy heaven. When we, as individuals and as a congregation, tell others that they are sinners but that Jesus died to forgive them, we are trying to help them. Who wouldn't be glad to hear that message of salvation? The unbelievers, that's who. A dog caught in a bear trap will snap at anyone who comes close. It does not realize that people are trying to free it from that trap. That's what unbelievers are like. They snap at those who are trying to free them from the trap of sin and death. It's sad, but we can expect it.

Without even searching, I stumbled upon a few examples this week. It seems that opposition to God's Word is pretty common.

- The Canadian government is considering legislation that would make it a crime to say that homosexuality and lesbianism is a sin. Pastors who say such things could face a 5-year prison sentence.
- Last week, a village in Nigeria in western Africa was attacked by a Muslim group shouting, "Allah is the greatest." Eighteen Christians were killed. That community has now been attacked seven times by Muslims.
- In Finland, a lady who served in Parliament for twenty years, was accused of hate speech for something she wrote back in 2004. She expressed her personal belief about marriage and sexuality and – probably worst of all – quoted a Bible passage.

- I read about a student at Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw, MI, (one of our synod's worker training schools), grew up in China. He and his family would secretly meet with other Christians to worship and they had to hide their Bibles. It is illegal to share the message of Jesus in China.

I know that many of you can give examples of opposition to the gospel in your own lives as well, some times even by your own close family members.

Notice how the believers in Jerusalem responded. They did not complain. They prayed. And they did not pray that the Lord would give Herod and Pilate and the Jewish leaders what they deserved. They did not pray, "Dear God, that was close; please protect Peter and John a little better next time." Or, "Dear Lord, protect us and our families so that we never face opposition to the gospel and all the laws are changed to line up with your commandments." No. Those early Christians knew that, by nature, they also deserved to be sentenced to eternal suffering. But somehow, somewhere, at sometime, they came into contact with the good news of salvation through Jesus and the Lord performed a miracle inside their hearts. He gave them faith. He turned them from someone who opposed the gospel to someone who rejoiced in the gospel.

The same thing miracle has occurred in each one of you. Everyone of us started life as an unbeliever, an enemy of God. But somehow, somewhere, at sometime, you came into contact with the gospel and the Lord performed a miracle inside of your hearts. Your ears hear the voice of your Good Shepherd. You have been washed clean of all sin through baptism. You have seen and tasted that the Lord is good as you take him in along with some bread and wine. Alleluia! Throughout Epiphany we continue to rejoice that the Lord appeared to us as our Savior. We will not – we can not – lash out in anger against the unbelievers because we were once like THEM. Jesus, however, made us like HIM – perfect, pure and holy. There are many times, however, when we do not feel very blessed. We face difficulties and struggles. We feel lonely and neglected. A lot of times we are not too comfortable. It's like waiting in line for a ride at an amusement park. We're tired and worn, but we look forward to the fun we're going to have. Right now, on this earth, we are simply standing in line and biding our time until we get to enjoy eternal happiness in heaven. Those early Christians in Jerusalem prayed that the Lord would make them bold to continue proclaiming the gospel in spite of opposition. They knew that the Bible also told them that the Lord controls that opposition.

The Bible tells us that the Lord controls it

Their prayer began (:24), "**Sovereign I, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.**" They reminded themselves

that God was bigger and more powerful than any of their enemies. They did not need to be afraid. God is sovereign. He can do anything, including protecting them. They continued praying (:29), "**Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.**" In other words, "Use us, Lord, to keep telling people about salvation through Jesus and to never be afraid." They also asked the Lord to continue performing miracles through the apostles. When Peter healed that crippled man, it proved to everyone that Peter represented the true all-powerful God. If God permitted the apostles to perform more miracles, then people would keep noticing and listening to the message of Jesus as their Savior. Now that the apostles are in heaven and left for us the words and works of Jesus in the Bible, we do not need to perform miracles. We can simply point to the Bible as proof that we are representing the true God.

After those early Christians prayed, there was something of an earthquake. The Lord let those believers know that he heard their prayer and approved of it. The Holy Spirit emboldened each believer to keep sharing God's Word. The Lord could send a little earthquake right now so we all felt his presence, too, but we do not need such proof. We have a completed Bible which gives us all the proof we need that Jesus is our Savior and that we are going to heaven. At this very moment, through God's Word, the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts so that we are not afraid to share God's Word whenever we can.

Just like the Lord foiled the plans of the Devil when Jesus was on the cross, he continues to foil the plans of the Devil today. Permit just one example. Ben Malcolmson is an assistant football coach in the NFL. He went to college at the University of Southern California (USC). He was on the football team and they were going to play in the Rose Bowl game his senior year. Ben was a Christian and wanted to give a meaningful gift to his teammates. A few days before Christmas, he placed a Bible at each of his 100 teammates' lockers. When he showed up for practice on the day after Christmas, he was crushed to see a pile of ripped up Bibles in the locker room. Oh well. The Bible said he could expect such opposition to the gospel. Nearly four years later, an old friend connected with him and told him that one of the Bibles was picked up and read by a teammate. The Lord used that Bible to bring him to faith just a few days before he tragically died. Still once more, the Lord had the last laugh and the Devil was foiled again.

Don't be surprised when you hear about, or experience, opposition to the gospel. The Bible tells us that we can expect it and that the Lord still controls it. You are living proof. And one day, along with the apostles and all believers who have also experienced opposition to the gospel, you will be happy in heaven praising the Lord for saving you. Amen.