

Lessons from Thessalonica and Berea Acts 17:1-15

Introduction

As we have been making our way through the book of Acts I have repeatedly stressed that the mission of each believer is to continue the work that Jesus began when he was on this earth

We take that idea from **Acts 1:1** where Luke writes that in his gospel he had “dealt with all that Jesus **began to do and teach** while he walked upon the earth and then from **Acts 1:8** where he told his disciples “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**”

From those two verses we see that our job as Christ-followers is to continue the work that Jesus began by being his witnesses to the entire world

And we have seen how the first-century Christ-followers were wildly successful in carrying out the mission in spite of beginning with very small numbers and a multitude of setbacks

Clearly God was at work through them as the gospel message spread throughout Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria through Peter’s ministry and as we’ve been seeing lately, it spread to the Gentiles in far-flung places through the ministry of Paul and his companions

And as we look at our world today we see that the Word of God is being shared all over the world and we rejoice

Just a few weeks ago we took a Sunday morning to recognize the work being done by missionaries that we support both domestically and abroad – and great things are happening in their ministries

But we often have trouble knowing exactly how to do our own personal part in continuing the mission of Jesus

We have the tendency to think of the early Christians as somehow superhuman – that somehow they had abilities that we don’t have - after all, look at the success they had

And we despair at even coming close to what they were able to accomplish and we wonder if we will falter now that the baton has been passed to us

But that’s where the book of Acts comes to our rescue as we read and study what they did and how they did it we see how we can proceed and succeed

We have already seen in previous passages how Paul began his ministry in each new city by going to the synagogue and preaching to the Jews there before taking his message to the Gentiles

And in today’s passage we are going to see just what he said in the synagogues – how he went about sharing the gospel

From his example we’re going to see **how we should deliver the gospel** to those we meet

Then we’ll see in the example of the people of Berea **how we should receive the Word** of God when we listen to it or read it for ourselves

Lastly, we will see what will be **the likely results** of following the examples before us

As we begin I would encourage you to open your Bibles to Acts 17

We will be looking at verses 1-15 this morning as we will consider what lessons there are to be learned from Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica and Berea

Follow along as I read **verses 1-3**

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.”

Remember, Paul went to Philippi with Silas, Timothy, and Luke and we saw how Luke began to use the pronoun “we” as he described what happened there

Now he switches to the pronoun “they” which seems to indicate that Luke remained behind in his native Philippi for some reason or another

I believe it was because Paul was far more than a church planter and he liked to stay in each city for a time and teach the new believers there so that the church would be more firmly established

But he and Silas had been asked to leave Philippi after being unjustly punished because many in Philippi were still hostile towards them so they may well have left Luke behind for a while to act as teacher in their absence

In any event, Paul, Silas, and Timothy travelled roughly 100 miles to Thessalonica passing through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia along the way

Since Luke makes note of the fact that there was a synagogue in Thessalonica we can safely deduce that neither of the other two cities contained one

Having just left Philippi which also had no synagogue Paul was likely ready to get back to his usual pattern of ministry

And we see that he went into the synagogue on the following three Sabbaths to present the gospel message to his brethren

That doesn't mean that they were only in Thessalonica for three weeks because we know that they were there for a considerably longer time than that

In his letter to the **Philippians 4:16** Paul mentions that while he was in Thessalonica the Philippian believers had sent him financial support on at least two occasions

And in **1 Thessalonians 2:9** he writes how he worked to support himself while in Thessalonica presumably by practicing his trade as a tentmaker

But during his first three weeks there he went to the synagogue and presented the gospel to his countrymen and in Luke's report we will see:

I. How we should deliver the Gospel

Paul was a master at meeting people where they were in order to win a hearing

Since his audience in the synagogue were familiar with the Old Testament that's where he began as we see that **Paul preached from the Scriptures**

A. Paul preached from the Scriptures

Our text says that Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures”

As we have seen previously it was customary to allow any Jewish male adult to address those gathered in the synagogue and visitors were typically offered the opportunity to speak

So on three successive Sabbaths, Paul rose and expounded from what we know as the Old Testament Scriptures

It's easy to imagine Paul selecting the scroll that contained Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22 and delivering a stirring message from those passages that prophesied about the Messiah

Truly, Paul had an abundance of passages to choose from

According to the Billy Graham Evangelical Association:

In his *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, J. Barton Payne itemized 127 Messianic predictions involving more than 3,000 Bible verses, with a remarkable 574 verses referring directly to a personal Messiah!

And the Greek word here also conveys the idea of a conversation or a dialogue so in addition to preaching Paul may have questioned and dialogued with those who were in attendance more like a Sunday school class

But he didn't stop there

B. Paul explained the Scriptures

Paul also **explained the Scriptures**

The Greek word behind our English word “explaining” literally means “opening” with the implication that it is fully opened like a door thrown wide

It’s the same word Luke uses when describing the spiritual awakening experienced by the disciples on the road to Emmaus in **Luke 24:31-32**:

And their eyes were **opened**, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he **opened** to us the Scriptures?”

When Jesus fully opened the Scriptures to the disciples to show how the spoke of him their eyes were fully opened and they gained new understanding that allowed them to make the proper connections

And that’s what Paul attempted to do here

He spoke with clarity and simplicity – he used plain, easy to understand words and ideas

When we talk about the Bible we often fall into the bad habit of using “church words” that our hearers don’t understand

I know I have the tendency to do just that and I am grateful for a friend named Sandy Lincoln who really helped me see the danger involved in using language that for many is unintelligible

Sandy is a member of Grace Church over in Burlington and she was a member of my adult Sunday school class some years ago

She deserves a lot of credit because she was brave enough to raise her hand after I had used some theological term or another and said that she didn’t understand what I just said

That took guts as she risked looking foolish if everyone else knew what I meant but they didn’t and she was a hero because she got me to explain the concept in simple language – to the benefit of many others who also didn’t understand but were too afraid to say so

Something as basic as speaking simply can make the difference between communication and confusion

Using 10-dollar words can make our priceless message worthless and Paul took pains to make sure that his hearers knew what he was trying to tell them

That the Old Testament passages he shared with them concerned more than their contemporary message and actually foretold what must happen to the Messiah

C. Paul proclaimed Jesus

Then we see that once Paul had shown them what the Scriptures had to say he **proclaimed Jesus**

Which means he shared with them the story of Jesus of Nazareth

He likely told them about his birth, his life and his ministry and he definitely told them about his death, burial, and resurrection

He probably related in detail how he had met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus

D. Paul proved that Jesus is the Messiah

Because Paul’s goal was to **prove that Jesus is the Messiah**

The Greek behind the word “proving” means to lay alongside

Paul set Jesus alongside the prophecies and showed that he had to be the fulfillment

It has been said that the odds of any one man fulfilling just eight of the Old Testament messianic prophecies is 10 to the 17th power – which would be roughly the odds of selecting one particular silver dollar from a pile of silver dollars that would cover the state of Texas to the depth of two feet

Paul began by showing them the Word of God, explaining it in terms they could understand, told them about Jesus, and showed them by logical proof that Jesus had to be the Messiah

What about us?

We also need to begin with God's Word

We don't need to be particularly eloquent but we do need to be able to show people key passages in the Bible and be able to explain them in plain, everyday language and we need to tell them about Jesus and who the Bible proves he is

God's Word is powerful and it will do just fine on its own – we don't need to engage in some kind of special technique in order to win people to the Lord

Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonica of how the gospel came to them in **1 Thessalonians 1:3** where he writes:

...our gospel came to you not only in word, but also **in power** and **in the Holy Spirit** and with full conviction

We may not be as sharp or as expressive as the apostle Paul but the power of God's Word hasn't changed and neither has the Holy Spirit who uses the Word to show people their need and point them to the Savior

And people don't need our opinions anyway – the world is full of opinions

People need the gospel because the Holy Spirit works through the message of the gospel with power unto salvation

We need to acquire understanding

Therefore, while we don't need an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible we do need to have a basic understanding of some of its key passages and teachings

So next we are going to jump forward to **verses 10-11** where we see that Paul and Silas travel to 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.

We'll consider why they went to Berea in a bit but for now we want to see **how we should receive the Word** in order to have a good understanding of it

II. How we should receive the Word

Luke refers to the Bereans as being "more noble" than the Thessalonians and then he goes on to explain what made them more noble

A. The Bereans were unprejudiced and open

First he says that the Bereans "received the word with all eagerness"

This means **they were unprejudiced and open** toward the Word of God

They didn't listen with pre-conceived notions or personal biases that filtered out what they were hearing

They were eager to hear what Paul had to say and to learn from it – they were receptive

2 Timothy 4:3-4 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.

I believe we may well be in the time that Paul wrote to Timothy about

Certainly we can point to instances where people are doing the very things he foretold in this passage

Paul is speaking about the specific sin of heretical teaching to please an audience but there is a sense that doesn't quite rise to the level of heresy per se that we can fall victim to

We need to guard against approaching God's Word with a closed mind thinking that we already know all we need to or to read into Scripture what we want to see there in a kind of conformational bias that quiets the voice of the Holy Spirit

We also need to guard against approaching God's Word in a lazy, disinterested, or casual way that keeps us from taking it in as well as we could and should

I remember taking a class called Survey of the Old Testament

A requirement of the class was that each student had to read the entire Old Testament during the course of the class which meant reading, if I remember correctly, seven chapters every day – and that included Psalm 119 which is one chapter...

That meant if you missed a day you had to read fourteen chapters the next day and it didn't take me long to realize how quickly I could fall behind if I wasn't diligent and disciplined in my reading

I honestly and truly got through it all but the sad thing is that I didn't retain much of it for long as I found that I was reading the words but nothing was sticking in my brain because I was reading it just to say that I had read it

Often our times with the Bible can be like that where we dutifully read a portion because good Christians are supposed to but as soon as we close the cover we're off to other things and what we read is forgotten quite quickly

Even sitting through a sermon can be a perfunctory practice that produces no permanence

But not so for the Bereans – they approached God's Word with enthusiasm

Like a person reading a letter from a close friend or lover, they couldn't wait to hear from God; they were eager to receive his message

They were hungry to hear from God and they eagerly listened as Paul expounded and explained the Scriptures

B. The Bereans investigated what they were told

But that doesn't mean that they were gullible or that they would simply buy whatever Paul was selling

Because as we see next in the latter part of verse 11, **the Bereans investigated what they were told**

The word translated as "examined" was used of judicial investigations and indicates that they studied the Scriptures with impartiality and care

Their investigation wasn't cynical; hoping to find some flaw so that they could dismiss what Paul was saying

It was a sincere desire to see the completeness and inter-connectedness of the Word of God as they searched for parallel and complimentary passages that would show them the truth of what Paul was telling them

The Bereans demonstrated their honest integrity and absence of bias by independently looking up and investigating the passages for themselves

There was nothing superficial or casual about the way the Bereans approached the Scriptures

They listened to them with eagerness and they examined them with thoroughness

And in so doing they developed the connections that lead to a greater understanding of God's Word

The truth has nothing to fear

And I believe that Paul welcomed the examination – as any honest preacher of the Word will

Look with me at **John 3:20-21** which tells us that –

“...everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

I encourage you very strongly to avoid any preacher or teacher who discourages independent verification of what they are telling you

Any authentic pastor or preacher will welcome your questions and your investigations into what they are telling you and if you ever run into resistance; run

Sharing God’s Word should never be an exercise in indoctrination and we should never expect unquestioning acceptance of what we say –

We must desire and accept examination but again that requires that we understand what we are sharing

The difference between knowledge and understanding

There is a subtle but important distinction between knowledge and understanding

There will always be someone who has more doctrinal or theological knowledge than you or I do

But knowing the general themes and the overall flow of Scripture is worth far more than formal theological training and what the average person can understand about the Bible is far more important than what the experts argue about

And as you examine the Scriptures and double-check what you read or what you hear and look for supporting or refining evidence from God’s Word you will begin to build that understanding

Understanding aids witness

Then as you build on your understanding you will be able to witness from the Scriptures the way Paul did

No longer will you need to say, “Well, my pastor says...”

But you will be able to open the pages of God’s Word and say, “This is what the Bible says...”

And believe me, the Bible is a much better authority to cite than your pastor will ever be

III. The likely results

So, let’s say that we are all going to be like the Bereans and we are going to eagerly receive the Word and we are going to thoroughly examine the Word in order to build our understanding

Then we are going to take that understanding of God’s Word and rely on it as we talk to others about our Savior

We’re going to meet them where they are and turn the conversation to what the Bible says, have a dialogue with them, and explain what the verses mean

And then we’re going to show them Jesus and tell them all about who he is and what he’s done and how he invites everyone to have a personal relationship with him

What should we expect to happen then – what are **the likely results**?

Looking at our passage we see that even though the people were quite different in Thessalonica and Berea, the results were almost identical

A. Some will accept

First we see that some accepted what Paul was teaching in both cities

Verse 4 says that in Thessalonica,

...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.

And **verse 12** says that in Berea,

Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

In both cities we see that some of the Jews came to a saving knowledge of Christ along with a goodly number of the Gentile men and women

So, when we witness as Paul witnessed the likely result is that some will accept our message and be saved

B. Some will reject

But that implies that others will reject the message and remain in their unbelief

Notice that even in Berea where the people were more noble in listening to Paul and examining the Scriptures that doing so didn't result in a unanimous verdict for Christ

It's somewhat of a mystery or a paradox that two people can hear the same message and come to different conclusions

I often think of the two thieves who hung on crosses on either side of Jesus

They both witnessed the same things and from much the same vantage point but one turned from his mocking and turned to the Savior while the other did not

Our job is to be faithful and to share the good news of the gospel – to be witnesses of Jesus and tell people about him and what he has done for us

In 1 Corinthians 3 that one person sows the seed of the gospel and another may come along and water it but it is God's responsibility to see that the seed takes hold and grows

The sower and the waterer are only responsible for sowing and watering – the growth is God's domain

C. Some will fight

So, we see for the apostle Paul some accepted his message and some rejected it and we should expect the same

But we also see that there were those who actively resisted the Word of God

So we see that some will accept and some will reject and **some will fight**

In Thessalonica

Look with me at **verses 5-9** –

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. 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." 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.

Some of the Jews, most likely a reference to the Jewish leaders, became jealous when they saw that Paul and his team were winning converts

So they went to the marketplace and recruited "some wicked men of the rabble" and incited a riot and when they couldn't find Paul and Silas they settled for Jason and some of the other believers and dragged them before the authorities accusing them of upsetting the peace

Which was pretty rich considering it was they who had provoked the disturbance

They also accused them of disloyalty to Caesar

And in a sense they were correct – Paul and his team were turning the world upside down – well actually the world is upside down and they were attempting to turn it right side up

And Christians do serve King Jesus – but you won't find a group more inclined to support the ruling authorities than Christians are because we are commanded to do so

Their accusations caused the authorities a bit of heartburn but at least they were wiser than the authorities in Philippi

They didn't beat Jason and the other and lock them up – they simply made them put up a peace bond against any further disturbance from Paul and let them go

And in order to bring no further trouble to Jason and the others Paul and Silas moved on and took their ministry to Berea

In Berea

Then in **verse 13** we see that the jealous Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and began to stir up the crowds against the missionaries there

To avoid a repeat of what took place in Thessalonica Paul, who was obviously the lightning rod in this situation, headed for Athens leaving Silas and Timothy behind for a time with instructions to follow as soon as possible

What about us?

As we share the gospel we will see some accept and some reject our message

I would have to say that anyone who has been faithful to witnessing has experienced both reactions

But there will also be times when people may openly oppose the message

Thankfully we can leave responsibility for the success or failure of the message in God's hands once we have been faithful to prepare ourselves and then to deliver the gospel

Conclusion

We can learn a lot from the early church

They show us a great example of faithfulness and resolve as we see how they took the message of the gospel far and wide in spite of many hardships and much resistance

In today's passage we have seen a very basic way of sharing the gospel with his Jewish audience where Paul began by sharing and then explaining a passage from the Bible

Then he showed how Jesus fulfilled the passage that he had just shown them and therefore how Jesus was the Messiah they were looking for

We saw how Paul needed to have a good understanding of the Bible and how it all fits together in order to present the gospel in this way

And in the example of the Bereans we saw how we can attain this clear and complete understanding by approaching the Word with eagerness and examining it with thoroughness

Next week as we finish Acts 17 we will see Paul use a slightly different approach as he begins witnessing to a Gentile audience but how he still meets them where they are and then works his way around to using the same method as he did with the Jews in the synagogues

Let's pray