

JESUS IS THE CHRIST

Acts 17:1-34

Key Verse: 17:3

“...explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’ he said.”

In the last passage God gave Paul a Macedonian vision to direct his mission journey. Paul obeyed God’s leading immediately. In Philippi, Paul preached the word, and the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to the gospel. Then a jailer believed the gospel. A church formed which supported Paul for the rest of his life and ministry. Receiving God’s vision is not easy. We must seek God earnestly and pray. But it is worth the effort, for work done according to God’s vision bears everlasting fruit in God’s history. We—especially young American men and women—must repent of petty desires and seek God’s vision earnestly.

Today Paul continues his second mission journey, stopping at Thessalonica, Berea and Athens in what we know as modern Greece. Though Paul speaks to different kinds of people, the content of his message is always the same: Jesus is the Christ. Still, Paul makes his message meaningful to each kind of people. Those with a right attitude received the message. Today let’s accept the message that Jesus is the Christ and share it meaningfully with the people around us.

First, the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (1-3a).

After experiencing the great work of God and severe persecution in Philippi, Paul and Silas passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica. It was the capital and largest city in Macedonia with a mixed population of about 200,000, including some Jews.

Look at verse 2. “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures....” Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures.” This is repeated in Acts 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, and 26:25. It was Paul’s practice to “reason with” his listeners about the meaning of God’s word and its application to their lives. God gave man a mind. Man thinks. This makes man different from animals—creatures of instinct. Man must use his mind to think, and he must especially think about the word of God. In fact, we are commanded to love God with our minds (Mt 22:37). When a person thinks on the basis of the Scriptures he can discover spiritual truth that opens his eyes to see God and experience God’s presence.

However, reasoning on the basis of God’s word is not easy. Sinners are not the rational beings, or the cool people they wish to be. Sinners are subjective and sensitive, based on their feelings, egos and self-righteousness. Consider the people of Isaiah’s time. They were sinning greatly against God, yet thought they were good people. In spiritual ignorance, they were damaging their souls and bodies, plunging their nation into tragedy. But they did not know what their real problem was. Instead of seeing their sins as God saw them, they blamed God for not meeting their demands. Isaiah cried because they were not wiser than a donkey or an ox (Isa 1:3). To those people, living on the animal level, God said, “Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isa 1:18). By reasoning together with them, God wanted to solve their sin problem. St. Paul teaches us that Bible study is not just preaching one-sidedly. We must know how to think based on the word of God and how to reason together with others based on the Scriptures. We can do so when we have awesome respect for the word of God and use our minds to think.

Look at verse 3a. "...explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead." Paul's reasoning with the people in the synagogue had a clear point. It was to prove that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Having a right concept of the Christ is essential for salvation. The Thessalonians did not realize that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. They probably had a popular concept of the Christ as a great conqueror like King David, or "Alexander the Great, modified." In the same way, many modern Christians have a popular concept of the Christ. They think that the Christ came to fulfill their human dreams and that is all. That was Peter's problem. Peter had made a sincere personal confession that Jesus is the Christ (Mk 8:29). But he did not really know what he was talking about, for he still wanted to live an easy and comfortable life and receive human glory (Mk 9:5). Jesus struggled to correct Peter, even rebuking him seriously (Mk 8:33). We must know that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.

Why did the Christ have to suffer? It was for our sins. Isaiah 53:4-5 explains this well. It says, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." Sin is our real problem. Sin makes people sick and sorrowful. Sin makes people lawbreakers who deserve the full measure of God's wrath. Sin fills people with guilt, shame, distress and fear. Sin wounds people and makes them wound others uncontrollably. Sin is so terrible that it demands the suffering, bloodshed and death of the holy Son of God in our places. Only by suffering to the full measure of God's demand could the Christ save men from sin.

When Jesus was on earth, this "must" was on his heart. He said repeatedly, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed and after three days rise again" (Mk 8:31). To Jesus, there was no other way. He had to suffer, die and rise again. This was the main work of the Christ. We must come to know the Christ as the one who died for our sins and for the sin of the world. We must have a right concept of the Christ and a right concept of sin. St. Paul said, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1Ti 1:15). However, to many, sin is not so serious, and even considered fun. Some think of sin as a genetic disorder or psychological problem. Some avoid coming to Christ personally by being busy doing something for God. At the bottom of their hearts, they are proud. We must come to Christ humbly for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Christ also had to rise from the dead. In Acts 13, Paul delivered a resurrection message from the Old Testament by referring to Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10. Thus, Paul proved from the Scriptures that the Christ had to rise from the dead. Christ's resurrection made a statement. Christ's resurrection declares with power that he is the Son of God and that God is the living God (Ro 1:4). Christ's resurrection reveals God's final victory over sin, for it proves that Christ's sacrifice was acceptable and those who believe in him are justified by faith (Ro 4:25).

Second, "This Jesus...is the Christ" (3b-9).

Through reasoning from the Scriptures, explaining and proving, Paul laid a foundation for what he really wanted to say. Look at verse 3b. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." Here, "This Jesus" refers to the historical Jesus who is God incarnate. This Jesus came to the world humbly as a little baby in a manger. This Jesus served all kinds of sinners with compassion and the power of God. But this Jesus was rejected by his people. Finally, this Jesus was crucified and died. On the third day, this Jesus rose

from the dead, conquering the power of sin and death forever. John the Baptist said of this Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29) Jesus is the Christ. The Christ is God's King. He is the King of peace and love. When we accept him in our hearts, he saves us from our sins and gives us eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God.

On hearing Paul's message, some Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas. They were like second-gen missionaries, who have studied the Bible from age 3. As soon as they accept Christ, they are ready to be Bible teachers. Also, many God-fearing Greeks and some prominent women accepted the message.

When the Jews saw the great work of God, they were jealous. They could not defeat Paul in Bible study, so they resorted to gangster activity. They rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace. Most likely, they promised each one \$100 for a couple hours of work. Then they formed a mob and started a riot to run Paul and Silas out of town. But they did not find them. So they dragged off a man named Jason and some other brothers and brought them before the city officials. They shouted, "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus" (6,7). In this way, they wanted to make Paul and Silas criminals and to discredit anyone who associated with them.

Where God was working, Satan was right there to hinder it. Many shallow people changed sides. But one man, Jason, was different. He accepted persecution without weakening in his faith. He stood on Jesus' side at great cost. No doubt, he really believed that Jesus is the Christ and that only Jesus could solve his sin problem. His commitment to Christ was deep, though his time of Bible study had been short. When such people are persecuted, they only become stronger. The great work of God in Thessalonica was in one person, Jason.

Third, the noble Bereans (10-15).

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. In terms of the political and economic situation of the times, Berea was not noteworthy. But in gospel history, Berea is beautiful forever because noble people lived there. Look at verse 11. "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." Luke says that the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. People are different in their attitude toward God's word, as Jesus taught in the parable of the sower (Lk 8:1-15). We learn two things from the Bereans.

In the first place, they received the message with great eagerness. To receive the message requires a humble heart. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). A person who is poor in spirit is a humble person. He realizes his need before God. Such people are honest in their self-examination. They also seek the truth sincerely. When such people hear the message that Jesus is the Christ, they give all their attention to it and listen with full concentration. They do not shift around in their seats or think about what to do when the meeting is over. They focus so intently on the message that they hear God's own voice speak to them.

In the second place, they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Though they were deeply moved by Paul's message, they did not accept it blindly. They verified it with the Scriptures. To them, the Scriptures were the final authority. They were not driven by political or social

trends of the world. They believed the Bible as the absolute truth. Their Bible study was not sporadic, but very regular. They studied the Bible every day. They studied the Bible personally, for themselves. May God help us to be like the noble Bereans.

There was a great work of God in Berea. Many of the Jews believed. A number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men believed as well. But the Jews from Thessalonica learned about it and did their best to stir up trouble. Ironically, this resulted in spreading the gospel still further, as Paul went to Athens.

Fourth, Paul proclaims the Christ in Athens (16-34).

In contrast with Berea, Athens is a very famous city and known to be important in world history. Most notably, Athens produced philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. While such men had great reasoning power, they had a problem. They respected human reason more than God's word. Then they became idol worshippers. Reason must be based on God's word or it makes people very proud and leads them to deep darkness (Ro 1:21-23).

When Paul saw their idols, he was greatly distressed. So he reasoned with them in the synagogue and at the marketplace. As a result, he began to dispute with two groups of philosophers: Epicureans and Stoics. Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) held that pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death. Zeno (340-265 B.C.) was the founder of Stoicism. His teaching centered on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized using one's rational abilities and all other faculties to endure hardship and rule over situations. The focus of both philosophies is to live the best life possible on earth because this life is everything. By the time of Paul these philosophies had degenerated; their adherents did not struggle hard to practice them. They did nothing but talk about and listen to the latest ideas, like people who enjoy "talk shows." To these people, Paul proclaimed the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul's message was new to the people of Athens. So they brought him to the Areopagus to hear more about it. In spite of his feeling of distress, Paul did not start by rebuking their idolatry. Rather, he praised them for being very religious. He did not quote Bible verses that would have no contextual basis to them. Rather, he used their altar to "an unknown god" to introduce the one true God. He met them where they were and spoke in a way they could understand.

Still, Paul's message was a simple and clear Genesis Bible study. He taught them that God is the Creator and Sovereign Ruler of man and the world. God made man in the image of God. Man must seek God until he finds him. Man should not worship things that his hands have made; it is terrible ignorance. Look at verses 30-31. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Paul proclaimed the resurrection of Christ. The Christ is God's King who will judge all men justly. The gospel is not just another human theory. It is God's absolute truth. Not many Athenians responded to Paul's message. But there were a few, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris.

In this passage we learn that Jesus is the Christ, who died for our sins and rose again. He is God's King. He saves those who repent and believe. But he judges those who ignore him. Let's accept this message and share it in a meaningful way with the people of our time.

