

God's Unstoppable Mission, Part 6: Thessalonica

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Date: 24 February 2019

Preacher: Donald MacLeod

[0 : 00] Acts 17 and verses 1 down to verse 15. When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollina, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.

This, Jesus, I am proclaiming to you is the Christ, he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

But the Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.

They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting, These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here.

[1 : 24] And Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are defying Caesar decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.

When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. They put Jason and the others on bail and let them go.

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. The Vibraans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. They received a message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

[2 : 28] The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought them to Athens and then left some instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Amen. It's funny, two people can, or a few people can listen to the same piece of music or read the same poem or the same piece of artwork and have completely different perspectives on it.

Last week I was in class and I thought I would share with a class a new song I'd heard. It was a wonderful song. I would listen to it all week, so I stuck it on before class started.

A few of the guys in class tried to smile and pretend it was okay, but I could see they weren't that bothered at all. Same for music, same for poetry.

One person can read a poem and see such beautiful verses, and the other person think it's just some pointless rhyming words that have no real meaning.

[3 : 38] So much of what we see and experience in life can be subjective, can be down to our own personal tastes, our culture, our upbringing, and a thousand other influences.

But when it comes, as we see this evening, down to the gospel, there is no place for us to be subjective. There's no place for us to say, well, that's true for you, but it's not quite true for me.

Or that makes sense to you perhaps, but not for me. Or that's what you believe, or that's your truth. We'll see as we go on through these verses that there's no room for that kind of thinking when it comes to the gospel.

The gospel requires a simple response. The gospel requires us to respond to it.

There's no place for sitting on the fence. So last week we left with Paul and Silas coming out of prison.

[4 : 46] They went to the house of Lydia. Then they encouraged the brothers and sisters there. And now we join them in chapter 17, arriving in Thessalonica.

They've traveled roughly about 30 miles southwest. And then another 25, 30 miles directly south on one of the Roman highways.

And here they are arriving in Thessalonica. Now when we read perhaps verse 1, we might be asking, why do they pass through?

Why do they just skip these other two cities we have mentioned? It's a question there's quite a bit of debate about. Of course we have no solid answer. Some say that perhaps there was no synagogue in these towns, so they moved through them.

But whatever the reason is, it seems they were making a beeline, a straight way to Thessalonica. Thessalonica. This town had around roughly 220,000 people in it or in the area.

[6 : 00] It was a capital of the area. It was a provincial capital. A great trading city we know from other sources. A great place of wealth.

A great place of fame. A great place where you could come and see culture and trade and make your fortune or lose your fortune. In this section from verses 1 down to verse 15, we have these, perhaps we could say, case studies of what happens when the gospel is shared in a place.

As we'll see, when the gospel is shared, it always has an effect. Even as we sit here this evening and listen to this account in Acts, as we hear the gospel this evening, it is having an effect on every single one of us.

Perhaps there are some this evening who as of yet don't believe. Well, as you hear the gospel just now, perhaps this is the evening. This is the night when you come to understand and come to see and come to know Jesus as your Savior.

Perhaps you're here just now as a Christian. As we hear the gospel this evening, we grow in our love and grow in our praise for our God and for our Savior. Sometimes, as folks listen to the gospel, they turn even further away from God.

[7 : 34] Either way, the gospel always has an effect. And as we look at what takes place in Thessalonica and later in Berea, I want us to have three very simple, very loose questions in mind.

What did they say? What did they do? And then what happened? As for a short time, as we look at what took place in these two towns, let's think about what happened then.

Let's think about how the experience of Paul and his companions in these towns, how that still speaks to us, even here in Becliffe.

A few thousand years away, a few thousand miles removed. So first of all, Paul and Silas in Thessalonica, then verses 1, excuse me, verses 1 down to verse 9.

So first of all, what did they do? What are we told about this impressive city? Does scripture tell us about its wealth?

[8 : 46] Does scripture tell us about its great trade routes? About its great mixed cultures and religions? About its fame? About its size? Scripture jumps past all these things.

What does it tell us? It tells us there's a Jewish synagogue there. It tells us that Paul and Silas and the companions, they're not there for the sights and the sounds of this place.

They're not there to adventure and explore. They're there on a mission. They're with one purpose in mind. They are going to share the gospel in this place.

They're going to share the good news that the Savior, the Messiah, that he has come to those who are still waiting, desperately waiting for his return.

It's important for us in verse 2 to note that this was Paul's custom. As he went to these towns, as he visited these places, it was his custom to go to the synagogue, to a place where the Jews were gathered, and to share the gospel.

[9 : 58] This is not just some one-off thing he decided to do. This is what he did. He went to where he knew the people would be, and he shared the gospel with them.

So what does he do in the synagogue? Does Paul use his own years of reasoning? Does Paul use his own experience in debate and discussion?

Does he engage in three weeks of philosophical, theological debate with these men? Then, what does Paul do? Well, we see in verse 3, verse 2, well, verse 2, verse 3, he reasons with them from the scriptures.

Quite simply, he opens, or he turns to the scriptures of a scroll, as it were, and he reasons with them. So what does Paul say?

We have that in verses 3 down to verse 4. Verses 3 and verse 4 helpfully summarize what Paul discussed these three weeks in the synagogue.

[11 : 11] He both explains and he proves what the Messiah had to endure. What the Messiah had to do. And then he makes this incredible fact, this incredible statement we have quoted here, that Paul told them.

This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ. He is the Messiah. The one you're waiting for. He has come.

He has called Jesus. Let me tell you all about him. The one who has come to save his people. Don't wait any longer.

He has come. And his name is Jesus. Paul, of course, was an apostle. Paul had many years of learning. But he knew the word of God was, of course, far, far superior to anything else he could offer these people.

Well, Scripture, God's word, is the basis of Paul's argument as he discusses with the Thessalonian Jews. Now, of course, Paul does, even as we'll see God willing next week, he brings in sometimes cultural references.

[12 : 30] He brings in poetry even when he's in Athens. But the basis and the main thrust of this argument is always Scripture.

Always from God's word. And the reality is, if the gospel is not shared with the word of God at its core, then it's being shared without power.

Also good for us to note that Paul was here for three weeks in this synagogue. Three weeks he shared with these people the good news.

Sometimes it's so distressing for us as we share the gospel with friends and family. As we share it and we share it and nothing happens. As we keep sharing the gospel and we're saying, why do you not believe this wonderful message?

It's good for us to remember that even if there's no immediate outside recognition of the gospel, when the gospel is shared, like we said, seeds are always planted.

[13 : 38] Paul spends three weeks here sharing the gospel. It takes time sometimes, but we strive to do it nonetheless.

So what did he do? He shared the gospel. He went to the synagogue and he used God's word. What did he say? Well, he describes who the Messiah was, what had to happen to him.

Then he tells them who the Messiah was. He tells them all about Jesus. So what was the effect of all this?

We have that in verses four, roughly down to verse nine. But first of all, we see in verse four, if you look down with me, in verse four, we see first of all a positive response.

We see that it was not completely in vain at all that, in fact, people were listening to the gospel. People were listening to the message that Paul shared.

[14 : 40] They considered what he said and they had believed the message. In fact, it tells us that a large number believed.

A large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. Very often the gospel, at least in Greek culture, was dismissed as something for the poor folks.

Something for the peasants, perhaps, but not for us. These peasants, these poor folks who believe whatever you tell them to, this gospel is for them.

But here we see who believes. Prominent people. Prominent women. Well-respected people.

Here we see these new believers were devout. They were well-respected men. Well-respected women. The gospel, of course, makes no distinction. The gospel makes no distinction between poor or rich.

[15 : 55] It doesn't matter our social or cultural background. It doesn't matter how much money we have in the bank right now. It doesn't matter what kind of family we come from. The gospel is for all who will hear.

My friend, when we share the gospel, we're not just throwing out our words to the wind, hoping something will stick occasionally.

When we share the gospel, whether in individual situations, whether we share it to our family, to our friends, whether we share it perhaps in the workplace, whenever the gospel is shared, we're doing something that is incredible.

We're sharing a message that is powerful beyond what we can ever truly understand. It's the very living words of God.

The very living words of our sovereign God. Just because we are so frail. And how often is it true that when we try and share the gospel, we realize that what we've been doing, that our wording of it, that the way we said it, that was so silly, why did I say that?

[17:08] Why did I do that? Why did I word like that? And we can be despairing at times of just how awful we are as servants to God.

But reality is, the power of the gospel, of course, doesn't come from us. Paul's not sharing the gospel here under his own authority. He's sharing the gospel pure and simple.

We could say, well, we only have a snapshot here of what happened in Thessalonica. How can we be sure that the message that Paul shared had any real lasting effect in this place?

Are we not perhaps presuming a bit too much here? Well, of course, we're not. We have the wonderful evidence, the gospel, the wonderful truth that was shared to these people.

The effect it had, it was lasting. The incredible effect it had, it lasted. So much so that we know that this small gathering of believers became a vibrant church, a living church, a hardworking church, even in the midst of a tough, tough situation.

[18:29] These people were serving, living in a town that had no care for the gospel, in an area that hated the gospel, as we see from previous and coming chapters.

These people were living in a land that had no time for gospel message. But yet we know that these small gatherings, this small gathering of Christians, of new Christians, that God sustained them. And that they became a church. They became a gathering of God's people, living and sharing the gospel. And we know that because Paul, of course, wrote two letters to them, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

And in the opening statement of his first letter to this new church, Paul says, 1 Thessalonians verses 2 down to 3, We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:51] This small gathering of new Christians. They were showing their faith. They were working hard from love.

And they were enduring. Showing endurance inspired by their faith in their Lord Jesus. An incredible description of this congregation of people.

Of this small church in this troubled town. It's a description we should all be striving for as Christians, and even as a church here. That we would be working and laboring out of love.

We'd be enduring because of our inspiration of who we're enduring for. And that we would work all we do based on faith.

We have a picture in these letters of a vibrant church. A living, working, serving church. All because the gospel was shared with them in that synagogue.

[21:06] Of course, as always, when the gospel is shared, the response is not always positive. We see that, of course, yes, a good crowd had believed.

But, of course, what then happens? Well, those who didn't believe and those who didn't agree to the gospel, they didn't just voice their opinions, then move on. Well, instead, they form a mob.

They form a riot. They gather up these, in verse 5, bad characters from the market. A mob is formed. And they go, of course, and they drag out Jason.

He's guilty of association. What caused this anger? Well, we see again in verse 5. Jealousy. The Jewish authority, they were jealous.

They were losing control, perhaps. Losing control over people. They lost prominent people. They lost good people. They lost these prominent women.

[22:08] And now, Paul's still preaching this gospel. And they're watching their world change. And they cannot handle that.

So they form this angry crowd. And, of course, they accuse Paul and Silas and Jason, all the Christians, with this wonderful accusation.

Accusation, the second half of verse 6 and verse 7. They say, These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here.

And Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.

Some translations have this as these men who have turned the world upside down. It's the same difference in the end. The same sense comes through. These men, they're ruining things.

[23 : 09] They're really spoiling how we do things here. This is not how this city works. This is not how we work. They have caused trouble.

Their message is causing problems for us. You can almost hear the distress in their voices. These men have come to our city, and look what they've done.

They've come and shared this message. And these people, they believe them, and they've left us. And if we let this carry on anymore, what will happen?

They've come and they've dared declare there is another king. Of course, this is the cornerstone of all our sin, of all our rebellion against God.

We make ourselves kings. We make ourselves the pinnacle of all things. And the gospel comes in, and it shows us that we are not.

[24 : 17] The gospel comes in like it did in this town, and it shows us there is another king, and that king is certainly not you or me.

Kind of echoed roughly in the words of Psalm 2, where it says, discussing contrasting earth and humanity to Jesus and his eternal rule.

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, let us break their bonds in pieces, and cast away their cords from us. We want to be free. We don't want another king over us. Just like these folks in 5th Leonica. They couldn't bear the fact there is another king.

This message Paul was sharing, it did not make sense. They didn't want to hear it. In many ways, they're just repeating, of course, the words of John 9, verse 15.

[25 : 23] The crowd at the trial of Jesus. Pilate says to them, what did Pilate say? Here is your king.

And the crowd answers, away with him. Away with him. Crucify him. Shall I crucify your king? Pilate asks. We have no king but Caesar.

They replied. If we're honest, then we're speaking very honestly. If we're being true to ourselves, in many ways, is this not how we view ourselves?

I review the gospel. I do not want anyone else ruling over me. I will not have Jesus as my king.

Get rid of him. Take him away. Crucify him. I want nothing to do with this man. Of course, the reality is, whatever we say, whatever we think, he is still king.

[26 : 28] He is still, right now, reigning as king. And we either serve him this evening as his servant, or we fight against him as his enemy, as a fight we will never win.

just like what happened here. The accusation, it was not wrong. The gospel was changing things. The gospel was turning this place upside down.

And the gospel will change your life. It's not so much turning it upside down, but it's turning it the way it's supposed to actually be. The gospel comes and it rearranges our lives.

It rearranges who we are to what we're made to be. Let this be the world's accusation against us. The accusation we made here against these guys in Thessalonica.

Against Paul and Silas and the companions. These men. They've turned the world upside down. These Christians. these Christians.

[27 : 40] They come and they mess things up. These Christians come and they say there is another way. These Christians, their message, it changes people's lives.

It changes and it challenges our views on wealth, on reality, on sexuality, whatever else the issues of the day are for us today. If people are going to talk about us, let it only be that the gospel we share is changing lives.

So they leave this place. They leave Thessalonica both having seen incredible fruit but also seeing opposition to the gospel. So then we see of course Jason and the believers there having to their own bail and they pay the bond so Paul and Silas can leave.

They're sent away of course then in verse 10 down to Berea. They travel 50 miles south of Thessalonica and they arrive in Berea.

It's just in the foothills of Olympian mountains. Very briefly, very, very briefly in fact we see because it's a repeat pattern of what happened in Thessalonica.

[29 : 02] First of all of course they go to the synagogue and they share the message there. But what's different in Berea? We find out that these Bereans in verse 11 scripture calls them noble in

character.

Their character was more noble than those in Thessalonica. So why were they more noble? Are they more noble because they listened better?

Are they more noble because they were nicer to Paul and Silas? Well of course we know that's not true. The word tells us they were more noble firstly because they received the gospel with eagerness but then because they took the time to examine the scriptures to test what they heard against the reality of God's word.

Testing to see if what Paul is saying is it really true? And they say well Paul was an apostle that's seen Jesus, been commissioned by Jesus, had done great things.

Why do they dare question what he said to them? How could they not believe his word? Surely they were more than enough. God said to you.

[30 : 24] I stand before you just now. I am a boy from Hebrides. I was going to be preached in this building very much aware of it. Very often my professors are listening into my sermons and if you ask them after the service I'm sure they could tell you just how many and where my faults and failings are in terms of knowledge and understanding.

I could show you my test results and pass marks and you'd see very quickly that I don't quite measure up in terms of many areas of understanding or intelligence.

So perhaps it would be fair enough to question my knowledge, question my understanding. But Paul, the apostle Paul, if he was here would you dare question his message?

Well the brains had no issue doing so. They tested all his words against scripture and that's the wonder of the word of God. All other things will fail.

My words will fail. Every person who stands here, their words are very much fallible. But scripture has no fault and it will never cease to be true.

[31 : 41] That's what separates Christianity from so many other religions and cults. They tell you don't dig around, don't search it out, just believe us, listen to us, it's fine, don't research whatever you do.

But we know that the Bible is true and because the Bible is true, we can say, look into it, dig into it, search it, and you'll only find more and more how true it actually is.

When I was a kid, I got a big lump of fool's gold. I was going to look up the actual name of it, but I forgot to do that. Fool's gold, I'm sure you all have seen it, it's a lump of rock that looks like gold.

And many a miner and prospector over the years has lost fortunes assuming it was gold and digging it out and realizing afterwards it's just a nice gold, shiny rock.

When you place fool's gold beside actual gold, it takes all of two seconds to realize what's real and what is not. When you put the word of God, the truth of God, the reality of the gospel up against any other reality, any other truth, they will begin to fall and falter so quickly.

[33 : 01] The Brains recognize that. They put Paul's words to the test. They use scripture as their ultimate source of authority.

Let that be true for every one of us here this evening. Let our ultimate source of truth come from God's word. Help each one of us be as honorable and noble as these Brains that we would see God's word as the ultimate source of all our reality, of all our truth.

So what is the effect in Berea? Well, initially we have the same glorious result. Look with me please to verse 12. We see many of the Jews believed as did also again a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

A wonderful result. More people believe in the gospel, more people calling Jesus their savior.

Again, a new church is being formed in as early stages as growing here.

Then of course we also see again opposition pops up. Not satisfied with having them kicked out of their own town, these guys from Thessalonica.

[34 : 19] They've traveled down, they've made the effort to come down and to find Paul and to find Silas and to start, to attempt to start another riot.

don't be surprised for a second when you face opposition for your faith. When you face opposition to the great gospel you are sharing, when you see the church locally, the church in our nation facing opposition, when God willing, if we're granted more years, when we see more opposition growing, don't be surprised.

It's nothing new for the church, nothing new. In fact, we know that Jesus promised it would happen in Matthew 5 and verse 11. So we see happening again and again in Acts again and again in the

early church, so we know to be happening right now across the world, the gospel faces so much opposition.

And if we were relying on ourselves, if we were relying on our hopes, and if we're just hoping it was all true, then how sad a situation would we have.

As we see the gospel attacked, as we see the gospel under pressure, we'd have no hope whatsoever that it would survive. But here we are in Edinburgh, thousands of miles away, thousands of years later from this place, and here we are worshipping Jesus.

[35 : 53] He will keep this church. he protect his people. Just as he did in these pages, in these verses, nothing has changed for us today.

Paul, Silas, and their companions, they shared the good news. They did so faithfully, and they did so most importantly, using scripture.

They shared it in the midst of trials of tough, tough situations, but God blessed that to further his church.

God blessed that to grow his church. What encouragement that should be for us this evening, we strive, we work, we share the gospel, we pray for it, we pray for our friends, we pray for our family members, we pray that they would come to know the gospel, we share the gospel with them, we pray for them, and so on.

But we rely on God, on his word, and he will use that for his glory. He will not be defeated. His purposes and his plans like we see in his verses, God is weaving all these things together.

[37 : 10] The gospel was shared. Opposition came up, yes, but the gospel was shared. Churches were started, new Christians believed. God's purposes, God's plan will not be stopped.

That's our comfort here this evening. As we go on through our lives, as we carry on serving and seeking to serve God in various ways in our homes, in our places of work, in our city, just as Paul and Silas based all they had on the word, that would be true for us also.

And we do pray and we do know that God will bless his word wherever it should. and we..... We'll... says the And we...

ask the picture of the ■■■ and then we say it and we can be