

“Examining the Scriptures” (Acts 17:1-15)

June 26, 2016

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Acts 17:1–9 (ESV)

¹Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining 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.” ⁴And 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. ⁵But 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. ⁶And 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, ⁷and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.¹

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a dangerous message. It’s definitely good news, which is what “gospel” means. But it’s not good news to everyone. To people who believe it, it’s good news. The gospel says that we can be in the right with God. We can be reconciled to him. We can have such a close relationship to him that we can be called his sons and daughters. The gospel tells us that we can be forgiven for every wrong thing we’ve ever done. And though we die, that’s not the end of the story. We will be raised from the dead and live with God forever in a perfect world.

But that’s only good news to the “we” in that description. “We” refers to people who trust that Jesus is the answer to our greatest problems and that he is the only way to be reconciled to God. “We” are the people who know that Jesus is the God-man who died for our sins and rose from the grave and is Lord over all.

That message is bad news to people who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord. Some people who aren’t Christians don’t seem directly opposed to the gospel. They may be agnostics or, better yet, “apatheists.” That is, they don’t really know if there’s one true God who exists, and they don’t really care. They’re apathetic with respect to God. But there are some people who are

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

violently opposed to Christianity. These are the ones who understand the Christian message's truth claims, but who don't believe they're true. Let me explain.

A lot of people like to think of Jesus as someone who gets close to sinners and embraces everyone and who weeps when bad things happen. It's easy to believe in a non-judgmental, buddy Jesus who weeps with you. This view of Jesus is based on a lot of truth. Jesus did spend time with sinners. Jesus embraced a number of people who were outcasts in his society. And Jesus did weep when he saw how Mary and Martha were mourning over the death of their brother, Lazarus (John 11). But what's often left out of the picture is a Jesus who demands repentance and who speaks of a coming day of judgment. Some people reject the gospel because they don't want Jesus to be their Lord. They don't want him to be King. They don't want God to be the ultimate authority who will judge them for everything they've thought, said, and done.

Those non-Christians who truly understand the claims of the gospel reject it most strongly. But people who come to faith in Jesus receive this message as what it is, the very word of God.

Today, in Acts 17, we'll see two different reactions to the gospel. One is a rejection of the gospel. It's a strong reject of the gospel, one that wants to silence the message of Jesus and stop Jesus' messengers. The other reaction is a careful consideration of this message and ultimately a belief in Jesus. These people are persuaded that the message is true and they put their trust in Jesus. In today's passage, we see that both reactions are really reactions to Scripture. How someone responds to the Bible is how someone responds to Jesus. If people love and trust Jesus, they will love the Bible and they will trust that it is true. If people find the idea of Jesus repellant, they will reject the Bible and they will want to get others to doubt that it's true. In some cases, they will do everything they can to silence the message of Scripture.

So let's turn our attention to Acts 17. Just a brief reminder: Acts is the story of the first thirty years of Christianity. At this point, the gospel message has spread from Jerusalem to Macedonia, a province in the Roman Empire. Almost all of this part of Acts centers on Paul, a Jewish man who had once rejected Jesus but now was his greatest spokesperson. As Jesus' special messenger, he was going around telling others the gospel. In Acts 16, he was in a city called Philippi. Now, he and Silas move on to a city called Thessalonica, which was about a three days' journey to the west.

Let's read verses 1-4:

¹Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining 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.” ⁴And 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.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and its most populous city, with as many as 65,000 to 80,000 people living within the city walls and roughly another 100,000 people living just outside its walls. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that Paul and his companions arrive in Thessalonica and that there’s a synagogue there. That meant there was a significant Jewish population in the city. We’re told that Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews there on three Sabbath days. Paul surely spent longer than three weeks in Thessalonica. We know that because Paul wrote two letters to the church he started in that city not long after he left. In the first one, he says that he and Silas worked in Thessalonica so that they wouldn’t be a financial burden to the Christians there (1 Thess. 2:9). Luke’s purpose is not to tell us everything Paul did, but to tell us that Paul went to the synagogue on three Sabbaths—Friday nights or Saturday days.

And what did Paul do in the synagogues? “[H]e 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.’” Think about that for a moment. Paul first reasoned with them. Paul used logic. He used evidence. He made a case for his beliefs. And in verse 4, we read that some were persuaded. This shows that Christianity is rational. We can use arguments for Christianity. When I say “argument,” I don’t mean fighting. An “argument” is a case. Some people who aren’t Christians probably think our faith is irrational. Mark Twain once wrote, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” But that’s simply not true. Faith isn’t believing something that isn’t true, or believing something in spite of the evidence, or believing something for which there is no evidence. Believing is trusting. It may involve trusting something to be true even when we don’t know everything. It may involve trusting something to be true even when we can’t answer every question we or others might have.

When Paul made his case in synagogues, he showed what the Old Testament says about the Messiah and then he showed how Jesus fulfilled those prophecies. His argument might have been something like this:

- 1.) You fellows Jews believe that the Hebrew Bible is the word of God.
- 2.) The Hebrew Bible speaks of a suffering servant who will die to pay for the sins of his people. He will make his people righteous. You can find that in Isaiah 53. I'm here today to tell you that Jesus of Nazareth is this suffering servant. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed offspring of David who will reign forever. Isaiah tells us he "opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). When Jesus was put on trial and was about to be killed, he didn't speak in order to defend himself (Matt. 26:63; 27:12, 14; John 19:9). Isaiah says of the suffering servant, "they made his grave with the wicked" (Isa. 53:9). Jesus died a criminal's death. He was crucified between two criminals (Matt. 27:38). Isaiah says he was "with a rich man in his death" (Isa. 53:9). Jesus was buried in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57-60). Isaiah says that the servant "had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth" (Isa. 53:9). Jesus never sinned. He was the only truly righteous person (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Isaiah says it was the will of God to crush him. Jesus died on the cross. Isaiah says "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6). Jesus said his blood "is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Isaiah said, "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous" (Isa. 53:11). Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).
- 3.) Since your own Scriptures say this of the Christ, and since Jesus has fulfilled these Scriptures, Jesus is the Christ.

We don't know exactly which Scriptures Paul used, but he could have used Isaiah 53, and that would be a great place to start. But Paul could also have used many Psalms, like Psalm 22. He could have used other prophecies that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah and would be a son of David and would be born in Bethlehem. And he could have pointed to broader themes that are in the Old Testament, like sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood, kings, and so forth, and he could have shown that Jesus fulfilled all these things, too.

I focus on Isaiah 53 because it was certainly written before the time of Jesus. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found between 1947 and 1956, was the Isaiah scroll. This was a copy of the entire book of Isaiah that was written around 100 BC. The book of Isaiah was written some six hundred years before that. The point is that the Dead Sea Scrolls are proof that before the New Testament was written, Isaiah made these prophecies. And given the historical reliability of the New Testament, we have reason to believe that what is written about Jesus in those documents is true. The New Testament shows that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of a book written well beforehand. How could that happen unless God orchestrated everything?

When we try to demonstrate the truth of the gospel, we'll probably have to take a somewhat different approach. Paul was speaking to fellow Jews who believed that the Old Testament was true. When we approach non-Christians, we'll be talking to people who don't know the Bible, let alone believe it to be true. We'll have to take more of the approach that Paul took in Athens. We'll see that approach over the next two weeks.

At any rate, Paul reasoned from the Scriptures and some Jews and Greeks were persuaded of the truth of the gospel. What happened next?

Let's see in verses 5-9:

⁵ 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. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ⁷ "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." ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Not everyone believed Paul's message. Some Jews didn't believe it. And not only didn't they believe it, but they wanted to silence it. So they formed a mob. They gathered "wicked men of the rabble" to form a mob. These men were probably day laborers who waited in the marketplace to get hired. Luke wants us to see that leading women came to faith in the gospel, but men of low status were the ones who formed the mob.

We're told that the mob "set the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason." We don't know anything else about Jason so we must assume that Paul and Silas stayed with him. The mob looks for Paul, but he's out. So they bring Jason and some other believers before the

city's leaders. They say that Paul and Silas "have turned the whole world upside down." The irony is that it's the mob that these Jews formed that has turned the city upside down, not Paul and Silas. The mob says that Paul and Silas "are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." It's certainly true that Paul's message challenged Caesar. Paul did say that Jesus is the true King.

To understand how threatening the message of Christianity was to the Roman Empire, we have to understand that there was something called the imperial cult. In various parts of the Empire, the emperor was worshiped. During the time of Augustus (who reigned 27 B.C. – A.D. 14), priests of the imperial cult were in the city. On the coins that were minted in that city, there was an image of a deified Julius Caesar (reigned 49-44 B.C.) on one side and an image of Augustus, bearing the title *divi filius* ("son of god"), on the other. When Paul preached in Thessalonica he would have told them that Jesus, not Augustus, was the true Son of God. He would have declared that Jesus, not the emperor, was the one Lord worth worshiping.

This might have upset the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire. Jews were allowed to worship their own God as long as they didn't make trouble. But now the Jews are worried that fellow Jews, Paul and Silas, are stirring up trouble by saying the true Lord is Jesus, not Caesar. They realized how threatening the message of the gospel can be to all earthly powers that are opposed to God.

And this brings me back to my point about how people regard Jesus. When people think of Jesus simply as one who welcomes others to him, and who weeps at tragedies, they forget other things that the Bible says about him. When there are tragedies, Jesus may weep, but it's not as if he's out of control. It's not as if he didn't see these things coming. His hands weren't tied. And when people asked Jesus about specific tragedies, he told them not to worry why others die, but instead he told them to repent so nothing bad would happen to them. You can read about that in Luke 13:1-5. Twice Jesus says, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." If we asked him, "Jesus, why did those people in Orlando die?" He would say, "Do you think they were worse sinners than anyone else? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Jesus is particularly threatening to the powers of this world. In Psalm 110, we read about how the LORD, Yahweh, said to David's Lord, the Messiah, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (v. 1). That's one of the most quoted verses of the Old Testament

in the New Testament. Think about that: God will make all of Jesus' enemies his footstool. The Psalm goes on to speak of how Jesus will rule. It says of Jesus these words, which are verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 110:

- ⁵ The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
⁶ He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.

Think about that: Jesus will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge the nations and fill them with corpses. He will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will judge presidents and prime ministers and dictators and you and me. That is a message that threatens.

In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he writes the same kind of thing. He writes of the kingdom of God and repeatedly refers to "Lord Jesus." The true King will come "with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess. 1:7-9). It would be good to read all of 1-2 Thessalonians this week, to get a sense of what Paul said in that city.

Perhaps it was talk of Jesus' future judgment that broke Caesar's decrees. Apparently there was a ban on making predictions about the demise of current rulers. When Paul said the true King would come and judge, he was implicitly saying that the current emperor would fall.

This message disturbed the rulers of the city. But they let Jason give them money as a promise that Paul and Silas would leave the city. They go to Berea, a city about 45 miles to the west of Thessalonica.

Before we move on to the rest of the story, I want to say this: Today I've been putting the hard edges of the gospel front and center. We don't normally talk about judgment and God's wrath. But judgment is actually good news. Think about it this way: If there were no judgment, there would be no justice. If there were no final reckoning, then evil wouldn't be punished. If there were no judgment, where would the justice for genocides be? Think of Hitler. The man committed great evil. Yet if he isn't judged in the end, he wins. He was responsible for the deaths of millions and then he committed suicide. He checked out on his own terms. If he isn't

judged in the end, where is justice? Fortunately, in the end, all evil will be judged and punished. All the evil committed in the world will be paid for by those who committed those evil acts, or by Jesus. The good news is that the sins of those who find their refuge in Jesus was punished almost two thousand years ago when Jesus died on the cross.

Now let's read about what happens next in verses 10-15:

¹⁰The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now 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. ¹²Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵Those 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.

When Paul and Silas arrive in Berea, they do what they normally do: They go to the synagogue. Here, they don't have the same problems. Luke says that the Jews in Berea are "more noble than those in Thessalonica." Why? Well, it seems they were more reasonable. They receive Paul's message "with all eagerness." But they don't just take Paul's word for it. They examine the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was saying was true. For them, the Bible was their standard of truth. And we're told that many of them come to faith. Again, Luke wants us to see that people of high standing become Christians. Christianity isn't just for the poor and the uneducated. It's for the rich and the people who read carefully, and it's for everyone in between.

Before I go on to explain the rest of this text, I want to say that it would be great if we were all like these Bereans. I'm thinking of writing an article about how to listen to sermons, because it's an important part of our worship services. We could learn a lot from these Bereans. Let me make a few points about listening to sermons.

- 1.) If you attend services here regularly, you see there's a preaching schedule in the bulletin. Read that week's passage before you come to church. That will help you because you'll be familiar with the basic content before you even hear the sermon.
- 2.) Stay awake. We're not told the Bereans stayed awake, but we are told they received Paul's message eagerly. Some of us have a habit of nodding off. Drink some coffee and pay attention.

- 3.) Listen eagerly. Come ready to learn. And don't just come ready to learn, but come ready to be changed.
- 4.) Sermons aren't Christian entertainment. God uses his word to form us, not entertain us. So be ready to be shaped by God's word. Don't look for jokes. Don't be passive. Pay attention.
- 5.) Take notes. Write down questions if you don't understand something.
- 6.) Ask me those questions later.
- 7.) If you missed something, you can always visit our website later in the week and listen to the sermon again or read the manuscript I prepared.

I find that we simply don't approach things the way the Bereans do. Let's pray that God would cause us to hunger for his word and examine it and live according to it.

The story of Paul in Berea doesn't end with these noble Bereans, however. We're told that the Jews from Thessalonica who opposed him in that city came all the way to Berea to agitate people against Paul. Remember, this was 45 miles away. That's a two-day journey on foot, made just so that they could stop Paul's message. Luke tells us that these Thessalonians heard that "the word of God" was being proclaimed. That's what they were rebelling against: God's word.

We've already seen this kind of opposition in the book of Acts. In chapter 13 Paul preaches in Antioch, where some Jews "were filled with jealousy" and reviled Paul. In chapter 14, Paul preaches in Iconium and Lystra before moving on to Derbe. In verse 19, we're told, "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead."

Such hostility to the word of God still exists today. In some places, Christians are persecuted and threatened. But even in places where that kind of persecution doesn't take place, people still want to silence Christianity.

For example, take something that Nicholas Humphrey said nearly twenty years ago in an Oxford Amnesty Lecture. Humphrey is a British psychologist, and while he was addressing people gathered to consider human rights in 1997, he said the following:

Children, I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas—no matter *who* those people are. Parents, correspondingly, have no god-given licence to enculturate their children in whatever ways they personally choose: no right to limit the horizons of their

children's knowledge, to bring them up in an atmosphere of dogma and superstition, or to insist they follow the straight and narrow paths of their own faith.

In short, children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense. And we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible, or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.²

This man is saying that parents don't have the right to teach their children about God. Why? Because, he asserts, God is not true. And teaching children the Bible is apparently like teaching people that the planets rule their lives or like knocking out children's teeth or locking them up in a dungeon. As outrageous as this sounds, I don't think Humphrey is alone. Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, approved Humphrey's message. I'm sure there are a number of people who would like to see Christian education banished.

Why do people react this way? Because Christianity threatens them. For the Jews in Thessalonica, Christianity threatened the peace they enjoyed in the Roman Empire. Christianity says the true Lord is Jesus, not Caesar, and certainly not me and you. For people like this man Humphrey, Christianity threatens their ideologies. Christianity threatens those who think that they alone are the only authorities they need to obey. That's why so many people find the concept of judgment so revolting. They don't want to be held accountable for their actions. They don't want there to be a God who made everything, owns everything, and judges everyone.

The sad part is that if people reject this God, they also reject the source of life. They reject the only hope they have in this life and the next. They reject the promise of eternal life in a world that will no longer be tainted with corruption, the way that this one is. They reject the source of beauty and truth and goodness.

In the end, all of us rely on some kind of savior, some kind of god. All of us have some object of worship. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he praised them because they had "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 Thess. 1:9-10). These Thessalonians realized that all their idols—the things they relied upon to give them security and comfort and peace and meaning in their lives—were worthless. The only real Lord and

² Nicholas Humphrey, "What Shall We Tell the Children?" <http://www.humphrey.org.uk/papers/1998WhatShallWeTell.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2016).

Savior was the one who died for their sins, and the one who would return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Why did the believing Thessalonians react this way? Paul gives us the answer a few verses earlier, in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5:

⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

They responded to Paul's message because God had chosen them, and the gospel had come to them in the power of the Holy Spirit, and it produced conviction. One chapter later, Paul writes, "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 Thess. 2:13).

The way people respond to the Bible is the way they respond to God. If they love God, they will love his word. If they reject God, they will reject his word. Some people will be like the unbelieving Thessalonians who tried to silence the gospel. Others will try to discredit the Bible. That has happened quite a bit in the last two hundred years. Others will shrug their shoulders; they are the apatheists who are not interested and can't be bothered. But others still will be like the Bereans. They will receive the word gladly and they will examine the Scriptures. They will use the Scriptures as their standard of truth, just the way that the Bereans used the Old Testament to judge whether Paul's message was true or not.

Christians, I say these things to encourage you to be like these Bereans. And I want to encourage us to be like Paul, who gave people solid reasons why they should believe the gospel. We can't just say to people, "Just have faith." We can't expect to give people a few verses quoted out of context and see them come to faith. We're going to have to explain what we believe and why we believe it. And we must be ready to receive all kinds of reactions from non-Christians. Some will believe our message and others will reject it, sometimes forcefully.

If you're here today and you're not a Christian, I ask you to consider the message of Christianity. No other system of thought gives us such a hope in a world of death. No other belief system gives us reasons to treat all other people—including our enemies—with dignity and respect and kindness. No other religion promises such forgiveness and grace, because no other religion says that God became man and died so that his people don't have to be punished for

their sins. No atheist dream of a perfect world through science and so-called “progressive laws” will ever bring about a utopia, the paradise we all long for. True justice and peace will come only when Jesus returns to make everything right.

We all need to consider whether we’ll be like the believing Thessalonians and the Bereans, or the unbelieving Thessalonians. Will we receive the word of God or reject it?