

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Twenty-One
Acts 16:28-17:18

Day One

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God — he and his whole family.

vs. 29&30 – These verses make me think of the quote from St. Francis Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary use words.” We don’t see that Paul and Silas ever said anything; they were just singing hymns at a time when other prisoners would have been cursing or moaning. I’m sure the jailer heard this. Then came the earthquake and the greater miracle that no prisoner had taken advantage of it to escape. The jailer was so overwhelmed that he came running and asked the question about salvation. The apostolic team didn’t give him a track or hand him a Bible; they simply allowed God to use them in a dramatic way. I’m not sure what I would do if I just been beaten and sitting in jail. I’m not sure I would thinking about ministry at that point. **What do people see when they watch you and your life? Are you preaching the gospel by what you do and who you are?**

There are some who believe that the man in Paul’s earlier vision who called them over to Macedonia was this jailer. There is nothing to warrant that opinion from this story.

v. 31 – Many have taken this response to mean that when someone gets saved, it is must a matter of time before his family gets saved. This isn’t what was meant, nor is this a promise that pertains to anyone who puts their faith in Christ. This man’s household would have included his natural family, plus any servants or other household workers. This man would have made a decision to introduce the apostles to his household and then decided as head of the household that the family would be baptized. Throughout history, there are examples of heads of tribes or clans coming to the Lord and they bringing their followers with them, since they had the authority in their social structure to do so.

v. 32 – Paul and Silas had a chance to teach the jailer’s household, who would have heard about the earthquake from the jailer himself. That got their attention, Paul preached the Word and God did the work in the people’s hearts.

v. 33 – We see that Paul baptized converts immediately both in the case of the jailer and Lydia. Paul knew that baptism was a first step in sealing a life and will that was committed to the Lordship of Jesus. I have often taught that we are baptized because

Jesus said it to be baptized. Whether we understand it or not, baptism is an early proof that we have surrendered to Jesus totally and completely. Yet baptism is a spiritual act with spiritual benefits:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:1-4).

v. 34 – What a night! This man went from suicide to eternal life. Instead of his family mourning his passing, they were eating and rejoicing in their new-found faith. God is so good and

Day Two

35 When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." 36 The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." 37 But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." 38 The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. 39 They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. 40 After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

v. 35 – The magistrates obviously wanted to teach the apostles a lesson, intimidate them and then send them on their way, for they had done nothing wrong. But they were about 12 hours behind God, who had already released them!

v. 36 – The jailer delivered this message and told Paul he was free to go. He sent them forth in peace, but Paul wasn't ready to go.

v. 37 – I am always intrigued by this, for Paul was a Roman citizen and had more rights in Rome than Jesus did! When Rome beat Jesus, He had no recourse to any justice, for he was a subject of Rome and not a citizen. But Paul was a citizen of Rome and should not have been treated the way he was. In part, this is why Paul and the brothers in Jerusalem had strained relations. They were from two different cultures, two different worlds in fact.

Paul wanted to humble the magistrates, no doubt. But he also wanted to make a public statement to help the new believers, to show that they had done nothing legally wrong. Perhaps Paul felt that this would help position the new believers in a more favorable light among their fellow citizens.

vs. 38&39 – The magistrates then realized that they had made a serious mistake! They came to see the team to try and make peace, for Paul could have made life difficult for them at this point. The magistrates asked them to leave the city, lest there be any further trouble.

v. 40 – Paul’s stay in Philippi seemed so short, yet we know that the church here became one of Paul’s favorites, as we can see from his letter to them. It would go on to grow, suffer persecution, appoint elders and support Paul in his missionary work on several occasions. It seems that even when Paul wanted to stay in an area, God would fashion circumstances that would force him to move on, trusting the Spirit to finish the work that Paul could not finish. **That is a good lesson to learn. I am convinced that we hold onto ministry, business or other situations too long, being resistant to change. I have done this myself. When I look back, I see that God was speaking to me about moving on, but I resisted, even re-doubling my efforts to make something work that wasn’t working. Has your time in some role or job come to an end? Is it time to move on? Are you investing more and more energy and getting less and less results? The answer may not be more effort, but more faith. It may be time to let go of the thing that God used in the past to bless you, but He now wants to have you do something else.**

Day Three

17:1 When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 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. 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.

v. 1 – I wonder why the team passed through these two cities. I would imagine it was because there was no synagogue. Paul’s ongoing strategy was to visit the synagogue, because he knew there were Gentiles there who rejected polytheism and embraced monotheism. Thessalonica could conceivably had the only synagogue in Macedonia. After they were so badly treated in Philippi, I would think they wanted to get back to a place where they at least had a chance to build relationships with those who had an awareness of the Old Testament.

v. 2 – This was Paul’s custom and not a directive from Scripture. If it was, we would still be obligated to follow this pattern. Paul acknowledged his debt to Judaism and always wanted to repay his people, but they would not allow him most of the time. Instead, they resisted him as an apostate. Even the believing Jews didn’t trust his regular contact with Gentiles. So Paul’s greatest effectiveness was among Gentiles, but his greatest burden and love was for the Jews.

This points out some interesting aspects of purpose. Paul wanted to go to the Jews, but God sent him to the Gentiles. First, you can't choose your purpose; it is assigned to you. Secondly, Paul never had much fruit from his work among Jews, but he had a lot of fruit among the Gentiles. God will help you identify your purpose by blessing your purpose endeavors. As I mentioned in the last study, Africans show much more interest in the purpose message than do people in the United States. That isn't because Americans are less spiritual or interested in purpose; it's because God wants me to work in Africa. I use the interest as an indication and confirmation of what God wants me to do and where He wants me to do it. **As you examine your life and work, where are your greatest results? How can you maximize those results?**

v. 3 – What did Paul do when he went to the synagogue? He argued that Jesus is the Christ, proving it from the Scriptures. And Paul had to address the issue of Jesus' death and resurrection, because that issue was hard for Jews to comprehend:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

Paul did not shy away from the controversial aspects of Jesus, but faced them head on. He did not sugarcoat the gospel, but went to the Scriptures and then trusted the Spirit to do His work in the hearts and minds of people.

v. 4 – God honored Paul's work in Thessalonica with fruit! Some Jews and a lot of Gentiles came to Jesus—and many of these were women. Nothing's changed in 2,000 years; women tend to be more spiritually sensitive than men.

Nothing is more exciting than to see the fruit of your labors in the Lord. When I came out of Afghanistan a few years ago, I had a long layover in Dubai. I got a hotel room to rest and wait, and found myself crying and I wasn't even sad. But I just kept thanking God for two things: that He had protected me and that He had seen fit to use me. It was a special trip that changed my life in many ways. **Do you know the joys of God using you? Doing what? If not, what can you do to capture that dynamic in your life?**

Day Four

5 But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, 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. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

v. 5 – Jealousy is a terrible thing and it affects many religious and spiritual people. Jesus was not immune from jealousy as He carried out the Father's will:

So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him (Matthew 27:17-18).

We can envy someone's spiritual gifts or the fruit that God grants them. Envy comes from comparing ourselves to someone else, which is never a wise thing to do:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you (2 Corinthians 10:12-14).

Even Peter was guilty of this when he meddled in John's affairs with Jesus:

When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (John 21:21-23).

Are you guilty of envy? Do you wish you were someone else? When you seen how God is using someone else, does it discourage you, making you feel like God can't use you because you aren't as gifted or dynamic as that person? Or do you resent what someone else has in the Lord? If you do, you may try to minimize or even ruin what that person has or does? You can even have envy toward an organization or denomination! Ask the Spirit to do a check of your heart to see if any envy resides there.

vs. 6-8 – The apostles were staying with a man named Jason and the crowd rushed his house to seize the team. But they weren't there, so the mob took Jason and some other to accuse them before the magistrates. Notice that the mob knew that Paul had been traveling all over the Roman world and that he was having success where he went. Of course, they characterized his success as anti-Roman. This anti-Roman sentiment became the cornerstone for persecution in the Empire for the next century, but here was disorganized and only in its initial stages. At this point in history, Rome saw believers as a sect of Judaism and not a separate group. That would eventually change and the charges brought here would be true eventually, for when the Caesars declared themselves divine, they came into direct conflict with the King of kings and His followers.

v. 9 – The disciples had to post bond to insure that they would appear to answer these charges and were let go. It occurs to me that there can be no spiritual progress without encountering some entrenched power standing in your way. **Are you encountering opposition right now? If not, why not? If you're not, you may not be making progress! Is that a fair and accurate statement to make?**

Day Five

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.

v. 10 – It isn't clear how long the apostles were in Thessalonica, but it couldn't have been for long—maybe a few months. And this created anxiety in Paul, for he knew how vulnerable the young believers were:

But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you — certainly I, Paul, did, again and again — but Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. 3:1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8).

v. 11 – Paul went on to Berea and had great success there. The Bereans seemed to be more grounded in the Scriptures and went to them to determine if what Paul said was true. The Bible can speak for itself and the convicting power of the Spirit led many to Jesus. I'm trying to use the Bible more effectively in my teaching and witnessing, for I've found that it isn't enough to refer to the Bible. I must show people the Bible and have them read it for themselves. **Are you talking about the Bible with people, or showing them the Word so the Spirit can work it into their hearts and minds?**

v. 12 – As happened more than once, God granted Paul great success after great humiliation and seeming defeat. Paul had to flee Thessalonica at night, but went to the next city and saw many people come to Jesus. But Paul's pioneering work was a work that brought great suffering to Paul, as Jesus had predicted:

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

Paul was a chosen instrument, but that meant he would suffer greatly. Today we celebrate Paul as a saint; then he was vilified and persecuted. As you study the lives of great men and women, you see that often they live lives of pain, misunderstanding and suffering. Someone once said that the ability to lead is the ability to bear pain. **How well do you bear pain? That may determine how effective you are as a servant of Christ and leader among His people.**

Day Six

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.

v. 13 – Presumably motivated by jealousy, the Thessalonian Jews came down to stir up the crowds against the apostles. Didn't they have jobs or businesses to run? They were so zealous for their traditions that they just had to come down and disrupt Paul's work. It seems that Paul suffered and was opposed no matter where he worked. It doesn't seem like he stayed long in Berea before he had to depart. Paul had to trust the Lord for any results that he hoped to have for his ministry.

v. 14 – The believers sent Paul away, since he seemed to be the focus for the opposition that arose. Silas and Timothy stayed on to continue the work and help care for the new believers. Paul always worked with a team, following Jesus' example. **I've asked this before, but I will ask again: Are you part of anyone's team for business or ministry? If you are a leader, whose team are you a part of? It's important to know to whom God has joined you so you can produce results that only a team can produce.**

One of my favorite sayings is, "All of us are smarter than one of us." The more people you have working on a project or idea, the better off you will be. I have another saying, however, that goes with the first one: "But all of us aren't as smart as we need to be." By that I mean that we are facing new challenges that require us to constantly expand our sphere to include more people along with their perspectives, gifts and experiences. **That means we need to work with people who don't look like us or think like us. Does your team include people who don't look like you? Youth? The opposite gender? Older folks? Do you pay lip service to diversity, or do you really see the need for diversity? Diversity can be messy, for when you include people who don't think alike, the work process can take longer and require more debate and discussion. But I urge you to build a diverse team that includes as many people as possible.**

v. 15 – The church didn't send Paul on his way by himself, but delivered him to Athens. They returned to Berea with a message from Paul for his team that they should come to him there as quickly as possible.

Day Seven

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

v. 16 – While he waited in Athens, Paul was provoked by what he saw—the city was full of idols. I went from Jerusalem to Athens a few years ago and it was quite an experience to go from the super-charged spiritual atmosphere of Israel to the secular environment of Greece. What a letdown it was! But then I thought to myself, “This is what Paul went through regularly.” I'm sure Paul would have preferred to be in a culture he knew, but instead went to a culture that wasn't his preference for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.

v. 17 – Paul didn't sit around waiting for Silas and Timothy, but rather engaged the Jews in the synagogue and the Greeks in the marketplace. I remember someone saying once, “There are people who want to change the world who don't know what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon.” Paul didn't turn the world upside down by waiting for things to happen. Paul made things happen. In Athens he did what Jesus had commanded him to do.

v. 18 – It didn't take long for Paul to stir up controversy and attract opposition, this time from Greek philosophers. The Epicureans had a philosophy that life should be enjoyed because the flesh didn't really matter. The Stoics believed that life should be endured, preferring a more disciplined, ascetic lifestyle. Both schools were humanistic to the core, making man the focus of study. Both schools would have reacted to the message of resurrection, for neither school believed that there was any life beyond this one.

What a sad state of affairs! What an insipid philosophy of life! Paul later wrote:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

The resurrection is in no way an optional doctrine or belief—it is the core of Christianity! And Paul wasn't afraid to present this truth to any and every audience.

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so (Hebrews 6:1-3).

Do you know what you believe? Can you explain it to others? If not, then it may not be as clear as it needs to be. I urge you to take steps to get clear, whether it's a class at your church or a general book about Christian doctrine or systematic theology. You should be able to hold a basic conversation with those who adhere to other philosophies, explaining the hope that you hold, which includes the resurrection of the dead.