

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Here We Go Again

17:1-15

Intro: Paul and Silas found the city of Philippi to be more exciting than they had even imagined. They had some great success – the gospel fell on receptive ears, lost men and women gave their hearts to Jesus and an effective, joyful congregation was started in that city. They also had a rough go of it there at the end, being arrested, beaten and imprisoned – but the Lord even used those adverse circumstances to show His glory and advance His kingdom. Thankfully, the difficulties didn't slow down Paul or his ministry team. Being politely asked to leave the area by the now-humbled magistrates, Paul and Co. move on to the south and as they leave, we see they are 1 member short.

1– Here we see the pronouns have changed again. It appears that Luke was left behind in Philippi to strengthen and care for this infant church. Paul knows this new church needs teaching and encouragement and although he is both capable and willing to do it himself, he leaves behind a trusted co-laborer to do that precious work. We will see this again at the end of today's study. Paul is compelled by two opposing desires: to share the gospel with those who have never heard it and to raise up and assist all those who have accepted Jesus Christ in their hearts. He knows he can't do both at the same time so he leaves behind teachers and he moves forward with the truth. It seems Paul's personal motto was, "I'm willing to go anywhere as long as it is forward!"

Ch17 describes Paul's ministry in 3 Grecian cities and how some of the people in those cities responded to the Word of God. The first city Paul decides to minister in is Thessalonica, 100 miles to the south of Philippi. Luke tells us that the team traveled through 2 other cities but doesn't mention any ministry in either one. This could be because they had no synagogue or because they were much smaller towns. If you follow Paul's missionary endeavors, you'll note a particular pattern: He is always travelling to large cities. He was commissioned by the church in Antioch, a large cosmopolitan city and we'll see he travel to Athens, Corinth and eventually Ephesus. Paul's goal was to preach in a large city in a region, plant a church there and then use the church for further outreach. He knew if he planted strong

Christian churches in the cities, the gospel would eventually spread from there to the surrounding areas.

Thessalonica was the capitol city of Macedonia and it was also a center for business and trade, 2nd only to Corinth in that area. It sat astride several important trade routes and had an excellent harbor. It was predominantly a Greek city but it was controlled by the Romans. It was actually a “free city” meaning it had it’s own elected assembly, could mint it’s own coins and had no Roman garrison within it’s walls. The city still exists today under the name Salonika. Paul’s strategy for bringing the gospel was to make contact and then teach the people.

Of course, the best place to make contact in a new and strange city was in the synagogue. Paul always went to the synagogue first because he knew he had an audience there. There would be godly Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there who were already interested in godly things and familiar with the Scriptures. They wouldn’t know anything about Jesus, the One the Scriptures are all about, but based on their prior knowledge, Paul would have an open door to announce Jesus Christ to them.

2-4— There is some confusion as to just how long Paul was in Thessalonica. Luke says Paul ministered for 3 Sabbaths before things went south on him – that would suggest a ministry time frame of just 2 weeks. But, we also know from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that they had sent financial assistance to him on more than 1 occasion while he was there (Phil 4:15-16). Sending a gift 100 miles in that day was no easy task. Whatever the time frame, Paul got busy as soon as he arrived and the message he brought made quite an impression on his ready listeners. It was not a long ministry, but it was an effective one and long-lasting. Let’s observe his ministerial approach.

Right from the beginning, Paul’s singular point of reference with these people was the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Word of God, and God has promised to bless His Word. He won’t allow it to return to Him empty (**Isa 55:11**). So for obvious reasons (theological, practical) Paul began with the Word, knowing that God would bless it and since that was the case, he’d be more effective preaching the Word of God than doing anything else.

But, he didn’t just share the Scriptures with them, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. Now, Paul could quote some Scriptures. From his years

of study and training as a Pharisee, he had an above average working knowledge of the contents of the OT. Paul could have probably quoted all the passages they needed to hear but that's not what he did. Simply quoting Scriptures would have been good but Paul went further – he reasoned with them; meaning he had a dialogue with them about the Scriptures through questions and answers. He encouraged them to think about the passage, to think about what it says, what it implies, what it says about Jesus.

Next, he explained the Scriptures – he opened the Scriptures to them; demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah through all the things He suffered. The word translated demonstrating means to lie down alongside, to prove by presenting evidence. Paul set before them one OT proof after another that Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah God. He emphasized in all this who Jesus is and what He did for them. Paul helped them understand the gospel by explaining the Bible to them.

It also helps to reflect on what Paul did not do. He didn't try to coerce anybody. He didn't beat them over the head with the Scriptures. Some people seem to think that in order to witness more effectively, all you need to do is shout louder. Being offensive is not very effective. Paul didn't badger people into believing. He reasoned with them in a reasonable way, trying to win them to his point of view. Another thing Paul didn't do – he didn't entertain them. We live in an entertainment age and a large section of the church is caught up in the entertainment business. Have you noticed that most of the “ministries” you hear of today are just businesses wrapped around an dynamic individual?

Paul didn't go to Thessalonica to entertain people or start a business. He went there to teach the Word of God. If your idea of ministry is to entertain then you will get results because people like to be entertained. But, the results will be short-lived, in fact, you won't really have a ministry, you'll have a business. You'll have a ministry that's wrapped around you so much that when you're gone, it'll fade away. Paul's work flourished because he focused on explaining the Scriptures rather than on advancing his own ideas. The result was a fellowship of Christian people called into existence by God's amazing grace, blessed by His loving presence and preserved by His omnipotent power

Above everything else, Paul preached Christ to them. Specifically, he

preached that Jesus had to suffer and die and rise from the dead. This is the core of the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ – that he is the Son of God; that He died for our sins; that He was buried and rose again on the 3rd day and was seen alive by chosen witnesses and is declared throughout the world as the only Savior from sin. Any teaching that leaves out this core leaves out the very thing God blesses, the only thing that brings sinful men and women to salvation.

What was the result of Paul's labor of ministry? Both Gentiles and not a few of the Jews were convinced and responded to God's offer of forgiveness through the work of Jesus Christ. This means that a rather sizable church was established in Thessalonica in pretty short order. After 3 weeks of ministry, Paul saw a large number of people believe and accept the gospel as the new defining characteristic of their life. The gospel had, once again, brought joy to a great number of hearts in the city but it didn't bring joy to every heart...

5-9 – Despite its recent establishment, we know the church in Thessalonica was strong because one of the very first things it experienced was persecution. It seems that, just like in Iconium and Lystra, so to here, those Jews who refused to accept the gospel became jealous of Paul's success and made a successful attempt to turn public opinion against him. They went down to the market place where lag-about's were known to gather—probably “Thugs-R-Us” and hired a group of scallywags and malcontents to rile up the people. Imagine, they manufactured their own riot! The apparent goal of the riot was to seize Paul and Silas, who were staying with a new convert named Jason. When they couldn't find the missionaries, they settled for Jason himself and hauled him before the magistrates of the city.

Their accusation against Jason, the accepted representative of Paul and Silas, was 2-fold: 1) that they were the ones who were upsetting people everywhere and 2) they were teaching people to defy Caesar's decrees. The 2nd part of their accusation was patently untrue but was still a good move on their part to mention it. If they could move the officials to think Paul and Silas were fomenting rebellion against Caesar, it would be easier to get what they wanted: Paul and Co effectively dealt with. But, although the 2nd part of their accusation was untrue, the 1st part was accurate.

Their claim was that these men...had turned the world upside down...what

they meant was...these men have radically impacted our world and nothing seems the same. It was mostly true; Paul and Silas were upsetting the world – one city at a time – but that wasn't a bad thing to do, it was a great thing because the world has already been turned upside down by sin. When sin entered the world, it completely upset God's original intention for His creation. But, those who are born into this sin-ravaged world assume this is the way it's supposed to be with all the pain and suffering, destruction and loss. They couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, God was working through Paul and Silas to turn the world right-side up again and they were doing this one heart at a time.

So, the accusation of these malcontents was actually an unintended compliment! Wouldn't it be great if all Christians upset the world in that same way? Many Christians spend a lot of time and energy upsetting other people but that's not what this means. They should be upsetting the world by bringing the grace of God to it through the preaching (or sharing) of His Word. This is the only thing that is able to bring the world back to its senses and bring God's blessing.

Luke merely provides a thumbnail sketch of the events surrounding Paul's visit to Thessalonica. Thankfully, more details are provided in Paul's first letter to this church. This is thought to be one of the earliest of Paul's epistles, if not the very first. In the first 2 chapters, Paul reflects on what happened there as a result of his preaching.

1) The preaching was blessed by God (1Th 1:5). Paul says his preaching came "with power," that is, by the Holy Spirit. This makes us think there were times in Paul's ministry when, as far as he could tell, the gospel did not come in such power. He preached the same gospel. But for reasons known only to God, not as many responded and the results were not as firm or long lasting. In Thessalonica God had blessed the preaching powerfully.

2. God's Word was received eagerly (1Th 2:13). Paul says that when he preached, the words he spoke were received "as...the Word of God". Paul often referred to his teaching that way, saying he taught God's direct teaching. People didn't always receive Paul's teaching as God's Word. Often they rejected it completely. But in Thessalonica they received it as given by the Holy Spirit and were blessed accordingly.

3. Believers modeled their lives after Paul (1Th 1:6). Those who received the gospel became “imitators” of Paul and his companions. There was no NT in those days. There was no Sermon on the Mount for them to model their new lives after. What they had was Paul, Silas and Timothy, and they tried to model their Christian life after them.

4. They became models for others (1Th 1:7). By imitating Paul, these new Christians became models themselves, not just to one another but “to all the believers” in the area. Their faith and way of life became known everywhere.

5. The Thessalonian church became a missionary church (1Th 1:8). As a result of all those things, this church became a center through which the gospel “rang out” everywhere: they became missionaries. There are a lot of perceived needs in the world today but what we really need today are churches that have received the Scriptures as the very Word of God, with individuals who are trying to imitate Jesus Christ and have a strong missionary vision. This would guarantee that the gospel would spread from these locations to others naturally.

10-11— Because of the trouble in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas left the city under cover of night and headed for Berea, about 45 miles to the south on the road to Athens. True to form, Paul hits the synagogue on the Sabbath and to his delight, discovers a group of people who are keenly interested in studying the OT. 3 things can be said of the Bereans: 1st they received the message eagerly; 2nd they examined the Scriptures; and 3rd they examined them daily.

This means that, unlike those in other cities, these folks were opened to the gospel because they hadn't prejudged it.

Many rejected the gospel out-of-hand just because it was new. The Bereans said, “This sounds good, tell us more!”

Then, having heard the good news, they went to the Scriptures themselves to see if the things Paul was teaching were really in them. And, they did it daily—not just on Sunday mornings for an hour, but daily, because these teachings were matters of life and death. They spent all their available time studying them. Some ministers want people to just accept what they say just because they say it. They don't want to be challenged. Good preachers want a congregation that hears the Word, receives it eagerly, and then goes to the Scriptures daily to see if what is being taught is really true. The

Bereans were more fair-minded (noble) because they were willing to listen to and confirm Paul's message from the Scriptures before responding. They were willing to do the work!

12-15 – What were the results? Many, both Jews and Greeks came to know Jesus Christ as their Savior. This means that in Berea as in Thessalonica (and Philippi before that) a church was established that grew strong and eventually sent missionaries to other places. But it wasn't long before Satan brought the fight to Berea. Apparently, the jealous Jews of Thessalonica were so unfair-minded that they travelled the 45 miles to upset Paul's apple cart in Berea. How did they know Paul was there? Maybe the growing witness of the Christians in Berea reached as far as Thessalonica or maybe someone snitched. Clearly, Satan has his own missionaries and they are busy.

As soon as the trouble started, the believers in Berea took action to assure Paul's safety. They outwitted the enemy by taking Paul to the sea and putting him on a ship bound for Athens. Once again, Paul was forced to leave a place of rich ministry and break away from dear people he had just recently come to love. How painful it must have been for him to go through this same struggle time and time again. Any normal believer would have given up long ago, not willing to suffer the loss and the unknown – what will happen to these after I am gone? Paul was able to carry on because he had a true sense of God's presence, not just in his own life but he could see it at work in the lives of the new converts. It was the assurance of the Lord's presence in their midst that freed Paul up to carry on.

Don't get me wrong, Paul didn't just tell them "Have no fear, God will provide; see ya later!" No, Paul did everything in his power to provide for their continued spiritual growth and encouragement. In fact, he takes his already pitifully small missionary team and divides it further; leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea to continue the work. Paul and Co. is now just Paul! The others will rejoin him again later, only to be dispatched to another area of ministry again. From a human perspective, Paul had an inadequate force for the job at hand but yet, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what a spiritual revolution they were able to pull off as men and women everywhere - Jews and Greeks, young and old, slaves and free—were led to Jesus Christ as their Savior. A decision that not only saved their lives but radically changed their lives as the gospel does to all who accept it by honest faith.

If God could use that small band of ministers, think of what He could do with this small congregation! 😊