

Paul Preaches in Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 17)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Background and Introduction

- a. In recent lessons we discussed the start of the church in Antioch, in the northern part of ancient Syria. This became a launching point for great missionary work to spread the gospel to the east and west.
- b. We saw how Paul and Barnabas embarked from Antioch on Paul's first missionary trip, and they returned there at the end (**Acts 13-14**).
- c. After the Council in Jerusalem, Paul and Silas proceed to travel via an inland route to revisit some of the churches planted on Paul's first missionary journey. They visit the churches in Lystra (where they are joined by Timothy), Derby and Iconium, then continue westward, to the end of Asia Minor (modern Turkey).
 - i. Paul has a vision to take the gospel even further west, into Europe. He sails west to Macedonia (a region in northern Greece) and ultimately preaches in Philippi.
 - ii. In Philippi, Paul and Silas get in trouble for casting a demon out of a fortune-telling slave girl and are cast into prison. However, the Lord delivers them, and the jailer and his household are baptized.
 - iii. They then depart Philippi and head south to Thessalonica (also in Macedonia)
- d. In the current lesson, we continue on Paul's second missionary journey, from the point where he departs Philippi. He now continues southward, on to Thessalonica and Berea (in Macedonia) and then to Athens (in Achaia).

II. Paul Preaches in Thessalonica and Berea

- a. Read **Acts 17:1-15**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. After leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas continue south through Macedonia.
 1. Macedonia was a province in the Roman Empire, which encompassed the northern part of modern Greece, extending

to also include parts of the modern nations of Macedonia, Albania and Bulgaria.

- a. The Via Egnatia (or Egnatian Road) was a major Roman highway that started from modern Durrës, on the Adriatic seacoast of Albania, and continued eastward to Byzantium (later called Constantinople / Istanbul). It facilitated access to eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Paul's travels from Philippi to Thessalonica in the beginning of **Acts 17** follow the route of a portion of this famous ancient highway. (Source: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, article on 'Macedonia').
2. Philippi and Thessalonica were the two most prominent cities in this area.
3. Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, and Berea are all in the northeastern part of modern Greece, along the coast.
 - a. When Paul praises the exemplary generosity of the *Macedonian* Christians (**2 Corinthians 8:1-5**), who freely gave even "beyond their ability", these were the cities and towns he would have had in mind.
- ii. Paul arrives in Thessalonica and speaks in the synagogue on three Sabbaths. Some Jews, "a great multitude" of Greeks, and "not a few leading women" are converted.
 1. However, the Jews become jealous, incite a mob, and set the city in an uproar. As a result, the Christians help Paul and Silas escape the city by night, and they go to Berea.
- iii. Paul starts preaching in the synagogue. The Bereans are described as "more fair-minded than the Thessalonians", and many believe.
 1. However, Jews from Thessalonica hear about this and go to Berea to stir up trouble there, as well.
 2. Paul is sent ahead to Athens by sea, alone, while Silas and Timothy remain in Berea.
- c. The trip to Thessalonica
 - i. Unlike Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch (**Acts 13**), we do not have anything Paul said when he preached for three Sabbaths in the synagogue in Thessalonica. However, I believe if we dig, we can still

learn some things regarding what and how he presented the gospel here.

- ii. **Question:** What can we learn from what Paul preached in Thessalonica?
 1. “Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’” (**Acts 17:2–3**, NKJV)
 - a. Paul went to the synagogue and preached first to the Jews of that city, as was his customary practice.
 - b. He “reasoned from the Scriptures”.
 - i. He used the Old Testament to prove the faith.
 - ii. He pointed to prophecies about “the Christ” that said He would have to suffer, and that he would have to rise from the dead.
 - iii. **Question:** Where does it speak about ‘the Christ, the Anointed One’ in the Old Testament Scriptures?
 1. Perhaps the best-known example: **Psalm 2**, which Paul had quoted in Pisidian Antioch, in **Acts 13:33**.
 - iv. **Question:** Where does it speak about *Him being rejected and suffering*, that we have seen cited by those preaching the gospel, in **Acts** thus far?
 1. **Psalm 2** (quoted by the apostles, in **Acts 4**).
 2. **Isaiah 53** (Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, in **Acts 8**).
 3. Foreshadowed by the rejection of Joseph and Moses (Stephen, in **Acts 7**)
 - v. **Question:** Where does it speak about Him *rising from the dead*, that we have seen cited thus far in **Acts**?

1. **Psalm 16/15** (Peter in **Acts 2**, Paul in **Acts 16**).
 2. **2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalm 89/88, Psalm 132/131**, regarding the Lord would “raise up” a ruler/king from the seed of David to rule over the eternal kingdom (Peter in **Acts 2**, Paul in **Acts 13**).
 3. **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**, regarding the Lord “raising up” a prophet like Moses (Peter in **Acts 3**, Stephen in **Acts 7**).
 4. **Amos 9:11-12**, regarding the fallen tent/tabernacle of David being restored and raised up (James in **Acts 15**).
2. Paul’s opponents charged, “Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying *there is another king—Jesus.*” (**Acts 17:7**, NKJV)
 - a. Paul obviously was teaching the message of the *kingdom of God*, with Jesus as the king over the eternal kingdom.
 - i. This points back to the prophecies cited by Peter and Paul regarding the king who would rule over the eternal kingdom, who also would be known as God’s Son. (**2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalm 2**, etc.)
 - b. We see elsewhere that Paul’s message was the kingdom of God (**Acts 20:25** in Ephesus; **Acts 28:23** and **28:30-31**).
 3. I see this as the original 1-2-3 gospel ‘knockout combination’, to bring unbelievers to the faith:
 - a. One: Jesus suffered and died in fulfillment of the prophecies.
 - b. Two: Jesus rose from the dead in fulfillment of the prophecies.
 - c. Three: Jesus is the king reigning over the eternal kingdom. (Therefore, you had better repent of your sins!)

4. **Question:** Is that how the gospel is being presented today?
 - a. **Answer:** In general, no! The typical emotion-based ‘meet-the-felt-needs’ type message often heard today (that God wants to fill our empty hearts, give our lives meaning and purpose, restore our broken marriages, clean up the mess we have made to give us happy lives here, etc.) was *not* the message that was getting Paul and Peter run out of cities and thrown in prison!
5. **Question/Challenge:** Are you equipped you do deliver the message *as the apostles did originally*?
 - d. The Bereans were more “fair minded” than the Thessalonians.
 - i. “Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were *more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica*, in that they received the word with all readiness, and *searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.*” (**Acts 17:10–11**, NKJV)
 1. “Now these were *more noble-minded* than those in Thessalonica...” (**Acts 17:11**, NASB95)
 2. “Now the Berean Jews were of *more noble character* than those in Thessalonica...” (**Acts 17:11**, NIV)
 - ii. **Question:** What were the Bereans doing, and what is Luke commending here?
 1. Paul presented the case that Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies.
 2. The Bereans did not just accept or reject what Paul said. They went back to the Scriptures themselves to check out what Paul had claimed regarding the prophecies being fulfilled by Jesus.
 3. What does this passage tell us about what God (through His Spirit-inspired Word) is commending here?
 - a. People who are truth seekers: those who want to know the truth, not just gullible people who will believe whatever sounds good.
 - i. “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” (**John 8:31–32**, NIV)

- b. People who are not lazy. They spent the time and energy to check it out. They did this every day. They were serious about their study of Scripture.
- c. People who are skeptical, who ask questions, and see if there is evidence to back up the claims being made.
 - i. "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (Mark 12:28-30, NIV)
 - ii. **Challenge:** God assigned each one of us *our own mind* for a reason. Let us use it, and let us call others to do likewise! Apply it to discern what the truth is. Don't be lazy and attempt to delegate your thinking to *other people*.
 1. The Scriptures are full of warnings about false teachers invading the Christian faith. The antidote is to know the word of God personally. That is what it says in **2 Peter 1** and **2 Timothy 3**.
 2. Throughout history, churches have gone off the rails because of sin and Satan. The solution is not to just find a good church and trust whatever the leaders say. There is no substitute for everyone knowing the Word of God, studying it every day, and having the courage to respectfully question and push back when something is wrong.
 3. Read **Psalm 1:1-3**.
 - a. The good-hearted man will meditate on the Word of God day and night.
 - iii. This is why we go to great pains to focus on expository preaching and teaching in our house

church and to post detailed notes for almost every lesson. We want to encourage everyone to go back and check things out for themselves.

1. Please, do not just trust what you are taught. Be like the Bereans, and take the time to check it out, to see if what is being taught is true.
 2. Love the Lord *with your whole mind!*
- iv. **Implications for Evangelism:** Look for people who are like the Bereans, who are genuine truth-seekers. Show them the Scriptures, and challenge them to go back and check these things out for themselves. The challenge for all of us:
1. Don't just reject what someone says about the Scriptures.
 2. Don't just immediately accept what they say either, because it sounds good or because the people sharing the message seem like nice, godly people.
 3. Check it out for yourself, every day!
- e. Does this passage imply that the Thessalonian Christians were in some way *inferior* to the disciples in Berea?
- i. For years, I read it that way (with the Bereans being the good-hearted ones, in contrast to the Thessalonians).
 - ii. Reading **Acts 17** alone, one might get the impression that Paul was in Thessalonica only for three weeks, and that the gospel was not well received in that city.
 1. However, let's take another look at the Thessalonians.
 - iii. After spending time in Thessalonica, Paul went down alone to Athens, before going to Corinth. While in Corinth, he wrote a letter back to the church in Thessalonica that sheds significant light on his relationship with that church. **1 Thessalonians** is generally considered to be the first epistle of Paul to be written.
 1. [**Correction:** I had assumed from reading **1 Thessalonians 3:1** (and therefore stated in the audio lesson) that Paul was in Athens when he wrote **1 Thessalonians**. However, since

recording that message I noticed in **1 Thessalonians 3:6** Paul speaks of Timothy having rejoined him (by the time he was writing this letter). However, in **Acts 18:5** it indicates that Timothy and Silas did not rejoin Paul until Paul was in Corinth (after he had departed from Athens). Therefore, it appears that Paul wrote **1 Thessalonians** *from Corinth*, after he had departed from Athens, on his second missionary journey.]

2. While in Corinth Paul appeared before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (**Acts 18:22**). From historical records, the time of Gallio corresponds to 50-51 AD. Therefore, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians would have been written about 50 AD, about 17 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.
 - a. This has obvious implications in refuting liberal scholars who try to claim that the Christian message was changed over time and written down much later.
3. Read the following passages from **1 Thessalonians**:
 - a. **1 Thessalonians 1:1-8**;
 - b. **1 Thessalonians 2:1-3** and **2:7-20**;
 - c. **1 Thessalonians 3:1-2**; and
 - d. **1 Thessalonians 4:9-12**.
 - i. Note that in chapters 4-5 Paul prominently addresses the Second Coming of Christ and eternal judgment.
4. What we learn about the Christians in the church of Thessalonica:
 - a. They knew all about what Paul had been through in Philippi (before he came to Thessalonica) and that he was writing from Athens.
 - i. Paul said that "Satan hindered him" from going back to see them.
 - ii. It is interesting that sometimes *the Holy Spirit* is hindering Paul from where he wants to go to spread the gospel; however, at other times, it is *Satan* who is hindering him!

- b. Paul had tremendous affection for them, like a nursing mother to a child, or a loving father toward his children.
 - c. They already were having a positive spiritual impact that extended through the region (in Macedonia and even into Achaia).
 - d. They, like their brethren in Judea, were facing persecution.
5. It is a great idea to read **1 and 2 Thessalonians** *along with* this part of **Acts 17**, to get a complete picture of Paul's outreach to the Thessalonians and the impact it had.
6. It seems to me that this was a very healthy church, in no way inferior to the church in Berea.
- a. Perhaps the Bereans were held up because when they heard to message initially, more people in Berea (than Thessalonica) were eager to go back and see if the Old Testament prophecies were really true.
 - b. However, for those who because Christians in Thessalonica, they had a tremendous impact as a church and were commended for their faith.

III. Paul Preaches in Athens

- a. Read **Acts 17:16-34**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. Paul is alone in Athens.
 - ii. He is distressed to see that the city is full of idols.
 - iii. He preaches starting in the local synagogue.
 - iv. He also is preaching in the marketplace, where he encounters Greek philosophers.
 - v. He preaches at the Areopagus.
 - 1. The Areopagus, or 'Hill of Ares', is also known as 'Mars Hill'. This is where philosophical discussions would take place and where an official council or court (by the same name) would meet.
 - vi. Some mock him; others want to hear more and become Christians.

c. Lessons from Paul's approach

i. He is reaching out to a completely different type of audience here, very philosophically oriented, worldly intellectuals.

ii. **Question:** Which city has been called '*the Athens of America*'?

1. **Answer:** Boston, since the early 1800s. Proud Bostonians today have tried to maintain that designation, despite the claims of Philadelphia.

a. Historically, Boston was considered the primary origin of the ideas that spawned the American Revolution.

b. Today, Boston is well-known as a dominant academic center in the U.S.

iii. Note Paul's strategy.

1. Paul starts by building a bridge to his audience.

a. Although disgusted by all the idolatry, he first finds something to commend.

b. At least they are very religious!

2. He finds a natural launching point that they can relate to: an altar in Athens dedicated '*To the Unknown God*'.

3. He then tells the people of Athens about the God *they do not know*.

a. He is the One who created all things.

b. He created all the nations "from one blood".

c. Why we are here (answering one of the great philosophical questions): "To seek God and find him".

d. Paul even quotes one of their own Greek poets.

4. After laying this foundation, Paul then blasts the people of Athens for their idolatry.

a. God now is calling all people, everywhere, to repent of idolatry!

b. Paul drops the hammer. (Notice that he did not wait long to address their sin!)

- c. He proclaims that in the end, God will judge all people.
 - d. Paul proclaims the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of Jesus (which confirms the promised final resurrection and judgment of all).
- iv. The outcome of Paul's preaching:
1. Many philosophers mock the idea of the *resurrection from the dead*.
 - a. Many philosophical types (then and today) struggle with the idea of a physical resurrection of our physical bodies from death. This concept seems too 'out there' for many who consider themselves to be intellectuals.
 2. Many Christians are confused about this teaching as well!
 - a. Many Christians today believe that when we die, our spirits go immediately to individual judgment and then pass straight to either heaven or hell.
 - b. However, Christians in the beginning believed in the doctrine of 'the resurrection of the dead', meaning that on the Last Day, all people will be bodily raised from the dead, with their spirits and bodies reunited immediately prior to the Final Judgment of all people, on the Last Day.
 - c. This is what is taught in the New Testament and what the early Christians believed.
 - i. Jesus spoke about this in **John 5:28-29, John 11:23-24**, and elsewhere in the gospels.
 1. "...the hour is coming in which *all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth*—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." (**John 5:28-29, NKJV**)
 - ii. Paul discussed it here in **Acts 17**, but goes into further detail in **1 Corinthians 15**.
 1. Note that there were people in the church in Corinth, which also is in Achaia (and not far from Athens), who were also

struggling with this Christian teaching of the bodily resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day.

- iii. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body (flesh) is one of the six items included among the six “elementary principles of Christ” that are foundational to the Christian faith, as laid out in **Hebrews 6**.
 1. “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of *resurrection of the dead*, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.” (**Hebrews 6:1–3**, NKJV)
 2. Note that thus far in **Acts**, we have seen *all six* of these elements being preached to those coming to faith.
 - d. For an explanation of what the early Christians believed regarding the resurrection of the body and what happens after we die, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on ‘Resurrection of the Dead’.
3. The gospel message bore fruit, even in Athens.
 - a. While some some people mocked Paul, others want to hear more and then come to faith.
 - b. This includes people who are considered prominent in Athens, such as “Dionysius the Areopagite”.