



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 17:1-15

Acts

"A Tale of Two Cities"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are in Acts 17 this morning and we're going to look at verses 1-15. Paul is on his second missionary journey. He, along with Silas, who have picked up Timothy and now Luke, have crossed over the Aegean Sea from Troaz in northwestern Asia Minor, or Turkey, to Macedonia in the city of Philippi, where they established the church, the first church in Europe, and did so with great success. The Lord blessed and a number of people came to faith, but then there was opposition and they had to leave.

And so we read in verse 1 of chapter 17, "Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and 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, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also;

and Jason has welcomed the, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

"The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now, these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that You would bless this reading of scripture and You would give us a deeper understanding of it as we spend some time this hour studying it, considering its meaning and its application to us. We look to You to bless. We do that because ultimately our understanding comes from You. You have given us minds. You've given us the ability to reason. And yet ultimately, Father, when it comes to spiritual things, we cannot do this apart from the Spirit of God. You have given the child of God a new heart. You have restored His faculties and her faculties that have been so affected by the fall. And yet still we must be instructed by You and You must open our minds to the truth and guide us through the Spirit of God and we are thankful that You have imparted to us the Holy Spirit. We literally actually possess the third person of the Trinity. Every believer in Jesus Christ has that and we thank You for that, Father.

Thank You for the blessings we have, and we pray that His ministry would go unhindered, that He would bless us as we study, that our hearts would be open, that we would be made receptive and You would give us understanding. May the things that are said be said clearly and may we, as we listen to them, consider them carefully, wisely, and be built up in the faith as a result of our time together. We look forward to that, Father. This is a time to be nourished, and as we'll consider in our lesson, it's not the only time. In fact, we should be nourishing ourselves all through the work, but this is a special time when Your church gathers together as a body and it reads the scriptures and it prays together and it studies together. May this time of study and worship be profitable to each of us. We look to You to bless.

There are other needs that we have, Father. Besides our spiritual needs, we have many physical needs, which ultimately of course affect our spiritual attitude and condition. We pray for those who are in special need, for those who are sick, and those who are in need of employment, those who are dealing with various issues in their lives. You know them, Father. You know the situations far better than we do and we pray that You'd bless those. Encourage them, resolve the problems in their life. Use the difficulties that they are experiencing to draw them close to You. Draw them to the throne of grace and may they see Your hand in their lives.

We know that You are involved in every detail of our life. Nothing is left to chance. We are not in the grips of chaos, though life sometimes seems chaotic. But we know by faith that You control all things. And Father, I pray that You would encourage those who are experiencing particular difficulty at this time, that You would encourage them with that fact.

Bless us this evening, Father, when we return to this place to worship again and remember our Lord and remember His first coming and His death for us, and remember that He's coming again. He's coming as the King of Kings. He will establish His kingdom on the

earth and He will come with His reward. May we always be mindful of that, always be mindful that this world in which we live is passing away, and the things that we do in this world will either be gold, silver, and precious stones, or they will amount to wood, hay, and straw that will perish and burn up. May we not build that kind of life. May we live builds that last. May we live for eternity. Keep that before us, Father.

Bless us now as we sing our final hymn, and as we study together, may our hearts be prepared for that. We pray that You'd bless us in this hour. We pray in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] Charles Dickens began his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with a lengthy sentence in which he wrote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness." It's a line that could apply to Luke's account in Acts 17:1-15, where he recalls Paul's experiences in two Greek cities, the city of Thessalonica and Berea. In both places, it was both the best and the worst seasons of light and darkness, because in the two cities many believed. And for an apostle, it couldn't get better than that.

But then revival was soon followed by counter revival, by opposition, and Paul and his companions were driven out of town, forced to leave the young churches that had been established in the young believers, which was very hard to do. But that was life for an apostle - certainly life for the apostle Paul. It was filled with moments of joy and moments of sorrow as he carried out his task of preaching the word.

And that I think is really the central theme in this passage, the preaching of God's word and the results of it. The word of God always has an effect when it is preached. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." It has power. And here again, Paul goes to both the Jew and the Greek in two more cities, where he lets loose the power of the gospel and lives are changed.

In fact, the effect of the word was so great that men said of Paul and his fellow preachers that they have turned the world upside down. That's quite a testimony to the influence of the scriptures, an influence that you and I have that God's people have when we speak and teach His truth. Seems to me, as You look at the evangelical church today, many Christians want to have a profound influence on society and so they become very involved in various ways.

But the reality is we will never be effective in society, the church will never be effective in society, unless the church preaches, teaches, the word of God. That must be foremost in what we do. That's what we're called to do. We must proclaim the word of God and when we do that, when we are faithful to the word of God, to the whole counsel of God, to all of God's word, when we do that, people and places are changed for the good.

The Greeks and the Romans were coming under this profound influence of the gospel. Paul and Silas, Timothy and Luke, had gone to Philippi in Macedonia and established a church there. They had encountered opposition and been asked to leave. And so Acts 17 begins with Paul and his friends leaving and traveling south through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia, then westward to the city of Thessalonica.

Luke writes, "When they had traveled," which indicates that Luke was not with them. As they left Philippi, he evidently stayed behind, perhaps to give medical treatment to some of the believer there. He was a physician. That may have been why he stayed behind. Or it may be that he stayed there to encourage the young Christians and help establish the church.

But the other three took the Ignatian way, the great Roman highway, to Thessalonica, which was the principle city of Macedonia. We learn something of Paul's strategy here, which was to go to major cities and to the population centers of the empire. And so he passed through places Amphipolis and Apollonia without stopping. He may have spent the night there, but he certainly didn't stop to carry on

ministry. He passed through those cities knowing that once a church was established in a central location, the gospel would spread to the outlying areas. He saw Thessalonica as a central location. It was a port city on the Aegean and a commercial center with land routes to the interior of the empire. And it had a synagogue.

So Luke tells us in verse 2 that when he arrived, he went to the synagogue, as was his custom, "and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures." Paul's preaching has been described as both proclamation and persuasion. We see that here. He began with Scripture. That is his source of truth. That is his authority. That's where he begins - always begins with Scripture. But he doesn't just read to the people the Scriptures. He "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead."

So he taught them the word of God in an orderly, logical way. He didn't give some bombastic sermon. He didn't raise his voice and pound the pulpit and shout and try to coerce the people into believing him. He reasoned with them. God has made us rational beings. He has given us minds. He has given us wills. And apostolic preaching appealed to these. It was addressed to these. It was designed to show that the Christian faith is a reasonable faith. And in verse 4 Luke writes that some persuaded.

God expects us to be thinkers. He expects us to know the scriptures. He expects us to know what we believe and why we believe it, so that we can give an account for the hope that's in us when we are asked. Well, to do that, we must know what we believe. We must know the Biblical. We must understand it and we must know why it is that we believe what we believe.

Paul did. Paul was effective in the use of the Scriptures, and his method of reasoning and persuading is given in verse 3, where Luke writes that he was "explaining and given evidence." Literally that word "explaining" is opening. So he opened the Scriptures to them. He made the meaning of the text clear so that they understood what that

text taught. And he would then prove that meaning by given evidence, which literally means "to place beside."

So he would read a text from the Old Testament and explain it as being a prophecy about the Messiah's death or resurrection. Then he would place beside it another text that supported that explanation. So he would interpret scripture with scripture. Then he would bring forth evidence from the historical facts that demonstrated that the prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and he would say, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ." He is the Messiah. He is the King of Kings.

He evidently spent some time teaching these people that Christ will, in the future, reign as King on the earth. The Jews understood that about the Messiah. That is their hope, that when Messiah comes, He will establish a kingdom on the earth and rule over the nations. And it seems from the accusation that is made in verse 7 that Paul was teaching that Christ is King. It's clear from 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10 that he did teach them eschatology; that is, the study of the last things, the last study of follow future things, both particularly about the second coming and the last judgment. In fact, as you read through both 1 and 2 Thessalonians, there's a great deal of eschatological or future teaching about the church being caught up to meet Christ in the air, about the man of sin who will appear, about the Lord's return.

So he gave a great deal of teaching about these things to the people of the synagogue and to the church that was formed. So I take it that while in the synagogue he made a connection between the Messiah that the Jews looked for and the Jesus that he preached. He is a King. He will reign on the earth. He is the Messiah, Paul said. But he then showed them that their knowledge of the Messiah was partial. He's not only a king. He's also a servant. He'll not only reign. He had to die. And this they had not imagined, that the Christ would suffer before He would rule.

And so Paul explained that in order for the King to establish a kingdom of righteousness, He first had to make His people righteous

before they could inherit the kingdom, and He did that by dying for them. So Paul explained the necessity of the cross as the means of atonement that which satisfied God's justice, His righteousness. He taught them how Jesus suffered for our sins. I suppose that he spoke of the sacrifices at the temple as a picture of Christ, a picture of what He would do, and cited numerous scriptures that prophesied His death.

Very well could have begun at the very beginning and said the first chapters of the Bible inform us that the Messiah would suffer; pulled out the scroll of the book of Genesis and read from Genesis 3:15, where Moses gave the promise of a Deliverer to come, the seed of the woman, the descendant of the woman whose heel would be bruised by the serpent. Well, there's something vague in that prophecy, but it's very clear from that prophecy that the Messiah, the Deliverer who would come would suffer violence. He would be injured. So from the beginning Paul might said we have been taught that the deliverance would come in that way.

But the Bible gets more specific and he began to place Scripture beside Scripture. He turned to Psalm 22 and he read David's words, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" And then read verse 7, "All who see me sneer at me." Verse 16, "They pierced my hands and my feet." "They divided my garments among them," verse 18.

All these things, he said, happened in Jerusalem when Jesus was nailed to the cross. The leaders gathered around the cross. They mocked Him, just as read in the Psalm. His hands and his feet were pierced. They divided His clothes there at the foot of the cross. He cried out that cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" All things, he said, were fulfilled in Jerusalem. And then he went on to say, "I suspect He is the Servant of Isaiah," and read some of those great servant passages and came to the critical passage, Isaiah 53, read how the servants is described as "pierced through for our transgressions" in verse 5." "His grave," Isaiah said, "was assigned with wicked men/And yet He was with a rich man in His death," and again Paul could explain how all of this fit with

Christ's crucifixion and burial. He was pierced through for our transgressions. He is God's sacrifice for our sins and He was placed in the tomb of a rich man, though He was a poor man Himself, and that rich man was Joseph of Arimathea, and he could have given all these details. Perhaps he then pulled out the scroll of Zachariah and read 13:7, the prophecy of God's shepherd who would be struck down and the sheep would be scattered, and spoke again of how all that had been fulfilled.

Then he spoke of the resurrection. The Lord's resurrection from the grave and His ascension into heaven, he gave Scripture of it, Psalm 2, Psalm 16, Psalm 110. He showed in Psalm 16 that passage that both Paul and Peter quoted so frequently to establish this point, the proof of the resurrection. And he read David's words and how he wrote of One who would not be destroyed by death. You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. Well, Paul would have said, David certainly wasn't writing about Himself, because he died. We know where his grave is. We know that his bones are laid in that tomb in Jerusalem. His body decayed. But Christ's body did not suffer corruption. He was raised from the dead.

And then he turned to Psalm 110 and read David's words, "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand/Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.' What mere man could take his seat next to the Almighty God in heaven? Well, not David. David wasn't writing of himself. In fact, David says this is said of his Lord, his Master and who could that be? It's clearly the Messiah. And the Jewish people knew that this was about the Messiah. And Jesus is that person. And he actually ascended into heaven. Men saw Him ascend into heaven.

In fact, there were hundreds of people who had witnessed all these things and they could testify to the truth of it all. Jesus Christ died as God's sacrifice for our sins. He is alive today. He is coming back as King of Kings and He will establish His kingdom on the earth. So Paul could have looked at all of those in the congregation and he

could have said, "The future is glorious because of the cross and your hope, whether you be a Jew a Gentile, your hope is in that cross. Your hope is in Jesus Christ, who is the Savior of the world."

Well, this went on for three weeks or more as Paul opened the Scriptures to the men and women of the synagogue, explaining them and reasoning with them, and his efforts were not in vain. Verse 4, "And some of them were persuaded to join Paul and Silas," meaning some of the Jews were persuaded, because Luke adds that along with them were a large number of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. So a lot of people were persuaded by Paul's preaching. They understood his explanation of the Scriptures. They believed the evidence as proof of it and they were convinced that truly Jesus Christ is the Messiah and the Savior.

Christianity is a reasonable faith. God does not ask us to believe the unreasonable. Faith is not irrationality. It is not believing in fables. Now, there is plenty of that. Everybody exercises faith in something, and most people put their faith in fables and myths and false ideas, and there was a lot of that in Paul's day. But he labored hard in the synagogue to demonstrate that Christianity is not that. It is not faith in fables. It is true, it is factual, it is historical.

He tried to persuade the people. He made an effort to do that. He was logical. He was reasonable, and I can imagine that the discussions in the synagogue were rather spirited, that Paul was forceful but winsome. He was not an argumentative man. He didn't get angry. And many were persuaded.

But while Paul was logical and very reasonable and very clear in his explanations, it wasn't that logic of the apostle, that force of argument of the apostle that was the ultimate cause of their faith. People will never be persuaded to believe in Christ by our power of persuasion, by logic, by our intelligence and reason.

Now, God uses all of that, and I think that if a person thinks that he or she can be casual about explaining the gospel and think that God will bless an unclear presentation of the gospel, that we're fooling

ourselves. God does not bless that. Now, He bless it. He can bless anything. He uses some unusual testimonies and occasions to bring people to faith. But generally God uses a clear exposition, explanation of the gospel. He uses that, but ultimately it is not our power of persuasion, but it is God's power that produces persuasion, just as it did with Lydia. Remember how that happened? Back in chapter 16 she was listening to what Paul was saying and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.

Persuasion and conversion is God's work in conjunction with His word. And Paul explains the events, the response, in Thessalonica in just that way. Not long after he would leave Thessalonica, he would write to the church. And in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 he wrote, "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." The word was preached. It must be preached, but it cannot be the word itself. It must come with power. It must come through the work of the Spirit who persuades and opens hearts to believe.

And the point of all this is we don't labor alone. When you are a witness for Jesus Christ and you present the gospel, you are not doing it in your own strength. You are not alone in that great labor. God is in it. It is a supernatural work and God always blesses His word. That's the promise that He gives in Isaiah 55:11. "My word," He says, "will not return empty without accomplishing what I desire." Now, what He desires may not be the salvation of the people that you speak to.

As we speak the word of God, God will cause it to do the work that He has chosen for it to do. And sometimes it's a hard work. Isaiah, if you'll remember, did not have an easy task. You go back to chapter 6 and his ministry was to preach the word of God and in so doing harden the hearts of the people.

Jeremiah had a similar ministry. But generally, I think we can say that as we preach the word of God, God opens hearts and He brings people to Himself. He will accomplish His work through His

word. The Spirit of God attends it. The Spirit of God directs His word to make it effective. That is the assurance that we have as we teach and preach God's word. Preach it from a place like this or teach it in a personal conversation that you might have with others. The word of God is our strength. That's where our power is. That's what will make us effective.

And we see the proof of that from the response of these people in Thessalonica. It was a great response. Jews and Gentiles believed, and a number of leading women. That is, women of high standing in the city. These were the wives of prominent citizens, as well as women like Lydia. Macedonian women had earned a reputation for being independent and enterprising. And so some of these women were no doubt like her. They were businesswomen. They were women of means. So all kinds of people believed.

And Paul's influence wasn't limited to the synagogue. Many in Thessalonica were converted from paganism. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9, he refers to those who had turned to God from idols. So the word spread, spread throughout the city. Its effect was wide and the results were predictable. Not only did many believe, but many were disturbed. They became jealous, those in the synagogue, Luke writes in verse 5. And so they went down to the market place, where some idle men were hanging out, some thugs, kind of like those guys who used to hang out at the Dairy Queen when I was in high school. And they stirred them up and started a riot. Mob moved through the city to the house of Jason, who was a convert and evidently Paul's host. They broke into the house looking for Paul and Silas and Timothy. They weren't there, but Jason and some Christians were, and so they dragged them before the authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is no king, Jesus." So their accusation was that Jason was harboring Jewish agitators who were causing unrest in the city by proclaiming that Jesus' arrival came to Caesar.

Paul had preached about the kingdom of God and so they seized on that to turn that into a charge that he and the others had committed treason, that they were fomenting revolution against the empire. Well, it was a charge, an accusation, of half-truths and no-truths. But their charge, the charge they made, that they have upset the world, was more true than they knew. The King James version says, "Have turned the world upside down."

And they had upset things. There was a kind of harmony in the ancient world among the false religions and philosophies that the gospel disturbed. Edward Gibbon, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, described the situation. He wrote, "The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord." So there was a peace among the religions. There was diversity and tolerance.

Well, this was the world that Paul moved through, a world of pagan temples and false religions that had a mutual respect for one another, a tolerance for one another that existed together in peace. And Paul came along and disturbed that peace as he traveled from city to city bringing light into the darkness, giving the truth, that exposed error, with the message that things aren't so good as you might think, that these religions and these temples are not helpful ways to God. In fact, all mankind is lost. All mankind is in darkness. All mankind is separated from God and he can only be saved by Christ and Christ alone. And as he preached the gospel, he struck a blow against every religion and every philosophy.

Probably the best known passage in *Pilgrim's Progress* is when Christian and Faithful entered Vanity Fair. Bunyan says they had to pass through this fair, which was an ancient fair full of vice, full of pleasures. And as they did, they were noticed immediately. They were different, different from everyone there in the fair. They dressed differently, they spoke differently, and they paid no attention to the

merchants of the fair and what they were selling. They cared only for truth. That's what they wanted to buy, they said. And that is what disturbed the merchants most, because they weren't selling truth. And so despised these two pilgrims. They ridiculed them, they threatened them, and finally they arrested them about whom, Bunyan says, the fair was almost overturned.

Well, that's what the truth of the gospel does. It overturns things. It challenges the ideas of an age by exposing error, by wounding human pride, by convicting of sin and causing change in that way. In 2 Corinthians 10:4,5, Paul speaks of destroying fortresses. And those fortresses that he's referring to are ideas that had been raised up against the knowledge of God. And so he speaks of destroying fortresses and taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. That happens through the word of God.

It is divinely powerful, he says. What we have in the word of God is not simply a written word like we would find in some book, like a novel by Dickens, or a philosophy by Plato, or any piece of literature. This book is unique. This is God's word and He uses it. He empowers it to make it effective. And as Paul passed through the Roman empire, he shook the world to its foundations with the word of God. And the church does that when it teaches God's word.

When it understands what it's to do, which is to be a witness for Jesus Christ throughout the world and understands how it's to do that, by proclaiming the word of God and living consistently with it. It's not a matter of just hearing the word preached. It's not a matter of just reading it and knowing it. We must live it as well, but we must know the word of God to do that, and we must use the word of God. That's what makes us effective.

Martin Luther understood that. Looking back over his life, he wrote, "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's word. Otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with Philip and my Amsdorf, the word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor afflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The

Word did it all." It did, and it does. The word turns things upside down. It really turns things right side up, because sin and the fall have turned everything upside down, and when the word comes along, it reverses that and restores things as they should be. It does that in society, and we can look at the effects of Paul's ministry as the generations unfolded, and by the 2nd century, Christianity has spread throughout the Roman empire and well beyond that and was having an effect on life in that empire.

But it does that not simply in a general, social way. Most profoundly, most importantly, it does that personally. It does that in our lives. It overturns things in a person's soul as we study and learn of God and learn of His ways. This is the Holy Spirit's means of changing us, of sanctifying us, making us like Christ. It's through the study and the knowledge of the word of God that He does that. He takes that and changes us. As we see Christ in the word of God, that reflection of Jesus Christ has an influence upon us. He uses that to transform us into Jesus Christ's image and have His mind. It gives us new attitudes and new thoughts through the study of scripture. Do you want that? Do you want to possess wisdom? Then seek it in God's word. Do you want a clean mind? Do you want to behave properly, to behave correctly, wisely? Do you want to be a blessing to others? Then you must know God's word. That is how we nourish our souls. It gives instruction. It gives correction, encouragement. It equips us for life. It is sufficient to do all of that.

Now the initial change that takes place with regeneration, faith, and conversion, all of that comes through the preaching of the word of God. It doesn't stop there. It continues as we study and learn about the Lord. We who have become new creatures through the gospel are developed into the likeness of the person of Christ.

Well, a lot of that happened in Thessalonica and it produced jealousy, which stirred a riot, which led to the arrest of Jason, who was brought before the city authorities. They were very disturbed by the accusation that Jason was harboring revolutionaries. That charge

of treason was a very serious charge, because if it could be proved that he was inciting treason against the emperor, well, that was punishable by death. So this was serious, but there was no proof for the charge and Paul and the others who were supposedly the perpetrators of this, they couldn't be found, and so they dismissed the case and they released Jason and those who were with him after receiving a pledge from him, which made him responsible for ensuring that there would be no more trouble, which meant that he had to see that Paul and Silas and Timothy left the city and did not return.

And so Paul and Silas left by night and they traveled to Berea, the second of the two cities that Luke writes about. F.F. Bruce notes that it is thought by some that Paul had originally planned to go on the Ignacian way, west to the end at the Adriatic coast, across the sea to Italy, and then go on to Rome. We do know from what Paul wrote in the book of Romans in chapter 1 and chapter 15 that he had planned for years to go to Rome. It was his great goal. But if he had done that at this time, he would have met Jews from Rome traveling eastward along the Ignacian way, informing him that the emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from the capital.

And so going south to Berea may not have been in Paul's original plan, but events prove that it was certainly in God's plan. And God's providential leading is always best, always wisest, and Paul followed that. Well, Berea was not a large city. It's kind of a city off the way. But it had a synagogue and Luke writes that Paul and Silas went in. He writes in verse 11 that this congregation of Jews was very receptive to the apostles' teaching, much more than the Jews of Thessalonica were. "Now, these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." And as we would expect from people who welcomed the gospel so eagerly, many of them believed.

But their belief was not credulity. It wasn't gullibility. These people did not just believe what they heard - just the opposite. They

took nothing for granted. They examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. They didn't simply take Paul's word for it. That's what so many people do in a church congregation. They believe it because, well, the minister said it. He's an ordained man, or he's a man who's been trained in a seminary, and they just simply take what's been said. That's the easy way to do things.

Not the way these Bereans behaved, though. They put Paul's teaching to the test by examining the Scriptures. Now, they weren't skeptics. They weren't disrespectful. They began with open minds. They liked what he said, but to ensure that what he said was correct, that this message of salvation, which was such good news, the promise that the Messiah had come, that their salvation through faith alone, in Christ alone, to ensure that that wasn't wishful thinking, they searched the Scriptures thoroughly. They did, evidently, what Paul had done in Thessalonica. He put Scripture with Scripture, and that's what they did. These Bereans studied the word of God, and they did it daily.

Now, that is so important. It was not just on the Sabbath day that they studied the Bible, like so many Christians who get their Sunday morning sermon and that's it for the week. No, these people were daily Bible students. So for an apostle, these were the best of times. He had a congregation that eagerly welcomed the word of God and that daily studied it. This is the reason that they are called noble-minded and it is the reason that they became a very strong and mature church.

Now, it doesn't say that, but lets consider something. And I take this from Dr. Johnson, because some years ago he commented on that fact and he asked the question, "Have you ever wondered why we don't have letters from certain churches? Why don't we have, for example, a letter from the Bereans? We have a letter to the Galatians. We have two letters to the Corinthian church, to letters to the Thessalonians, and so on. But we don't have any letters to the Bereans."

Well, one reason is they didn't need a letter. All those letters that were written - the Galatians, to the Corinthians, to the Thessalonians - were written because those people had problems. There were particular issues that Paul was answering. The Galatians had fallen from grace. The Corinthians were carnal. The Thessalonians were confused. Evidently the Bereans didn't have any of those difficulties. Paul didn't need to write a letter to them, because they studied the Scripture seriously. They studied the Scriptures daily. They loved the word of God. They received it eagerly, and the person who does that will be strong and will be stable.

But that doesn't happen by Sunday morning sermons alone. You grow by daily nourishing the soul on the word of God. Scripture is sufficient to turn a life upside down and right side up. So read the Scriptures. Study the Bible if you want to have a sound mind and maturity.

You young people, read and study. You're never too young to start doing that. You have to learn to read first, but once you've learned to read, study the word of God. This is the time to do that. And as you do that, someday you will be able to say with the Psalmist, "I have more understanding than all my teachers." And you can say that as an older person too. You must start to study and read the Scriptures.

Well, Paul experienced the best of times there in Berea, but the best of times were followed by more times when the Jews of Thessalonica discovered that Paul was in Berea preaching the Scriptures, and so they came and stirred things up.

This time Paul left and Silas and Timothy remained behind. He was taken to the coast and there he sailed to Piraeus, which is the port of Athens. And there in the great city of Athens, he waited alone for the others to join him. As he stayed in Athens, the word of God was doing its work. The churches that had been planted were spreading the gospel of the forgiveness of sin through faith and the personal work of Jesus Christ. They were spreading the gospel of eternal life in Him.

Paul would write to the Thessalonians, "You have become imitators of us," and an example to the others, an example to the churches in Macedonia and beyond. For he wrote, "The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you and not only in Macedonia and Acaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth so that we have no need to say anything."

Well, that was Paul's strategy, to take the gospel to these central locations, and then the people, after being equipped for the ministry would carry on that ministry so that Paul didn't have any need to go to those places and speak. They were going out. They were proclaiming the word of God. They were being Christ's witnesses, as He has commanded us all to be.

Well, that is what we are to do. Those Thessalonians were an example to others. They are an example to us. That is what we are to be doing. We are to be the Lord's witnesses in this world in which we live. We have the light. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and we live in a dark world. We're to claim that word and shine His light. May God help us to do that.

But if you're here without Christ, you're not a light. You're in the darkness. You're still in your sin. You need God's forgiveness. Only God can give that and He has made the way of forgiveness in His Son Jesus Christ. And it can be yours in no other way. All religions are false. All other ways are wrong. The only way to God, the only way into eternal life, is through Jesus Christ, God's Son who died for our sins.

So by God's grace may you be persuaded as the Thessalonians were. May you believe the message of salvation as the Bereans did. May God help you to do that, because at the moment of faith, you will receive the complete eternal forgiveness of God and life everlasting. And may God help us who have done that to rejoice in what we have and serve Him faithfully. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for what we have seen, what we have read in this text, the great work that you did through Your

apostle and his companions as they move through these Greek cities, preach the word, and lives were changed. They did turn the worship upside down. We can do that, Father, by Your grace as we go out and teach, turn lives upside down as people hear the word of truth about sin, about guilt, and how that is removed through Your Son. Give us boldness to do that and bless the work that we do. We pray these things in the Savior's name. Amen.