

Acts 17:1-15

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[0 : 00] It was the best of times, but it was the worst of times.

So begins Charles Dickens' tale of two cities, right? His long, sprawling, sometimes boring novel about London and Paris during the French Revolution.

Well, in our passage this morning, Luke's going to tell us his own tale of two cities. Two cities that are addressed with a revolutionary message, but who give two very different responses.

And what makes this tale of two cities relevant to us today is actually this same revolutionary message is summoning each one of us, even here this morning.

A summons to have our world turned upside down, as it were. Or maybe, perhaps better put, to have our world turned right side up. So let's pick up our study of Acts today in chapter 17, verses 1 through 15.

[1 : 16] That's page 296 in the Pew Bible, Acts 17, verses 1 through 15. Let me read Luke's tale of two cities.

Now, when they, that is, Paul and Silas and Timothy, 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, that is, the Jewish leaders of the synagogue, 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.

[2 : 38] 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 in 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 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 learned 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.

[3 : 48] Well, we have a great contrast here, don't we? Paul comes, arrives, proclaims the message, the good news that Israel's long-awaited king and the world's true Lord has come.

This Jesus whom I proclaim to you, he says, is the Christ. And at Thessalonica, this word is met with highly charged accusation. And then at Berea, a city some 30 miles down the road, it's met with a noble or open-minded examination.

One message, two responses. And it's this contrast between these two that I think Luke wants us to see. And for us today, I think that there are sort of three things that kind of come out of this contrast

as we hold them in tension.

I think that as we look at this contrast for us today, there's an encouragement and there's a challenge. And lastly, there is a summons. As I mentioned, there's a call.

So first, let's look at the encouragement in this contrast. And it's this. Don't we see here that healthy churches can grow even in hard places?

[5 : 09] You know, you might think that the opposition in Thessalonica would have destroyed any chance of the church taking root there, right? But that's not what we see. Compare.

Look down. Compare verse 4 and verse 12. Look at both of those verses, one in Thessalonica, one in Berea. In both cities, we see something stunning.

That men and women, Jews and Greeks, working class and upper class, they're all responding and joining themselves to Christ and the church.

You know, it's funny, isn't it? Somewhere along the way, we got this idea that Christianity only really gets traction among the uneducated or the impoverished.

But historically, that's just not true. In fact, in places where Christianity is growing even today, like in China, for instance, it's growing across the social strata.

[6 : 05] But, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, powerful and marginalized, all finding in Jesus their true king.

It's just what Luke shows us here in Acts 17, that all kinds of people find the message of Jesus as king, not just merely plausible, but intellectually compelling and personally liberating.

But, you know, we also got this idea somewhere along the way that sort of stiff cultural opposition or resistance to the gospel will somehow eliminate any hopes of seeing real growth and health in the church.

But again, doesn't Luke's tale of two cities here prove that healthy churches can thrive in hard contexts? And if Luke's description is enough, listen to Paul's own description of the church in 1 Thessalonians, a letter he wrote not long after leaving that city.

This is what he writes in the first chapter. In fact, if you want to turn over there, this would be a good paragraph to look at. 1 Thessalonians in chapter 1. Pick up in verse 4.

[7 : 13] This is a paragraph, by the way, that's really captured our imagination as a church.

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

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord. For you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols. To serve the living and true God. So here Paul admits that the church was born in much affliction.

[8 : 21] And yet the church is growing in joy and in faithful imitation of Christ. And even more, the word is sounding forth from them like a ringing bell.

To the surrounding cities and regions. So much so that, did you catch what Paul said there? It's almost as if the apostles are now out of a job in Macedonia and Achaia.

They show up to a city and people are already talking about the great thing that happened in Thessalonica. Brothers and sisters, I think this is an encouragement to us today. An encouragement not to be driven by fear.

Not to be blown and tossed by the rhetoric of the culture wars that we live in. And not to give in to discouragement thinking all is lost.

And also not to think that we need to radically sort of reinvent the message or the methods of the gospel. If we hope to see God's kingdom take root in our city and in our day.

[9 : 26] I mean, look at how Paul approaches Thessalonica and then Berea. It's not as if Paul preaches at Thessalonica, gets slandered and misrepresented and forced to leave. And then says, well, that didn't work.

And then tries a totally different strategy in Berea. And somehow it happens to work. No. He does the same exact thing in both cities. And by God's grace, the church takes root in both.

So isn't that a great encouragement that we can keep the message clear? Look at verses 2 through 3. It's a good model for us, actually. Look at how Paul approaches this. He patiently, over a number of weeks we're told, he patiently reasons.

And that word reason there implies that he's listening and engaging with questions and concerns. And he explains. The emphasis there is on clarity.

He's literally opening up, as it were, as clear as he can, the truth about Jesus. And he proves. He lays out the evidence, putting the claims and the evidence side by side as best he can.

[10 : 33] And we know that he loves. We know from 1 Thessalonians that we just read from that Paul stays in this city longer than just these three weeks that sort of Luke mentions here.

And he's there. And he's there. He's living. He's loving. He's sharing his life with them. That's the shape of good gospel outreach.

Reasoning, explaining, proving, loving. And yes, sometimes it will be misrepresented.

Even slandered. You know, when the synagogue leaders in Thessalonica stir up a riot, these wicked men of the rabble. Isn't that a great phrase? And they say to the governing authorities, these men are turning the world upside down.

It's obviously not a compliment, right? It's not like they're giving them a high five for being so cutting edge. Way to turn the world upside down, guys. You're trending on Facebook.

[11 : 36] No, the word for world here basically means the Roman world. It's not cosmos, sort of absolutely everything. It's the oikumene.

It's the Roman world. And turning upside down functionally means that they're subverting it. So the charge being leveled against Paul and Silas and Timothy here is that they're subverting the rule of the empire.

It's a charge of high treason. These men, they're saying, or at least trying to say, are socially dangerous.

They're bad for our city. We don't want them here. And neither do you. Now keep in mind, historically, only about a year before this incident, Claudius, the emperor, had all the Jews expelled from Rome.

Because of a theological conflict. We'll get into that in a couple weeks when we meet some of those Jews in chapter 18. So you see, there are political tensions in the air cropping up over the Christian movement.

[12 : 42] And that's probably why the city authorities are so, Luke says, disturbed at this accusation. And of course, in the way that this accusation was meant, it wasn't true.

Christians weren't plotting a military coup to overthrow Caesar and enthrone Jesus in Rome. Wasn't exactly the strategy, right?

Jesus was sitting at the Father's right hand, ruling and reigning over everything. He didn't really need to be sitting on a throne in Rome. Thank you very much. In fact, one of the points that Luke seems to be making here for a broader Greco-Roman audience is that such allegations against Christians are false.

The church's mission is not some sort of power play military takeover. Far from it. But, that the kingdom of Jesus is not the way of the sword, but the way of the cross and the resurrection.

And Paul, true to this message, comes not manipulating, not coercing, but reasoning and persuading and loving.

[13 : 59] But, of course, for some, this call to complete allegiance to Jesus as king is still considered today a socially or culturally dangerous idea.

You don't need me to tell you that. After all, some say, won't allegiance to Jesus as the one true king make you utterly intolerant of other people? Unloving to those who disagree?

How can you say that your way is right and theirs is wrong? That seems bad for our city. Or, won't allegiance to Jesus as king mean that you have to suppress your identity and lose your freedom? Won't you have to commit some form of intellectual or emotional suicide to believe something like that? That idea is bad for our city. And that brings us to the second thing that Luke's tale of two cities puts before us.

There's not just an encouragement for us here to not despair, but there's also a challenge. And the challenge is this. One of the things we say we value as a culture is being open-minded, isn't it?

[15 : 25] We place a high value on not judging too quickly and certainly not letting prejudice or certainly not social conformity override our reason, right?

And Luke's story is challenging us, as it were, to put our money where our mouth is. To not merely say that we should be open-minded, but to actually do it.

The Jews in Berea are held up as an example to us. Look at verse 11. They examine the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

And that, Luke says, makes them more noble. And the sense of that word means something like more open-minded. You see, Christianity, friends, welcomes careful questioning, thorough examination, reasoned investigation.

In fact, the nature of Christianity not only welcomes this, but it practically demands it. You see, Christianity doesn't come along and say, look, you should believe in Jesus simply because it works. [16:36] Because it gives you subjective peace or inner strength or joy. You know, lots of religions claim to work in that way. Maybe some of you experience them working in that way from time to time.

But rather, Christianity comes and says, believe in Jesus not just because it works, but ultimately because it's true. Because Jesus was an actual person who lived and died and rose again in history.

We're not talking about something off in a theoretical realm, but a flesh and blood person who made good on his claims. Now, you might be thinking, there is no way I could consider Christianity to be true.

It's one thing if it works, but come on. There is no way I could give my whole life to Jesus as king, as Lord. I mean, look, all of my friends, all of my colleagues, all my professors, all my teachers, none of them believe this.

And they're all really, really fill in the blank, right? They're all smart. They're all important. They're all accomplished. They're all influential. They've all published big books that eventually end up being doorstops after a while.

[17:59] No, books are great. Publish books. Do that, friends, in the academy. But, you know, when you step back, isn't it interesting that Thessalonica, as we know, was the leading city of the district.

In fact, Paul sort of passes through Amphipolis and Abilonia to get to Thessalonica to do some work there so that it will spread. Thessalonica is the leading city. It's the capital, the hotspot, the influential center. And Berea, well, Cicero even says it's a little off the beaten path.

It wasn't quite Nowheresville. But it wasn't the leading city of the region. And yet it's interesting what happens when we contrast the responses of the two.

You see, it's not the bigger, more influential, more important place that's more open-minded. Or even more intellectually engaged. Just the opposite.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's easy to hide our prejudices behind our prestige. It's easy to make a good show of being reasoned and open-minded when actually we're just protecting our interests.

[19:28] Friend, don't make that mistake. Why not examine it for yourself with an open mind? But you know, it's not just the people around us that keep us from an open-minded examination of the claims of Christianity, is it?

Isn't it also the nature of this claim itself? That Jesus is king. That we owe him our utter allegiance and loyalty.

The right over our lives. Every part of it. It's not hard to see why we avoid considering that with an open mind. We don't want another king.

As verse 7 says. We're happy being our own kings. We're happy with the kings that we've set up. And our comfortable equilibrium that we've developed. I'd much rather run my life my own way than give him the throne of my life. Sure, he can be an advisor.

[20:35] Even a wise teacher. Even some kind of divine being. But not king. After all, we think. Why can't I just run my own life?

Do some good works. Be a good person. And then, God will just accept me on the basis of how I've lived my life. Isn't that a much safer bargain?

I earn God's favor. I keep control. Everybody wins. But friends, what makes us so sure that our good works can actually earn God's favor?

And what makes us so sure that we're capable of running our own lives well? Does history prove that humans are good at running their own lives?

And taking care of this world that we live in? But underneath it all, isn't the biggest question, isn't the biggest barrier this one?

[21 : 41] That if I give my life to this king, to this lord, how can I be sure that he has my best in mind? How can I be sure that if I submit my life to him, I won't end up, let's just be honest, miserable and alone?

Nearly every other king that we see in the world, every other power, every other authority, every other so-called Caesar, aren't they usually out for their own interest?

To advance their own little kingdom? What makes Jesus' kingship any different? In other words, can I trust him?

Can you trust that he's not just another king like all the rest, but a wholly different kind of king? And that brings us to the third and last thing we see in this passage.

There's a summons. And it's a summons to see something deeper about this king. And it's found in verse 3. Look at it again. It was necessary, Paul explains, for the Christ, the Messiah, this king, necessary to suffer and to rise from the dead.

[23 : 04] Did you catch that little word? Necessary. You see, friends, here's the difference between casual religion and a heart-changing relationship with God.

Here's the difference between holding Jesus at arm's length and gladly embracing him as king. Here's the difference between keeping up the status quo and having your world turned upside down.

It was necessary. The Messiah had to suffer and die. Of course, everyone thinks something's wrong with the world, right?

The question is, what's going to rescue us? Good education? Better laws? A stronger economy? None of these things are bad. They're all good and worthy pursuits. But the problem's much, much deeper.

The problem is we've rebelled against our creator and justly deserved death. And the only way for us to be reconciled to him and know the life for which we were created is for our penalty to be taken away by another in our place.

[24 : 12] And Luke says that Paul explained and proved this from the scriptures. Of course, Paul probably had certain passages in mind.

Isaiah 53, Psalm 22. Some others we've seen along the way in the story of Acts. But look at the whole sweep of the biblical story.

It's there on every page, isn't it? In order for Israel to be brought home from captivity, she must pass through the darkness of exile. In order for worshipers to draw near to God, there must be a sacrifice.

In order for Adam and Eve to return to the garden, someone must pass under the flaming sword of judgment. The very warp and woof of God's long, patient revelation in scripture is this.

That our only hope is that a king must come, suffer, and be raised for us. And the good news is this.

[25 : 25] This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is that king. The king who in love willingly came and did all that was necessary, dying our death, rising for our life.

All that was necessary for you and me to be reconciled to God through trusting in him. Do you remember how Dickens' novel ends? A tale of two cities? Of course not, because you read it in like ninth grade, right?

The two main characters, Charles and Sidney, one French, the other English, who look practically identical to one another, both fall in love with the same woman. But she, Lucy, eventually marries Charles, the French aristocrat, and they have a child.

And then as the French Revolution rages on, Charles is captured, arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. But at the end of the story, Sidney, the jilted Englishman, visits Charles in prison.

And on the night before he's about to face the guillotine, Sidney offers to take his place so that he can go free. And Charles refuses, of course. So Sidney has him drugged and smuggled away to England with his family.

[26 : 47] And that night in prison, a young seamstress is there. She's also condemned to die. And she comes up to Sidney to talk with him, thinking that he's Charles. And then she realizes it's not him.

And her eyes grow wide. And she asks, are you dying for him? And Sidney responds, and his wife, and his child.

Hush. Yes. It's a moving scene. But how much more moving to realize that this is what the king has done for us?

How much more riveting to realize that what Jesus has done is actually more than just one friend taking the place of another. As amazing as that is.

But the king of glory. Emptying himself. For sinners. So now you see why the accusers in verse 6 of our passage spoke better than they knew.

[27 : 50] The death and resurrection of Jesus does turn the world upside down. Unlike any other king, Christ used his infinite power and glory not to lord it over others.

Not to be served. But to serve. And to give his life as a ransom for many. And doesn't all this mean that through the cross and resurrection, we see that this is a king.

This king is a king you can trust. It was necessary for the Messiah to die. That we know. And Jesus has gladly done it for you.

So when you give your life to him. When you give him your total allegiance. No strings attached.

You're giving your life to the one. Who gave his life for you.

And that means you have nothing to fear. If he's done all that for you. Emptying himself. Suffering. Dying. How could his risen lordship over your life not be for your good.

[29 : 03] Not be to bring you too. Into the reality of his new creation. And so friends you can enter in to his kingdom.

And you can stop having your mind closed. By the need for power and status and approval. And instead. You can come enter into a truly revolutionary life. After all doesn't the world say that wealth and power and status.

That that's what matters. But through the cross and resurrection. Jesus shows us. That true power comes through service.

And that true status comes through being brought low. For the sake of others. And that true wealth is found. When you give it away.

The first will be last. And the last will be first. Jesus has turned the world upside down.

[30 : 06] This isn't just another king. But a wholly different king. And friends that is good news. For you. For me. For the world.

For the world. For the world. For the world. For the world. For the world. For the world. So Christian. I wonder. Will you too. Take up. This noble example. Of the Bereans.

And daily. Eagerly. Examine the scriptures. To see if these things are so. Will you make it a life giving. Noble practice.

To commune with God. And his word. And to be shaped. More and more. Into this kingdom. Life. Maybe one of the reasons. We're so bored.

In our walk with God. Is because we're not. Actually getting it. And if you're not a Christian.

[31 : 01] Yet. Will you see through. The misrepresentations. And really consider the heart. Of Christianity.

This morning. That there is a king. Who yes. Calls you. To utmost allegiance. And loyalty. But who gave himself.

Fully to prove. That he's the only one. Who actually deserves it. A tale of two cities. Which are you this morning.

Let's pray. Let's take a moment.

And just be quiet. Before God together. And consider the ways. In which our hearts. Have been responding. To the lordship.

[32 : 02] Of Christ. Christ. Perhaps there's an area. Where we've. Been unwilling.

To fully entrust to him. Perhaps you've been. Considering Christianity.

For some time. But haven't yet. Made a decision. To trust in him. Father. I pray this morning.

That the message. Of your son. Jesus Christ. Our lord. The world's true king. Lord. That the message. Of his cross.

And resurrection. Would melt. Our hearts. To trust him. And by your spirit. To live. In light of his kingdom.

[33 : 04] Lord. We confess. It's not easy. To have our. Comfortable worlds. Turned upside down. We've spent so many years. Building. Our reputations. And our prestige.

And our status. We have so much. Invested. We think. In these things. That they're painful. To think about. Letting go.

Or sitting loose to. Or not considering. Ultimate anymore. And yet. The glory.

Of knowing you. How does it not. Outstrip all these things. Father. Impress it upon our hearts. We pray. Amen.

Well friends. We're going to worship. This king. Together. In song. As we respond. So let's stand.

And let's sing together. Perhaps. Thank you.

[34 : 09] Once. Harvest. Once. Once. Now. ■■. If. You were. Four. I'm forgiven. Because. You were. Forgiven. Forgiven. Because.

You were. Forsaken. Unaccepted. You were condemned I would lie to them Your spirit is within me
Because you died and rose again Sin had bound me But your mercy freed me Your grace was
given me