



SERMON NOTES

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#23 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

1. Intro; 1 Chr. 12:22-23, 32, *"For at that time they came to David day by day to help him, until it was a great army, like the army of God. Now these were the numbers of the divisions that were equipped for war, and came to David at Hebron to turn over the kingdom of Saul to him, according to the word of the LORD... of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their command;"*
 - a. Mt. 24:4-14, *"Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."*
 - b. The rise of the cult of Cæsar and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD to the Roman armies.
 - i. Begun in 27 BC by Cæsar Augustus (Octavius of the Battle of Philippi), it was inseparable from that of Rome's official deities, whose cult was essential to Rome's survival and whose neglect was therefore treasonous. The granting of apotheosis served religious, political and moral judgment on Imperial rulers and allowed living Emperors to associate themselves with a well-regarded lineage of Imperial *divi*. Christian apologists and martyrs saw the cult of the Emperor as a particularly offensive instrument of pagan impiety and persecution. It therefore became a focus of theological and political debate during the ascendancy of Christianity.
 - ii. Paul's theology, grounded in Jewish thought and scriptures, propelled him to confront the powers of Rome and the pagan gods that stood behind them. His gospel, he writes, is about God's son, *"concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."* (cf. Rom. 1:3-4). The apotheosis formula.
 - iii. In Paul's day, the cult of Cæsar was the fastest-growing religion in the Mediterranean world. In Rome itself the emperors did not claim full divine honors, but they did adopt the title "son of god"-the god in question being their recently deceased, and newly deified, predecessor. And in the provinces, from Greece and Turkey through the Middle East to Egypt, divinization

was standard. The people had worshiped rulers before; why shouldn't Augustus and his successors, with their extraordinary powers, receive the same divine honors? So the imperial cult grew and its "good news" was that Cæsar, the son of God, was now the lord of the whole world, claiming allegiance from everybody in return for bringing salvation and justice to the world. Resistance was met with crucifixion. The system was based on sheer power.

1. Paul's subversive declaration in Rom. 1:15-16, "*So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*"
 2. In Romans 13:1-7 Paul urges his readers to obey the authorities, but this is more subversive than is often supposed. Rulers are not divine; they are answerable to God. God wants order, not chaos; there is no point in overthrowing the official tyranny of appointed rulers only to have it replaced by the unofficial tyranny of the bullies, the strong or the rich. The revolution Paul has in mind is deeper than mere civic disobedience. It is about giving to the Davidic Messiah the total allegiance that, in his day, was claimed by Cæsar. After all, Cæsar killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead.
- c. Eagles; Mt. 24:28, "*For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.*" Vultures and eagles easily ascertain where dead bodies are, and hasten to devour them. This proverb also teaches a universal truth. Wherever wicked people are, there will be assembled the instruments of their chastisement. The providence of God will direct them there, as the vultures are directed to a dead carcass. The answer implies that it would be where there is the most "guilt and wickedness." Eagles flock where there is prey. So, said he, these armies will flock to the place where there is the most wickedness; and by this their thoughts were directed at once to Jerusalem, the place of eminent wickedness.
- i. Eagles with the apotheosis of Antoninus Pius and his Empress Faustina (161 AD); the Roman Empire (SPQR) up until 376 AD; Holy Roman Empire (800, 962-1806); the Weimar Republic (1928-1933); Nazi Germany (1933-1945); and present day Germany. And... the USA.
- d. The decline into Nazi Germany; Germany became the seat of the Holy Roman Empire (Charlemagne in 800 AD, the Otto 1 starting in 962 and onwards until 1806)
- i. The 1932 election success of the Communist Party to gain 100 Reichstag seats whipped up fears of civil war. In 1933 Hitler was selected to be the Reich Chancellor and Germany went down the road of National Socialism. The National Socialist party, led by Hitler, was freely elected to power by Germans and, in general, had their support because of its early success energizing a moribund economy. Though we know in hindsight that Hitler was a monster, at the time he gave Germans a reason to take pride in their nation again and he proved adept at adding more territory to Germany without firing a shot. In the years leading up to the invasion of Poland in 1939, Berliners and other Germans were generally content with Hitler and the party.

ii. Parallels

1. Citing Darwinian evolution, Hitler convinced the German people that purging millions of people was acceptable because of the need to create a pure race; also referred to as eugenics.
2. Abortion was made “safe and legal” in Germany and they killed 40 percent of all babies conceived.
3. Euthanasia was permitted for the crippled, deformed and handicapped, and then to the killing of Jews. At one point in the 1930s, the Nazis emptied out hospitals, clinics, and sanitariums, and killed up to 275,000 old, sick, crippled, retarded, or otherwise handicapped persons.
4. A preoccupation with environmentalism and animal rights with the Nazis laws, rules and regulations to protect the environment while restricting the rights of their people and to protect animals (wild and domestic). One of the most chilling statements made by the Nazis came from their charter: *“...returning to the animal nature within man, communing with nature, and elevating animal life to the level of cult worship, as alternatives to modernity, technology, and urbanization...would lead to the spiritual and ideological changes necessary...for new national self-identity.”*
5. Gun control laws were implemented in Germany in 1935 and society became very highly militarized.
6. In 1935, under Hitler's rule, prayers ceased to be obligatory in schools. By 1938, all private schools were abolished by Hitler and all education placed under Nazi control and the state started taking over the job of child care.
7. Hitler eliminated Christian holidays in the schools first by calling Christmas *“Yuletide.”*
8. Hitler took Easter out of schools and instead honored that time of year as the beginning of spring.
9. Nazi Germany became a *“Big Brother”* police state that constantly monitored everything that German citizens did.
10. In Nazi Germany, if you conducted business outside of the socialist paradigm you were heavily punished and government regulation of business got wildly out of control.
11. Hitler outlawed the cross and replaced it with the swastika.
12. Pastors who spoke against Hitler's worldview and his murderous regime found themselves on trial and frequently imprisoned for *“Abuse of Pulpit.”*
13. Pastors often cited Romans 13:1-2 to encourage Christians to obey the Nazis, justifying their allegiance to Hitler through a belief that *“their duty to God was spiritual; their duty to the state was political;”* retreating into neutrality.

e. Politics

- i. Definition from Webster's 1828 dictionary, *“The science of government; that part of ethics which consists in the regulation and government of a nation or state, for the preservation of its safety, peace, and prosperity; comprehending the defense of its existence and rights*

against foreign control or conquest ... and the protection of its citizens in their rights, with the preservation and improvement of their morals."

- ii. God's perspective on the state is that it is strictly subordinate to His sovereign dominion and control. The authority of the state, within the economy of the divine design for the political sphere, is subject to and dependent upon the authority of God Himself. Governors and magistrates hold their power purely as delegates and representatives of the King of all kings. They are appointed and armed with the sword in order that they might 1) punish evil and 2) condone good. Those who forget these principles and become puffed up with a sense of their own importance are, like Ahab (cf. 1 Kings 21), Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Dan. 4:20-30), Uzziah (cf. 2 Chron. 26), and Herod (cf. Acts 12:21-23), liable to swift and severe judgment.
- iii. When Israel asked for a King towards the end of Samuel's ministry, they should have been wary of placing too much power in the hands of any one man because of the evil inherent in human nature. By looking to a king to "*go out before them*," they were in effect handing over a huge portion of the sovereignty of other social spheres to the governing authority and expecting it to function as their "*savior*." In this way, they were aiding and abetting the "*rise of the state*" as a rival to God. As an alternative, they could have asked Samuel to discipline his sons or replace them with godly judges – a privilege and responsibility that resides within the hands of the people in a form of government in which the leaders are elected.
- iv. "*Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's.*" It is rarely mentioned that Jesus' words have clear implications, He indicates that there are *limits* to the power and authority of the state: some things are rightly Cæsar's, but others belong to God alone. In claiming the "*best of your fields and vineyards ... a tenth of your grain and your vintage ... and a tenth of your sheep*" (cf. 1 Sam. 8:14-17), Israel's future king will in effect be setting himself up in the place of God.

2. Paul and Silas in Philippi

a. The Roman colony

- i. *"These colonies had one great characteristic. Wherever they were they were little fragments of Rome, and their pride in their Roman citizenship was their dominating characteristic. The Roman language was spoken; Roman dress was worn; Roman customs were observed; their magistrates had Roman titles, and carried out the same ceremonies as were carried out in Rome itself. Wherever they were these colonies were stubbornly and unalterably Roman. They would never have dreamt of becoming assimilated to the people amidst whom they were set. They were parts of Rome, miniature cities of Rome, and they never forgot it. We can hear the Roman pride breathing through the charge against Paul and Silas in Acts 16:20,21, 'These men are Jews, and they are trying to teach and to introduce laws and customs which it is not right for us to observe—for we are Romans.' 'You are a colony of heaven.' Paul wrote to the Philippian Church (cf. Phil. 3:20). Just as the Roman colonist never forgot in any environment that he was a Roman, so they must never forget in any society that*

they are Christians. Nowhere were men prouder of being Roman citizens than in these colonies. And such was Philippi."

b. The Heralds

- i. The Python Girl, *"These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation."* Paul through the name of Jesus casts out of the Python spirit.
- ii. The crowd, *"...they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe."* Under Roman law Judaism was *Religion licita*, Christianity became *Religion illicita*.
- iii. The Jailer, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* Paul states, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

c. The Prison

d. The Deliverance from the prison.

- i. Citizens' rights.
- ii. This is what the kingdom of God looks like when it's on the road, arriving on earth as in heaven. Prayer and testimony bring healing and hope to people, but this will often result in a challenge to an economic or political power structure at one level or another. The church must remind them of their God-given duty, must hold them to account.

3. Letter to the Philippians

a. Chapter 2

- i. One of the best examples is in Phil. 2:9-10, where Paul declares, through a deliberate quotation of Isaiah, that what YHWH had claimed as unique was now shared with Jesus. *"To me, me alone,"* says YHWH, *"every knee shall bow, every tongue swear."* Maybe, says Paul, but now *"at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow."* Simultaneously, and precisely because of the inner dynamic of just this Jewish tradition, Paul was announcing that Jesus was the true King of Israel and hence the true Lord of the world, at exactly the time in history, and over exactly the geographical spread, where the Roman emperor was being proclaimed, in what styled itself a "gospel", in very similar terms."
- ii. If Jesus is Messiah, He is also Lord, *Kurios*. The main challenge was to the lordship of Cæsar, which, though certainly *"political"* was also profoundly *"religious."* Cæsar demanded worship as well as "secular" obedience; not just taxes, but sacrifices. He was well on the way to becoming the supreme divinity in the Greco-Roman world, maintaining his vast empire not simply by force, but by the development of a flourishing religion that seemed to be trumping most others either by absorption or by greater attraction"

b. Chapter 3

- i. First, coherence. *"To write the same things",* he says in verse 1, *"is no trouble for me, and it is safe for you."* Why *"safe?"* Because, I suggest, nobody reading verses 2-16 would at once deduce that the recipients of the letter were being encouraged to be disloyal to Cæsar. Of course, anyone paying attention would recognize what was going on in verses 20-21, but the main thrust of the chapter is not to present a stark contrast between the two Lords of the world, but to provide the Philippians with a powerful train of thought and to encourage them

to live within it. “Join in imitating me,” Paul says in verse 17; but of course, not being Jews, they cannot. It encourages them to think their way into Paul's situation, and then to transfer what he says about himself and his own privileges to their own position and status. Paul is not, in fact, shifting his target; he is using one warning as a powerful code for another.

- ii. We might, then, treat his appeal as follows. God has, in Jesus, unveiled God's true kingdom, the true empire. There is nothing specifically wrong with being a citizen of a country or of its wider extension, just as there is nothing wrong with being Jewish. But when the gospel of Jesus is unveiled it reveals the true empire, the true citizenship, and in that light all the pretensions of empire, not least the arrogant and blasphemous claims of the emperor himself, are shown up, just as those who pride themselves on their circumcision are shown up as being “the mutilation.”
- iii. Paul, for neither the first nor the last time, has Judaism and paganism – in particular the Cæsar-cult – simultaneously in mind, and is here using warnings against the former (Judaism) as a code for warnings against the latter (paganism). Paul's main concern is to warn them against the Cæsar-cult and the entire panoply of pagan empire; but his method of warning them, and of encouraging them to take a stand for the counter-empire of Jesus, is given for the most part in code. He tells them his own story, the story of how he had abandoned his status and privileges in order to find the true status and privilege of one in Christ, and encourages them to imitate him. Read this way, the chapter gains both in coherence and in subtlety.
- iv. Phil. 3:20, “*Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await the Saviour, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.*” These are Cæsar-titles. The whole verse says: Jesus is Lord, and Cæsar isn't. Cæsar's empire, of which Philippi is a colonial outpost, is the parody; Jesus' empire, of which the Philippian church is a colonial outpost, is the reality. 17 And the point of having citizenship in heaven”, as has often been pointed out, is not that one might eventually go home to the mother city; Rome established colonies precisely because of overcrowding in the capital, and the desire to spread Roman civilization in the rest of the empire. If things were getting difficult in one's colonial setting, the emperor would come from the mother city to rescue and liberate his loyal subjects, transforming their situation from danger to safety.
- v. The central point is as Paul has rethought his Jewish allegiance in the light of the crucified and risen Jesus, so they should rethink their Roman allegiance in the same light. The Philippians, like Paul, must find their whole identity in the crucified and risen Messiah and nowhere else. It is precisely because they are assured they are indeed the people of the one true God, formed in the Messiah through his death and resurrection, that the Philippians will have the courage and confidence to trust him as savior and lord and so to renounce the imperial claims of Cæsar. And in doing so they will find the warnings of Paul resonating at various levels. If he can renounce his unrivalled privileges, so can they.

4. Take-Aways

- a. The western church has assumed that the main object of the game was to forget earth and concentrate on heaven instead. We believe that the church has a responsibility, not to usurp the proper and God-given functions of governments and authorities, of magistrates and officers, but to support them in prayer and to remind them of what they are there for – and to point out when they're getting it wrong. God has established authorities in the world, as part of the goodness of creation, because without them the bullies and the malevolent would always get away with it. But the problem of evil includes the problem that the people who are supposed to be keeping evil in check may themselves become part of the problem instead of part of the solution.
- b. In early Christianity and Judaism, those who believe in God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven are not particularly concerned with how rulers get to be rulers. They are not going around campaigning for an early form of parliamentary democracy. They are extremely concerned with what rulers do once they become rulers, knowing that a bad ruler is worse than an ordinary bad person, because their evil is becoming part of the system. The church claims the right, in invoking Jesus as Lord, to challenge the systems of corruption that dehumanize people and enslave them, and to remind the powers that be of what their duty actually is.
- c. Politics and theology are at the same time. Our culture has pulled apart theo and polis, and they need to be put back together again.
- d. The story the Gospels tell is how God becomes King; the divinity of Jesus has been a major part of evangelical belief. Many of the miracles demonstrate His sovereignty over all things