

ACTS 16:25 to 17:21 "WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?"

In our study in the book of Acts we are in the middle of Chapter 16. Paul is currently on his second missionary journey. He has made it to Philippi. Paul is traveling with Silas, Timothy and Luke. So far on this missionary journey he has made it from Antioch in Syria through Cilicia, Phrygia, Asia, up and across the Aegean Sea to Philippi. That is where he has made it to this point in the lesson so far – to the continent of Europe. He is having a very successful visit in the city of Philippi. Things are going great. But something happened in our study last time that changed things abruptly. Paul casts an evil spirit out of a local slave girl. With the evil spirit gone, the girl can no longer tell fortunes or predict future events. So, with their primary source of income being gone, the slave girl's masters become quite upset with Paul and Silas. They have these two missionaries dragged in front of the local authorities, all kinds of false accusations. We left off with these verses last time:

"The crowd joined in attacking them [Paul and Silas], and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks" (Acts 16:22-24).

There, that takes care of that! That ought to shut those trouble-makers up! Or so, they thought.

READ Acts 16:25

What was that sound coming from inside the dark and dreary jail cell? That sound doesn't sound sad. That sound sounds glad! Our two missionaries are singing and praising God! What is with these guys? How can they be so joyful?

READ Acts 16:26-27

Now, why would the jailer want to kill himself if the prisoners had escaped? Because the Roman government would put him to death for that. So, he thinks, "I might as well take my own life."

READ Acts 16:28-29

I believe the jailer trembles with fear because he recognizes what he is seeing as being a miracle from the hand of God. He falls to his knees in humility and brokenness. He sees this as God working.

READ Acts 16:30-34

"What must I do to be saved?" In the shortest witnessing exchange ever recorded, Paul tells the jailer all he needs to do – "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..." No baptism required (although later he does get baptized). No circumcision required. No special religious words need to be chanted. Not even a change of life is needed to be saved. That comes in time. But to be saved, you don't need that. The only requirement for salvation is belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The next thing you know, Paul and Silas are brought to the jailer's house and they begin to share the Gospel with his family. All of his family is there in the middle of the night. Every one of them is saved and baptized. For their part, Paul and Silas receive medical attention for their wounds. They even serve a home-cooked meal to them! There is great rejoicing in the jailer's house this night. Life-changing!

Meanwhile it is starting to get light outside. The local authorities had felt the tremors from the earthquake the night before. It is very possible that the city magistrates have connected the earthquake they experienced to the God that Paul and Silas had been proclaiming around town. We don't know for sure, but they are suddenly quite eager to release the two missionaries.

READ Acts 16:35-36

Paul says, "Not so fast!"

READ Acts 16:37-38

When the city officials learn that Paul is a Roman citizen, they become afraid because they know that they have violated his legal rights. You see, under Roman law, a Roman citizen had the right to a public hearing and, under Roman law, the scourging of a Roman citizen was prohibited. They realize that they could be in serious trouble with the Roman government for what they had done to Paul and Silas.

READ Acts 16:39-40

Remember that Lydia was Paul's first convert in Philippi. Her home became their meeting place in Philippi. On their way out of town they go by and see Lydia and tell her good-bye. So, Paul and Silas leave Philippi with Timothy. Luke remains behind temporarily to minister to the many new converts in that city. The missionary team makes their way down the road from Philippi on foot 30 miles to the next town, Thessalonica.

At this time, Thessalonica is the largest commercial center in southeastern Europe. It is a prosperous port city on the Aegean Sea across the bay from Mount Olympus. You have all heard of that. Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia, remains a flourishing city in Greece today. The city's modern name is Thessaloniki (a slight difference in spelling).

READ Acts 17:1

Notice that, unlike Philippi, there is a synagogue in Thessalonica. So, it has a rather large Jewish population. Where do you suppose Paul goes first with the Gospel message? Well, as was his practice, he goes into the synagogue.

READ Acts 17:2-4

For three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul is in the synagogue reasoning with the Jews there from their Old Testament scriptures. Paul's message consists of three main points:

His first point is that the scriptures foretold that the Messiah must suffer. Notice that the Greek word for Messiah is "Christ." Perhaps Paul used such scripture passages as Psalm 22 that describes the crucifixion scene. Maybe he used Isaiah 53, which is the Suffering Servant passages. We do not know. It doesn't say which scriptures he used. We know that he uses the Old Testament scriptures to show that the Messiah must suffer.

Paul's second point is that the scriptures predicted that the Messiah must rise from the dead. So, in order for the Messiah to rise from the dead, the Messiah has to die! That must have been shocking when they heard Isaiah talking about that. To show that He must rise from the dead, he probably quoted Psalm 16:10, "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." Paul quoted this verse in his sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:35). This is the same verse Peter quoted right after Pentecost (Acts 2:27).

The third point Paul makes is that Jesus is your (the Jews) Messiah.

How is Paul's message received? It is fairly positive. There are many converts to Christianity. Some of these converts are Jews. But many are God-fearing Greeks (Gentiles). We also see that "not a few of the leading women," in other words, quite a few women from prominent families in that community believe Paul's message.

Paul will later write a letter to the Thessalonians reminding them of their conversion to Christianity – about this time period right here. He says, "For they themselves [talking about believers in the churches in their area] report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians. 1:9-10). So, in Thessalonica during Paul's brief ministry there, we see that both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles and many pagan idol worshippers all turn to Christ. So, this is a very successful ministry in Thessalonica.

Between Acts 17:4 (which we just read) and Acts 17:5, an indefinite period of time passes. During this time (Acts does not record it), Paul and his mission team stop attending the synagogue. We are not told the reason for this. We can speculate based on what has happened before. Generally, the Jews are OK for a while but over time they tend to turn on Paul and become jealous. In fact, v 5 says, "the Jews were jealous." So, what probably happened is that Paul and company left the synagogue because the Jews started becoming hostile toward them. Paul and his team begin meeting together with the many converts in a man named Jason's house. Jason is one of the new Thessalonian believers. His home becomes the worship location for the new believers there in Thessalonica. So, it was in Lydia's home in Philippi and it is in Jason's home in Thessalonica. Remember all of the early churches were meeting in people's homes.

READ Acts 17:5-8

When the Jews notice that the people are embracing this new message proclaimed by Paul, they become jealous. They get mad. This sounds familiar. It has happened before. The Jewish leaders never refute Paul's theology, but they become jealous because of his popularity with the people. They see him and his Gospel as threatening to their established religious system. This is very much like what happened with Jesus.

The Jews hire what amounts to a gang of thugs. Paul refers to them in v 5 as these "wicked men of the rabble." They stir up the entire city. They assault Jason's house. They cannot find Paul and Silas there, so they drag Jason and some other Christian brothers before the city leaders. As with the crowd at Philippi, this group brings a bunch of false charges against the missionary team. They accuse them of trying to set up an anti-Roman government under a rival king called Jesus. Was that what they were doing? No. They say that they are "acting against the decrees of Caesar," which is totally false. They accuse Jason and the others of being complicit with Paul and Silas. Not one word of their accusations is true.

READ Acts 17:9

So, Jason and his friends manage to post a bond, money for his and the others' freedom. By doing so, they promise the city magistrates that the trouble allegedly caused by Paul and Silas will cease. If it does not then, according to the law, they could forfeit their own property. That is the agreement. Satisfied with these terms, the city officials release Jason and his friends and allow them to return home. But there is some fallback from this, right?

READ Acts 17:10

The Thessalonian Christians manage to move Paul, Silas and Timothy safely out of the city at night. This is NOT how Paul wanted things to end at Thessalonica. For Jason's sake, however, there is little choice. Undoubtedly if they had stayed, the Jews there would have stirred up more trouble. The Christian brothers escort the 3-man team 40 miles to Berea.

In Paul's day, Berea was already an ancient city. It was first mentioned by the Greek historian Thucydides in 437 BC. By Roman times it had become a prosperous city with a large Jewish community. Berea is known today as Veria, Greece. It is a very picturesque city with a lot of orchards and beautiful mountains in the background. In Berea the missionary team is pleasantly surprised at the warm reception they receive from the Jewish community there. Outside one of the churches in Berea (Veria) is a statue of the Apostle Paul. His visit to Berea was a big deal.

READ Acts 17:11-12

The Jews in Berea have an eagerness to learn and listen with an open mind to Paul's teaching from the Old Testament scriptures. They examine the scriptures daily to see for themselves whether what Paul was saying about Jesus being the Messiah is true or not. That is why he calls them "noble." That is all you can ask someone to do. "Just consider what I am saying is true." Now, herein lays good advice for us. Let's say you are in a Bible study or listening to a sermon and you hear a "new" truth, something that you have never heard before. It is wise to check it out for yourself against the backdrop of Scripture. That is a good thing to do. It is what

these people do. They look at the scriptures and see that there is something to what he is saying. As it was at Thessalonica, the converts to Paul's Gospel in Berea were both Jews and Gentiles; and both men and women – a diverse audience that accepts the Gospel.

It seems like when things are going well, something always happens. Poor Paul!

READ Acts 17:13

They cannot just leave well enough alone. Paul had left town. Now they have to follow him and cause trouble wherever he goes. So, the Jews from Thessalonica show up. They are seething with anger. They had not been able to capture Paul and Silas in their own city. So, they track him down in Berea. They are eager to finish the job. They are going to get these guys. They don't like them. The Berean converts, however, get wind of the Jewish plot and escort Paul out of town with the Jews in hot pursuit.

READ Acts 17:14-15

Paul leaves Silas and Timothy behind in Berea.

Let me tell you what is happening. To throw these trouble-making pursuers from Thessalonica off, the Berean brothers create a diversion. They pretend to take Paul down to the sea to send him away by boat. In reality, however, Paul is escorted down the road leading to Athens. They think he is going one way, but he goes another.

Having witnessed the hatred and venom of the Thessalonian Jews, Paul, heading for Athens, is really concerned for the physical and spiritual welfare of the believers back in Thessalonica. Paul knows full well, though, that there is nothing he can do. it is impossible for him to go back to that city right now.

He will later address in a letter this particular time period of his frustration not being able to go back to Thessalonica and being concerned about these brothers. He says, "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more

eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us” (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18). Paul sees what is going on with the Thessalonian Jews as spiritual warfare, as Satan at work. This reminded me of the scripture which says that our war is “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers...” (Ephesians 6:12). A lot of our battle is spiritual warfare. Paul sees this as “Satan hindered us.”

Paul later will send Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the body of believers is getting along and to minister to their spiritual needs. He gives instructions to Timothy to come to Athens with news about them as soon as possible. How do we know this? Because in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 3 he talks about this. We know this from his letters later. Acts doesn't mention it but some of Paul's letters fill in the gaps for us.

So far on this second missionary journey, fanatical opposition against Paul, what Paul really sees as Satanic opposition, has forced Paul to be expelled from three successive towns – Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Things were going great and he gets kicked out of three towns in a row! As you might guess this leaves Paul weary and a bit discouraged. And not only that but he is quite concerned about the believers and his fellow missionaries whom he has left behind. He left Luke in Philippi. He sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. And he had Silas remain in Berea. He is by himself. In a later letter Paul will recall this period. He describes himself arriving in Corinth “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). This is what Paul is going through at this time. He is under a lot of stress and is concerned for the believers and his team.

And so it is that Paul finds himself tired and somewhat discouraged as he heads toward the city of Athens by himself without his mission team.

Eventually Paul arrives in Athens, one of the oldest cities in the world. It had been the leading city of the ancient Greek Empire and is very pagan and idolatrous. Paul finds it to be a place of cold culture, sophisticated superstitions and cynicism.

Acts 17:16-17

Paul is shocked and disappointed to see just how rampant pagan idolatry is in Athens. Such pursuit of emptiness exasperates Paul. It is said that Athens at this time in history had more statues of various gods than the rest of Greece put together. The lowest pits of human depravity accompany the loftiest culture. Paul senses the misery of the meaningless existence that pervades Athens.

As is his standard operating procedure, Paul visits the synagogue on the Sabbath and converses with his fellow-Jews. And then during the week Paul finds a forum to share the Gospel in the market place. He enters into dialog with the Greek philosophers, who view themselves as intellectual "seekers of truth."

Acts 17:18

For your information, there were many philosophical groups in Athens in the First Century. The Epicureans and the Stoics are two prominent groups that are mentioned here in this verse. The Epicureans subscribed to a philosophy of indulgence. They say that pleasure is the chief end of life. This sounds like America! We get our English word "epicure" from them, which means "to indulge in sensual pleasures." The Epicureans believed in many gods but hold that these gods had no real interest in the affairs of mankind. In other words, man can basically do what he wants because the gods really do not care one way or the other. They also did not believe in life after death. So, basically their philosophy is, "This life is all there is, so you might as well live it up!" Like I said, it sounds a lot like America today.

The Stoics were at the totally opposite extreme, the other end of the spectrum. Their philosophy was marked by indifference. This was due in large part to their false view of an impersonal God. Stoics were fatalists, believing that man is powerless to change things. They were also pantheists, believing that God lives in everything; in nature, trees, mountains, stones, etc. The Stoics claimed that man finds his fulfillment in virtue, in his own moral goodness. This belief had led its followers to live

lives of moral earnestness, but also to possess great spiritual pride. Stoics were a people above passion, unmoved by joy or grief, by pleasure or pain. Our English word, "stoical," which derived from this same group, means, "to show no passion or feeling."

These two groups of intellectuals proudly refer to themselves as "seekers of truth" but, in reality, they have no real love of truth. They merely have an insatiable intellectual curiosity. They indulge in every idle speculation. How ironic it is, then, that they refer to Paul as "this babbling." If they had really been seeking the truth at all cost, they would have responded to the Gospel.

Jeremiah 29:13 says, "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." Jesus said later in Luke 11:10, "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened." These are great promises from God's word that those who are seeking the truth of God will find it. That is why I am a bit skeptical about how hard these people were looking for truth. Here is truth right in front of their face!

Well, when Paul mentions Jesus's resurrection from the dead, he gets their attention. This is something they have not heard before. It arouses their intellectual curiosity.

READ Acts 17:19-21

The Athenians are fascinated by any new thought or idea. So, the Council of the Areopagus, which meets on Mars Hill west of the Acropolis, invites Paul to speak to their group. They think that they are honoring Paul by such an invitation. Little do the pagan skeptics of Paul's day realize that, 2,000 years later, when their magnificent structures lay in ruins and their names have long since been lost to weather and time, that men and women from all corners of the world will visit their ruins largely because Paul, this "babbling," dared to stand and preach the Gospel here in this place.

And so, it is in this setting of skepticism and idolatry that Paul stands and delivers his famous sermon on Mars Hill. We will look at that in detail next time.

Applications from today's lesson...

- Consider Paul and Silas in that Philippian jail cell. Your positive attitude during times of trial can have a huge impact on the people around you. It really can.
- If somebody asks you, "What must I do to be saved?" would you be able to give them an answer? Be prepared to share the Gospel whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself.
- When talking to others, take some time to try and understand their background, culture, and moral authority. Everybody has some moral authority. In the book of Acts, Paul connects with his various audiences right where they are. Notice how Paul presents the Gospel differently to a Jewish audience than he does to a pagan Gentile audience.
- Like Paul, we do not operate alone. As my wife likes to say, "You are not an island." We can find a great source of strength in relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters. Take time each week to pray for and encourage your brothers and sisters in some way.

The question was raised at the end of class about whether Paul's second missionary journey was successful or not. His efforts seem to have been constantly interrupted as he is frequently run out of town.

My response was that whenever you see God at work, Satan is right there wanting to counter it. So yes, it was a very successful trip!