

Acts 17:1-15 What is your response to the Gospel?

Introduction

Some people have claimed over the years that being a Christian would be a boring life! Undoubtedly there are lifestyle choices that have to be made and some things that others claim is part of 'having a good time' are avoided by Christians. In addition, this will mean that there are some events in which Christians will not want to participate and some activities that are outside the boundaries for a healthy and fulfilling God-honouring life. However, public surveys, for what they are worth, consistently rate believers as being more happy with their lives; with a greater circle of 'friends'; note that they give at least double the average citizen's contribution to charities and are characterised as wanting to assist people in need both at home and overseas. Of course there are people who hold to other faiths or none who are good and generous citizens and neighbours etc, but the general pattern of Christian living is perceived as making a major impact in the wider community. However, although we live in freedom a large proportion of Christians around the world experience persecution and killing as well as routine discrimination in matters of employment, for example, in Islamic countries. Paul and his colleagues lived in a brutal world. The beatings they endured with limited medical assistance when rescued must have taken a toll on their health. Yet within twenty-four hours of being released from Philippi jail they were on the move once again to another town with all their worldly belongings on their backs. The Church of Jesus Christ is growing today around the world, but usually in a context where great suffering has been courageously endured, in places like Korea, China, and a host of countries in Africa. We have a legitimate right to expect the church to grow numerically and spiritually over time, if we truly honour the Lord. It may take a good number of years, but faithful sowing of spiritual seed will produce a harvest in God's time –if we persevere as Paul declared in Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* Paul; and Silas had no car or train or aeroplane, not even a horse and carriage to take them on their journeys round the Roman world. It was a tough spartan existence sleeping many nights in the open air and some days without food or adequate clothing. Paul in II Corinthians 11:23-29 compared what he and his companions endured compared to some bogus 'Christians' who claimed to be super spiritual people. *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* This is inspirational stuff, but also a sober reminder of what it cost earlier generations of Christians in proclaiming the gospel so that eventually you and I could hear it freely in our generation.

1. The Mission at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9)

(a) The courage displayed (Acts 17:1; I Thessalonians 2:1-2)

¹ *When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. Acts 17:1 covers a walk of over 100 miles carrying all their possessions. Luke's account is very calm and logical but the human story behind these factual*

statements is an extraordinary one. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul mentions some of the difficulties he and Silas had experienced. *You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.*² *We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition* (I Thessalonians 2:1-2). God the Holy Spirit gave them the strength to survive the journey and have the stamina to keep going with the missionary journey to which they had been called by God and the Christian Church. We have our low times of discouragement and doubt when we wonder if our hard work in Christian service has been worth it. We too can struggle with continuing with evangelistic work when we see precious little to show for the effort expended at sharing our faith. In this church we are fortunate that God has granted us the blessings of a good number of people coming to Christ over the last decade or more, but we need to continue with this ministry so that God may use us to lead even more people to faith in Him. Paul had absolutely no sympathy for apathy and indifference –people needed to know Jesus and so he pressed on. Countless stories of Christian women and men down the centuries have had a similar resolution and defied the most astounding odds in their faithfulness to Jesus Christ, thus proving the truthfulness of Paul’s words in Philippians 4:13: *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.* God who is the same yesterday, today and into the future will provide the strength you and I need also in our service for Him as well. Do you trust Him to take care of your future?

(b) **The method used** (Acts 17:2-3)² *As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,*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.* Here Paul felt at home with a large Jewish presence in this place. Thessalonica was a flourishing town, a significant trading post for Jewish merchants in Greece. The synagogue was at the heart of the community and the majority of its members would have heard Paul preach during these weeks of public ministry from its pulpit. Luke concentrates on this ministry to the Jews, but in the gallery besides Jewish women and girls and young boys there were a significant number of non-Jewish Greeks who wanted to accept the God of the Jews without becoming Jewish. This group of people would have been thrilled with what Paul had to say concerning Jesus. In fact although some Jews accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, the majority of the believers were former pagan Gentiles. This is why Paul in I Thessalonians 1:7-10 refers to them in this way: *And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*⁸ *The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia— your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it,*⁹ *for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,*¹⁰ *and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead— Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.* Paul knew that the people he was most likely to reach with the gospel were people who already had a reverence for the Bible. When in places like Athens where very few believers lived he could not make any such assumptions. There he sought to use, amongst other things, figures in their own religious traditions to communicate the gospel. Here he can focus on passages in the Bible that speak about the suffering Messiah such as Psalm 22, written 500 years before crucifixion was invented, yet Jesus’ agonising suffering is described in significant detail there around 1000BC. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is another passage that speaks about the substitute for sinners whom God punished in our place on the cross. This was the section of the Bible that puzzled the Ethiopian official whom Philip assisted in Acts 8:30-34: *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you are reading? Philip asked.*³¹ *How can I, he said, unless someone explains it to me? So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*³² *The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*³³ *In his*

humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else? Psalm 16:8-11 was quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost with reference to the resurrection of Jesus, and likely to have been another passage that Paul also mentioned in his sermons to Jewish audiences fairly frequently. Paul worked out carefully the views held by his audiences and sought to relate the Christian message to that particular group of people. The logic of his message to Jewish congregations was this: if God has fulfilled all these extraordinary prophecies concerning the birth, life death and resurrection of Jesus, then his hearers ought to take seriously the claims Jesus made for Himself. Then, respond accordingly by putting their faith and trust in Him.

(c) **The results achieved** (Acts 17:4)⁴ *Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.* Undoubtedly Paul would have been expecting a larger proportion of the Jews to accept his message and put their faith and trust in Jesus, with a small number of sympathetic Gentiles. Yet it was the other way round with a large proportion of the converts coming from a pagan faith background. In Romans 9-11 the great apostle explained later to the Church at Rome the reason for this development –in essence many Jews had hardened their hearts to the gospel and declined to accept it, whereas the reverse was true amongst some Gentile communities where a significant proportion of them trust their lives to our Lord and Saviour. Acts 20:4 speaks of two members of Paul’s mission team who came from this town: *Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica* (see also Acts 27:2). The gospel was liberating to women and Gentiles who grasped that they were equal as persons before God with Jewish males, as recipients of the grace of God. The radical nature of God’s grace is shocking at times even to people who have been Christians for many years. God’s extravagant love for sinners is undeserved and extraordinary, but intelligible through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross. Do you, as a Christian, struggle with the grace of God to sinners? This is a serious question because God accepts people where they are, in order to transform them over time into the likeness of His beloved Son. We can be tempted to expect people to conform overnight to Christian standards of behaviour and forget that it took a while for God to convince us of the necessity of gathering week by week with His people in church each Sunday; or in offering our gifts for Christian service during the week in some ministry or other. For some people there are lifestyle issues about relationships that need to be addressed over time, but rather than telling a new Christian to what to do, to pray with them as to how God might enable them to make the right choices. Or maybe the struggle for you was in financial giving to God’s work. The principle of tithes and offerings was unknown to you at first and you struggled to give that level of priority to the Lord’s work with the funds He has placed at your disposal? None of us is the finished article; all of us are learning from the Lord and I trust seeking to grow in our faith as disciples of Jesus.

(d) **The problems faced** (Acts 17:5-9)⁵ *But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here,⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.⁹Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go.* In 1781 the British Army marched out of Yorktown, Virginia, led by General Cornwallis, after an unconditional surrender to American General George Washington, a decision that led to American independence from Britain. The French navy had blockaded the port and prevented supplies being unloaded to the British troops so they were obliged to surrender. The irony of their departure was seen in the tune played by

the band that day. It was entitled: 'The world turned upside down'. In the ancient world a 'rent-a-mob' could easily be hired with promises of food or cash payments, to cause chaos, in this case for Paul and Silas. In this sizable community the cost of hiring this group of ruffians must have been quite considerable as Luke gives the impression of a significant number of people rioting in the city and harassing the apostle and his companion. The civic leaders were also concerned about the civil disorder and bailed Jason and other local and prominent followers of Jesus until they could restore order and get some kind of grip on the situation. The claim before the judicial authorities was this: Paul and Silas were proclaiming another man, Jesus, as the King, in breach of the law put in place by the Emperor Claudius, which banned speculation about the future succession on the throne of Rome after his day. Yet this was to misunderstand Paul who had no interest who was occupying the throne of Rome. His interests were exclusively about who was honouring the King of Kings and seeking to live for Him. The gospel does challenge people and from as early as June 1997 a small number of street preachers in the United Kingdom have been jailed overnight by the police (in Leeds and York in these cases) for preaching a message that some people did not want to hear. Praise God that the gospel was firmly established in their hearts and Jason and his colleagues all stood firm, as far as we can tell from the New Testament. However, the challenge comes to each generation of Christians: if sharing my faith was made illegal would I still do it –even if it risked my liberty? It is easy to say yes in church, but when the pressure is on in the wider community it can take a lot of courage to be faithful to our Lord and Saviour. God honoured their witness in Thessalonica and then in consultation with local Christians took the decision to move on to other towns in Greece.

2. The Mission at Berea (Acts 17:10-15)

(a) The openness shown (Acts 17:10-12)

¹⁰ *As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.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.¹² Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.* Forty-five miles south-west of Thessalonica, along a less prominent highway stood the smaller town of Berea. Paul was able to follow his familiar pattern of preaching to the Jewish community in their synagogue. Here he was thrilled with the response. Instead of a handful of Jews accepting Jesus and a majority rejecting Him; by contrast here it appears that the whole congregation was open to discussing and studying God's Word about this important matter. The verbs translated as: *searched* or *examined* (depending on your Bible version) are terms that were used in Roman law courts, with reference to the careful weighing of evidence, prior to pronouncing a verdict on the person in the dock with reference to the charges brought against them. (For example used in the Bible when Herod examined Jesus (Luke 23:14-15); the Sanhedrin Peter and John (Acts 4:9) and Felix Paul (Acts 24:8)) Paul was not wanting an uncritical acceptance of His message by His hearers, nor should any preacher today either; instead what Paul and any other minister should desire is a people willing to give them a fair hearing and test what they are proclaiming by the Word of God. This is an excellent model for us to follow when we proclaim to live our lives under the authority of God's Word. As we get into a pattern of seeking to get to grips with the teaching of Scripture we will in turn be able to assist other believers get to know the Lord better and be available to the Lord to use in speaking to people outside the faith. Peter challenged his readers with these words: *but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who ask you to give the*

reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect... (I Peter 3:15). Praise the Lord for all the people who were converted! Oh that we might see such a large response in this community in coming days!

(b) **The opposition aroused** (Acts 17:13-15)¹³ *When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.¹⁴ The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.¹⁵ The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.* A large group of people appear to have accepted Paul's message, but sadly not all the Jews did. In fact a proportion of that synagogue congregation were so outraged that they sought to bring reinforcements from Thessalonica to disrupt Paul's meetings. It is highly significant that there were not enough local Jewish men who opposed Paul –possibly because they had been converted to following Jesus as their Lord and Messiah. Once again a mob was aroused; however, the Christian leaders were very wise in sending Paul away with companions from their ranks, while Timothy and Silas stayed behind to finish instructing the new church in basic Christian principles. As soon as Paul had departed the mob would have had the wind taken out of their sails and they disappeared as quickly as they came. Remember this, when God's work is going forward the devil will seek to do everything in his power to disrupt it. This principle is just as true today as it was then. Had Paul intended to stay longer in Berea and maybe give Athens a miss? We will never know, but what we can say is this: God intended you and me to be alive at this time in history to witness for Him by our words and our lives. Can God count on you? What is your response to the gospel today? Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus for the first time? Or as a Christian, are you aware of a situation where you need God's help to live for Him as you should? May God help each one of us to put our faith and trust in Him. May He strengthen us by His Spirit to be effective in that witness and may He bless us with the privilege of leading other people to Christ, for Jesus' sake Amen.