



A Tale of Two Cities

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 17:1-15

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One thing we can say with certainty as we read through the book of Acts is that Paul did not live a comfortable, ordinary, easy kind of life. Everywhere he went, everywhere he preached the gospel, some sort of opposition was sure to follow him. There was always a battle, always a fight, always a conflict. In fact, whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is faithfully proclaimed, whenever the Word of God is preached and applied, whenever the truth is received by God's people and changes hearts and minds, confronts sin and fleshly thinking, exposes our desperate need and presents Christ as only Savior and worthy Lord, and as a result -- wins converts, establishes and strengthens the church, and magnifies the glory of God over all -- there is a conflict, a struggle that inevitably ensues.

And that is so, simply because some will receive the truth of the gospel and its implications with joy and some will reject it. As we have seen, the Word of God is two-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers glorious good news -- grace, mercy, eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, adoption into the family of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to every sinner that trusts in Christ alone for salvation. But on the other hand, it is the death knell to human pride, to self-sufficiency, to values, attitudes and lifestyles that are in opposition to God's truth, and it destroys all the things that make for distinctions among men -- social position, wealth, education, physical beauty, intelligence, physical prowess, occupation, race, culture, power -- all of it. To embrace Christ requires letting all of these things go and seeing them for what they are before God -- nothing in which to boast, nothing of standing before the God of the universe. The gospel, when it is preached faithfully, confronts people with the reality of who they are and calls them to unqualified surrender to Christ as Lord and Savior, and not just for a moment in time, but the gospel truth rightly applied continues throughout or lives to call us in increasing measure to joyful and glad submission to the One who has loved us with the shedding of His own blood and with the full measure of His own life.

And because of its nature, the gospel call will always cause conflict. Those who embrace the Lordship of Christ anger those who reject it; the selfless bother the selfish; the submissive shame the rebellious; the faithful expose the hypocritical; the humble disgrace the proud; the forgiving anger the bitter; the repentant exasperate the unrepentant; the united irritate the divisive; the believing offend the faithless. And for that reason, the Book of Acts, this book of the worldwide witness to the worth of Jesus Christ, to His glory as Savior and King and Lord, is not a tranquil, quiet, peaceful book. It is a book that is filled with spiritual warfare and we see more of that this morning. Let's pick it up here in verse 1. Remember that Paul and Silas have just been the victims of a lynch mob, beaten and thrown into prison, not for their own sins, but simply for faithfulness and obedience to Christ and for preaching the gospel. God had proven Himself faithful to deliver them and to use them, even in the midst of severe persecution, to establish the church in Philippi. And now we see them on their way to Thessalonica.

“Now when they had 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, 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.” (Acts 17:1–4, ESV) Now we are not told why it is that this missionary band passed over Amphipolis and Apollonia to go to Thessalonica, but Paul must have had a plan. What we do know about Thessalonica is this – that it was called the “lap of the Roman Empire.” It was a very important and exceedingly prosperous trading city, located on the central trade route known as the Egnatian Way. The Egnatian Way or Via Egnatia extended from the Adriatic Sea on the western shore of Greece to the straits at Byzantium in modern Turkey to the east. It was the major trade route between Italy and Asia. For that reason, it was a strategically important city for the expansion of the gospel.

When Paul got there, he proceeded directly to the synagogue, as was his custom – to start with the Jewish population and the Gentile God-fearers in the synagogue, and he began to instruct them from the Scriptures for three consecutive Sabbaths, that is, for three weeks. Now he probably spent a little more time than that in Thessalonica, but the initial ministry that he did in the synagogue lasted three weeks. And the message was, as we have come to expect from Paul, grounded in the Scriptures – always in the Scriptures and filled with Jesus Christ. He knew among them Christ and Him crucified and raised from the dead. He was not concerned with entertainment or flowery words, just direct and faithful proclamation of Christ.

And the preaching that Paul did there always followed the same pattern. The progression of His preaching was something like this: The Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming of the Messiah. The true Messiah must be rejected by His people, Israel, and be put to death for the sins of men, according to the Scriptures. This crucified Messiah must, as testified by the Old Testament prophets, be raised from the dead. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, having fulfilled all of these prophecies in full. Everyone who hears this truth of God must respond – either by receiving Christ as Messiah, as Savior and King, or to reject the testimony of God concerning Him. To receive Him is to receive the forgiveness of sins, the redemption of God, and the promise of eternal life; but to reject Him was to choose judgment on that day when He will come to receive His people to Himself and to judge and to punish His enemies. That was the message, but I want you to notice the words that are used here to describe Paul’s preaching and instruction because they are a window to the intensity of his heart and soul. This was no dispassionate message. Notice these words that Luke uses to describe Paul’s ministry – he reasoned, explained, proved, proclaimed and persuaded.

Paul reasoned – we get the English word dialogue from this word, but don’t get the coffeehouse vibe where everyone sits around offering their two cents and coming to some kind of conclusion based on human wisdom. That’s not how you arrive at truth. No, the idea is that Paul would take the prevailing worldviews and ideas and then hold them up to the scrutiny of Scripture and they couldn’t hold up.

Paul explained – it’s a word that means that he opened. In fact, it’s the same word that was used of Jesus on the Emmaus road when he met with a couple of disciples and their eyes were opened to understand what Jesus said when “He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:25–27, ESV) He opened up the Scriptures so they could understand what they were saying.

Paul proved – it’s a word that means “to lay alongside.” He laid Scripture alongside of Scripture and laid Christ alongside them all to prove Who He is.

Paul proclaimed – he preached Jesus to them and he did it to drive them to a response, to bring them to a place of decision. He announced the truth and some of them...

Paul persuaded – it means to convince someone to believe something and to act on the basis of what is recommended. He pressed for a response.

All of these words taken together point to the passion, the intensity, and the fervor of Paul in his appeal to the Thessalonians. This was no time for complacency, no time for indifference, no time for dispassionate speech making. Life and death was at stake. These Thessalonians had to see, not merely that Jesus died and rose from the dead, but that it was necessary for Him to do so – necessary for their salvation. And some believed -- some of the God-fearers – the Gentiles, some of the Jews, a number of the leading women. They joined themselves to Paul and Silas, were joined by faith to Christ, and came out of the synagogue and became a church.

But while some believed, it also provoked a strong negative reaction, not only to the message and the response, but to Paul and the brothers personally. “But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.” (Acts 17:5, ESV) The rejecting Jews reacted swiftly, angrily, and underhandedly – stirring up a rabble, a mob, setting the city into chaos, doing all they could to undermine the ministry of Paul. They attacked the house where he stayed, the house of Jason, to bring them out to the mob and destroy them.

It seems like everywhere that Paul went, his opposition was singing off the same sheet of music, doesn't it? It's like a memo had been sent out – If Paul comes to your city or your synagogue, listen to what he says. If he proclaims Jesus of Nazareth to be Messiah, Savior and Lord, be enraged and jealous, get a mob together, throw everything into an uproar, trump up some charges and cause such a problem that the authorities have to get involved. And that's just what the rejecting Jews did. “And when they could not 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 are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”” (Acts 17:6–7, ESV)

Not finding Paul and the other missionaries at the house, they did the next best thing and dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities. They don't care whom they get it from; they just want a pound of flesh. They accuse Paul and his band of turning the world upside down – stirring up the city, inciting men to violence and revolution. They accuse them of agitating for another political king, a rival to Caesar, and Jason is in cahoots with them because he has received them into his home.

The ironic thing is that what they are saying is true, just not in the way that they meant it. The gospel does turn the world upside down, or actually, right-side up. The world is fallen and broken and sinful. It has rejected God as Creator, as the source and essence of Truth, as Sovereign, as Judge. And the gospel changes everything. It is the only way – Jesus is the only way – that anyone will ever understand the truth of God and who He is, that anyone can be delivered from sin and receive the righteousness that God demands of His creation, that anyone can be forgiven and called holy, that anyone can be restored to a right relationship to the Creator of the Heavens and Earth, that anyone be welcomed as a son or daughter and be received into His kingdom now and into the Kingdom to come, the new heavens and earth, the new Jerusalem, where all things will be made right. Jesus does turn this upside down world right side up.

And He is a king, not a political king, not a king over an Empire like the Roman Empire, but the King of kings, Lord of lords, the Lord over a thousand hills, over all creation, the Ruler and Judge over all, the one who raises earthly kings and kingdoms and who brings them to the ground. This is the declaration of the Father concerning Him: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” (Psalm 2:2–12, ESV) he is not an earthly king, but the King of all of creation.

What they said was true; they just didn't know how true it was. "And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go." (Acts 17:8–9, ESV) To ensure that no further violence would take place – the violence they were causing – they took money from Jason and as we will see, in order to avoid more trouble for Jason, Paul and his compatriots left to go to Berea. And though they thought they had won, this rabble of unbelieving Jews did nothing to impede the progress of the gospel and the growth of the church. In fact, just a quick view of some verses from the book of 1 Thessalonians testifies to that fact. Paul would write the church in Thessalonica saying such things as: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." (1 Thessalonians 1:2–10, ESV) "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." (1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV) That doesn't sound like a defeated church, does it? That's because God in and through His people cannot be defeated, no matter the opposition. From the rabble of the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica, we come to a decidedly different scene – at least at first – in Berea.

"The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." (Acts 17:10–11, ESV) The difference in the reception that Paul and Silas received in Berea couldn't be any greater. As opposed to the hard but good labor that was required of Paul to proclaim Christ in Thessalonica – reasoning, explaining, proving, proclaiming and persuading – his ministry in Berea was not as difficult because the Berean Jews were more noble. What does that mean? It's a word that means a willingness to learn and evaluate something fairly; to be open-minded, to be noble-minded.' In other words, they wanted to

know the truth. The evidence of that is found in the fact that they received the word with all eagerness – with desire, with zeal and with readiness to hear it all. They were expectant and excited to hear the truth. And then, not only did they hear the words, they examined the Scriptures, evaluating what they heard and seeing if it matched up with the Word of God. They dug into the Scriptures and compared what they heard with the Word of God – they submitted themselves to the truth of God’s Word believing that the Word was just that – the Truth, capital T. This is a preacher’s dream. I’ll talk more about this when I make some application at the end, but this is all Paul could have hoped for. And the results are awesome.

“Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” (Acts 17:12, ESV) What was the difference? Surely the difference between what took place in Thessalonica and Berea is ultimately attributable to the sovereignty of God. But from a human perspective what was the difference? The difference was not with Paul. He preached the same message in Thessalonica as he did in Berea. The difference lay with the Bereans and their determined decision to receive the Word with eagerness and through examination with a desire to be renewed in mind by the truth of God. Luke wants us to see that as evidenced by his use of the word, “therefore.” Many of them therefore believed.

As great as things were going in Berea, the Thessalonian Jews just can’t stay out of the fray. “But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.” (Acts 17:13, ESV) Not content to just oppose Paul and gospel in Thessalonica, not content to just reject Christ and the truth of God’s Word themselves and leave Paul and the Bereans alone, they just have to try to undermine his ministry in Berea as well. They have to try to dissuade the Bereans from listening to Paul. So stirring up things in Berea just like they did at home, the ignoble Jews run Paul off.

We read, “Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.” (Acts 17:14–15, ESV) Paul was the flashpoint, the main object of their hatred, and so he left, but Silas and Timothy stayed behind, probably to encourage and organize the church in Berea. Paul on the other hand went off to Athens where he couldn’t cause any more trouble...haha...not quite. We will look at Paul in Athens next week.

But what do we need to take from this text? There are some themes that are written in bold face type over this text that we need to really take heed of. Let me give you just two to consider and mediate over this next week.

First, we cannot miss the devotion, the determination and the urgency that gripped the heart of Paul. In every instance that we see him, we see the devotion of Paul on display. Paul loved Christ supremely. God had taken Paul's hardened heart, a murderous heart, a sinful heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh, a heart of love for God, a heart of love for His Christ, a heart of love for His church, and a heart of love for His gospel and for His truth. This is the transforming power and nature of God's grace and of His pursuing, saving love. It utterly and completely transformed the character and the nature of Paul. He knew what it was to be lost and found, to be an enemy and to be reconciled, to be a rebel and now a worshipper. Christ had loved Him with His life, rescued Him by His death, saved Him through faith and Paul was driven to devotion as a result. He kept Christ and the gospel at the forefront of his mind always. His devotion to Christ was the driving force of his life.

Because he was so devoted to Christ, it created within him a determination to endure all things for the sake of the gospel, a determination to lay down his life for the sake of Christ's glory, a determination to order His life in a manner that honored Christ as Lord, and a determination to live a life worthy of the gospel by which he had been saved and one that was pleasing to Christ.

And his devotion and determination combined to create an urgency and a passion in him to proclaim Christ that we see here that is remarkable, an urgency that mastered his soul. Paul was urgent in his proclamation of Christ. He was urgent because he knew that all men are sinners, unable to save themselves and headed for eternal judgment and agony. He was urgent because he knew that only the gospel, only Jesus Christ alone could provide God's salvation. It is why he was so urgent to preserve the purity of the gospel. He was urgent because he was deeply aware of the charge that had been given to him by Christ to be a witness for Him. He was urgent because he understood the times in which he lived. He was urgent because he knew that life was a vapor and the days of a man's life were uncertain, including his own. He knew that the kingdom was at hand, the nearness of the Lord's return growing closer with each day that passed. He was urgent because he did not know when God would move him

somewhere else and if he would ever see these people again. He was urgent because he knew he would stand before the Lord and give an account of his life.

Paul was urgent and so must we be as well. My point is not that we should all feel really guilty because we aren't just like Paul. All of our lives won't look like Paul's – his calling and his preaching, his mission. We should not seek to imitate Paul in all of his actions, but rather in his sense of urgency for Christ. Let's imitate his attitude of urgency about the need to make Christ known in this fallen world in a way that is consistent with our gifts and our place in life and in our place as a part of the body of Christ in the world. Let's all of us seek God's leading regarding our place in His work of bringing the gospel to the world – not out of duty – duty can become drudgery, not out of guilt – guilt is a poor motivator, not out of fear, but out of faith in Christ and love to Christ who has rescued us and given us the ministry of reconciliation. Let's pray and ask God to show us, with our gifts and our place in this society, what des gospel urgency look like in my life?

And second, in light of the commendation given to the Bereans by Luke, really by the Holy Spirit through Luke, we need to ask ourselves, "How can we be Bereans as it comes to receiving the Word of God?" How can we eagerly receive the Word of God? Let me give you some ways.

1. We need to value the preaching of the Word of God and see faithful preaching for what it is, not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. Value the preaching of the Word of God. Don't just listen to the preacher, but listen to God in his Word. It is the responsibility of the preacher to preach the Word faithfully and it is yours to listen for God's voice in the Word. So value the preaching of the Word and approach it as the blessing and gift from God that it is.

2. Do not listen to preaching seeking what you think should be said, or a certain feeling, or a "blessing" in the sense that you think it ought to be communicated. Come eagerly to seek the truth and to hear what God has for you that day in the Word of God, trusting that in His sovereignty He will give you exactly what is most beneficial to your soul. Sometimes the truth is easy to hear and to amen, sometimes it is hard to hear, sometimes it is sweet and other times it is painful, sometimes it affirms your faithfulness and other times it confronts your sin, sometimes it confirms your thinking and other times it demands your thinking be changed – in

fact, most times it is a combination of those things. But it is the truth that saves us and sets us free, the truth that sanctifies us, the truth that renews our thinking, and the truth that deepens our faith in God and leads us to treasure Christ in all that He is. And it is the truth that we need.

3. Examine everything you hear according to the Word of God. No preacher should simply be received because he is winsome or engaging, or because he is educated or simple, or because he has a certain style, or because of his reputation, or because of his method, or because he has written books or headlined conferences, even because of past faithfulness to the Word, or any of those things. He should be received because what he says lines up with the counsel of God. That includes John MacArthur, John Piper, RC Sproul, Alistair Begg, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, or me (not that I belong on that list...). Every man's teaching and preaching must be tested by the Word of God.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, ESV). Don't dismiss a preacher's teaching out of hand, but neither accept it without being sure it is faithful to Scripture. And listen, no preacher worth his salt will never think it insulting to ask, "I don't understand how you got that point of doctrine from this passage – can you explain it to me?" That is like music to any faithful preacher's ears.

4. Determine not only to hear the truth but to obey it whatever it is. Receive the Word with faith and with a clear view to what you will do with it yourself, first.

5. Pray for the preacher before He preaches – that day and throughout the week as he is preparing, that you will hear from God when he preaches. Pray for God to prepare your soul to hear from Him that day. Pray as you are listening to have a soft and receptive heart, that God will give you understanding of what is being said and to give you grace to believe and obey. Pray that God would seal His truth to your heart. Pray earnestly to hear from God.

6. Discuss what you hear with others. Thomas Watson wrote: "One reason why preaching the Word on a Sabbath does no more good is because there is so little good conference. Few speak of the word they have heard, as if sermons were such secrets that they must not be spoken of

again." Talk about it as a family. Talk about it with other brothers and sisters. Talk about what you hear and apply it to your life. If you are not in a small group, you need to be. If it is not what you are doing in small group, you need to start.

That is how to make the most out of the preaching and the hearing of the Word of God -- to make us to know with certainty and to feel deeply God-magnifying, Christ-glorifying, soul-nourishing truth. When we gather to hear the Word of God, this is warfare for our souls, for our affections, for our minds, for our wills – that God in Christ would be enthroned in His church and in the hearts of His people. Preaching the Word of God is spiritual warfare. Hearing the word of God with faith is spiritual warfare.

This kind of eager listening to the Word of God cultivates a hunger for God’s Word, reorders our hearts and minds and priorities, and leads us in the way of life. It protects our souls from the corrupting influences of the world. The Scripture tells us “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3–4, ESV) This kind of listening guards us from itching ears. This kind of listening gives encouragement to the preacher and makes him all the more bold when the flock hears the word and is shaped by it. And this kind of hearing makes the church to be unified—to be of one mind. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10, ESV) Let’s be like the Bereans.

Imagine with me, beloved, what more our lives would be in Christ, if we made it our mission to hear every sermon as the Bereans heard Paul's sermons. If we heard the Word with a prepared mind, eagerly, with desire, with zeal and with readiness to hear it all; if we considered and examined it thoroughly, comparing it with the Holy Scripture as a whole -- not only to authenticate its truthfulness, but because we know it is the crucial necessity for our faith and life. Just imagine our spiritual lives, the depth of our love and devotion, the strength of our faith, the consistency of our obedience, the richness of our prayer, the power of our witness, the fullness of our joy, if we eagerly made the fullest and best use of every opportunity when the Lord spoke to us through the preaching of His Word. It is a glorious thought and it is one to be pursued.

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