

Thessalonians, Pt 1: Turning the World Upside-Down

Acts 17:1 ESV (Pg 540) 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.

- I. Today, we will be beginning a new series that will take us verse by verse through the books of 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. These are marvelous, encouraging books that deal with everything from the security of our salvation, to the return of Christ, the Christian work-ethic, holy living, among many other things.
 - A. 1st Thessalonians was the first epistle (or letter) that Paul wrote, and he did so from Corinth soon after the Jewish disruption of his ministry, and his premature departure from the city of Thessalonica, which we just read about in Acts 17.
 1. Paul had come to the city (which is located in modern-day Greece) on his 2nd of 3 missionary journeys. The first mission, which we read about in Acts 13-14, brought Paul and his partner Barnabas through the island of Cyprus, and the cities of modern-day Turkey, proclaiming the gospel, performing many miracles and seeing many Jews and Gentiles come to belief in Christ.
 2. Upon returning, a second journey was planned: **Acts 15:36 ESV** **And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”**
 - a) However, before they left, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp dispute over John-Mark who had abandoned them on the 1st journey. Barnabas thought he deserved a 2nd chance, but Paul saw him as a risk.
 - b) So they separated, and Barnabas went with John-Mark back to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas and began by heading north through Syria and Turkey, making their way west into Greek Macedonia, where they eventually wound up preaching the gospel to those in Thessalonica.
 - c) As a sidebar, the Bible says John-Mark and Paul were later reconciled¹, and John-Mark was used by God to write the gospel of Mark.
 - B. As a preparation for this series, you should read the whole account of Paul’s 2nd missionary journey which you will find in Acts 16-18.

1. It was on this journey that Paul met Timothy and added him to their band of missionaries. It was also at this time that the Holy Spirit gave them a vision instructing them to go into Macedonia, where Thessalonica was located.
 2. On this journey, while in the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for casting a demon out of a slave-girl. When they offered prayers and sang praises to God at midnight, that same God sent an earthquake and destroyed the prison! But instead of making a break, they shared the gospel with the jailer and his family, all of whom believed and were baptized!
- C. It was immediately after all this that they came to Thessalonica. What they found there was a crowded metropolis of anywhere between 100,000 and 200,000 people. That may not seem like a whole lot to you, but remember that this was in a time when most of the world's population was rural and agrarian.
1. The city was also marked by a plurality of religious worship, including adherents of the Imperial cult, who worshipped Caesar as a god. There were also Pagans worshipping the Greco-Roman Pantheon, Egyptian Cults, and a large number of seemingly politically influential Jews.
 2. The city was located on the Via Egnatia (or Egnatian Way), a vital trade and military transport route, built by the Roman Empire in the second century BC. It stretched for almost 700 miles and was paved with stone slabs. It ran from the coast of Albania, to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).
 3. This road became very important to Paul, Silas and Timothy's ability to bring the gospel to the Macedonian people on his last two missionary journeys. This is where this message becomes about more than history or geography.
 - a) Consider the possibility that more than a century before Christ's birth, a sovereign God put it into the hearts of the Romans to construct this (then) modern thoroughfare from east to west **so that** the gospel could reach the people far from Israel! Could it be that God **planned** for Greek to be the common language of the people during those days so that they could all hear his message of salvation and either believe or reject it?
 - b) If it is true that God so perfectly planned ahead for the gospel to reach those people, then what mountains has he moved, or what inroads has he provided, so that **you** might be effective in sharing the gospel?
 4. John Calvin said "...it is certain that not a drop of rain falls without the express command of God."² If we truly believe that, then we can believe that God has provided anything necessary for us to accomplish his will on earth!
- II. So after their work in Philippi, the team arrived in Thessalonica. Paul, as he always did, entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and begins to point to Jesus from the scriptures. The book of Acts uses 3 distinct words to describe Paul's preaching and proclamation. These 3 words can provide important guidance for us as well:
- A. **Acts 17:2 ESV** 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."

- B. Paul reasoned, he explained and he proved that the claims of the gospel were true. “This brings together argumentation, explanation and illustration. His approach was logical, it was thorough, and it was unmistakably biblical.”³
1. To **reason** from scripture means that he showed that Christ was the central focus of the Word of God using the Old Testament, which the Jews revered. “He engaged their minds with hopes that God would enlighten their hearts.”⁴
 - a) If we are going to be effective in our proclamation of the gospel, we must not be afraid of appealing to a person’s mind, confident that it is the Holy Spirit’s job to persuade their hearts and emotions.
 - (1) After his resurrection Jesus met two men on the road to Emmaus, but he supernaturally disguised his identity. After sharing with them from the Old Testament how he had fulfilled the prophecies, he revealed to them, miraculously, and in a moment’s time, who he really was.
 - (2) **Luke 24:32 ESV** They said to each other, “**Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?**” This shows a Spirit-inspired emotional response on their part to the rational, scriptural presentation of Jesus Christ.
 - b) Jesus could have started with a miracle to convince them, but instead gave them truth from the Bible, and the Holy Spirit convinced them of it.
 2. But Paul also **explained** what he had proclaimed to their rational minds. He let the people know what the scriptures said, and where they said it. He was not afraid of their questions, but took the time necessary to answer them patiently. There are three things I want you to learn from this truth:
 - a) First, that we rarely share the gospel with people who don’t have mental or spiritual obstacles to overcome in order to receive it. Be patient with them. Stop trying to get a notch on your belt, and take the time to love them, answer their questions and pray for the Spirit’s enlightenment.
 - b) Second, you don’t have to be a seminary-trained theologian to explain the gospel. If you have been saved a week, you can boldly say, “I’m not sure how all this works, but I was lost and guilty, but I know Jesus found and forgave me, and my life is changing because of it! Wouldn’t you like to experience what I have found in Jesus?” **“A man with an experience of God is never at the mercy of a man with an argument.” -Leonard Ravenhill**
 - c) Lastly, though any believer can explain the basic gospel, sharing it more clearly is a great motivator for us to study the Bible! Learn who God is, and how the gospel works, and your witness will become more effective.
 3. But lastly, Paul **proved** what he said by illustrating it in a way that people could see the implications. He might have said, “Do you need to be free from guilt? Jesus alone can give you that! Do you need assurance of God’s love and care for you? The gospel proclaims that very thing! Do you need power to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil? That’s the very thing Christ offers by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through the gospel!”
- III. As a result of this 3-week labor of preaching in the synagogue, the Bible tells us that **Acts 17:4 ESV** **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 that wasn't the only response they saw. **Acts 17:5 ESV** 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.

- A. Count on it. The proclamation of the gospel will **always** illicit a response from its hearers. You cannot hear the truth proclaimed without responding to it; both because of its inherent power, and because of the nature of humanity. There are usually one of three predictable responses when someone hears the Word.
 - 1. A person may respond by rejecting what they have heard. Rejection may show itself in anger; thinking that you have a lot of nerve to question their soul, or lifestyle, or religion, or lack thereof. It may be expressed in arrogant condescension; assuming that your belief makes you an uneducated hillbilly, calling on your imaginary friend in the sky. It may show up as casual indifference. The hearer may not take the time to consider the claims of the gospel, but dismiss it because it seems too disruptive to the life they have chosen. You may even experience all of these responses on some level.
 - 2. Secondly, sometimes the response takes the form of open hostility, with angry words and the unbridled persecution of the believer. We see this today around the globe, especially in Muslim, Hindu and secularized societies.
 - 3. But thankfully, according to the unstoppable work of the Holy Spirit, you may actually see humble and joyful acceptance of the truth, resulting in a regenerate spirit, a renewed life and a soul won for Christ Jesus.
- B. In his preaching throughout the book of Acts, Paul saw all of these responses to the message of salvation through the work of Jesus that he proclaimed. Thessalonica was no different. Verse 4 tells us that both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, along with prominent women who held leadership positions in the city believed. And with their belief, a church was born to give light to Macedonia.
 - 1. But there was also a hostile response! The Jews became jealous of the gospel's saving power and stirred up a bunch of idling trouble-makers to create a ruckus. Soon the whole city was shut down because of the riot, and they even attacked the house of Jason, the missionary team's host.
 - 2. What was happening? The people of the city had settled into several dominant religious paradigms, and along comes these foreigners with the audacity to reason, explain and prove how everything they've trusted in has been exposed for the farce that it really was. Everything had changed!
- C. There is a lot of talk at times of "taking back the culture for Christ" or of "winning a culture war"; but I would have you never forget that the true gospel proclaimed is **always** and **entirely** countercultural. To be a Christian is to be engaged in unending conflict with the systems of the world, while also loving and serving the people that are the captives of it. No compromise is possible.
 - 1. That was the basis of the accusation against Paul and his compatriots. **Acts 17:6 ESV** 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.**"

- a) In the eyes of their accusers, the world was spinning along just fine, until the gospel was introduced to the world! With its coming, the world was turned upside down! The whole system was upset and disrupted.
 - b) As I read those words this week, I couldn't help but wonder, "Would our countrymen say that about the church in America? Would anyone in Lubbock say it about NRLC? Have we, by the power of a God we claim is almighty and living within us, threatened the world systems at all?"
2. Some might say that we have disrupted things by our obnoxious evangelical and political posturing, but that's not what I'm talking about. Have we disturbed the powers that be by our hopeful and confident proclamation that there is another King in charge of everything, and his Name is Jesus?
- D. May God make us people who can reason incisively, explain clearly, and prove definitively that **Revelation 11:15 ESV** "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." May the accusation be justly applied to us that we have turned the world upside down, or at least our city, or at the bare minimum, the North Ridge subdivision.
- IV. One last thing, we see that Paul's short ministry in Thessalonica ended with the city in an uproar, the new believers persecuted, Jason's house attacked and a heavy fine levied against him, and Paul and Silas whisked out of town under cover of darkness for their own safety. Sounds like their ministry there was a tremendous failure, doesn't it? Next week when we get into the text of Paul's letter, we will see how it all panned out.
- A. But today, let's let our time at the communion table remind us that there is another King, and his name is Jesus! Let us renew our pledge of total allegiance to our Sovereign as we taste the bread and drink of the cup and remember together as one body how he purchased us with his broken body and spilled blood.
 - B. Let's ask God to meet us here and empower us to be bold witnesses so that we can live counter-culturally and turn our world upside down at work, at school, in our neighborhoods and at church. But don't ask for the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit that you're not willing to receive! Only open hands and open hearts have any hope of real empowerment for the mission of Christ!
 - C. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ 2 Timothy 4:11

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/calvin-institutes-christianity/book1/chapter-16.html>

³ Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians; by Mark Howell; Pg. 7; © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

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