

Read Psalm 124:1-8

Oakland, California, Saturday, May 21, 2011, newsflash, “We’re still here.”

Did you believe the world was going to end on May 21st? There were a few in the parking lot of radio minister Harold Camping on Hagenberger Road near Oakland Airport that day; among them reporters, a psychic, and a “compassionist.”

The psychic, who offices next door, was there to offer advice. "No one can tell when the end of the world will come," he said, and suggested clairvoyance works best. The "compassionist" was there to reassure people that "if the theological speculation of a fallible man fails, then that does not mean God has failed you."¹

But for those of you who were here for the first sermon on Acts, and who have a good memory, you should have something to say about this. Do you remember what Jesus said in Acts 1 before he ascended to heaven when the disciples asked, “Is this the time?”

Jesus said, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know.” (Acts 1:6-7)

So Paul, I am sure, did not speculate about certain things. But other things he trusted in. For instance, he believed that he would witness before the Emperor in Rome. Surely that was on his mind as he disembarked from the boat and walked the last thirty miles along the Appian Way, that world famous road built by the Romans. *I can't believe I'm here! He did it! God got me here – wow!*

But Paul certainly did not expect to be going there in chains.

READ Acts 28:16-20

It cost him. Paul’s religion was costly. He was under arrest. Paul had put his life in God’s hands; total surrender. That’s a little risky.

There are two ways to live out faith. The one costs much. It requires surrender to God; giving God control, not know exactly where it will go. The other way is instead of being open to what God is doing, you kind of keep your own opinion. Paul called it “willful blindness.” Let’s continue reading. READ Acts 28:21-25a.

You see the Jews who argued and disagreed with Paul were really saying, “What do you mean God comes down to us in Jesus? We don’t want to change our ways. We just want to be religious; believe in God, but keep things as they are.

So Paul quotes from Isaiah (Acts 28:26):

¹San Francisco Chronicle, page A-11, 5/21/2011, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/05/21/MNP41JJA8B.DTL>, accessed 5/24/2011.

“You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.”

Paul was describing “willful blindness.” That is when we believe that God is “out there,” there is no doubt about that. But, God is more like “The Absolute Mind” who set the world up but is impersonal and disconnected. “It” doesn’t really know us; but you can go to church and “feel religious.” You can talk religiously about “The Absolute Mind,” but there is no danger of its doing anything to you. It can’t mess with your life. It is just kind of immovably “there” and would never come “here.”²

That kind of religion has no cost because you are in charge; you keep control.

The preacher in Oakland didn’t really surrender to God; he came up with his own game plan about God.

When we live with religion the way we design it, Paul says this is what happens to us:

“For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn-- and I would heal them” (Acts 28:27)

That’s like saying religion is on the outside. There is no object to love. Love must have an object. Otherwise, that’s like being in love with love, not a person.

That’s like believing in marriage, maybe even picking out the one you want to marry, but never taking the risk of getting married.

Paul said, “I want something, Someone, to love; I want to know Him, even though it is risky.” It’s all about heart and response –

When we turn to God with the heart we are healed.

To take that risk means this: God gets to be God. We can know God only by His getting to be GOD of our life; the Boss; the one we trust and obey.

Harold Camping said, “I got God figured out.” But God said, “No, that’s not for you to know.” And God did not show up according to Harold’s plan.

Religion where we are in charge costs us nothing and is a waste of time.

Paul was in Rome at God’s bidding.

God sent Paul to the epicenter of the known world. In 57AD Roman culture under Emperor Nero was known as a “Golden Age.” An artistic genius, Nero was one of the most capable Emperors the Republic had enjoyed. He established the games, including chariot races, and musical and

²C. S. Lewis describes this view in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, (London: Fontana Books, 1955), 168-169.

oratory competitions. He was generous and just; young and well-liked. He was a renowned world leader, from a long line of nobility leading back to Caesar Augustus.

How would an unknown Jew have ever gotten an audience with him?

Only God could accomplish that. The chains actually enriched, expanded, and authenticated his ministry with those who heard him.

As Paul stood before Nero the thought probably crossed his mind, “This man can sentence me to death.”

But then maybe he remembered the impact on him of another man named Stephen, a man who did great miraculous signs in the name of Jesus, who stood boldly before an angry mob and testified. And he died for what he believed: that Jesus is real; that Jesus is worth it; that Jesus sets us free.

Religion that is costly is authentic; it makes an impact on those around you; religion with no cost is simply to be mocked.

And Paul stood strong before Nero.

With heart set free, Paul and the rest of the apostles lived for something worth dying for.

He had let go of being in charge and put his life in the hands of Jesus Christ just as we are asked to do.

Are you putting your life fully into the hands of Christ? It takes risk and trust.

After hearing Paul’s testimony, Nero declared him innocent and released him. And Paul continued to share his faith.

But Nero became increasingly bloodthirsty. His power went to his head. He began eliminating political opponents. Then, a tragic fire destroyed much of Rome. He was quick to rebuild but when a second fire occurred, the public turned against him. He laid the blame on Christians and persecution broke out. Soon, Nero’s career was shattered. Declared “public enemy number one” and exiled, he escaped to a former servant’s home where he committed suicide.

Two different men; two drastically different lifestyles. Paul chose to give himself fully to God. Hundreds came to hear him preach. Yet, that is the short list because putting himself in God’s hands, his letters, which comprise much of the New Testament, have touched tens of thousands of people over the course of the centuries, shaping them into disciples of Jesus Christ.

That’s how powerful God is.

Paul did not even realize what all was being accomplished. But he went to the fight. And, when we give ourselves (and our experiences) to Jesus Christ, he will use our witness, not for our few hundred friends, but for the far-reaching impact He has in mind, just as He has done through the Acts of the Apostles whose lives still testify today.

Do you believe in a personal Lord who loves you, heals you and is willing to open your eyes and your heart to the truth? If so, don't be afraid of the cost of standing for what you believe. It is never a waste of time to surrender to Jesus.

READ Acts 28:30-31.

AMEN