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Acts 17:1-9

Outward Church: An Upside-Down Church

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My wife and I watched the Broadway Musical Hamilton last summer on Disney+. All the songs are brilliant, but I was reminded of one of them as I thought about today's sermon. Have you heard the one about the battle of Yorktown? Washington is trying to defeat General Cornwallis, and he sends Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton to capture two key positions. In the musical, as they're going into battle, they sing about what they're trying to accomplish. They're trying to create a new and free nation, which will flip their world upside down. They sing, "Till the world turns upside down... Till the world turns upside down!" Hamilton and his men actually charged a quarter mile without their guns loaded so they could take their enemies by surprise. It was pretty bold, and when they win the Revolutionary war, they sing, "The world turned upside down. . . The world turned upside down."

They had a goal to win freedom and turn the world upside-down. They did it through war, violence, diplomacy, and politics. They over-powered their enemies, and that's how our nation won its freedom. The world turned upside down. By the end of our passage today, an angry mob sings a similar tune about Paul and his mission. They shout about Paul and his associates, "These men who have turned the world upside down. . ." But they didn't do it through war, violence, diplomacy, or politics. They did it by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The early Christians turned the world upside-down by telling others about their upside-down king and living like his upside-down followers. Today I want to talk about 1) the upside-down king, 2) the upside-down kingdom, and 3) our upside-down church. When we truly get what the gospel is, it should turn our whole world upside-down. And it all begins with...

The Upside-Down King

Paul and his team are on their second missionary journey, this time into Europe. Thessalonica is a strategic trade city in Northern Greece located on the shores of the Aegean sea and along the Via Egnatia Roman highway. When Paul arrives there, they go preach in the synagogue. He tells the Jews that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah and that he suffered and died.

Acts 17:2b-3 (ESV)

. . . [Paul] reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. According to the Hebrew scriptures, the Messiah was supposed to be from King David's line and was going to rescue the people of Israel (2 Samuel 7). Over time this promise became less about healing the people's relationship with God and more about casting out their foreign oppressors, the Romans. But if we look closely at Scripture, we see the Messiah was always going to suffer.

- Genesis 22 is the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac, which pointed forward to God the Father sacrificing his son on the cross.

- Isaiah 53 talks prophesied the Messiah would be a suffering servant, someone who would be “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”
- Psalm 22 is like the Isaiah 53 of the psalms. As Jesus hung suffering on the cross, he actually recited Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But when Paul says, “Jesus is the Messiah, and he had to suffer and die,” it doesn’t make sense to many of his listeners. Some get it. Some stop, listen and believe, but others just get angry. They gather up all the rough characters in town and start a riot. That’s when they start shouting:

Acts 17:7b (ESV)

“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also . . . and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

Paul is offending the Jews for saying their Messiah, which means their promised King, suffered and died. But he also offends the Greeks and Romans because he recognizes Jesus is king, which threatens Caesar and his power. To say “Jesus is Lord” is a political statement because “Caesar was Lord.” Jesus threatens their power, but not through **power over**, but by **power under**. He doesn’t muscle his way in through war or violence or diplomacy or politics but through suffering. Jesus flips the world’s patterns upside-down by coming under those who hate him.

It says when the city authorities heard this, they were disturbed. They weren’t intrigued. They were disturbed. Jesus threatens their power by modeling a different way, the way of true power, through self-sacrifice and submission. The upside-down is building an upside-down kingdom.

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Paul stands for the kingdom of God, which is a kingdom of the suffering self-sacrificial Savior. But the Jews and Greeks, and Romans only understood the kingdom of this world. One author and pastor contrasted the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God. He lists five contrasts (quoting):

1. **A Contrast of Trusts:** The kingdom of the world trusts the power of the sword, while the kingdom of God trusts the power of the cross. The kingdom of the world advances by exercising “power over,” while the kingdom of God advances by exercising “power under.”

In our story, the non-Christians trust in the power of the mob. Since they can’t find Paul, they drag the one hosting him, Jason, and some of the other Christian before the city’s authorities. Paul trusts in the Messiah, which means king. They trust in Caesar, but we as believers trust in Jesus. When we trust in economic stability, or political victories, or personal safety, or any aspect of the kingdom of this world, we’ll try to exert power over authors. But Jesus is the upside-down king of an upside-down kingdom. There’s also...

2. **A Contrast of Aims:** The kingdom of the world seeks to control behavior, while the kingdom of God seeks to transform lives from the inside out. Also, the kingdom of the world is rooted in preserving, if not advancing, one’s self-interests and one’s own will, while the kingdom of God is centered exclusively on carrying out God’s will, even if this requires sacrificing one’s own interests.

Paul wanted to change their hearts by telling them about the Savior who died for them, but many in Thessalonica didn’t want things to change. They liked being in power. They had it good. They just wanted to preserve what they already have, which is why when Paul leaves town, they chase him out of the next town, Berea. They don’t want anyone near them who might destabilize their power through the gospel message.

3. **A Contrast of Scopes:** The kingdom of the world is intrinsically tribal in nature, and is heavily invested in defending, if not advancing, one’s own people-group, one’s nation, one’s ethnicity, one’s

state, one's religion, one's ideologies, or one's political agendas. . . . The kingdom of God, however, is intrinsically universal, for it is centered on simply loving as God loves. It is centered on people living for the sole purpose of replicating the love of Jesus Christ to all people at all times in all places without condition.

The Jews, Greeks, and Romans in Thessalonica knew if word got back to Caesar there was an insurrectionist king in their city, it wouldn't go well. They knew the best way to safeguard their city was to stop this teaching about a new king and squelch any rebellion. They got caught up in self-preservation instead of trying to love others as Christ loves them. How easy is it for us to get invested in tribalism and the kingdoms of this world rather than simply loving God and loving others as Jesus intended?

4. **A Contrast of Responses:** The kingdom of the world is intrinsically a tit-for-tat kingdom; its motto is "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." . . . But kingdom-of-God participants carry the cross, not the sword. We, thus, aren't ever to return evil with evil, violence with violence. We are rather to manifest the unique kingdom life of Christ by returning evil with good, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, loving, and praying for our enemies. We are to respond to evil in a way that protects us from being defined by it and that exposes the evil as evil, thereby opening up the possibility that our "enemy" will be transformed. Far from seeking retaliation, we seek the well-being of our "enemy."

How should a church protect itself? That question ties into what type of king we follow and what type of kingdom we are a part of. If king Jesus is a military king who came to overthrow the powers of this world, then let's arm up. But Jesus says:

Matthew 16:24b-25 (ESV)

. . . "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

If the church is a kingdom outpost of King Jesus, we arm ourselves with crosses, not swords. The church is a manifestation of the kingdom of God, and we abide by a different constitution than the country we live in. The church abides by the Bible, which calls the church to be a counter-cultural community defined by the cross, not by the sword. So this question is really a question of kingdoms. When the church gathers, and we're all here worshipping, are we going to bear the cross or the sword? But this question also extends to your everyday lives. As believers, how will you represent the king in your daily lives? Will we carry swords, focusing our hearts on personal safety, or will we carry crosses, looking for kingdom opportunities in whatever Jesus bring us? The kingdom of God is also...

5. **A Contrast of Battles:** The kingdom of the world has earthly enemies and, thus, fights earthly battles; the kingdom of God, however, by definition has no earthly enemies, for its disciples are committed to loving "their enemies," thereby treating them as friends, their "neighbors."
– The Myth of a Christian Nation by Gregory A. Boyd

We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Much of Acts is a story of believers sacrificing themselves repeatedly to share the gospel and bring others to Christ. And they get beaten and stoned and killed for it. But remember last week, when there was an earthquake, and the jail cell opened? Paul could have fled, but instead, he stayed put to see how God might transform his jailer's heart. He didn't exert his rights but showed his enemy compassion. How might we not get caught up in earthly battles but get caught up in loving our enemies and praying for them?

Jesus is the upside-down king of the upside-down kingdom. Are you starting to imagine how different Christianity is from the way the world operates? We have an upside-down king who is building an upside-down kingdom, and he wants to do it here in Westford by creating an upside-down church.

An Upside-Down Church

Sometimes my personal study in the Bible overlaps with what we're preaching. And that happened to be the case when I was preparing this message. I was meditating on the story of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, and their mother Salome's request (Matthew 20:20-27). Right before Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey at the triumphant entry, James and John's mother come to Jesus. Salome asks for them to sit on his right and his left in his kingdom. She must be thinking he will ride into Jerusalem, overthrow the Romans, and set himself up as king. She's not thinking of a heavenly throne, but an earthly one. She wants her boys to become powerful. She wants to get in while the getting is good.

Jesus tells James and John they don't know what they're asking, but they will drink the cup he drinks. They will drink the cup of suffering, which Jesus drinks on the cross. And we know that James does. Herod kills James in Acts 12. But at the time, Jesus says this to James and John.

Matthew 20:25-28 (ESV)

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus says the rulers of the Gentiles use and abuse their power. They exercise power over others. But you, he says, are to exercise power under. You're to be a servant. You're to serve others like Jesus did, even giving up your life for others. An upside-down church is a place full of upside-down people exercising the power of the cross by coming under others. We serve and love and care for those in need and don't try to exert power over them.

Jesus, the one who had it all, the one who had absolute sovereign power over all things, came under. He humbled himself, became a human, and allowed himself to be crucified. He died. Jesus died an upside-down king, but then God raised him from the dead. He rose again to new life, and yet he still exercises power under. He sends his upside-down kingdom outposts, churches, into the world to turn it right-side up.

Paul was only in Thessalonica for three weeks (v2 "three Sabbaths") before he got chased out of town. But after he visited there, he wrote them a letter, the book of 1st Thessalonians. Near the end of the letter, he talks about how one day Jesus is going to flip his upside-down kingdom right-side up.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (ESV)

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

This passage isn't about Christians disappearing in a rapture. It's about the return of the king. When a king comes to visit, you go out to greet him just like the crowds did at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21:1-11). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds streamed out of the city to wave palm branches and shout "Hosanna!" That's what we're going to do when Christ returns, but we'll go up into the sky to greet our coming Savior. We'll go up to greet our King, and will return in victory to the new heavens and the new earth and the eternal Jerusalem with our victorious king. One day, Jesus will turn the upside-down church right-side up.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What is the kingdom of the world like? How does it exercise power and authority?
2. How is King Jesus fundamentally different than the kings of this world?
3. What does it mean for the kingdom of God to be upside-down?
4. What does it mean to be part of an upside-down church?
5. How might you live an upside-down life?
6. How does Jesus' suffering grant us access to this kingdom?

Sources

Boyd, Gregory A. *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, 47-48, Kindle.

Watch the [Bible Project: The Gospel of the Kingdom](#). It beautifully explains the upside-down nature of the gospel of the kingdom.