

# Acts

## Acts 17:1-15 - Why such differences in response to the gospel?

In Acts 16 we had the tale of two ladies that compared genuinely Christian to fake. In Acts 17 we have another tale of comparisons too, this time the tale of two cities **comparing responses to the gospel**, that help explain to Christians in all ages why some people respond well to the message, and why some don't and may get very angry instead.

**Acts 17:1** opens with Paul and Silas heading west from Philippi across the north end of Greece to the port city of Thessalonica, a three day trip on foot along the Via Egnatia, the hilly Roman road linking the Black Sea in the east to the Adriatic Sea in the west. With stop offs at Amphipolis and Apollonia, Paul and Silas arrive in Thessalonica. and "as his custom was" Paul makes a beeline for the Jewish synagogue.

And this is where the fun begins, because it's in Thessalonica that the Holy Spirit has another lesson for Christians in all ages. We know already that the Holy Spirit's strategy is to head for the place where people are most likely to listen and respond, which back then was the Jews in the local synagogue. But there's a second reason for that; it was to set up a "bridgehead" in enemy territory, much like in war time when an advancing army sets up a secure position behind or very close to enemy lines.

We're learning still more, then, about how the Holy Spirit operates, and it is in war-like terms, because the preaching of the gospel really is like an advancing army pushing into enemy territory. And the Spirit often heads for where the enemy is most heavily entrenched and ready for battle too, which is exactly what Paul and Silas are now walking into in Thessalonica.

And so the battle begins, at the moment Paul opens his mouth in the synagogue "and on three sabbath days," or three weeks in a row, **verse 2**, "he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, "explaining and proving" **verse 3**, "that the Christ (or Messiah) had to suffer and rise from the dead."

And why was that so important for these Jews to hear? Because they were really struggling with Jesus being the prophesied Messiah. How could he be the great conquering hero their Scriptures talked about, when he'd been crucified, which to a Jew was a criminal's death and utterly shameful?

It takes three weeks, therefore, for Paul to show them from Scripture that the Messiah would indeed die a criminal's death (Isaiah 53:12), and the reason why. It was "the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10), because "the Lord was laying on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). It was all there in black and white in Isaiah 53, and Psalm 22, that **Jesus died the criminal's death that we should have died**. And through his death that's how we'd be rescued from our enemy and find "peace" and "healing" (Isaiah 53:5), not through a violent physical revolution and lopping heads off.

What we're seeing here is the main weapon used by the Holy Spirit in setting up a bridgehead in enemy territory. **It's taking the time to teach, explain and reason from Scripture about Jesus**, because it's through Jesus alone that peace and healing are brought to a beleaguered, helpless, despairing people pinned down by a powerful enemy. And to back up that supremely important point for all humanity to grasp was this same Jesus being resurrected from the dead, which, as Paul points out in Acts 17:3, was in their Scriptures too (as in Psalm 16:10).

And that's Paul's gospel message, which he nicely summarizes for us in **verse 3**; it's simply, "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." So with that firmly established from Scripture, we get to the lesson the Holy Spirit has for us in this chapter, which is **the differing responses to the clearly explained Scripture about Jesus**, starting with **verse 4** when "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 (too)."

But why only "some" of the Jews, compared to many Greeks? Because the Jews thought they knew it all already. In their minds they didn't need anyone explaining to them what Scripture said. Which was a trifle embarrassing, because they'd missed the most vital part of Scripture about the Messiah's death and resurrection. But instead of humbly admitting they weren't so clever and knowledgeable after all, they became "jealous" of Paul and Silas and turned against them, **verse 5**.

Compare that now to the response of the many Greeks attending the synagogue. One has to wonder why non-Jews were even attending a Jewish synagogue in the first place, but there's a clue in Luke mentioning the "prominent women." These were ladies from the highly educated Greek upper class. They were familiar, therefore, with the best of Greek philosophy. So what had they seen in the Jewish religion that the best of their pagan teachings hadn't given them? Clearly, something was missing, or they, of all people, would never have darkened the door of a Jewish synagogue.

But Judaism had one thing going for it, that Greek philosophy did not, and that was the awareness of a **living God**, and a long history of that living God stretching way back too. The Jews had amazing stories to tell from their Scriptures that made their God come alive. Which really appealed to these Greek ladies and others with them, when comparing it to their pagan teachings that were so totally focused on feeding **the mind** with knowledge and wisdom, **but nothing to feed a hungry heart.**

So the Holy Spirit has taken Paul and Silas to a Jewish synagogue where there are lots of people with hearts just hungering to be fed. It's the perfect bridgehead in enemy territory for advancing the gospel. But why, if these Greeks had already found what they were looking in the Jewish religion, would they have found Paul's message so captivating?

Because in **Jesus** the living God of the Jews actually came to earth as a human being, and he died to free the Jews from their enemies, to show the world this is the kind of God he is. And then he was resurrected from the dead to fulfill all those marvellous prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures about the kingdom the living God would be setting up on the earth forever.

So this is what the Jewish Messiah - that the Greeks had heard so much about in the synagogue - was up to. The living God was forming and shaping a wonderful new world, and not by the burdensome rules and regulations of Judaism either, but, as they were learning from Paul, through Jesus.

You mean you could actually experience this Jesus Messiah doing that in your life every day, then? You mean the living God could be that real? Well, to a hungry heart this was the food of the gods they'd been looking for. No wonder they found Paul's message so captivating.

But the devil could also see what was happening here, so he strikes back quickly, and cleverly too, which handily explains **why there are such differences in response to the gospel.** We've got both the Holy Spirit at work and the devil, and the devil had people in that synagogue he could stir too, which in his case were the Jews who were rigidly set in their religious ways and were jealous when something more appealing was being accepted.

So in **verses 5-9** these jealous Jews get some well known rabble rousers to create an angry mob, which storms the house of Jason where Paul and Silas are staying - but no Paul or Silas. So they drag Jason before the city authorities with wild accusations about the whole world being upset by Paul and Silas inciting insurrection against Caesar by preaching Jesus was a king too.

But it all fizzles out when Jason pays off the authorities and Paul and Silas slip away that night and head off to the city of Berea, a two day journey by foot heading south west, and on arrival straight to the synagogue they go.

And it's here we get the comparison between two cities that make it very clear why there are differences in response to the gospel. Berea is not like Thessalonica, because as Luke phrases it in **verse 11**, "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." And again it was the same mix of people as Thessalonica, but what a difference, because in **verse 12**, "**Many of the Jews believed**, as did also a number of prominent women and many Greek men."

In Thessalonica it was only "some" of the Jews who were "persuaded" by Paul's teaching, because the rest were stuck in their old beliefs and weren't about to accept any challenge to them, even from their own Scriptures. They could not be reasoned with, because they were proud and stubborn and lacked the "noble character" of the Bereans, who were humble enough to accept they didn't know it all, and when proof was given from Scripture as to what they'd missed in it, they accepted that too.

And that's our clue as to how the Holy Spirit sets up a bridgehead in enemy territory to advance the gospel, It's through people who are eager to learn from Scripture and aren't afraid to check out those teaching from it. In other words, it's through people who are **doing their homework and studying Scripture to make sure they understand it correctly** that the influence of the gospel grows. So it's good finding a group of people doing that, because it creates an atmosphere of learning that influences others, as it did "prominent women and many Greek men" in Berea.

This is encouraging, because if we're in such a group we ARE that bridgehead of the Holy Spirit advancing the gospel in enemy territory. We are it when we study, but the kind of study that isn't locked into any denominational traditions or on one preacher's teaching. It's by one's **own nose in the Bible** with a group of people who are serious about getting the gospel understood, because it's not only the Holy Spirit's way of setting up a bridgehead, it's also his way of defending it against an enemy counter attack, as happened in Berea, because the disgruntled Jews in Thessalonica came storming down to Berea to "agitate the crowds and stir them up" there too (verse 13).

So here's the lesson for Christians in all ages from the Holy Spirit as to why there are differences in response to the gospel. It's in who is studying their Bible and being willing to be corrected by it, and who isn't.