

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY

30. TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

(Acts 17:1-14)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 23

1. The Gospel is revolutionary (6-7)
2. The Gospel appeals to men who are not prejudiced (11).
3. The Gospel will bear investigation (11).
4. It is the work of the minister to put first things first (3).
5. The spirit of the hearers has much to do with the success of the preaching (11).

When Paul and Silas had been released from the prison at Philippi and had comforted the brethren they departed from that city. Philippi was at the eastern end of the Egnatian Way which was called by Cicero, "that military way of ours which connects us with the Hellespont." Westward over this old Roman road the missionaries hastened a distance of about thirty-three miles to the great city of Amphipolis. It was called, The City of the Nine Ways, because of the roads which radiated out from it. Why they did not pause to preach in Amphipolis we are not told, it may have been because they believed their enemies would follow them and stir up trouble in order to prevent their work as they had done at Philippi.

After resting for the night in the city they would hasten on the next day, still following the Roman road, over this section of it through the mountains and across a peninsula. As it was growing dark they would probably reach the city of Apollonia where they would halt again for the night. The distance between the two cities was thirty miles. They would thank God that he had brought them safely thus far, particularly on this part of the journey through the wild rough country, and they would lie down so weary that they would almost forget that their backs were still sore from the beating at Philippi.

From Apollonia on to Thessalonica was a distance of about thirty-seven miles. This city was named by Cassander in honor of his wife who was a sister of Alexander the Great. As they entered the east gate they would pass through a triumphal arch and along a great marble way which ran directly across the city. It was, and still is, an important seaport at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. It is now known as Saloniki. It was an excellent center from which the Gospel might spread. Paul could find abundance of work at his own trade.

He reminded them afterward how he had worked to support himself: **“For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God”** (I Thessalonians 2:9). At this busy seaport men met from every quarter of the world as they do in any of the great seaport cities today. From there the Gospel would be carried into various parts of the world. That this was the result is a matter of record. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul said: **“For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad”** (I Thessalonians 1:10). When we think of these facts we can easily see why Paul and Silas decided to preach in Thessalonica.

The church at Thessalonica had an unusual record in the manner in which they held to the Gospel when they had once received it. It has been said: “No city, which we have yet had occasion to describe, has had so distinguished a Christian history, with the single exception of the Syrian Antioch; and the Christian glory of the Patriarchal city gradually faded before that of the Macedonian metropolis. The heroic age of Thessalonica was the third century. It was the bulwark of Constantinople in the shock of the barbarians; and it held up the torch of truth to the successive tribes who overspread the country between the Danube and the Aegean - the Goths and the Slaves, the Bulgarians of the Greek Church, and the Wallachians, whose language still seems to connect them with Philippi and the Roman colonies. Thus, in the mediaeval chroniclers, it has deserved the name of “the Orthodox City” (Conybeare & Howson, p. 279).

LUKE AT PHILIPPI

The missionary band seems to have been smaller for a time. Luke apparently remained at Philippi. The change from the pronoun, “we”, which indicates the presence of Luke, to “they”, in an indication that Luke was not with Paul until near the close of his third missionary journey when he was sailing from Philippi to Troas: **“And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days”** (Acts 20:6). This would seem to show that Luke was not with Paul for several years from the time when he first left Philippi.

PREACHING IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Paul and Silas seem to have climbed up the steep streets of Thessalonica until they came to the house of Jason who welcomed and encouraged them. Jason would have no idea of the rough manner in which he was to be treated for entertaining the new missionaries. Paul, as was his custom, went on the Sabbath into the synagogue and reasoned with them from the Scriptures concerning Christ.

Paul was: **“Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead”** (17:3). The word which Luke uses here, “opening,” is the same word which he uses when speaking of Jesus opening the Scriptures to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. It means to expound or explain thoroughly. This was what Paul was doing for the Thessalonians, as His Master had done for the disciples.

The word, “alleging,” means, as was used by Luke, to set out in order or display. Paul was giving his hearers a systematic view of the teaching of the Scriptures which had foretold the suffering and resurrection of Christ. He also so applied the Scriptures to show that Jesus who had been condemned to death was really the Christ.

MANY BELIEVED

Paul thus taught the assembled Jews on the Sabbath. No doubt through the week he talked to all sorts of people. He would talk to the dyer as he bent over his vats; to the potter as he shaped his clay on the whirling wheel; to the leather-worker as he made shoes or saddles; to the shipbuilder as he bent the wood into place for a new boat; to the wives and sisters of merchants and councilors as they came in to and out from the harbor, until, after a few weeks there were a few Jews, many Greeks and a number of the chief women who believed and gathered with Paul and Silas for Christian services.

A MOB AROUSED

Then some of the Jews who became envious, as they saw the Gospel being accepted and the work growing, began to stir up the market-loungers and some of the rougher element of the city and broke into the house of Jason with the intention of bringing Paul and Silas out to the mob. When they did not find them they dragged Jason and some of the other Christians before the rulers of the city, crying, **“These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also. Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus”** (17:6-7).

The rulers of the city evidently knew the class of people who had assaulted the missionaries, and did not put a great deal of confidence in their charges. If they had thought that they and their followers were guilty of treason they would not have allowed them liberty. As it was, they simply bound Jason and the others to keep the peace and let them go.

Jason and the brethren knew that if the mob was able to find Paul and Silas the next day it would treat them very roughly, so they advised them to go on to another city until the rabble should quiet down. Paul had taught them faithfully and established them, as well as he was able during the short time he was with them, in the Gospel. He tells us how faithfully and tenderly he had taught them, and some of the lessons he had impressed upon them, in the fourth chapter of the first letter which he wrote to them. He says that he longed to go back to Thessalonica many times, but each time Satan hindered him. He assured them that if he could not be with them in person he was with them in thought:

“But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us” (I Thessalonians 2:17-18).

TO BEREA

When darkness settled down over the city Paul and Silas passed quietly out of the west gate into the open road. For miles in front the Egnatian Way stretched before them. They walked on silently but rapidly in the freshness of the evening. The shouts of the surging mob of Thessalonica were still ringing in their ears, and the memory of Philippi was still vividly before them. Like their Lord, they were despised and rejected of men; they had not where to lay their heads; but like Him they set their faces steadfastly to go forward. As God gave them strength they would bear the Gospel farther into the great centers of Europe. As they traveled on they came, about down, to a branch of the road, turning to the left off the great highway. It was a rough and uninviting road running through a country where there were woods. If they were to present their message in Athens and Corinth they must turn from the Egnatian road toward the south. After traveling through the hills for a time, about fifty-one miles to the southwest of Thessalonica, they came to the compactly built little city of Berea. Cicero had called it, "the secluded town of Berea."

BIBLE STUDENTS AT LAST

At the first opportunity they went into the synagogue of the Jews and began to teach. What a relief it must have been to these devoted missionaries to find a group of people who were real Bible students! They had actually found some people at last who wanted to know what the Bible meant. So when Paul told them what the various prophecies meant they took out their much used scrolls and began to look up these passages to see whether these things are so. They were eager to learn and searched their Bibles every day to learn the truth, particularly all the truth that they could find concerning the coming of Christ. When they searched they found that Paul was right, and many of them believed that Christ had really come. They decided that the council of Christians at Jerusalem was right when they agreed that the ceremonies of the law were no longer binding upon them. There were many converts of both Jews and Greeks.

This blessed season of teaching and fellowship was not to last. Some of the enemies of the church in Thessalonica heard that Paul was in Berea and that he was having great success there, and **"they came thither also, and stirred up the people"** (17:13). Since Paul and Silas had escaped at Thessalonica they would have vengeance at Berea. But the Christians at Berea were alert and active, and before the Jewish opposition could come to a head they sent Paul away **"to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still"** (17:14). Some of Paul's friends accompanied him as far as Athens. He sent word back with them to tell Silas and Timothy **"to come to him with all speed"** (17:15). Leaving Paul at Athens for the present, let us make some practical observations upon the passage before us.

THE GOSPEL IS REVOLUTIONARY

The enemies of Paul and Silas said that they and their sect had turned the world upside down. They taught that there was another King, one Jesus (6-7). Christianity declares war, not material but spiritual, on all evil. It does not make men bitter toward their enemies; it makes them kind and helpful. That is a revolutionary idea for all worldly men.

The ordinary revolution turns things wrong side up; but the revolution which Christ inaugurates turns things right side up.

It is absurd to urge that religious life or social life can remain on the same low plane where Christ is truly followed. When the Gospel is received and Christ is believed new standards, purposes and ideals come into the life. New habits are formed and new companions are sought. In the social life, such evils as slavery, impurity, blasphemy, falsehood and dishonesty must be eliminated. We cannot be with Christ in faith and against Him in life. If we wish to reform evils in the family life, to purify the nation or regenerate society, the best instrument which we can apply is the Gospel of Christ.

If you wish to have your lawn leveled and your street paved you must expect that they shall first be torn up. For a time it will look as though nothing but confusion and a worse condition than before will be the result. But after a time, when it is completed, you say, how much better it is than it was before! It was worth while to endure discomfort for a while in order that it might be improved. So, if we labor toward the end that the world may be made better by the Gospel, we must expect that there shall be upheavals and strife and dissatisfaction until the enemies of purity and honesty are converted. When we see these things occur let us not conclude that the Gospel has been useless, but rather that it has done what it did when Paul preached it - turned the world upside down. It has done what Jesus said it would do when He declared: **“I came not to send peace, but a sword”** (Matthew 10:34).

The Devil does all that he can to oppose a living Gospel. He will let a dead church largely alone, but a church which is getting in the way of the promotion of his plans will have to face him and his evil forces, and the way forward will not be easy.

ANOTHER KING

The enemies of Paul and Silas declared that they preached another KING, one Jesus. These Jews were not sincere. They were not true friends of Caesar. The principal reason why they opposed Paul was because he taught that Jesus must suffer and reign. They made the worst charges which they could make against Paul and Silas, that of sedition and treason. They knew that questions of theology would not appeal to the Roman magistrates.

The King whom Paul proclaimed was the best friend of Caesar if he would rule in submission to Him. Caesar would not be hindered in his work as Emperor if he would honor Jesus Christ. Who would extend the life of the empire longer, those market loungers who shouted loyalty, or the Christians who lived peaceful and upright lives and honored the Prince of Peace? Paul exhorted his followers, when he wrote to the Romans, to be subject to their rulers: **“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same”** (Romans 13:1-3); and when he wrote to Timothy he exhorted them to pray for kings and for all in authority:

“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:1-4). If Rome had honored the KING whom Paul honored it might be standing today. Paul did not attempt to destroy the Roman empire but to establish it on a basis of Christian faith and life.

THE GOSPEL AND THE OPEN MIND

The Gospel appeals to men who are not prejudiced: **“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so”** (17:11). It was well for Berea that it was a somewhat isolated city off the busy Roman road. The people had not been hardened by Pharisaic teaching. They received the Gospel with open minds. They were teachable and earnest. They were not of an ignorant, simple race. They were both able and ready to search the Scriptures.

The enemy of souls is always alert to find an instrument of opposition. He is pleased when he can find the atheist, the agnostic, the skeptic, or the critic whom he can use to take an active stand against the people of God. The Bereans had no thought of objecting to the Gospel until some of the bitter opponents from Thessalonica came and scoffed at and misrepresented the missionaries. The little child is trustful, until it has been deceived or injured by some one, and listens eagerly to the Gospel of Christ. It is the skeptic or the hardened opponent who leads others to doubt the truth of the death and the love of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Taylor of Norwich once said to John Newton: “Sir, I have collated every word in the Hebrew Scriptures seventeen times, and it is very strange if the doctrine of the atonement which you hold should not have been found by me.” Newton replied: “I am not surprised at this. I once went to light my candle with the extinguisher on it. Prejudice from education and learning often prove to be extinguishers. It is not enough that you bring the candle, you must remove the extinguisher.”

What will prejudice not do? It was prejudice that made Ahab hate the upright Micaiah and the Athenians condemn Aristides. It was prejudice that caused the Jews to call Christ a wine bibber and a friend of publicans and sinners. It was prejudice that led the poor man who did not know the doctrine of John Huss to be so busy in carrying wood for his funeral pile. The most difficult conditions which ministers of the Gospel have to face today are religious prejudice and religious pride. One of the most difficult places to make an impression with the Gospel is in a congregation which has become hardened to its appeal and satisfied with the external forms of religion. May we receive the Gospel in childlike faith and walk with implicit trust in its blessed Lord and its eternal promises!

THE GOSPEL INVESTIGATED

The Gospel will bear investigation. The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so. Paul was an expository preacher when he was dealing with the Hebrews who knew the Old Testament. With them he had a common ground on which to begin.

It is well to have an open mind, but it is also well to exercise caution. Both of these the Bereans did. A Bible teacher may err. As there are many who were mistaken in years gone by, so there are many who are mistaken in their interpretations of the Word of God today. The true teacher has no fear because he knows that the Bible will bear investigation. We are exhorted to try the spirits whether they be of God. False teachers shall arise, we are warned, who shall turn the truth into fables.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan says: "Some men have an idea that to preach in a London pulpit is the most difficult thing. It is by no means necessarily so. Among the mountains of Wales, and in the highlands of Scotland, are men and women who will make the preacher preach as it is by no means necessary that he should do in London; men who will get their Bibles down, and say, Is this man right? That is nobility. It is the nobility of being determined to find out if human interpretation is in accord with the actual Scripture. Paul interpreted the Scripture before the Bereans, and they listened with a skeptical and honest inquiry, a determination to seek and know and examine, and they made the Scriptures the test of the interpretation (*The Acts of the Apostles*", p. 404).

In an argument between Dr. Pentecost and an atheist, the latter declared that he did not believe the Bible because he did not know the author. "Do you know the author of the multiplication table," asked Dr. Pentecost? "No," replied the atheist. "Then, I suppose, being a scientific man and a conscientious skeptic you never use the multiplication table." "Oh yes," was the reply, "that proves itself to be true by its works." "Then," replied Dr. Pentecost, "may we not know also that the Bible is a work of absolute authority, because its works in its own sphere prove itself to be true?"

FIRST THINGS FIRST

It is the work of the minister to put first things first: "**Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ**" (17:3). The burden of Paul's message was to preach Christ crucified and Christ risen. He emphasized the fact throughout his ministry that it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead, and that this Jesus was the One that he proclaimed, and that He is the Christ.

The atonement, the resurrection and the deity of Christ were the first things which he preached. Paul evidently made clear, also, that the risen Christ has ascended to the right hand of God and there reigns upon the throne. At least his enemies charged that he preached that Jesus was the King (v. 7).

The atonement should be first and central in our preaching. The priestly office of Christ is not more important than His kingly office, but men must accept Him as their Priest; they must believe in Him as the one who suffered and died for them, before they are ready to believe that He is their King. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "**I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified**" (I Corinthians 2:2).

Paul did not so preach because he undervalued the kingship of Christ, but because he knew that the Corinthians needed to be cleansed by the blood of the LAMB who had been slain, before they were ready to receive or to apprehend any of the other doctrines of the Gospel.

The Jews were ready to believe in a Messiah who would try to secure the throne at Jerusalem and independence for their nation. They were not, however, in general, ready to believe in a Christ who must suffer. If we had to interpret the Old Testament without the New we would likely make as many mistakes as they did. Some of their rabbis, realizing that there were passages which spoke of a suffering Messiah, taught that there were to be two Messiahs, one who was to suffer and one who was to reign. Let us not make the mistake, either in placing our faith in Christ, or in our teaching concerning Him, to overlook or to underrate the importance of the atonement. Let us place no confidence in ourselves, or our ability to save ourselves, but let us rest our faith wholly upon Christ who died that we might live.

HEAR AND BELIEVE

The spirit of the hearers has much to do with the success of the preaching. The people of Berea were more noble than those of Thessalonica. They were teachable, reasonable, and tried to learn. Here were two different groups of people comparatively close together, they listened to the same preacher and to practically the same message. In Berea the Gospel was accepted far more readily.

In this record we have evidence to show that it is not right to attribute all the difference between the growth of the church in different places to the difference in the ministers. The same minister may be successful in winning men in one place and not in another. The same evangelist may win many converts in one city and not many in another. The difference was not in the Gospel or in the minister, but in the people. In one place men will listen to the Gospel appreciatively, in another they will listen scoffingly. We have the Scripture warning, take heed how ye hear!

A gentleman once said to Rowland Hill: "It is sixty-five years since I first heard you preach, and the sermon was well worth remembering. You remarked that some people are very squeamish about the manner of a clergyman in preaching, but you added, 'Supposing one is hearing a last will and testament read, expecting to receive a legacy, would you employ the time in criticizing the lawyer's manner while he was reading it? No, you would give all your attention to see if anything were left to yourself, and how much. Let that then be the way in which you would listen to the Gospel'."

A missionary to one of the islands of the Pacific preached on the subject of stealing. He enforced also the duty of restitution. The next morning he found his house surrounded with natives bringing their stolen goods. "We have not been able to sleep all night," they said, "we were at chapel yesterday and heard you say that the Word of God commanded us not to steal. We used to worship a god whom we thought would protect thieves. We have stolen all these things which we have brought with us." Then one of the men held up a saw, saying, "I stole this from the carpenter of a ship."

The people begged the missionary to keep the things until they could find the owners. One man who had stolen from a missionary, who was then on another island, took a voyage of seventy miles to restore the stolen goods.

That is the kind of hearing that is profitable. If it were imitated today by Christians who have had the privileges of the Gospel for many years, it would bring about changes and blessings in the church that would cause the world to marvel. If the nominal Christians would hear in such a manner, Christ would be greatly honored and His people would, as a consequence, be far more effective epistles than they are, of the mercy, the beauty, the purity and the love of their Lord and Saviour.

QUESTIONS (Acts 17:1-14)

1. What cities were passed through, here recorded?
2. In what cities did Paul and Silas preach?
3. At what distance did they travel?
4. Why was Thessalonica an opportune center for preaching?
5. What was the record of the church there in after years?
6. What evidence have we as to Luke's position at this time?
7. What was the central thought in their preaching at Thessalonica?
8. What did their enemies charge them with preaching?
9. What truth was there in this charge?
10. Who were doing more for Rome, the missionaries or their accusers?
11. Where do we find the record, and what were some other things which Paul taught the Thessalonians?
12. What were some of the outward features which were to the advantage of Berea? Some of the inward?
13. How were the Bereans an example to us?
14. How do such people stimulate god preaching?
15. What indicates the Paul was an expository preacher?
16. What are some of the hardest things to confront in preaching today?
17. What effect on religious and social life will the reception of the Gospel have?
18. What is there in this passage to indicate that it makes a difference how we hear?
19. What are some of the things which prejudice men today?
20. What may we expect on the part of the world when the Gospel is widely received?

~ end of chapter 30 ~

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