

Acts 17 (Part 1): 1-15 • When what we believe is challenged

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Life Bible Ministry

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ 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.” ⁴ 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. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

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

Let's stop there and let's pray.

Father, we thank You for the opportunity this morning to be together, to worship together, and to spend some time digging into the Word. And we pray Father in Jesus name that You would lead and guide and direct our hearts into

all truth, because Lord, this is Your promise to us. Be with us we pray, in the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen. Amen. Amen.

Well, you guys will remember, we noted last week that when Paul and Silas arrived at Philippi there weren't enough Jews in that city to qualify to have a synagogue, and so they simply gathered at the river's edge to find a place to pray and so forth.

But now, as they make their way into Thessalonica, there is a sufficient Jewish population to have a synagogue. And as was his custom, Paul went there first to share the good news of the Messiah to and with his fellow Jews. And you'll notice here in this passage, and I like this, Luke gives us a very, very brief sampling of the message that Paul brought to the Jews. And the essence of it is contained in verses 2 and 3.

If you look there with me in your Bible, it says once again, *“And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ 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.””*

Now, this is really interesting. First of all, you need to understand that Paul's talking to Jews and Luke is writing this in Greek so there are some different words that are being used here. Paul would not have used the name Jesus because that's Greek, and he would not have used the title, Christ, because that's Greek. He's talking to Jews and so he would have said to them, this Yeshua, whom I proclaim to you, is the Mashiach, or the Messiah. Okay?

And specifically, he goes on, and Luke tells us that *“he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”* Now, when it says *“the Scriptures,”* what is it referring to? Well, it's referring to the only Scriptures he had, which was the Hebrew Scriptures.

And so it's saying here that from the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul *“reasoned with them.”* And you'll notice that it says, he explained and proved that the Messiah must *“suffer and rise from the dead.”* Interesting, isn't it? Think about that.

If you had nothing but the Old Testament from which to share Christ, how would you do? If you were set out with the task to prove to your audience who was aware of the Hebrew Scriptures, but that's all you had, how would you do in explaining that Jesus must suffer and rise?

Well, I want to explain to you just in a moment how he did that. I want to show you some of the Scriptures that I'm sure he used to explain from the Old Testament about those things.

But first I want to explain to you why it was necessary for Paul to demonstrate to those Jews, first of all, that Messiah must suffer. Why was that even necessary?

Well, the reason it was necessary, it's because, to Jews, the idea of a suffering Messiah was a contradiction in terms, and the reason it was a contradiction to them is because of what the name Messiah means. Let me put this up on the screen for you.

Messiah = The Anointed One (God's anointed servant)
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The word Messiah, the title Messiah, means The Anointed One. In Hebrew, it literally means, anointed, but they came to understand it as the One who was Anointed of God. In other words, this is God's anointed servant, anointed by God. That's what it meant to them. All right.

And so that's what would naturally enter the mind of a Jewish audience when Paul stood up, or actually the Rabbis sat down to teach back then, but he would begin to teach them and he'd say, let me tell you about Messiah.

Well, instantly, in every mind in the room, they're thinking, The Anointed One. The Anointed of God. Okay? You have to think like a Jew, right? Now, keep in mind, Paul also told them that God's Anointed would suffer, and not only suffer, but He would suffer on a Roman cross. Now, think about this. Crosses were made from wood. Wood came from trees and that means a passage from Deuteronomy 21 comes into play. Let me show you that passage.

<u>Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (ESV)</u>
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<i>“And if a man...is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”</i>

“And if a man...is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, (why?) for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

Now, since Jesus was crucified on a wooden Roman cross, that means that the following, let me show you.

Messiah = The Anointed One
Anointed by God

Hung on a tree = Cursed
Cursed by God

Remember, we looked at Messiah means, Anointed by God. Well, hung on a tree means Cursed by God.

Do you see how it is a contradiction in terms to a Jewish mind? The Jews would naturally, as Paul starts talking about the cross, they'd say wait, wait, wait a minute, Saul of Tarsus. You're trying to convince me that this Yeshua that you're speaking of is at once, the Anointed of God and the cursed of God at the same time. And so they would say, well, that doesn't make any sense.

But I want to emphasize something here to all of you. Paul didn't explain how such a thing could make sense. There is a way to explain it. All right, and I'm not going to get into it this morning.

There is a way to explain it, but you'll notice he doesn't do that. He doesn't get into some long, detailed explanation of how Yeshua can be both the Anointed of God and the cursed of God at the same time.

All it says is, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, okay? In other words, Paul simply showed them where the Scriptures taught the idea, and he left it at that, okay?

Now, that should be enough for anyone who believes in the Bible. And the reason that's important for us to know as we're looking through this passage, is that, we have to remember that there are a great many biblical doctrines that frankly don't appeal to our intellectual reason. What I mean by that is, they don't make sense to a human mind.

And there are a lot of people out there who demand that things make sense to them. And if they don't make sense to them, they're pretty much going to kick them out, and they're going to tell you, well, I'm not going to believe that because that doesn't make any sense.

Have you ever been asked by anyone to explain the Trinity? Anyone ever asked you to do that? I've had that question many times. And let me tell you, when you tell people, a., I can't explain the Trinity because it defies human explanation. And b., it's something that we simply believe because it's revealed in the Word of God, some folks just tilt and their brains go offline because they're not willing to go there. They're not willing to, a., believe that there's something in the Bible that goes beyond their human intellect and b., they just not willing to believe something simply because it's in the Bible. That's not good enough.

And so, they just won't believe it. But here's the deal, if everything in the Bible has to be intellectually apprehendable to you personally, I'm just telling you right now, there are a lot of things in the Bible that are going to cause you problems. If you demand that everything be intellectually understandable, you're going to run into problems.

And most of those problems, I'll tell you right now, are going to pertain to the person and the nature of God, okay, because the Trinity is one of those things that pertains to the person and the nature of God. And those things, they're beyond us.

I got to tell you though, I am convinced to this day that the reason that the Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe in the Trinity is because they just can't figure it out. They just can't figure it out. I've had Jehovah's Witnesses stand on my doorstep when I talk to them about the nature of God and they say to me these words, that doesn't make sense. And I'm like, exactly.

But I'll be honest with you, I find great comfort in the fact that God exceeds my ability to figure Him out. I've said to you many times, if I could figure out and understand the nature of God, that would mean that my brain is equal to the nature of God. You with me? That's the thing we don't seem to understand. That's the thing Jehovah's Witnesses don't seem to understand.

If you could understand and explain God's nature, that would mean your intellect is equal to God's nature. That's not possible because God so far exceeds you and me and our ability to figure Him out.

There are things He has revealed to us and we can know them. I know that God is a Triune being; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three Persons, one God. I know that to be true. I can't even begin to explain to you how it's true. So you see, there's a difference between knowing something and explaining or understanding something.

Now when the Scripture says that Paul would argue that the Messiah was prophesied to suffer for the sins of mankind. I want to share with you what I believe are quite certainly some of the Scriptures that he would cite because, and I'm sure that Psalm 22 is one of them. Because that's the Psalm that begins with, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* The very words that Jesus uttered from the cross. But that very Psalm, Psalm 22 goes on to say this, look at this on the screen, it says,

Psalm 22:16 (ESV)

...a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—

...a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—

Now, the Jews believed that Psalm 22 is Messianic and yet here in this Psalm, it clearly prophesies that He would be nailed to something. By the way, when David wrote these words down 1,000 years before the birth of Christ, Roman execution by crucifixion had not yet been developed, okay? And yet, here, it is prophetically spoken to us, *"they have pierced my hands and (my) feet—."*

And then I'm pretty sure Paul would have quoted a good portion, if not all of Isaiah 53, which includes statements such as this, look at this. Again, 700 years before Christ was born. The prophet Isaiah was given these words,

Isaiah 53:4-6 (ESV)

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced (look at that, pierced, pierced) for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And this very chapter ends with these words in verse 12,

Isaiah 53:12 (ESV)

...he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

...he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

I mean, this is beautiful and it's powerful. But it is insightful from the standpoint of being able to argue that the Old Testament Scriptures verify the suffering of the Messiah and that very chapter goes on to speak of the resurrection as well.

Now, Luke tells us in verse 4 that, “...*some of (the Jews) ...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...*” Now when he uses the term Jews here in verse 5, he's referring to those who refuse to believe. He says, “*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,...*” At this point, we haven't even been told who Jason is, but he appeared is apparently a believer who offered Paul and Silas and their team a place of lodging, and they began to attack him.

But anyway, I want you to check out with me verse 6 which is very important. It says, “*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,”* That's a really interesting accusation, isn't it? These men have turned the world upside down.

Now, obviously they meant it as an insult, but I truly believe that if Paul and Silas had heard them say that, they would have been delighted to hear unbelievers say, “*these...(guys) have turned the world upside down...*” Inside you're going, yeah, all right, turn the world upside down.

Here's the deal though. I have to confess to you this morning that there are times that I mourn rather than rejoice. There are times that I mourn about the fact that we have failed to turn the world upside down.

They turned to the world upside down without the internet, instant messaging, satellite TV, instantaneous informational broadcast worldwide. But even in our little corner of the world, I feel like we haven't done nearly enough to stop the

downward spiral of decay that naturally happens within the world. But you see, we're called to stop that decay.

Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13) We're to be salt. And back in those days, salt was used for far more than just flavoring your soup. It was used to retard the process of decay. Well, there was no refrigeration so if somebody, killed an animal and they wanted to save some of the meat for later, and keep it from going bad, they used salt, and that would stop or slow down.

In fact, they were so good at it, they could keep a piece of meat almost indefinitely. That's what we're called to do as believers. We're called to slow down the decay process.

But I just, sometimes I feel like, what have we done? What have we accomplished as the body of Christ? I got to tell you something, guys, every time I drive by a pot shop or every time I see a sign advertising the sale of marijuana, I consider it a personal failure on my part.

And the reason is because I've been teaching God's Word in this city for over 33 years and to our shame, we still have, there doesn't seem to be enough of us to keep pot sellers out of our community. Shame on us. We're supposed to be turning the world upside down and we can't stop something like that.

I see all those dispensaries as a black eye on the Christian community. Whenever—I have a hard time even looking at them when I drive by, I mourn that we haven't done enough. That the Christian community hasn't turned the world upside down. We've let too many things slide and guys, that's on us. That's on us and we have to simply take the responsibility.

Verse 10 goes on and it says, *“The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, (that'd be about 45 miles from Thessalonica to Berea) and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.”* Again, in Berea, there was enough Jews and it didn't take much. It was something like 10. I think you had to have like 10 Jews in a city to qualify to have a synagogue. I think that number is correct.

Anyway, Luke tells us in verse 11 and I want you to see this. It says, *“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; (and then he explains why, he says) they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”* And I really liked that. And I think we need to pause here for a minute and we need to talk about this because this deserves some of our attention.

The Jews of Berea contrasted with the Jews in Thessalonica, welcomed Paul's message, and then they dug into it. They diligently just jumped into the Scriptures every day to see if what they were hearing was in fact so. And this response stands in stark contrast where in Thessalonica, the Jews, many of the Jews heard the word and they responded with jealousy and violence.

And so you look at those two reactions to the Word of God by the Jews, right? And you're thinking, wow!, that is night and day. One group gets jealous and violent and the other group becomes excited and eager to check the Scriptures and see if this is actually the case. And Luke describes the Jews in Berea as being *“more noble than those in Thessalonica.”*

So what was the result? Look at verse 12. *“Many of them (it says) therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.”* Right? So many of them believed, but did you notice something here about what Luke is explaining to us in this passage? Well, I guess what I have to say that a different way.

Did you notice there's something that Luke doesn't tell us? He doesn't tell us what made the difference between the Jews in Thessalonica and the Jews in Berea. And you might say, well, yeah, he did. He says it right there, they were more noble. No, no, no. Why were they more noble? That's what I want to know.

Why did the Jews in Berea eagerly examine the Scriptures? Well, again, Luke doesn't really tell us. He just says that there was a greater nobility in their hearts. But I thought long and hard about this, and I thought, what would make the difference between two groups of people, 45 miles apart. Right?

So something like between here and Nampa that would be so different that one of them would respond to the Word of God with jealousy and violence and the other one the other group of people would eagerly say, oh cool, interesting. Let's dig into this and see if this guy is true or if he's blowing smoke What would make that difference?

Well, as somebody who's been in pastoral ministry for the better part of 40 years, I think I can offer at least somewhat of an educated guess. Because I've learned over the years that this eagerness to dig into the Scriptures doesn't typically happen unless a group of people have already developed a habit and a system for digging into the Word of God. You with me?

And I've noticed an odd characteristic about human nature and you tell me if you think this is accurate. But I've watched people, particularly as it relates to the Word of God, once people have started to learn how to study and understand the Bible, they are far less likely to become defensive when their beliefs are challenged. Would you say that's true? I believe it is.

Let me say that again. People who have learned and have developed a habit of studying the Bible are less likely to become defensive and angry when their beliefs are challenged. When somebody comes along and challenges their beliefs.

But I have found that the opposite is also true. If somebody has never studied the Word of God, and they've never learned how to dig into the Scriptures, they are much more likely to become irritated, and defensive, and even abusive if someone dares to challenge what they believe.

And the reason is of course, is because they believe what they believe, but they have no idea why they believe what they believe. They believe it because somebody told them somewhere along the line, this is what's true, and they never looked into it, and they don't know how to defend it. They just, but they believe it, and they can even become very passionate about their beliefs.

But if you say to them, why do you believe that? They're going to get angry at you because they have no idea why they believe. And they don't, and they're too embarrassed to say to you, well, I believe it because somebody once told me that was true. And that's pretty much like saying, I'm an idiot.

I would venture to say that among those who believe something about God or something about the Bible, if you just were to go out and talk to people at large and you say, hey, do you believe in God? Yeah, I believe in God. Do you believe the Bible's God's Word? Yeah. They'll say, yeah. Among those sorts of people, the vast majority of those people are completely unable to defend their beliefs if they were challenged to do so. And you say, do you believe in God? Yeah. Why? Well, I don't know. I just do and it's right for me. And that's the excuse of the day.

That's what we say today. Well, I just believe it because it works for me. Okay. Here's the deal. Paul and Silas came to Berea and they challenged those people as to what they believed. They challenged them, but the response of the Bereans wasn't anger. It wasn't getting defensive. It was eagerness to investigate and judge for themselves. Is this in fact true? We're going to check it out and we're

going to see. And I believe that eagerness to investigate happened because they were accustomed to the process of investigation and looking into God's Word.

And we need to be accustomed to doing that so that if somebody challenges you about your beliefs, you're ready. And you're not going to get angry, you're not going to get defensive, and you're not going to go, well, I don't know. I just believe it. Look what Peter says. 1 Peter chapter 3, verse 15.

1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)

...in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

...in your hearts (he writes) honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

Don't get into an argument. Don't get into a verbal spar, but be ready to make a defense, to make a defense. You know that make a defense, that's where we get our word, apologetics.

Be ready to be able to say, this is why I believe what I believe. Here it is in the Bible. And by the way, here it is in the Bible, that's enough. That's enough. You can also go on to give a testimony of how God's Word has transformed your life. That's wonderful, and that's personal, and it's great. But we need to be able to say, here's where it says in the Bible da, da, da, da, da, and that's why I believe what I believe. Okay? Very important.

It is my sincere hope that you've been around the Word enough that if anyone were to challenge your beliefs, you could do that. You can respond with a biblical reason for the hope that you have. And if you can't yet, don't get discouraged. You'll get there. Just keep pressing in. Keep pressing into know God's Word better and better.

This section ends with Luke telling us that, “...when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that” Paul and Silas were in Berea, they went there. They actually traveled 45 miles just to stir up the crowds there in Berea to the degree that the brothers sent Paul off for his own safety. While Silas and Timothy stayed behind to minister and Paul was taken as far as Athens.

And while he waits there for Silas and Timothy to arrive, Paul is going to be busy sharing the gospel. And that's going to be our focus for next week. Paul in

Athens. And we're going to find out that Paul struggles to share the gospel with intellectuals and we're going to find out why. And it's interesting and it'll help. It'll be some interesting insight that will help in your evangelizing others.

With that, we'll close and let's stand and let's pray. As always, we invite you to come down front after we're done if you need prayer, we would be more than happy to pray with you. Let's pray.

Father God, we thank You so much for the opportunity this morning to be in the Word, to open our hearts to the message of the Scriptures, and to be encouraged, and challenged. Lord challenged.

Lord, You called us to be light and salt, and we confess that we've fallen down far too much. Now strengthen us Father through Your Spirit to be the body of Christ and what You've called us to be.

And Father, we just thank You so much that You have given us everything we need in the Scriptures to be able to defend what we believe. And we pray together as the body that we would be diligent and eager like the Bereans to dig into the Word of God and to know not just what we believe, but why we believe it.

And we praise You and thank You for your incredible goodness to us. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and all God's people said together, amen.

Have a good rest of your day.