WHAT IS TRUE OF GOD IN NEGATIVE WORLD

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Big Idea:
In an increasingly hostile, negative world reality, believers must not lose sight of who God is and what is true of him.

Primary Texts:

- **Acts 23:12–22**
- **Acts 23:23–35**
- **Acts 24:1–27**

God is sovereign over negative world reality

- Paul is living in an increasingly hostile culture, environment, and atmosphere toward Christianity
- Paul is navigating an increasingly negative world.
- Christians can identify with Paul in ways they have not been able to before.
- The aim is to remember who God is and what is true of him in the middle of it.
- The focus in this passage is **the sovereignty of God over negative world**.

First truth to remember: The plot of the mighty enemy only serves to propel the purposes of Almighty God

Text: Acts 23:12–22

- Some Jews formed a conspiracy to kill Paul.
- Context:
    - Paul was preaching, minding his own business.
    - They started a riot.
    - They falsely accused him

    - He is in jail under pagan protection.
    - While he is in jail, this plot unfolds.

- More than 40 men were involved.

Supporting observation

- They ask the Sanhedrin to petition the commander to bring Paul down on the pretext of wanting more accurate information. They are ready to kill him before he gets there. They are not even pretending to be righteous anymore.
  Key emphasis
- The men claiming the moral high ground…
- The men claiming to be super religious…
- The men claiming to be super righteous…
- The men claiming to be guardians of the Mosaic law…
- These same men have openly made a demonic pact to murder someone.

Illustration

This is still happening today.

- Men claim the moral high ground as theological and doctrinal watchdogs.
- Meanwhile, strategy sessions are happening behind the scenes:
    - waiting for someone to catch a social media wave
    - attacking at that moment
    - attaching SEO strings to his momentum
    - letting negative stories ride his wave for more attention and coverage
- Those claiming moral high ground are themselves making a demonic pact to do evil in the eyes of God.

Scripture connection

- God had said Paul would stand before Caesar in Rome as a witness to the gospel.

Illustration

- You do not just call the White House and ask for lunch in the Oval Office with the president.
- It would require a series of sovereign events to put someone in that room.
- In the same way, Paul is going to stand before Caesar himself.
  Key emphasis

- Luke is spending time on this plot for a reason.
- Evil men are plotting destructive purposes.
- Believers may be tempted to fear them, feel intimidated by them, or think they have more influence than they do.
- But what is true of God is this:

> **Even the plots of the mighty enemy only serve to propel the purposes of Almighty God.**

Second truth to remember: Evil men are nothing more than water boys for God

Text: Acts 23:23–35

- The commander calls two centurions.
- Horses are to be provided for Paul.
- Paul is to be taken safely to Governor Felix.
  Key emphasis
- The plot of evil men is what keeps the plot of God moving forward. They think they are scheming. God is simply having them pull the next lever in his plan.

Text movement

- The soldiers take Paul by night as far as Antipatus.
- Paul is handed over.
- Paul is kept under guard in Herod's palace.

Main point

- Paul is being worked up the Roman government food chain by events outside his control. All of it is being orchestrated by the hand of God.

Second Truth

- Evil, cunning, lying, slandering, conspiring, lawbreaking, murdering, violent men are nothing more than water boys for God.

    - God does not have any non-servants.
    - On one level, there are servants of God and enemies of God. But on the cosmic level, everyone is functioning as a servant of God.

Important note

- Paul does not know any of this is going on.
- He has no idea how all these events are serving God's purposes.
- All he has is the promise of God that God is not done with him yet.

Until God is done with you, you are bulletproof.

Third truth to remember: God uses evil men, good men, godless men, and secular infrastructures to fund and facilitate kingdom work

Text: Acts 24:1–27

- Five days later:
    - the high priest Ananias comes to Caesarea
    - some elders come with him
    - a lawyer named Tertullus comes with them
    - they bring charges against Paul before the governor

Tertullus' opening

- He is a "bottom smoocher."
- Flattery, flattery, flattery.

Charges against Paul

- Troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world, ring leader of the Nazarene sect, tried to desecrate the temple

Supporting contrast

- Who was rioting?
    - not Paul
    - the religious Jews
- Paul is just talking, they are the ones acting violently.

Illustration

- Paul is just standing there while they act like people throwing rocks through store windows, tossing Molotov cocktails, and burning businesses down.
- Then they say, “He’s burning our city down.”
- “Nothing like today.”

Believers need to be increasingly okay with being considered troublemakers when all they are doing is the same thing that used to get them kudos from the community.

- Christianity has not radically changed.
- The culture has changed.
- The Overton window has shifted.

Further accusation

- They present themselves as protectors:
    - “We’re the holy ones.”
    - “We’re stopping this dangerous man.”
- Meanwhile, they are calling dangerous: Christianity, marriage and families
- The whole situation is upside down.

Paul’s defense

- He gladly makes his defense.
- He sticks with the facts.
- Then he says:
    - he worships the God of their ancestors as a follower of the Way,
    - which they call a cult. He believes everything in accordance with the law and the prophets
    - He has the same hope in God, the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked

Supporting argument

- No problem defending yourself.
- You should be able to defend yourself articulately.
- You should stick with facts.
  People who hate God hate facts, because facts are always inconvenient to their narrative.

Key emphasis

- Paul also does not soften the charge that he follows Jesus.
- If they are accusing him of following Jesus:
    - "totally guilty"
    - Unashamedly following Jesus Christ, the leader of the Way

Further defense

- He came to bring gifts for the poor and to present offerings.
- He was ceremonially clean.
- There were no crowds with him.
- He was involved in no disturbance.
- His accusers from Asia should be there if they have anything to say.
- Otherwise, let the men present state what crime they found in him.

Illustration

- Paul is essentially saying:
    - "I'd love to see my accusers."
    - "I always enjoy a good laugh."
    - "Let's see what they have made up today."

What Paul talks about

- Righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come
- Felix becomes afraid because he was in an adulterous relationship with this woman.
- Paul is always poking the bear. Of all the things he could have talked about, he went right to the sin the leader was currently embroiled in.

Key emphasis

- Paul did not count it faithful to talk about everything else in the Bible except the very thing being attacked or violated in the moment.
- He considered it his job as a faithful watchman to move to the part of the wall under attack and speak the truth of God there.

Supporting contrast

- Paul could have:

    - waxed eloquently, quoted poets, quoted philosophers, told great stories, tried to win Felix over, and perhaps gotten cut loose

- Instead, he talked about:

    - righteousness and holiness, sexual purity, self-control, judgment to come, and God punishing sexual immorality

Key emphasis

- Hearing men of God declare the truth of God will never be convenient for a culture committed to exalting self as ultimate god.

Further text detail

- Felix keeps sending for Paul.
- Two years pass.
- Felix is replaced by Festus.
- Paul will get a trial within seven days of Festus' arrival, after being in prison for over two years.

Third truth stated

- God uses evil men, good men, godless men, and secular infrastructures, to fund and facilitate kingdom work.

Explanation

- Paul was busy, But God had things for Paul to do that were not on Paul's agenda.

Scripture connection

- In Acts 23:11, God had already told Paul:

    - "Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify about me in Rome."
- How is God going to get Paul safely to Rome without being murdered?
- By using a thousand Roman soldiers to escort him.
- God says, in effect:
    - "I'm going to use Roman soldiers with spears and swords and chariots and horses."
    - "I'm going to get my boy to my place for my date on my time."

    - "I'm going to get him there in style."

Illustration

- Paul is escorted like royalty.
- Then God puts Paul up in the "Roman Marriott" on Rome's dime.

Kingdom outcome

- For two years Paul has time to: sit, think, reason with an intelligent, godless head of state, write letters to the church. Those letters will be read for the next 2,000 years.
- All funded by a godless Caesar.

Key emphasis

- God is never on the ropes.
- God is never on his heels.
- God is never playing defense.
- God is never caught off guard.

Key emphasis

- There is nobody on the planet who does not functionally serve as a servant and water boy in God's kingdom.

Five Pastoral Hacks for a Negative World

1. Be willing not to be liked by the world as much as your mentor pastor was

- Many pastors today were mentored by pastors who lived in: positive world or neutral world
- Their mentors were liked. They were seen as assets to the community. They got invited to white houses and places of honor.
- That epoch is largely over.

2. Grow thicker skin faster by changing your expectations

- Stop expecting the world to see you as a value add to the community.
- As the world becomes increasingly secular and hostile to God:
    - the church will be seen less as a value add

    - and more as a threat to the value system of the regime

- This is happening all over the country, even in small-town America.

3. Obey Jesus and die to yourself in a way you never have before

- Include your good reputation in that death.
- Christians give Jesus their sin. Christian leaders give Jesus their reputation.
- That is increasingly what it will take to lead faithfully in this age.

4. Cultivate a deeper fear of God than your mounting fear of man

- It will always be tempting to fear:
    - men plotting your death
    - governments with massive power and authority
    - people who appear to have the upper hand

- The spiritual discipline of leadership is to cultivate a fear of God whose hand is over all things all the time.

5. Define love, compassion, and faithfulness in direct relationship to your willingness to tell the truth

- Telling the truth will increasingly be unpopular.
- It will get leaders labeled terrible things.
- The temptation will be to soften the truth in the name of mission or in the name of a good reputation. **But then you cease to be faithful as a minister of the gospel.**
- Increasingly, the mark of a godly leader will be whether love, compassion, and faithfulness are defined by willingness to:unapologetically preach, declare, and hold the line of truth

Conclusion: If God's purposes ripen in his own time, then stay alert, stay open, stay sharp, and stay ready

Foundational conclusion

- God’s purposes ripen in his own time.

- Paul is taken to Caesarea and put in prison for two years. For a man like Paul, that is an eternity.

Application

- You may not see God's purposes ripen on your timetable.
- But you can know for sure they are ripening on his timetable.

If these two things are true

- If God's purposes are ripening in his own time…
- And if God is working in all circumstances…
- Then what is the proper response to things we do not understand in:
    - family
    - personal life
    - immediate community
    - world today

Response

- **Stay alert.**
- **Stay open.**
- **Stay sharp.**
- **Stay ready.**

Stay alert

- Ask the Lord for a God-radar turned up on high alert.
- Ask: "God, help me see where you are at work."

- Instead of living: busy and distracted, ask in every phone call, text, and circumstance:
    - "Lord, help my radar be sharp."
    - "Help me not miss what you are doing."

Stay open

- The mildly frustrating situation may contain something for you.
- Something you can participate with God in doing.
- Something that can redeem what is currently frustrating.

Stay sharp

- Always thinking.
- Always reading.
- Always learning.
- Always growing.

Stay ready

- Be ready in all situations to say yes.

Single encouragement

- Wake up tomorrow and say:
    - "Father, help my radar to be sharp and my ears to be attuned so that I can say more yes to you today when you call my name."
      .

Final declaration

- God is at work, friends.
- Do not doubt it.
- Do not question it.
- Do not forget it.
- God is at work.
- And we get to be a part of it.

Condensed preaching flow

1. Opening frame

- Negative world is real.
- Do not lose sight of who God is in it.

2. Truth One

- The plot of the mighty enemy only serves to propel the purposes of Almighty God.

3. Truth two

- Evil men are nothing more than water boys for God.

4. Truth three

- God uses evil men, good men, godless men, and secular infrastructures to fund and facilitate kingdom work.

5. Pastoral hacks

1. not needing to be liked
2. thicker skin
3. dying to reputation
4. deeper fear of God than man
5. defining love and faithfulness by willingness to tell the truth

6. Closing exhortation

- stay alert
- stay open
- stay sharp
- stay ready
- say yes to God