

Is Paul Inimitable?

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bibles, and Edward is beginning this evening a series which is going to be looking at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

But you'll see that we're reading this evening not in Thessalonians, at least not at first, but in Acts chapter 17. And I hope the reason for that will become obvious because it's the background to the church at Thessalonica.

And it teaches us about Paul's visit there, how it all began, what went on, and gives us much of the background that will help us as we come to study his later letter to that church that was formed there.

So we're going to read together Acts chapter 17 and the first nine verses. Now when they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.

[1 : 20] And saying, this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women.

But the Jews were jealous. And taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they couldn't find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men, who have turned the world upside down, have come here also. And Jason has received them. And they're all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there's another king, Jesus.

And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they'd taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

[2 : 34] Amen. May God bless to us his word. It's easy, isn't it, to think that being a Christian believer doesn't really make that much difference to the way that we live lives in comparison to other people.

It doesn't cause us too much trouble in our society these days. But of course, that's not usual, is it? It's not the way that the Christian church has been for most of history. It's not the way that the Christian church is treated in most of the world today.

It's been a very anomalous time that we've lived through in the West, at least in our country in recent years. That may be changing. I suspect it is changing. And what we've read there gives a much more realistic picture of what it usually means to be a Christian in the midst of society, which society and authorities find very disturbing and rattling, just as there.

Well, another Christian who lived very much through that was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, as you know, lived in the time of Nazi Germany and stood out very much against that, ended up being put in a prison camp and losing his life as a result.

And this is a wonderful hymn that he wrote. Here's somebody who understood exactly the sort of Christianity that Paul is demonstrating to us there. It's a lovely hymn. It speaks of the power of God sheltering his saints, whatever may come their way.

[4 : 05] By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered and confidently waiting, come what may, we know that God is with us night and morning and never fails to meet us each new day.

Well, good evening, friends. You might like to turn to Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 16 and 17.

We've had a short passage from chapter 17 read to us, but we're going to be in chapter 16 as well. And tonight we're beginning a new series of sermons in which we'll be studying the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

However, on this first week, I wanted to start a little further back so as to think about the context in which Paul wrote this letter. After all, every letter has a context.

You might say a prehistory. Even the slenderest of emails that we might send has some reason behind it. And I hope that by looking at the context in which Paul wrote this letter, we'll be able to understand it more and feel the force of its message better.

[5 : 13] And the context was nothing less than the extraordinary life of the Apostle Paul himself. A wide awake Bible reader will want to know about Paul as well as about Paul's message.

In fact, you simply cannot separate the two. The whole force of the man is thrown into every sentence he wrote in his letters. And a prominent theme in his letters, in many of them, is to call to the churches to imitate him.

To be like him. So, for example, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 1, he writes, Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.

I want to take that as a kind of key text for tonight. Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. In other words, note my example. Follow the pattern of my life and behavior.

Because I am following the pattern of Jesus' life and behavior. So if you follow me, you're learning to follow Jesus. Now, when you look seriously at Paul's life, you have to say to yourself, But how could I possibly imitate him?

[6 : 26] He lives life on a completely different plane from my life. He seems a giant, and I am certainly a pygmy. Surely he's inimitable. And yet he says to the Corinthians, who were a raggle-taggle of a church, ill-disciplined, shallow in their faith, he says to them, Imitate me.

He could hardly have said that to them if he knew that he was asking for something impossible. He was serious. I want to read you a striking quotation from a fine book on Paul's missionary work written by the Australian scholar Paul Barnett.

Paul was determined to achieve what he set out to do. That is, to establish Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. During his decade-long burst of energy, that was really the years 47 to 57 AD, during his decade-long burst of energy, he walked thousands of miles, something like 20 per day, across forbidding mountain ranges, and through arid wastelands, proclaiming the message of the crucified but risen Messiah.

For preaching a message that was offensive to both Jews and Gentiles, he was repeatedly and severely flogged, on one occasion stoned.

Virtually penniless, he labored throughout the night to earn money to preach by day. This ex-Pharisee brought the message about Jesus the Christ to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and wanted to repeat this achievement in the western province, Spain.

[8 : 07] Apart from Paul's Herculean efforts, it is difficult to imagine how the gospel of Christ could have taken root so comprehensively in the Greco-Roman world.

End of quotation. And this man is telling the Corinthians and all the churches, ancient and modern, to imitate him. Could he really be serious?

But the fact is, he meant what he said. Now, I don't think he meant that all Christians should travel in the way that he did, or necessarily have to endure the extreme physical sufferings that he had to go through.

But he certainly meant that all Christians should learn and embrace and love his teaching, his gospel, and that all Christians should follow his lifestyle of love, truthfulness, gentleness, joy, and endurance.

Be imitators of me, he says, as I am of Christ. Is it possible? We're bound to ask, is it possible? Well, think of it like this.

[9 : 11] Imagine that you're a keen young tennis player, perhaps in your late teens, and you want to improve your game. So how do you go about it? Well, you join the local club, you practice, you play there as much as you can, but you also study the example of the great players.

You get hold of video material, which analyzes the technique of Roger Federer or Serena Williams. You look at the slow-motion footage, just how the arm is used to play the forehand or the backhand, how the great players move their feet and anticipate the play, how they toss the furry little sphere upwards and then whack it down in the surface.

And you learn to follow their example, and you learn to imitate them. Now, you know that you're never going to be as good as they are. You know that if you ever got onto the court with one of those great players, you probably wouldn't win a single point, let alone a game. But their example spurs you on. Their example enthralls you. It has given you a vision for playing tennis that you didn't have before. Now, Paul is saying to the Corinthian church and to all the churches, follow my example, and you'll be learning the Christian life as Jesus himself exemplified it and taught it.

Now, Paul's example is opened up to us in two places. First, in the Acts of the Apostles, and secondly, in his 13 New Testament letters running from Romans to Philemon.

[10:41] So think first of the book of Acts. Acts was written by Luke, Luke the doctor, who was one of Paul's closest friends and had traveled with him on some of his missionary adventures.

In the book of Acts, Paul is first introduced, towards the end of chapter 7, as a witness who approves of the stoning of Stephen. Luke then tells us of Paul's astonishing conversion on the road to Damascus when he meets the risen Christ in Acts chapter 9.

And Paul meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus road was the defining event of his life. It utterly changed him from a savage persecutor of Christians, a kind of religious terrorist, to a determined, unstoppable gospel preacher.

And it's from the beginning of chapter 13 in Acts that Luke then begins to tell the story of Paul's missionary journeys, traveling first with Barnabas and later with Silas, Timothy, Luke, and various others.

So it means that something like 60% of the book of Acts is devoted to Paul's life and work. So we're bound to ask, why does Luke give Paul such a lot of space?

[11:56] Why doesn't he tell us more about James and John and even Peter, who features strongly in the early chapters of the book but disappears after chapter 15? I think the answer must be that Luke also is saying to his readers, imitate Paul because he imitates Christ.

Paul was much opposed, much criticized, vilified, just as Jesus had been before him. Paul eventually was killed by so-called Roman justice, just as Jesus had been before him. You see the pattern there. Paul tirelessly taught the good news, just as Jesus had done before him. So Luke is presenting us with a figure who is following in the footsteps of his master Jesus. Luke is not simply recording bare historical facts for us. He's recording facts with a message. Follow Paul. That's what Luke is saying to his readers.

And Luke would say to us, note two things. First, the powerful spread of the gospel through Paul's efforts. But secondly, the painful opposition to the gospel that Paul had to endure.

[13:07] And those two things are inevitably deeply linked. The powerful spread of the glorious good news always comes at the expense of hardship and suffering for the gospel workers.

This is the real Christian life, Luke is saying to his readers. Be prepared, like Paul and Jesus, to endure great suffering and opposition. Be prepared to lay down your life if necessary.

But in doing so, you'll be taking the glorious saving message of the gospel to the ends of the earth. So, we have Paul's example in the book of Acts. But we also have his example in the letters that he wrote.

Now just think of 1 Thessalonians, which we're about to start reading. Well, really next week, rather than this. As we read 1 Thessalonians, let's look at it from two different points of view.

First of all, from the point of view of those who received it, the Thessalonian Christians. They were young Christians. So, we ask the question, what did they learn from it? They learned how to live the Christian life, how to persevere in the Christian life, how to behave ethically as Christians in a way very different from the pagan society around them.

[14:19] So, let's look at it from their point of view. But secondly, let's read the letter from Paul's viewpoint. How did he pastor these young Christians? How did he go about teaching them?

Why did he choose to write about the things that he wrote about? So, we learn to follow his thinking. We try to trace his mind so that we can learn to imitate him, to treat other Christians as he treated them.

So, we first learn the things that young Christians need to know, but we also learn the habits of mind that older Christians need to develop so that they can then look after younger Christians. Well, let's turn now to the Acts of the Apostles and chapters 16 and 17. And as you know, this first little section of chapter 17 tells the story of Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica.

And we'll come on to that in a few minutes' time. But I want to start in chapter 16 because it gives us the immediate context of chapter 17. It's all one story. It just runs on from one event into the next. [15:23] The year is probably 48 AD and Paul at that stage would have been about 44 years old. He was born almost certainly in the year 4 or 5 AD.

So, he was by now about 44. He was converted about 14 years previously at the age of about 30. And the start of Acts chapter 16 records the beginning of his second missionary journey. He's with Silas and you'll see they come in chapter 16 verse 1 to a town called Lystra in western Turkey in modern day terms. And there they meet Timothy who would have been about 20 probably at that time.

And Paul as he meets Timothy, this young disciple, he can see that Timothy has potential for leadership as a preacher and so on. And he asks him to join himself and Silas.

And off they go and the adventures come thick and fast. They cover scores of miles, hundreds of miles on foot. How many pairs of sandals they got through I have no idea.

[16:28] But there would have been all kinds of difficulties. Blisters, boils, sunstroke, bad food, diarrhea, snakes, guard dogs. Have you seen guard dogs in places like Turkey?

They are horrendous. Bandits, there would have been bandits. Luke hasn't space to write a modern style travel book. If somebody here is doing film studies at university, let me sow something in your mind.

How about making a film, a real dramatic film of the life of Paul the apostle at some future point? It would be a tremendous thing. We've had lives of Jesus, but how about a life of Paul?

You wouldn't need to spice it up. The spice is all here in the text. You just need a few good actors and excellent camera work. So maybe something will happen in 20 years' time.

Anyway, we'll get back to the story. They reach the seaport of Troas in verse 8. Have a look at chapter 16, verse 8. And Troas is built on the site of the ancient city of Troy.

[17:32] So Troas and Troy are the same word. And one night, Paul is asleep there and in a vision, a man from Macedonia comes to him and calls to him to cross the water some 80 miles or so to Macedonia in northern Greece.

At this point, Luke joins Paul and Silas and Timothy. You can see that in verse 11 because he writes, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, an island, then on to Neapolis and then on to the important city of Philippi, a leading city of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

So Luke joins them at that point. Now Troas, in the very northwestern corner of modern Turkey, is in Asia. And Paul's arrival at Philippi in Greece marks the beginning of the evangelization of Europe.

So the gospel is now spreading westwards. And the rest of chapter 16 tells the story of what happened in Philippi. I'll just give you the bare bones of chapter 16 and the story.

It starts delightfully and ends rather painfully. Well, that was Paul's life in a nutshell. Wonderful joy and great pain all mixed up together. Now Paul, Silas and Timothy and Luke, they reach Philippi in verse 12 and you'll see in verse 13, it's the Sabbath day and they go down to the riverside.

[18:54] If there had been a synagogue there, they would certainly have gone there first. But clearly, there were hardly any Jews in Philippi at that time. So they went to the river and they sat down.

Sounds lovely, doesn't it? A quiet seat beside the river. Anyway, some women come along and the missionaries talk to them and tell them the gospel. And Lydia, if your name is Lydia, you're named after her originally.

Lydia, who's a businesswoman from Thyatira and clearly quite a wealthy woman, she becomes a Christian. As verse 14 puts it, the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. It's a lovely verse, isn't it? The Lord opened her heart. The closed heart becomes an opened heart. She accepts the good news. She's baptized and her household and she invites the missionaries to stay at her house.

Come and stay, she says to them. I'll feed you. I'll look after you. I'll wash your shirts. I'll let you sleep in real beds. I've got soap and hot water. This is generous hospitality from this woman whose heart has been opened to the Lord.

[20:03] But then, there is painful trouble. Timothy and Luke seem to keep a low profile at this point and we don't hear about them for the next few verses. But Paul and Silas are accused of

causing civil disturbance having cast a demon out of a slave girl whose owners get cross with Paul and Silas.

The missionaries are hauled before the city magistrates. Some kind of a kangaroo court, hardly a kangaroo court, is set up. And then look at verse 22. The very magistrates themselves start to tear the clothes off Paul's and Silas' backs and give orders for them to be beaten.

They're beaten badly with many blows. They're locked up in the city jail and their feet are fastened in the stocks. You'll have been to places where prison museums and such places.

You know what stocks are like. The ankles are clamped there in these wooden stocks. Very painful because you can't move. You want to wriggle, don't you? And you can't even wriggle. It's terribly painful.

Anyway, verse 25, midnight comes. Glorious things of thee are spoken Zion city.

[21 : 14] That's about 18 centuries out of day. Anachronistic, if you know what. But they were singing hymns, weren't they? They were singing hymns at midnight. Do you still want to imitate Paul?

Anyway, they're singing, they're praying, and the other prisoners are listening to this in amazement. Suddenly, an earthquake. The prison shakes. All the bindings and fetters on the prisoners are loosed, and they begin to rush out, at least they threaten to rush out into the streets.

They just can't believe their luck. The jailer is terrified. He knows that he's had it, basically, for not keeping the prison up and running, and he's just about to fall on his sword to kill himself, and Paul calls out to him, don't do it, man, don't do it, we're all here.

It's okay. The jailer says, what must I do to be saved? And Paul and Silas say, believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved, you and your household.

And that's just what happens. They too receive baptism, the jailer and his whole family. And to cut a long story short, the next day, the city magistrates end up with egg all over their faces.

[22 : 25] Paul tells them that they have publicly thrashed men who are Roman citizens without even a trial. So the magistrates have badly broken a lot of imperial protocols.

They apologize to Paul and Silas and abjectly ask them to leave the city, which they do. But they leave behind them a little church founded at the expense of blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

Prison. Stalks. Hymns at midnight. Paul says, imitate me. Do you still want to imitate him? Chapter 17, verse 1.

They come to Thessalonica or Thessalonica, about 30 miles westwards and southwards along the coast from Philippi. Just imagine walking that 30 miles with your back in ribbons from your beating. I would have wanted a doctor's note and taken a month off work. But not Paul and Silas. They were engaged in the evangelization of the world. If there have ever been men with a mission, it was Paul and Silas as they walked into Thessalonica.

[23 : 39] So what happened there? Well, there was a synagogue indicating a significant minority population of Jews in a Gentile city. So Paul and Silas go to the synagogue and the synagogue leaders kindly invite Paul to say something to the congregation if he would wish to.

They might have regretted that decision a week or two later. But they allow Paul to speak at the synagogue services on three consecutive Sabbath days, not Sundays, Sabbath days.

And Paul is not going to pass up the opportunity. So how does he speak? Well, verse 2 tells us he reasoned with them from the scriptures, from the Old Testament.

So he presented them with a reasoned argument. Verse 3, explaining, demonstrating. So he took time and trouble over his gospel work.

There was Paul, a reasoning human being, treating these people as human beings who were open to reason and argument. Now, what is he explaining from the Old Testament?

[24 : 47] Verse 3, that it was necessary, divinely necessary, for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead. Now, does that phrase ring a bell?

Doesn't it take us back to Jesus on the road to Emmaus in Luke chapter 24 when he says to the two disciples, was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and then enter into his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. So do you see how Paul here in Thessalonica is imitating Jesus on the road to Emmaus, explaining from the Old Testament that the Christ must suffer and then be raised from the dead.

and that, of course, is the heart of the gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death to make atonement for our sin and his resurrection to assure us of the future resurrection of everybody who trusts in him.

Now, back to Acts 17 and verse 3 because here's the crunch issue for the Jew. The Jew may be happy to accept that the Christ will suffer death and be raised.

[26 : 04] But, here's the question, who is the Christ? That's the \$64,000 question. And Paul says to the Thessalonians, the Christ is Jesus, this one that I'm presenting to you, Jesus of Nazareth.

Really? Says the Jew? Really? Do you mean that wandering self-styled prophet that Pontius Pilate had crucified nearly 20 years ago? Yes, says Paul, that's the one, him.

Now, you can see from the way that verse 3 is laid out that Paul does his reasoning and arguing from the Old Testament first. So, he prepares the ground in talking about the Christ from the law and the prophets.

He unpacks the meaning of various Old Testament passages. And then he says, this Christ that I've been describing to you is Jesus of Nazareth.

So, Paul argues his case before providing the all-important conclusion. Now, what is the result? Verse 4, some of them were persuaded, says Luke, and joined Paul and Silas.

[27 : 13] Now, let's just pause for a moment and notice that word persuaded. Persuaded. How would you describe your conversion, your coming to Christ if you're a Christian? Would you say, I've been saved?

Would you say, I've become a believer? Would you say, I've been born again? Would you say, I've become a Christian? Now, all these are good and true ways of describing it.

But would you ever say to somebody, I've been persuaded of the gospel? An interesting thought, isn't it? Our minds need to be gripped. They need to be convinced by the gospel.

We need to be persuaded of the truth. Persuasion means a deep and growing conviction that the gospel is true. It's not just a question of superficial ascent or acquiescence to certain ideas.

It's a deep and growing persuasion of the truth. And the deeper we are gripped, the more steady and the more happy we shall be as Christians. So what happens in verse 4?

[28 : 17] Some of them, that's the Jewish members of the synagogue, some were persuaded and joined ranks with Paul and Silas. Also a great many devout Greeks, that was Gentiles who attended synagogue worship because they were drawn to the Jewish faith and the Jewish scriptures.

And also, says Luke, not a few of the leading women. That is a thought. Middle-aged matriarchs with powerful personalities. Some of you young girls who are here this evening, at the moment you look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, don't you?

But just give yourselves 25 or 30 years and you will be leading women. Hopefully, like the fine godly woman that we were learning about from Proverbs 31 last week. The church needs deeply persuaded leading women because they bring great strength into the life of a local church.

Now, back to Thessalonica. What happens next? Look at the first word of verse 5, the word but. Willie, you read it with great emphasis, didn't you?

You said but, and then you paused for a second, and I quite agree. That was the right way to read it. But. You see, up to now, it's all sweetness and light in the synagogue, is it?

[29 : 32] Certainly not. How can it be? There's got to be a big but or however, hasn't there? Paul's message at this point is dividing this little synagogue in two. It's splitting the congregation.

People are joining Paul and Silas. And those who refuse the gospel message become jealous.

They can't stand seeing their friends and neighbors and relatives accepting Paul's teaching.

So what do they do? They go out into the streets of the city. Verse 5. They rouse up a mob of fierce layabouts. They attack the house of a man called Jason who's clearly offering hospitality to Paul and Silas.

They fail to find Paul and Silas at the house of Jason so they drag Jason himself and other Christians before the city authorities shouting. Do you see that in verse 6? Shouting.

These men who've turned the world upside down have come here to Thessalonica. This wretch Jason has taken them in as house guests and their preaching anti-Caesar propaganda. They're saying there's another king, Jesus.

[30 : 34] They're undermining the very stability of civilized life in the Roman Empire. Do you want to imitate Paul? There's a ferocious backlash here from the people of Thessalonica.

Paul and Silas are not physically maltreated here as they were in Philippi but they're in real danger and it's no surprise that in verse 10 the Christians send them away under cover of darkness for their own safety.

Now friends the reason that I've gone at some length into Acts 16 and 17 this evening is that I want us to see something of the turbulence the turmoil that gave birth to the Thessalonian church and gave birth to the letter that we call One Thessalonians which was written just a short time after Paul's initial visit to the city.

One Thessalonians is not a calm piece of philosophizing. It was not written by some learned academic in his oak paneled book line study in an ancient and venerable university just before having afternoon tea and crumpets and a round of golf.

The Thessalonian church was born in a pressure cooker. Paul was not some tranquil philosopher. He was a man with a huge heart who loved this young church a church threatened by fierce and potentially violent opposition and he wrote one Thessalonians to these young Christians to steady them to stabilize them because he feared for their very survival.

[32 : 11] Well as we draw to a close this evening let me make two points about Paul and his way of life to encourage us to be unafraid to imitate him. First of all let's learn Paul's message which is also Jesus' message and it's summed up for us here in verses 2 and 3 of Acts 17 and it's this by by divine God's saving purpose God's plan the Christ had to suffer death and then be raised from the dead he died in our place to deal with our sin problem and to bring forgiveness and he was raised to new and eternal life as the prototype of the resurrection the guarantee that all who belong to him will likewise be raised to eternal life it is a glorious message it's the truth the necropolis will not have the last word but notice verse 2 why was Paul able to argue so persuasively about the death and resurrection of Christ it was because he knew the Old Testament scriptures so well as he preached there in the synagogue at Thessalonica he was expounding Moses and the prophets and the Psalms and the lesson for us is that if we are to have a deep and persuasive understanding of Jesus and the gospel we need to study and digest and devour the Old Testament as well as the New Testament if you're a young Christian and many here are if you haven't really stepped into the Old Testament yet let me assure you that a great adventure lies before you but it's a necessary adventure you need to get in there try and think of the Old Testament as a great tract of beautiful country to be explored a beautiful tract of land full of hills and valleys and rivers and forests where you can go biking and rock climbing and panning for gold and fishing it's like that, it's fascinating it is the very words of God we've been experiencing something of the Old Testament on Sundays recently as we've been listening to sermons from Ecclesiastes and the book of Proverbs

Paul's message about Jesus crucified and raised is the message of the Old Testament and once we get the Old Testament into our bloodstream we will understand the New Testament so much better and we'll be able to tell other people the gospel very much more confidently so first let's learn Paul's message secondly, let's learn from Paul's willingness to endure pushback and opposition we'll never understand Paul and his letters until we appreciate that he was prepared to suffer hardship and opposition again and again and again it was his lifestyle it was how he lived it's not that he never relaxed we can be sure that he did he would have had periods of comparative peace and calm when he could enjoy his friend's company enjoy meals with them enjoy the ancient equivalent of chess or tennis and a Sunday afternoon walk but he suffered hostility and he was prepared for it and we need to imitate him in that respect today

Willie hinted at this when introducing the Bonhoeffer hymn but it's true, isn't it that life is rapidly changing in the Western world as far as Christianity is concerned when I was young perhaps about the age of 20 the church was largely respected in society the Bible was very much held in honour Christian ministers were generally respected and thought well of but the times are changing and we know it the opposition to Paul came from two main sources the first was the religious establishment in his case it was the world of established Judaism the Jews at Thessalonica became jealous there it is in verse 5 they became jealous Paul was drawing people away from their long-standing ecclesiastical institution his teaching unsettled them profoundly they hated it and it was just the same for Jesus again Paul is following in his footsteps it was the religious establishment in Jerusalem who hated Jesus and again it was jealousy at one point in John's Gospel one of the leading priests says to his friends looking at the great crowds in the street he says what can we do? the whole world is running after Jesus it was the Jewish establishment that forced Jesus to be crucified the Apostles' Creed can be a little bit misleading when it says that Jesus was crucified

under Pontius Pilate now he was but Pilate could see that Jesus was innocent he said so more than once it was the Jewish leadership that forced Pilate who was a weak man to give permission for Jesus to be crucified and for us today if we stick to the Bible's teaching and the Bible Gospel we will sometimes be opposed by the establishment churches which have moved far from the Bible because they don't want to endure the potential hostility then the second source of hostility to Paul came from the governing authorities he was brought before the magistrates at Philippi and the magistrates were called in at Thessalonica too the state, the government quickly gets involved Paul is accused at Thessalonica of preaching anti-Caesar doctrine because for Paul Jesus is the king not Caesar there it is in Acts 17 verse 7 and for us today if we imitate Paul we will find that the authority of the government is going to press against us sorely it's happening all around us now legislation in recent years has been passed and is being passed both in Westminster and in Edinburgh which is tending to deface humanity that's the problem legislation which threatens the true nobility and sanctity of the human race as described by the Bible all such legislation is anti-God because it attacks and diminishes human beings who are the very image of God and therefore it's an attack on God himself so the kind of legislation which promotes and facilitates euthanasia or the abortion of unborn children the undermining of marriage rightly understood the marriage of a man and a woman the legislation that promotes homosexuality and transgenderism and the curtailing of parental responsibility towards children all these things are diminishing and downgrading the human race and are attacking human dignity as taught by the Bible and that's the kind of pressure that we're under today which we need to resist

[39 : 29] Paul did his gospel preaching in the cauldron of the Roman Empire a tyrannical superpower whose Caesars were worshipped as God and whose armies simply crushed rebellion so for Paul the hostility came from the religious establishment and the tyranny of a totalitarian regime now for us today the power of the old religious establishments in Britain is waning what is left of the Church of England the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church is largely in the pocket of the world and the world's agenda the bigger problem for us today is the growing totalitarianism of society's government backed agendas people are becoming fearful you know this fearful of stepping out of line fearful of speaking their views openly in public I mustn't say that they think

I might lose my job I might find my name put on a list never be offered a job again now Paul was fearful at times even trembling he says so clearly in his letters but he kept on speaking the truth in that anti-God cauldron he was following in Jesus' footsteps Jesus kept on speaking he was silenced by crucifixion Paul kept on speaking until he was silenced by execution but have they been silenced they are unsilenceable imitate me says Paul as I imitate Christ now that's the man who wrote one Thessalonians and God willing we'll get there next week so let's bow our heads and we'll pray our gracious

God we thank you for calling the apostle Paul to serve you at great cost to himself thank you for his joy his love his devotion to the church of Christ his willingness to follow in the footsteps of Jesus we know that we are little people compared to this wonderful man but please give us we pray something of his courage something of his willingness to endure a life shaped by the cross we ask it in Jesus name Amen Amen