

Acts 17 - Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] Acts 17 verses 1 to 15. 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. 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. 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 which were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing, as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learnt that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

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.

Thank you very much. Lizzie, good morning everyone. Lovely to see you. If you've not met, my name's Rupert. We're going to be looking at that passage together over the next few minutes. I think you'll find it helpful to have Act 17 open in front of you. And there's also an outline of the talk. I think it's going to be going up on the screen. But if you've got the service sheet with you, it's in there too. Shall we begin with a prayer?

Our Father, we thank you for the way in which the book of Acts teaches us about the growth of your kingdom. And we all long to see your kingdom grow in our own day. And so we thank you that you haven't left us in the dark about how that happens. We pray, therefore, that you would teach us now what it looks like and involves for your gospel to advance.

[3 : 1 6] And we pray that understanding that, we would be those who give ourselves to that great task in our own day. Amen. Well, there can be little doubt that Christianity is on the back foot in Europe.

European nations, including our own, are increasingly secular, hostile to traditional Christian morality, and celebrate religious pluralism. Just as long, of course, as those religions don't threaten the status quo or claim to possess absolute truth for everyone. Christianity itself is often treated with a mixture of ridicule, suspicion and contempt. And in such a context, Christians can all too easily despair and wonder if or how people could ever become believers in Christ in great numbers again, or otherwise be tempted to change our message and methods to accommodate to those around us.

And that's where these middle chapters in the book of Acts, including chapter 17, which we're going to be looking at over the next two Sundays, are so helpful and, I think, so encouraging for us. Because they tell the story of the steady, if largely unspectacular, expansion of the gospel in Europe. And in a Europe which wasn't so different from ours today.

You see, first century European culture also treated Christianity with a mixture of ridicule, suspicion and contempt. It celebrated religious pluralism with its multitude of gods, just so long as the status quo and the authority of the state weren't brought into question. And in its morals, the Roman Empire exhibited the same permissiveness we see all around us today.

So these chapters in Acts ought to be instructive for us as we seek the expansion of the gospel. The book of Acts tells the story of the unstoppable spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and then to the ends of the known world. And in doing so, Luke, the book's author, teaches us what we can expect to accompany and characterize gospel growth in every generation.

[5 : 30] Already in the first half of the book, he has recorded for us many of the obstacles we can expect to hinder gospel advance, whether persecution from outside the church or false teaching or division or distracted priorities from within. And wonderfully, we see how at every step these threats are overcome.

But in these middle chapters, Luke begins to relate to the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. And in doing so, I think, shows us what will help gospel advance. What it is we also must do if we wish to see the growth of the gospel in each subsequent generation.

And over these two Sundays, we're zooming in to study Paul's labours in three of these cities to which he comes. Thessalonica, Berea, and next week, Athens.

Now, one of the challenges for the preacher of Acts is to know how to be faithful to the message Luke's wanting to convey, so that it's his and therefore God's voice we're listening to, while also being fresh, ensuring sermons aren't repetitive.

Because many episodes in Acts superficially look very similar to each other. Paul or someone else preaches, there's a mixture of conversions and opposition, and then Paul goes on to the next town before the cycle begins again.

[6 : 49] We see something of that even in our passage this morning. So the reader of Acts must ask, what is distinctive about each particular passage? What does it add to the narrative? What's its particular emphasis? What's new?

They're great questions, actually, for any of us to ask in our Bible reading. And here in the first half of Acts 17, there's a clear structure, which therefore ought to govern the way we read and teach the passage.

The incidents in Thessalonica and Berea seem to form a pair. So notice how the first part of each episode emphasises something about the Scriptures, while the second part tells us about the opposition that the same Thessalonian Jews stirred up in both places.

So have a look with me at verse 2. We're told Paul went into the synagogue, 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.

After meeting with some success in verse 4, Luke then tells us in verses 5 to 9 how this led to aggressive opposition from the Jews. So Paul and Silas have to be packed off to a different location in verse 10.

[8 : 03] And then we get the same pattern in Berea, if you look down. The Scriptures appear again in verse 11, where we learn the Berean Jews received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

We then hear of some more conversions before the same Thessalonian Jews rear their ugly heads and cause so much trouble that Paul has to be sent off a second time to a new location at the end of our passage.

Can we see the repeated pattern? And the interesting thing is that the word Scriptures, which appears twice here in each of these two accounts, hasn't appeared in its plural form at all in Acts previously.

So it seems a distinctive thing to draw out from this particular section is the way in which Scripture, or the Bible, was central to Paul's evangelism, as he sought to bring the good news of Jesus to the people of his day.

And that brings us on to the first of three lessons I want us to draw from this passage this morning about what accompanies the advance of the Gospel. Three hallmarks of authentic Gospel ministry, which I think Luke wants his readers to notice.

[9 : 16] So first of all, and we'll spend more time on this than the other two, we're to have confidence in expounding the Bible. Confidence in expounding the Bible. Look with me at verse 2 again.

We're told halfway through that verse, On three Sabbath days, Paul 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 the little phrase I want to highlight there for us is from the Scriptures. Paul reasoned with people from the Bible. For him, the Old Testament Scriptures. In his missionary endeavours, he taught the Bible, explaining and proving his case as he did so.

As the theologian and Christian writer Jim Packer has written, to Paul, the only right method of evangelism was the teaching method. Opening up the Bible was Paul's method in evangelism, in seeking to share the good news of Jesus with people.

He was confident in expounding the Bible, in the power of God's Word, as he simply opened it up and challenged people to respond. For all his miracles, which we see on occasion in Acts, authenticating his authority as an apostle, and for all his great learning, strikingly, it was actually the Bible to which Paul appealed when he came to this work of evangelism.

[10 : 43] So I wonder if we share Paul's confidence in opening up the Bible in our efforts to make Jesus known. Perhaps we've subconsciously begun to put our confidence elsewhere, secretly fearing, if we're honest, that the Bible is dated or dry, irrelevant or inadequate, that it won't be effective in our contemporary context.

But we've already seen how Paul's context wasn't that different from our own. And here we see that the Bible lies at the heart of his evangelism.

And that's right, isn't it? As Paul says elsewhere in the New Testament, the Scriptures are able to make people wise for salvation. Or as Peter puts it, people are born again through the living and enduring Word of God.

Despite appearances, the Bible is powerful. We must share Paul's confidence in expounding it if we wish to see the Gospel advance in our own day.

I remember Patasha and my wife telling me when we were on the staff of a church in Cambridge about a couple who attended a Christianity Explored course she was helping to lead. And at the start of the course, typical, I guess, for an academic context like Cambridge, they raised a whole load of intellectual objections they had when it came to the Christian faith.

[12 : 00] I can't remember exactly what they were now, but presumably questions about science or suffering or the reliability of the Bible and so on. But over the next few weeks, as the Bible was simply opened up to them and they looked at the Scriptures for themselves, they became convinced that Jesus was who he claimed to be and wonderfully put their trust in him.

And the striking thing was that none of their intellectual questions had even been addressed. Not because there aren't good answers to such questions or there's never a time to answer them. I would maintain the Bible's claims stand up to all scrutiny.

But because it is through the expounding of the Bible that people come to faith in Jesus. And as the Bible was opened, this couple found its claims about Jesus compelling and their questions fell away.

And down the centuries, that has been the pattern again and again. Whether at the Reformation, as the peoples of England heard the Bible in their own language, or the time of Whitefield and Wesley in the 18th century, where as the Bible was simply taught, a great spiritual revival took place.

The Bible is always the means through which people are brought to faith. And at the start of a new academic year, or as more people return to offices after the lockdowns of the past year, is great, I think, to be reminded of this.

[13 : 20] I wonder which colleagues we might be able to invite to a lunchtime midweek service in the city where the Bible is taught. Or which friends here in Dulwich might be willing to meet up with us to look at the Bible one-to-one.

Or for those in JAM, our youth group, which friends at school we could invite to hear the Bible opened at a Christian Union meeting. Because if we do these things, we might just find, perhaps to our surprise, the very same outcome that met Paul's preaching in Thessalonica.

Have a look at verse 4. 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 we see a similar outcome in Berea in verses 11 and 12.

And just notice how Paul's Bible teaching was sufficient for the Jews in the synagogue and the Greeks for men and women to come to faith in Jesus. And the fact that Greeks were converted here, sorry, the fact that Greeks were converted here is, I think, significant, given many people using others, he used a different, more philosophical approach.

But I don't think that's right. While Paul may quite sensibly have found different points of contact with his heroes in Athens, and even initially sometimes started further back when speaking to those who wouldn't have shared the Bible's basic assumptions about the world, time and again we see that he puts his confidence in expounding the Bible, and that in doing so, every kind of person is enabled to find salvation in Jesus.

[14 : 53] And incidentally, this is, of course, why the Bible lies at the heart of our church life here at Grace Church. There were all kinds of things Paul could have said or done in this Thessalonian synagogue as he arrived in a new city.

Just as, sadly, all kinds of things go on in churches today. But over his three Sabbath days in Thessalonica, Paul expounded the Bible. Now we need to move on in a moment, but I don't want us to miss, finally under this first heading, what it is that Paul taught from the Scriptures.

Because if we look down at verse 3, we see Paul explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead. Acts is Luke's second volume, and it's striking how many parallels he makes between Jesus' ministry in his first volume, Luke's Gospel, and Paul and the other apostles' ministry here in Acts.

And I'm sure we're supposed to notice that the language Paul uses here, that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, is exactly the same message Jesus had given his disciples after his resurrection in Luke 24.

Bruce actually quoted these verses to us earlier. When Jesus showed from the Scriptures how the Christ must suffer and rise. When we teach the Bible to people, we're to teach them about Jesus, its main subject, and in particular about his death and resurrection, which lie at the heart of the good news about him and through which all types of people can be saved.

[16 : 30] The heart of Paul's Gospel wasn't God's mere existence or creation or the example of Jesus even, but his death. So first, we're to learn from Paul's confidence in expounding the Bible as he teaches people about Jesus.

But it's not just Paul, but also his hearers, who I think Luke wants us to learn from in our passage. And that brings us on to the second thing we're going to observe as we begin to move more quickly, the second hallmark of authentic Gospel ministry we notice in this passage, which is conscientiousness in examining the Bible.

Confidence in expounding the Bible and now conscientiousness in examining the Bible. Because it wasn't just Paul who was committed to Scripture in these verses, you see, but also the Jews in Berea to whom he speaks.

And these Bereans receive high praise from Luke's pen, don't they? And they are, I would suggest, a great model for us to imitate. Let's look on to this second example of Gospel proclamation in our passage.

And verse 11. Paul once more goes to the synagogue and it's pretty clear from verse 11 that he must again have taught the word there. And we're told in that verse that these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica.

[17 : 47] Why? Well, they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. I don't know what you're eager about.

Perhaps eager to watch the next episode of your favourite box set on Netflix or to finally be able to enjoy a holiday abroad again. I don't know what you're eager about when it comes to church on a Sunday.

Maybe it's the singing or the coffee afterwards and the chance to catch up with people or just getting home for Sunday lunch that we eagerly await as we arrive each week. Well, the Bereans received the word with eagerness.

That was the thing they were eager for when they met together. And for Luke, there could be nothing more noble than being an eager beaver of the Bible. That's what Luke would have each of us be.

Someone whose nose is never for very long out of God's word. That's what's really noble and commendable in the Christian life, to listen to and examine the Bible in order to better get to know God, the one we meet in the Scriptures.

[18 : 56] And I'm particularly struck by how Luke tells us that the Bereans examined the Scriptures daily. I just fear that our generation of Christians sees the daily quiet time, the practice of reading a chunk of the Bible and praying each day, as at best a luxury and at worst an unnecessary chore.

But daily study of the Bible is actually a noble and vital thing to do. Perhaps for some of us near the beginning of a new academic year, this would be a good time to start or revive that habit.

But it wasn't simply the Scriptures these Berean Jews examined, notice. They also examined the preaching they heard. See how verse 11 continues.

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.

As Paul preached, these Berean Jews neither rejected his message because it didn't fit with what they'd been taught previously or what they perhaps might have wanted to believe, nor did they just blindly accept it.

[20 : 03] Rather, they listened to Paul's preaching and eagerly submitted what he said to the authority of Scripture. And wonderfully, many of them were converted as they came to see that what he said was true.

Well, what a brilliant example these Bereans are for us. Because if they examined what the Apostle Paul preached, then how much more must we examine everything we hear and read against Scripture?

The Bible is clear that false teaching will be commonplace in the Church. And I take it even the most faithful of preachers, and we're blessed to have faithful teachers on the staff team here at Grace Church, won't always get everything right.

And even if they were to do so, we must remember our authority doesn't come from them, but from the word they teach. In recent years, the practice of fact-checking has become prominent.

In particular, when politicians make a claim in a speech or perhaps say something in a pre-election debate or TV interview, there are often now professional fact-checkers watching on who don't just take it for granted that what's been said is accurate, but do the research in order to verify whether the claims being made are correct.

[21 : 17] And when it comes to listening to the Bible being taught, we're to be Christian fact-checkers who are conscientious in examining the Bible, in verifying whether what's been said is true.

I guess this means we mustn't be either too proud or stubborn to be willing to change our minds when a preacher says something different from what we think or have heard in the past, nor be so naive and lazy that we just assume it's true without checking it out properly.

Instead, we must examine the preaching we hear and the Christian books we read to see if they conform to the Bible. That's why we encourage everyone to have a Bible open during the sermons here at Grace Church and why we point people to the verses we're explaining and ask people to look down at those verses as we do so so we can all see these things for ourselves and check that what is being taught is what the passage is teaching.

As a preacher, I always find it immensely encouraging when I see people looking at their Bible during a sermon or when someone picks me up on something I've said afterwards because it shows they're thinking and examining the Scriptures like these Bereans.

We're to be discerning. So the gospel advances as God's people as well as God's preachers are committed to God's word.

[22 : 36] But there's one final brief lesson from this passage I think about what we can expect gospel ministry to be like. And here again Luke draws our attention to that which threatens to derail the growth of God's kingdom.

So thirdly, we're to have courage in enduring opposition. Courage in enduring opposition. I wonder how we respond to setbacks and knockbacks in our attempts to share the gospel.

I know I can often feel sorry for myself, get discouraged and am tempted to go quiet. We're once bitten, twice shy. But that couldn't be more different from Paul's attitude.

And he really did get some knockbacks. But he also knew the gospel was so important and he had such confidence in its power that he kept on speaking even when discouragements and hardships multiplied.

Here in Acts 17 some Jews gang up with a mob to get Paul into trouble with the Thessalonian authorities. They then travel all the way to Berea to try a similar tactic there. A reminder to us of how militant opponents of the gospel can be and the lengths they'll go to to disrupt gospel labour.

[23 : 50] Twice in one chapter Paul is forced to flee a town. But praise God that Paul didn't let these discouragements silence him as we might have.

Because if he had, then as we'll see next week, the great city of Athens might never have heard the gospel. And Luke is showing us here what we can expect to be normal when we teach the Bible faithfully and hold to biblical truth in a sometimes hostile culture.

People will oppose us. And it's striking here how the same people stir up problems in different places on different occasions. I've certainly come across this in my ministry.

Opponents of authentic gospel work who often, like these Jews, claim to be religious but who won't relent, who persevere and telling lies. Paul wasn't, of course, seeking to overthrow the Roman Empire and persist in trying to thwart gospel ministry, agitating and stirring up others to use the language of verse 13.

As here, perhaps they whip up a mob. Maybe in our culture today it's likely to be an online mob or a mob in the media as much as a physical one. And like these Jews, perhaps forming alliances with those outside the church in order to achieve their sinister goals.

[25 : 12] But none of this just surprises. Luke is showing us we're to expect it. And while we are, of course, to examine everything as the Bereans did, such opposition no more means a particular minister or ministry or set of convictions is to be rejected any more than the opposition to Paul here in Acts 17 meant his authority was to be called into question.

And like Paul, when under attack, we're to show courage in enduring opposition, in persevering, in getting on with gospel labour. If gospel ministry becomes impossible in one place, Paul simply moves on to the next and keeps going.

William Tyndale is, in my view, one of the greatest men of English history. In the 1500s, he defied church authorities by translating the Bible into English. He was a marked man and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, in particular Thomas More, relentlessly hunted him down, opposing him again and again at any opportunity until eventually he was executed.

On one occasion, Tyndale, like Paul, was forced to flee at night after a tip-off that he'd be arrested. He fled, but didn't have time to take his books with him. Two decades of work translating the Bible were destroyed as his translations were seized and burned.

But Tyndale simply started again from scratch, translating the Bible in hiding from morning till night because, like Paul, he knew how powerful the Word of God is. Like Paul, he displayed courage in enduring opposition.

[26 : 50] He persevered that Englishmen might be able to read the Bible for themselves. And we're to do the same as we remember that when we courageously proclaim Jesus from the Bible, we can expect not only opposition but also conversions, even in the context of a secular and hostile European culture.

Shall I lead us in prayer as we close? We thank you so much, our Heavenly Father, this morning for the example of the Apostle Paul. We thank you for his courage and we thank you for his faithfulness in expounding the Bible everywhere he went.

And we thank you also for those to whom he preached, for these Berean Christians and the example that they are to us too. And we pray that like them we would be those who examine the Scriptures to make sure that everything we hear is true and that like them we would be those who seek to submit our lives to your rule in your Word for the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Amen. Thank you for that. Amen.