

THE POWER OF THE WORD
ACTS 17:1-15

I.

Lee was born in New Orleans in 1939. (LEE BABY) His father died two months before he was born, and his mother had to go to work. Lee spent a short time living in an orphanage. He and his mother lived in several places after that. Lee's mom then remarried. When he was 9, his mother and stepfather divorced. In 1952 he and his mom moved to New York City. Lee did not like school, and he was not popular. He was a loner who often skipped school. An evaluation that was ordered indicated that he was emotionally disturbed. His mom refused to let the school get treatment for him.

One of Lee's favorite places to hang out was the Bronx Zoo. (LEE BRONX ZOO) I brought my boys there several times when we lived in Connecticut. On Thursdays there was no admission charge, and that was my day off which made it work for me. One day Lee skipped school and was wandering around the Bronx Zoo when somebody approached him and gave him a tract promoting socialism. It's hard to imagine that there would be someone in New York City promoting socialism, right? Something about the message appealed to him, and this began a long fascination with Communism and socialism.

Lee dropped out of school at age 17. The next year he joined the Marines. (LEE MARINES) Military life did not appeal to him, but he did become a good marksman. He left the Marines two years later and decided that he would go to the Soviet Union. He defected when he got to Moscow. He renounced his citizenship and told the Russians that he was happy to serve them in whatever way he could be of use. The Russians didn't know quite what to do with Lee. They strung him along for a long time. By 1962 he became disillusioned and returned to the US with his Russian wife.

Lee didn't find his niche in life back here either. As you may have figured out by now, Lee Harvey Oswald (LEE HARVEY OSWALD) was the man who assassinated President Kennedy. A key point in his life seems to have been that little tract that a socialist gave him in the Bronx Zoo. The words of the message had a powerful effect on his life. Unfortunately those words did not correspond to reality, and they led to disillusionment and death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Words are powerful. The most powerful words are those which correspond to reality. They are words which are given by our Creator. God's Word is the most powerful word of all. It changes people's lives for the better. We need to be reminded of the power of God's Word from time to time. The passage before us does just that.

In our ongoing study of the Book of Acts we have been looking at Paul's second missionary journey. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) We have seen that Paul,

accompanied by Silas, revisited churches in Asia Minor established during his first missionary trip. As a result of a vision he and Silas, who had been joined by Luke and Timothy, crossed over into Europe. At Philippi (PHILIPPI MAP) they established a church with the help of a business woman by the name of Lydia. Eventually they were run out of town by Jews and Gentiles who did not like their message.

I.

(I. PAUL AND COMPANY AT THESSALONICA) In Acts #17 we take up our story with PAUL AND COMPANY AT THESSALONICA. After leaving Philippi Paul and Silas undertook the seventy mile trip to Thessalonica. Keep in mind that Paul and Silas had just been beaten by the magistrates in Philippi and thrown into jail. The next morning they were released and allowed to go on their way. So these guys were probably not in ideal shape for a long trip. Nevertheless they headed west along the Egnation Way, which was a major Roman road that led to the west coast of Greece.

A.

(I. PAUL AND SILAS... A. A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL) In vv. 1 & 2 of #17 they find A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL. Paul and Silas, probably accompanied by the younger man Timothy, did not stop for long at either of the two cities along the way. So they came to Thessalonica. (PHILIPPI MAP 3) Thessalonica was the capital and largest city in the Roman province of Macedon. It was a seaport. It was a free city, which meant that it had more independence from the Roman government than many other towns. (THESSALONICA MAP 1) The Thessalonians had considerable control of their own government. There was no Roman garrison in the town. They even minted their own money. (THESSALONICA RECONSTRUCTION) The modern Greek city of Thessaloniki is today second in size only to Athens. Unfortunately there are very few Christians there.

Verses 2 & 3 tell us that Paul went to the synagogue there as was his custom and “**on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 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.’**” (PROJECTOR OFF) It was a great strategy to go to the synagogue first. For the Jews had a long tradition of allowing men learned in the Scriptures to stand up and speak during a service. In first bringing the gospel to the Jews, he was dealing with people who accepted the Hebrew Bible as authoritative and accepted many of the same spiritual principles that the Christians did.

So Paul reasoned, explained, and gave evidence from the Hebrew Bible that Jesus was the Messiah. The Jews were very familiar with passages that spoke about a messiah who would deliver the nation from its enemies. They didn’t spend as much time on passages like those in Isaiah that spoke of a suffering servant. But the rabbis could not overlook those passages entirely. Some of them had concluded that there had to be two messiahs--- a conquering messiah and a suffering messiah.

Paul argued that they were one and the same person. He claimed that the key factor was that this suffering servant had risen from the dead and would one day return as the conquering messiah. This messiah was Jesus. In other places Paul's presentation had been accompanied by miracles. Apparently here it was a case presented strictly from the Bible and the witness of Paul and Silas about Jesus.

According to v. 4 some people believed. A few of them were Jews. Most of the ones who responded, at least at first, were "God-fearing Greeks." These were Gentiles who were attracted to the God of Israel, but who had not fully converted to Judaism. A message to them about a messiah from Israel who would accept them on equal terms with the Jews would have naturally found a more welcome reception from them.

The historian Luke notes that a number of these Gentiles who responded to the message were "leading women." Women in Macedonia were known to have greater independence and boldness than other women in that part of the world. The leading women would have had more education than other women, and would thus have been more familiar with Greek philosophy. The Greek culture in many ways had a low view of women. Perhaps that contributed to the interest of these women in the God of Israel. When Paul came along saying that in Christ there is neither male nor female, that would have sounded even more appealing.

B.

This positive response at Thessalonica leads then to a consideration of PRINCIPLE #1: THE BIBLE HAS POWER TO BRING PEOPLE TO JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. THE BIBLE HAS POWER...) We who are Christians probably believe that. But we need to be reminded that the thing that will ultimately lead to change in the people around us is the message of the Bible. In our modern age we can be so consumed with techniques and methods and technology that we can in practice forget that it is the Bible and its message that have the real power to change lives. It is not methods and techniques and technology and the way that we act, though all of these things have their place.

Paul knew that the real power to change people rested not in miracles but in God's Word. The proclamation of that Word produced a positive response in some. *Guideposts* magazine told a story about an American soldier who found himself on a remote island in the South Pacific during W.W.II. A native of the island happened to come across this GI and proudly showed him a Bible that he had. The soldier said, "**We've outgrown that sort of thing.**" The native replied, "**It's a good thing we haven't. If it wasn't for this Book, you'd have been a meal by now!**"

We need to remember that the Bible and its message as applied by the Holy Spirit have the power to bring people to faith in Christ and change their lives. Later Paul would write to these Thessalonian Christians (1 THESSALONIANS 2:13): "**...when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God...**"

C.

In vv. 5-9 the missionaries encounter A NEGATIVE RESPONSE. (I. A. B. C. A NEGATIVE RESPONSE) We might get the impression from the mention in v. 2 of reasoning in the synagogue for three Sabbaths that Paul and company were in Thessalonica for a very short time. However, there is good reason to believe that there was a significant period of time that went by between verse 4 and verse 5. At the end of Paul's letter to the Philippians the author said that the Philippians had sent a gift more than once for his needs when he was in Thessalonica.

Then also in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians he makes reference to the fact that most of the first members of the church there had turned away from idols. During the first three weeks of Paul's stay in Thessalonica he was preaching to Jewish people in the synagogue, not to idol worshipers. So there must have been some time after that during which Paul preached to Gentiles.

So Paul may have been forced out of the synagogue after three weeks. But he apparently started preaching to the Greeks as well as teaching the converted Jews and God-fearers. Verse 5 indicates that after a while the Jews grew jealous of Paul's increasing influence, and they stirred up a riot: "**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.**" The word translated here as "people" was usually used by the Greeks of a governing body of people. This mob apparently wanted to haul Paul and his missionary friends before a town meeting.

Being unable to find the missionaries the Jewish-inspired mob hauled a guy named Jason and some other Christians before the city authorities. Perhaps Paul and Silas and Timothy had been staying at the house of this Jason. The Greek word for "city authorities" was a technical term for the town councilmen who ruled some of the Greek cities of the Roman Empire. Ancient inscriptions at Thessalonica indicate that there were five of them at this time in this city.

The complaint that this mob makes, seemingly under the guidance of the Jews, is this: "**These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.**" There are two basic charges that are being made against the Christians. First, they are accused of being trouble makers. They were upsetting the world. When the world is upside down to begin with, and someone comes along to set it right side up, the messed up people take a different view of things.

We know that about this time the Roman emperor Claudius had kicked all of the Jews out of the city of Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius says that this happened because of "**constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus.**" Reading between the lines this may mean that the Jews were in the same kind of uproar in Rome about Jews and Gentiles becoming followers of Christ.

The second charge against Paul and his friends was that they were guilty of treason. They were saying things that would imply that there was a king other than Caesar. This was, in a sense, true. We know from Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians that he did talk to the people here about eschatology and the return of Christ to establish an earthly kingdom. So this was interpreted as seditious activity by the unbelieving Jews and activity that went against the decrees of the emperor.

The real irony here is that it was the Jews themselves who had considered themselves a nation set apart. The theology deeply embedded in the Old Testament was that Israel should have no king but God. Eventually the Lord allowed them to have their own king. But the Hebrew Bible constantly stressed that the Jews were to be a people that were to be different from everyone else, and that their supreme loyalty should be to the Lord. The Jews often were a problem to the Romans. There were a number of revolts in Palestine that they had to put down. But it was this same charge of treason that the religious leaders in Jerusalem had made against Jesus. According to the gospels they concluded their allegations before Pontius Pilate with the affirmation that they had no king but Caesar.

The city authorities handled the situation in a very clever way. They may have realized that there wasn't much substance to the actual charges. The mob couldn't find the people that were charged with causing trouble. So the town leaders required that Jason and his Christian friends come up with a bond. We don't know exactly what that involved. It probably involved coming up with a certain amount of money and/or perhaps a lien being placed on some of their property so that if Paul showed up in town again, these Christians would risk forfeiting some substantial financial resources. Paul in his letters to the Thessalonians seems to make reference to this situation as an evil tactic that Satan used to keep him from returning to the city.

D.

This brings us then to PRINCIPLE #2: WE SHOULD EXPECT OPPOSITION TO THE GOSPEL. (PRINCIPLE #2: WE SHOULD...) Wherever Paul and his cohorts went, they saw a positive response to the Bible message. But they also ran into opposition. They were accused by some of causing trouble, of stirring up turmoil. A similar thing happens to some of us. Some of us who came from unbelieving families were, and still are, accused of being troublemakers, of messing up the family. We go to church now, and we act differently, and we have different friends, and things are just different, and some people in our family aren't happy about that. We are a problem, in their eyes. Some of us have taken flack for that.

We may have had friends that we used to drink with and do drugs with, and we don't do those things anymore. So we are the problem. We aren't fun anymore. We have messed up the group dynamics. Our friends aren't happy with us. Jesus Himself told His followers that they should expect that kind of reaction. He said that He came not to bring peace but a sword. In other words, the acceptance of His message would cause turmoil in families and communities. When we are sharing and teaching the Bible, we should expect to encounter the charge that we are creating turmoil.

The other charge made against Paul and his friends was that they were unpatriotic. They were treasonous in their teaching. A similar kind of charge is made against conservative Christians today. When we talk about morality and prayer in schools and when we speak out against abortion, we are accused of trying to impose our values on others. Religion, we are told, should be a private matter. When we try to bring our religious views into the public arena or involve them in matters of political debate, we are often accused of violating the doctrine of church and state separation. To do that is unpatriotic. It is against the Constitution. If we oppose gay marriage or transgenderism, we are accused of being haters. So people like Charlie Kirk need to be taken out.

In our last church we put up a large lighted sign (CHURCH SIGN) that had a message area. It was bigger than the sign that we have now. Our building was located on a state highway that had a lot of traffic. It was also an upscale neighborhood. Initially many of the neighbors were unhappy with it. We were messing up the looks of the neighborhood. We got several calls from people who were upset with us. We should have expected the opposition.

But Principle #1 reminds us that we can also expect that the Bible and its message will bring people to faith in Christ. Some will have a positive response. After our sign was up for a few weeks, we started getting positive feedback. Most importantly there were some people who came to the church and came to the Lord because of the sign which often had Bible verses.

I remember doing a funeral for a woman named Joanne. She lived in the neighborhood, and she said that every time that she drove by the sign, it seemed like the message applied to her situation in life. These Bible-based messages had the power to bring her to faith in Jesus. It was the power of God's Word.

II.

(II. PAUL AND COMPANY AT BEREIA) In vv. 10-15, then, we come to PAUL AND COMPANY AT BEREIA. The pattern of positive and negative response that happened at Thessalonica also happens at the next stop.

A.

In vv. 10-12 we find A POSITIVE RESPONSE. (II. A. A POSITIVE RESPONSE) Paul and Silas were snuck out of town at night in Thessalonica and headed west and south. Berea was about 45 miles away to the southwest. (BEREIA MAP) This was not as big a town as Thessalonica. But it had a synagogue, and Paul followed the usual method of preaching there first. That synagogue has been excavated and is today a regular tourist stop.

The Jews in the synagogue at Berea were more responsive than their counterparts at Thessalonica. They compared what Paul said with the Hebrew Bible, and many of them came to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Again there were a number of

prominent Greek women who believed along with some men. So Paul and Silas must have been involved in evangelism outside of the synagogue with Gentiles also.

B.

In vv. 13-15 we again find that there was A NEGATIVE RESPONSE. (II. A. B. A NEGATIVE RESPONSE) The unbelieving Jews at Thessalonica got wind of what was happening at Berea, and headed down there to stir up trouble. A 45 mile trip in that day meant a considerable expense of time and energy and money to oppose these Christians.

We read beginning in the middle of v. 13, “**...they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there.**” We don’t know how long Paul was there before he had to leave. Perhaps Silas and Timothy remained for a while because the Christians were still so very young in the faith, and it was recognized that they needed more grounding before Silas and Timothy could rejoin Paul and do more evangelism and church planting.

We are also not told what was the exact nature of the threat to Paul. Perhaps the Christians were not sure themselves what action would be taken against the apostle. Given what had happened in Thessalonica and knowing that some of the same Jews were now in town at Berea, it seemed a wiser course of action to have Paul move on to Athens.

C.

So we come to PRINCIPLE #3: WE SHOULD STUDY THE BIBLE. (II. A. B. C. WE SHOULD STUDY THE BIBLE) Luke says that the Berean Jews were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica. Why were they more noble-minded? Because they were receptive to the message of Paul. Why were they more receptive to the message of the Apostle Paul? Because they were **“examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”** They were willing to take a serious look at the evidence. Religious people are often the hardest to reach because they have become so set in their ways, and they are unwilling to consider the evidence for the claims of Christ that are described in the Bible.

These people were willing to study the Bible daily to see if what the preacher said was true. That is always a good thing to do. Preachers are not infallible. A lot of preachers today have messed up their congregations because parishioners have not held them accountable to the Word of God. In order to do that it is necessary that people study the Bible regularly to see if what the preacher says is true.

There are at least two ways in our passage in which Bible study proves to be valuable. First, it is effective in evangelism. Because Paul knew the Bible well, he could argue effectively with the Jews that Jesus was the messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. One thing that we can do to be more effective witnesses and evangelists is to study the Bible.

There will be occasions when people around us will also ask us questions about the Bible and why we believe what we believe. To be an effective witness we need to be studying the Bible to give them good answers. (1 PETER 3:15) In 1 Peter #3 v. 15 we are told: **“...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...”**

The second reason from this passage why Bible study is important is that it is effective in changing lives. Many Bereans became followers of Jesus because they listened to Paul and read the Bible. (PROJECTOR OFF) Today the term “Berean” has a very positive connotation in Christianity. The first church which I pastored was originally called Berean Bible Church. Of course Bible study is not only important in our salvation but also in our continued spiritual growth.

I read that years ago in Yellowstone Park when the tourists fed the bears that a considerable number of bears died by the side of the road. Why? Park rangers said that these bears were still waiting for handouts from the tourists. Their excessive dependence upon tourists had short-circuited their natural instinct to look for their own food. It is unfortunate that too many Christians are like those bears. They have become dependent on hearing messages on Sunday and listening to preachers on Christian radio. They have not spent time reading and studying the Bible on their own.

Boris Dostenko grew up in Siberia. After W.W.II he was moved with his family to Ukraine. There he was able to enroll in an electrotechnical college. One August afternoon he was at his grandfather's house recovering from a bout with pneumonia. He happened to wander into an old barn and fall asleep on a pile of hay. When he awoke, he discovered that he had slipped down between the hay and the back wall of the barn. There he discovered an old book without a cover. On one side of the yellowed pages of this book were words in Old Slavonic script. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN'S GOSPEL SLAVONIC) On the opposite pages were the words translated into Russian. Boris came across the words: **“The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ...”** A bit farther on he read the words of John 1:1: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

Principle #2 says that the Bible always encounters opposition. Communist leaders in the Soviet Union, which included Ukraine, tried to get rid of the Bible during their 70 years of dictatorial control. As a result Boris had never been exposed to it. But Principle #1 says that the Bible has power to bring people to faith in Christ. Boris was attracted to this message of the Bible. For the next two weeks he studied it regularly--- Principle #3. After two weeks that Bible just disappeared from his room. He never found out why that happened, but he did not forget what he had read.

Boris Dostenko continued to do well in his academic studies. He pursued a course of studies in science. When he learned about thermodynamics and the Law of Entropy, he remembered what he had read in the Bible. The Law of Entropy says basically that

every physical system left to itself will decay over time. Matter will tend to become increasingly disorganized. Energy dissipates into heat. So how did that matter get organized in the first place? Boris found no satisfactory answer in science. Any material source would necessarily become disorganized. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

After finishing studies at the University of Kiev in physics and mathematics Boris went on to do graduate work at the University of Leningrad. From there he went to Moscow State University, where he earned his Ph.D. in physical and mathematical sciences. Then in 1954 he was assigned to work at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. He became involved in nuclear research at the Institute of Physics in Kiev. About this time he went through a major depression when he discovered that both his father and his wife were reporting to the KGB about his actions and his beliefs.

In 1966 Boris was appointed head of his laboratory. (BORIS DOSTENKO) Shortly after that he was called to Moscow to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. There he was told that he would be sent to Canada, and after that to Vienna, as a senior member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. From there he would be expected to send back information about the achievements of nuclear researchers from around the world. One of the top men on this committee, Comrade Baskakov, lifted his finger to indicate a quotation from the highest source and said, **"Boris Borisovich, we will be able to reward your service greatly--- up to the Nobel Prize in physics!"**

Two days later he was at the University of Alberta in Canada. When he began to unpack his bags in his Edmonton hotel room, he found another Bible, a Bible placed there by the Gideons. His hands trembled as he turned to John 1:1 and read the words that had gripped him so forcefully 22 years before: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** After that Boris spent every available moment studying the Bible. Shortly afterward he trusted in Christ as His Savior and was baptized in a church in Edmonton. Boris stayed in Canada and became a Canadian citizen. His first teaching job was in Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. (BORIS DOSTENKO YELLOWKNIFE) After that he taught at Waterloo University and the University of Toronto.

Dr. Boris Dostenko writes, **"I believe that God is the Creator of the universe, but He is not confined to it. He is independent. He keeps and controls the whole universe, and each part that makes it up. He is the One who maintains its order. But He does not belong to this 'reality.' No analogy can do justice to God's provision for men to enjoy spiritual union with Him. Paraphrasing Francis Bacon, one may say that superficial and egocentric knowledge leads to atheism, while genuine, deep, and objective study leads to faith in God."** (Scientists Who Believe, Barrett and Fisher, Moody Press)

The Bible has power to bring people to faith in Christ. We can expect opposition, however, when we promote it and teach it. Our response should be to discipline ourselves to study it diligently.