

Bible Study Acts Of The Apostles

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'm delighted that some of you have undertaken to bring to pass this good news at noon here in this magnificent, I don't know, it feels like a missionary compound here, but it's a wonderful place.

And I've been anxious about how to start talking to you because the great advantage for me about talking on Wednesday is I have some idea of who's going to be there, but coming here this morning I had no idea who was going to be here, and so now I have to adjust to who you are and where you're from.

And I picked up from Jeremy that maybe a word on when Armageddon starts would be a good subject for today. I don't feel particularly qualified.

But there are some things that I think today, we're going to get to this passage of scripture, but we're probably not going to get there today.

Because I need some time to sort of figure out who you are and where you're coming from and what you're thinking about. So I would like to get some feedback from you maybe when I'm done and see where you're at.

[1 : 1 8] What I thought I would say to you today really has to do with the establishment and maintenance of an argument. This Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, is that what it's called? Ukrainian Catholic?

Ukrainian Catholic Church. Does that mean it's not Orthodox? It means it is Orthodox, but it isn't Orthodox. It's really what I mean. The ancient Catholic Church has an ancient Catholic creed.

And the ancient Catholic creed of St. Athanasius begins with these words. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic faith.

Which faith, except one do keep, whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish everlastingly.

Now, as you know, we don't talk in terms like that anymore. And that creed perhaps is an embarrassment to us. That here is the faith, you are to hold it, whole and undefiled.

[2 : 3 8] And if you don't, you will perish eternally. And so it becomes very decisive. The very decisive thing, which is at the heart of the Christian faith, is the gospel or the good news.

Now, most of you are addicted, as I suppose I am, to watching the news these days. And the hope is that you will pick up the two o'clock news today and that there will be some good news.

It's hard to imagine what that good news would be, but it would be nice if it came. What I guess we mostly hope for is that it won't be as bad as we're afraid it might be.

And so it's good news if it's not too bad. But what you have in the New Testament is the proclamation of the gospel as good news.

And it's something very specific. It's specific in the sense that this creed is specific. You know, unless you hear and receive this, you will without doubt perish everlastingly.

[3 : 53] That's the ancient language of a time in our history when we were not afflicted as we are at the moment by believing everything and nothing.

We're sort of a little bit like a flower, you know, that opens up like this. And we're open to everything but closed on nothing, you know.

We're open to every possibility. So that when we hear a statement like, Whosoever will be saved must before all things believe the Catholic Church, and except you believe it, you will doubtless perish.

Well, we say our armor for that kind of statement is, Well, that's somebody's opinion. And then, on the other hand, we can have somebody else's opinion. And on the other hand, we can have somebody else's opinion.

And we can go on living the whole of our life, never deciding about anything. Well, the gospel is something which is at the heart of the New Testament, which demands a decision.

[5 : 00] You've got to make up your mind about it. And even if you decide not to decide about it, you find yourself having decided about it.

Because that's your decision, and that's what you have to face up to. Now, what I want just to show you by way of this gospel is that it is the heart of an argument which is started by the New Testament and which it is the responsibility of the Christian church to maintain in the heart of the community in which we live and the culture in which we live.

We have got to set forth this argument, and we've got to maintain the argument. So I just took a quick look through the Acts of the Apostles to try and show you how it works in different places and how the gospel was preached, exhorted, proclaimed, argued, demonstrated all the way through the Acts of the Apostles.

And all the way through the Acts of the Apostles, some people believed it, and some people denied it with everlasting consequences.

And that goes on. And our responsibility is that people hear the argument and make up their mind. You know that most of our life is based on argument.

[6 : 36] We spend most of our time arguing. Our political system is a system whereby you take any issue and you argue about it until you come to the point where somebody says, we're calling for a vote this way or this way.

So that the argument is presented. I was very impressed by the argument in the Senate which preceded the decision to support the President in his call for war against Iraq.

It was a magnificent argument. And opinions were clearly presented and senators were called upon at the end of it to get off the fence and say yes or no.

And they did. And even the Canadian Parliament did that yesterday. They argued it. And every debate that comes up, if you want to build a particular project on this street, you get an argument going about it so that you can hear all the opinions and so you can make a decision.

Now that's what the New Testament is about. It's about this argument. And when you look at the argument, you can see Paul goes to Salamis in Cyprus and there he proclaimed the word of God in the synagogue of the Jews.

[8 : 00] So the synagogue was a place where arguments took place. And churches need to be places where arguments take place. And what I hope this group will become is a place where an argument is taking place on a continuing basis from week to week.

And that argument concerns the truth of the Gospel. And people in this community will hear what the argument is for it and they hear every day what the argument is against it and they will recognize, I trust that they have to make their mind up about it.

And by God's grace will come to do so. So Paul starts that in Salamis in Cyprus. He goes on to Antioch. And there again he goes to the synagogue.

And it's always a great delight to me for my Jewish friends to remind them that the earliest records of synagogue worship are in the New Testament.

That's one of the peculiarities of history. But that's the way it works. So Paul goes to Antioch and there after the reading of the law and the prophets the rabbi looks around at this congregation and says to them, Well, if any of you have a word of exhortation for us, say it.

[9 : 32] And you didn't have to ask St. Paul twice. And he got up and he said it. And he said it with such eloquence, contending with him that Jesus was the Christ, that they said to him, Well, this has been very worthwhile.

Will you come back next Sabbath day? And Paul said, Yes, I will. And so he came back the next Sabbath day. And in Antioch, virtually the whole city came to hear him on that Sabbath day.

They had been caught up in the argument concerning this teaching that Paul was giving so that they all came. Well, then the religious institutional authorities got wind of this and decided that if you belong to a particular church or denomination, you recognize this syndrome that if anything is going too well, there must be something wrong with it.

And so in Paul's argument, won this tremendous hearing. They decided, Well, there must be something wrong with what he's saying. And so when the whole city came out, the religious establishment saw the multitudes and they stirred up controversy about it and Paul and Barnabas were driven out of the district.

So they had to leave. But the argument was left behind them. Paul and Barnabas left, but the argument they'd raised was still there. When you go on to Iconium, there again, the same kind of thing happened.

[11 : 22] Believing Jews stirred up the Gentiles. Some sided with the Jews. Some sided with the apostles. The apostles were molested and stoned and driven out of town.

But again, the argument had been started. You know, that was what happened. And then with that argument and with the positive response to that argument, the Church of Jesus Christ was established in that community.

Then they went on to Lystra. And Lystra was the place where a man who had been crippled was healed. And of course, that was a sign of the authority of the gospel.

Miracles take place in the New Testament only to point to the gospel. miracles are not ends in themselves. They are signs that point to the gospel. And this became very controversial.

The first thing that happened was that the community turned out in large numbers and the prophet of Zeus came and offered worship to Paul and his companions.

[12 : 25] They wanted to worship them. And Paul said he thought that would be singularly inappropriate, that they had missed what the argument was about. And so having missed what the argument was about, he started again.

And when he started again to tell them what the argument was really about, then they decided that they didn't want to deal with that. And so what happened to Paul at that point was that he was stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead.

So you can imagine that he'd never do that again until the next opportunity came along. And so when the next opportunity comes along, as it's recorded in Acts, he goes to Philippi, and there there's a women's prayer circle by the river, and he goes and he teaches those women and that group that gather there on the Sabbath, he teaches them the gospel.

He starts the argument among them as well. And the argument didn't bother anybody there until one of the girls, a girl that went around following them who had a spirit of divination, the Bible said, and called them the servants of the Most High God, became such a nuisance that Paul had the evil spirit cast out of her, and this turned the merchants of the city against Paul, and he was thrown into jail, which was better than being stoned to death.

But he was thrown into jail, and you will remember in the middle of the night, the jailer understood the argument in a way that is sort of exemplary to the whole, you know, when he was about to do himself in, and Paul said to him, no, no, do yourself no harm.

[14 : 12] And the jailer and all his family were saved, and they were baptized into the Christian faith that night. And so you have a nucleus of people who responded positively to the gospel.

In Berea, the same thing happens. The argument is started, and the Bereans were considered better than the Thessalonians because the Bereans listened to the argument and studied the scriptures to see whether the argument was true or not.

And that's a great help because most people in our society reject the gospel of Jesus Christ by muttering about Jimmy and Tammy Baker or something and walking away.

They don't really examine the evidence or hear the argument. They can say, well, I had a friend who professed and called himself a Christian and he drank too much, so I don't really believe in that. Well, that's not what you'd call hearing the argument.

That's not what the argument is about. The argument is essentially about the person of Jesus Christ. And Paul had made that argument for three weeks in Thessalonica.

[15 : 25] Day after day for three weeks he argued with him that Jesus was the Christ. And then he was driven away from there, went to Berea, and they listened to the argument and heard him, but then he was driven away from there.

So it's thought that he then took the holiday and went to Athens. Lots of people go to Athens on holidays, but he was overwhelmed by the need of the city and so he went into the Areopagus and he started the argument again.

And they were very interested in the argument and because they were, that's really the home of this debating society of the world that the whole pattern of arguing your way through to some kind of truth is established in Athens so that Paul got in on the argument at this central point in the whole ancient world when he went and argued in Athens.

And they said to him, we will hear you again about this. But the result of his argument was that Dionysius, Damaris, and others became Christians and so a Christian community, a positive response to the argument was established there.

And then he went to Corinth and he started arguing again, again in the synagogue. He split the synagogue in half is a wonderful way of building churches in the economy of God.

[16 : 47] We don't think it's so good, but sometimes God uses it. The synagogue was split down the middle. Paul moved into the hall next door to the synagogue, which was very diplomatic in the street and ecumenically minded of him, so that he was in the hall next door.

And there he carried on the argument. And it says that he carried it on for 18 months of teaching. And you can imagine the impact it had, and you can see some of the impact it had if you look at the letters that subsequently were written to the church that was established after Paul's 18 months of arguing in the hall next door to the synagogue in Corinth.

And so the argument was there. Then along came Apollos, and Apollos was arguing in Corinth as well.

And the Corinthians heard him and decided he hadn't quite got it straight, so they took the preacher aside and sorted him out. There's always some people in every congregation who have that high calling.

And there needs to be. But they sorted Apollos out, and he went on and showed them by the scriptures that the Christ, the Messiah, was Jesus.

[18 : 07] So then Paul went on to Ephesus, and in Ephesus he was arguing and pleading about the kingdom for two years. In Troas, you begin to get a change at this point when Paul in Troas goes there to confirm the saints in their faith, those who had believed and had taken up the argument, had taken up the battle for the gospel in their country, in their city, and Paul went to encourage them.

Paul goes to Jerusalem, and where there is a howling mob screaming against him, he asks if he could speak a word to them.

The Roman authorities didn't quite know who he was and what he was saying, so they let him speak to them. So Paul stood up and told them what the argument was about, that Jesus was the Christ.

And the howling mob turned him over then to the council of Sadducees and Pharisees, and they listened to him, and Paul again took up the argument with them.

And that was the place where he was very cunning and recognized that there were Sadducees here and Pharisees there, and so he told them that he was arrested because he believed in the resurrection of the dead, at which point the Sadducees took off after the Pharisees and the Pharisees after the Sadducees, and they fought each other then about that because the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

[19 : 42] When he went from there, he was, having been arrested, he was taken down to Caesarea, and there King Herod Agrippa and his sister Berenice and Festus, the governor, all came out and heard him, and Paul presented the argument to them.

And the end result of that argument was that Agrippa said to him, do you think to make me a Christian? And Paul said, I would that you were even as I am except for these chains, that he really did want to make him a Christian.

And the purpose of establishing and maintaining the argument concerning who the person of Jesus Christ is, is that people will come to put their faith in him, that he is, in fact, who he says he is.

And that's the argument that we all need to become engaged in. It's a conflict in our world, and it's a serious conflict.

And I'm not advocating necessarily that we've conducted in the same way, but it ultimately is a more serious conflict than the Gulf War, because it has to do with the eternal purposes of God in history.

[21 : 01] We're right now fighting about temporary purposes of man in history, where we've come to a place of conflict, but the essential conflict concerns the gospel.

And what I wanted to show you before, as I conclude here, is this. Because I think this is where the problem is in the whole thing.

The difficulty that we have, and I think we particularly have this difficulty in Canada, is that we don't understand what it is that Paul was arguing about.

And the reason we don't understand it is that we don't think anything is true except ourselves and our own awareness. We think there is nothing that has objective truth out there.

What the scripture says is that, in fact, there are things, some of them are secret things that you can't know, and the other things are revealed things which you can know.

[22 : 07] And the nature of the gospel is that it's revealed. We didn't discover it. We didn't invent it. It was something in which God reveals himself to us.

Paul wasn't saying that I have studied philosophy these many years and this is the conclusion I have come to. Paul says exactly the opposite. I believe this thing to be diabolically untrue and I was out to persecute the people who maintained that it was true.

And it was while I was, in fact, caught red-handed doing that that I was confronted by a light above the brightness of the sun and I was struck down by Christ who said, Paul, Paul, why are you persecuting me?

Why are you rejecting me? Now that's the most dramatic possible story of a Christian's conversion. But the thing that, the reason that we try and establish and maintain this argument and the reason that we want to establish in this place a gathering of people where you can come and hear the argument presented on a continuing basis week by week is for that very reason that people will be confronted by the person of Christ who says to them, what have you got against me?

And that's the most profound question that anybody can ever answer because it searches the depths of our hearts when we have to answer that question.

[23 : 49] And you find that when you get somebody to begin to unload what it is they have against Christ that you find out all the secrets of their heart come up. and it's in that you see that God has revealed himself in Christ and we are meant to know what God has revealed and we are meant to know it because God has revealed it.

You see it's not the result it's not a finding of our technologically proficient society nor is it a finding of our philosophers. It is something that God has revealed.

In the same way you could look at me all afternoon and never know that I was born in Hogs Hollow unless I told him. In the same way you can consider the possibility of God and know nothing about him at the end of the day unless he tells you.

And Paul's argument you see was that God has told us who he is. He's shown us exactly who he is. He is Jesus Christ. And that's the thing that you have to contend for.

Now what happens you see in our society and with this I will conclude our society has become very confused. And that is with what John Stott quotes as being a becoming modesty.

[25 : 17] He says with becoming modesty we say I don't know what is revealed and I do know what is secret. Our society is really mixed up. The things that we're not able to know we have convictions about and the things that have been revealed to us we say we don't know.

And we turn the whole thing upside down. So that when you present the argument of the gospel of Jesus Christ to people then they tend to say well I happen to know a whole lot about God on my own.

I don't need to know that because the secret things I understand. You don't understand. You don't understand them essentially because you can't understand them they're secret things.

They haven't been revealed and there's lots and lots that we don't know. Christians get into trouble all the time in our world because it looks as though they are saying they know everything.

They don't know that much. but they do know what's been revealed and what's been revealed is that God has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 25] And that was the argument that Paul took to Athens to Berea to Philippi to Ephesus to Thessalonica to all those places.

He took the argument. And for his trouble he was stoned horsewit left for dead. driven out jailed all those things because of the enormous resistance there is to the revelation that God has made of himself in Christ.

We are in a war right now with a world community that is built on a rejection of Jesus Christ.

And that's the world of Islam. It is designed as a rejection of Jesus Christ. The tragic part of the war is that we who should have faith in Jesus Christ have faith in technological superiority.

And so in a sense we have rejected dependence upon Jesus Christ. And what we need to argue is that what we are called to do is to put our faith and trust in Christ as the one in whom God has revealed himself.

[27 : 48] And in a loving, caring, amiable, thoughtful, sensitive, hearing way, faith. I trust that God will honor the beginning of this group on this day as being a place where we will be faithful not to try and uncover the secrets which we can't know, but to share what we can know of what God has revealed of himself in Christ.

Let me say a prayer. Amen. Father, our words are too many and too vague and too ill-defined, but you have spoken and you have spoken clearly to us in the person of your Son.

And though we struggle to hear one another, give us grace to hear you and to know what it is you are saying to us, to enter into the argument with you that we may be convinced of the truth of your revelation and that we may come to put our whole hearts trust in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.