

Acts

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“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” Acts 17:11 ESV

Masterclass in Mission

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Acts 17:1-15

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Introduction:

Good morning Church! This morning we are continuing our journey with Paul in Acts. Let's get our bibles open to Chapter 17. By way of reminder, the book of Acts was written by Luke, a missionary partner of Paul. Luke is a physician, and a very careful observer and an accomplished student. There is no doubt that in his medical training he would have attended lectures or courses we call “masterclasses” on various topics related to medicine. High level musicians do the same thing. They attend masterclasses as already accomplished students to fine tune and polish their performances. And I think that's what Luke gives us today in our text. Two Masterclasses from the early church. A Masterclass in Mission from the missionary master Paul, and a Masterclass in good listening courtesy of the Bereans.

So with this framework in mind, lets read our text of Paul in Thessalonica and Berea:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who

have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. Acts 17: 1-15

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A Masterclass in Mission – Three Lessons

1. Stick to the assignment and trust God with the results

First thing we should notice is, despite significant push back Paul sticks to the marching orders he was originally given.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” Acts 17:1-2

Remember its almost always in the synagogue with his Jewish brothers where the trouble starts! But into the synagogue he goes! In Jerusalem, Hellenistic Jews plot murder and brothers relocate him in Tarsus. In Antioch in Pisidia – he’s forcibly driven out. Iconium – plot to stone them. In Lystra synagogue Jews caught up with him and did stone him! Is Paul a glutton for punishment always heading to the Synagogue? No he’s sticking to the plan. There was the theologically driven priority to go first to the Chosen People. Listen to Paul Romans 1:16

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Romans 1:16

So despite persecution and the apparent failures in previous synagogues he still goes there first. He sticks with the plan, and trusts the Holy Spirit will do His thing.

I think we can learn a couple of points from this observation. Firstly, I think we can over-react to hostility and stop evangelizing after one bad interaction. We say, “Oh no, that didn’t go well, I guess they are not elect, time to move on...”. When what we really mean is “wheh that was awkward, or uncomfortable, or embarrassing! I don’t want to do that again” I think this is a huge obstacle to our personal evangelism. It is certainly for me! I can even concoct fictional rejections ahead of time that prevent me from evangelism! I over-react to hypothetical hostility! Look, Paul could easily have said, “based on my experience, the synagogues give me too much push back, I’m not doing that again!” But he doesn’t. He sticks to the plan, and people are saved, AND people get hostile! He never knows if it’s a revival or a riot that will break out. Often it’s both! That is important to see in and of itself! But, imagine if he, like us, gave up evangelizing after one bad encounter with a person or people group? Lots of fruit would be lost. Don’t let push back alter the plan!

Secondly, Paul demonstrates a commitment to doing things the way God commands and doesn’t fall victim to pragmatism. At this point Paul is having more success with Gentiles than Jews. It could have been very easy for him to be pragmatic – stick with what works – and skip the synagogue troubles entirely, going to the gentiles, but he doesn’t. **GOD’S COMMANDS DETERMINE PAUL’S HABITS.** Sometimes as churches our missions are shaped more by “success” than faithfulness. Success is in quotes there. What we think success is. Doing “what works” rather than staying faithful to what God commands has lead the church into all kinds of problems like the seeker church experiment in the 90’s and the collapse of the main-line churches earlier in the last century. Let us not repeat these errors of pragmatism from the past!!

Also notice that faithful witness can result in apparent failure, like this riot in Thessalonica. But just as often faithful witness can result in revival like in Berea. The point is actually really simple: Stick to God’s plan, and trust him with the results!

Sounds a lot like what he says in 1 Corinthians 3:6

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” 1 Corinthians 3:6

Paul is faithful to plant. Others are faithful to tend and water. But spiritual growth and response to the gospel are in God’s hands and people’s own choices.

You stick with the assignment. Trust God with the results. Let me give an example. Is there situation where you have done your part and have been faithful, but it’s still appearing, or actually is a disaster?

- A child (or parent) not walking with the Lord.
- A friend in persistent sin despite your efforts to point them to God’s ways.
- A ministry that is dying despite your best efforts

Then take Paul’s attitude to heart. Do what is in your wheelhouse and leave the rest to God. He’s got it. Listen to a wise word of a man who has seen success and failure:

“The true servant of God is responsible for diligence and faithfulness, but he is not responsible for success or non-success, results are in God’s hands”. Charles Spurgeon

2. Always be ready for Redeployment

Next we see Paul while sticking to the plan, Paul is always ready for redeployment. After just three trips to the synagogue Paul has triggered enough of the Jewish population that they form a mob willing to attack the house of a prominent and rich citizen to try and capture Paul! If we jump down to verse 5 we read:

“But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason”. Acts 17:5

AND verse 10

“The brothers [and sisters] immediately sent Paul away by night to Berea”. Acts 17:10

Let’s notice a couple things here. Paul is ok with strategic retreat. He is not a coward – he’s just endured a beating and imprisonment in Philippi. And remember Lystra, beaten so severely they thought he was dead, he gets up goes to Derbe with brother Barnabas for a short detour then straight back to Lystra where he was just beaten! But he is not stubbornly stupid either.

Consensus of the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica was Paul should be redeployed, and he

submitted to that and left for Berea. Strategic Retreat is just as much of guiding principle for Paul as enduring suffering. Recall the Words of Jesus:

“And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” Luke 9:5

I don't think Paul wanted to leave. How do we know this? Firstly, we read about it in his letters to the Thessalonians.

“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”. 1 Thessalonians 2:17

Secondly, we know Thessalonica was an important city. It was on the imperial road and was a hub for distribution in the Grecian world. This was a strategic city! I am sure Paul saw the importance of a strong foothold here. So, despite brotherly affection for the people, and knowing the strategic importance of the city, Paul consents to redeployment. Why does he consent to redeployment? The text suggests it's the Holy Spirit working through the ordinary means of consensus of a church being enough to pull Paul away from the bustling city of Thessalonica to the seemingly less important backwater town of Berea.¹

And in Berea Paul finds open hearts to the Gospel as we find in verse 13

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” Acts 17:13-14

This echoes our observations from Acts 16 and Lydia in Philippi. Paul and his leadership team pick up and redeploy based on the leading of the Holy Spirit through the vision and consensus interpretation of the Macedonian vision, and abandon plans to enter Asia (Acts 16:6-7). Pastor Levi encouraged us based on that narrative to “keep moving when God closes the door” and “to seek counsel when discerning direction”. We see the same principle worked out in the narrative here. Paul submits to counsel and keeps moving – and is redeployed to Berea with great success!

¹ G Campbell Morgan references the Roman historian Cicero account of an administrator Piso being so unpopular he needed to flee Thessalonica for the “out of the way town Berea” by night to avoid the complaints and wailings of the populous!

“Many of them therefore believed!” It is interesting to note that the Holy Spirit uses persecution as much (or maybe even more than) success to disclose His will for the next steps in personal and corporate mission. We need to recognize this principle, persecution is often a means redeployment – it’s not a sign of failure!

And by the way, don’t get tricked into thinking you are necessary for the completion of the mission! Sometimes we (individually or as a church) can be arrogant enough to think God needs us. If I were Paul, I would be tempted to think, “oh no, what will the church in Thessalonica do without me?” I bet many of the congregation in Thessalonica thought that too! But Paul knew that all Pastors are replaceable. So he leaves Thessalonica and a great ministry breaks out in Berea. But also, a great ministry breaks out in place he just left! Read this from his letter to the Thessalonian church he “left pastorless”

“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.” 1 Thessalonians 1: 6-8.

Paul is faithful to his part and trusts God, and is ready to be redeployed! Again, He sows and waters while he can. Sometimes a riot breaks out, sometimes a revival.

3. Don’t be surprised by ongoing opposition

Thirdly, we ought not be surprised by opposition and persecution! Let’s look back to our text verse 5 and 13:

“They formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.” Acts 17:5

AND

“But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.” Acts 17:13

I feel like this is an application in EVERY sermon in the Acts! And yet we can’t hear it too often. It’s is one of the central themes Luke highlights again and again in his narrative – don’t be

surprised by opposition! Other Bible writers knew despite Jesus's warning that "in the world you will have tribulation." (John 16:33). We are still going to need reminders!

1 Peter 4:12 and 1 John 3:13, both say "don't be surprised (by the fiery trial when it comes – that the world hates you!). And yet we still are surprised aren't we?!"

But the pattern of the Bible is utterly consistent, growth is almost always accompanied by trial. WE NEED TO EXPECT EVERY TRIUMPH TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY COST UNTIL CHRIST RETURNS. Sometimes we think we have done something wrong when we offend people. The Gospel is offensive to some! The Gospel sinks of death to the perishing! It is offensive to those blinded to the truth! Often persecution is proof we are on the right track!

Commenting on this passage in Acts, G. Campbell Morgan observes:

"No propagative work is done, save at cost; and every genuine triumph of the Cross brings after it the travail of some new affliction, and some new sorrow. So we share the travails that make the Kingdom come. G Campbell Morgan²

Understand brothers and sisters that when we do God's work a target gets painted on our backs. THE POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES OF THIS WORLD DO NOT WASTE THEIR TIME ON INEFFECTIVE, LAZY, OR DISTRACTED CHRISTIANS. Paul knew he was a danger to the Kingdom of darkness. He expected obstruction and attack. He expected an enemy to launch countermeasures. Sometimes the enemy was fellow Jews in synagogues. Sometimes rich merchants in the idol trade like in Ephesus. Sometimes the enemy was local politicians incited by a mob like in Philippi. But always behind the religious disputes, the corporations, or the machinery of politics lurked the real enemy, the Satan. Listen to Paul's own description:

"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 2:18

We are not sure what means Satan used in this specific instance, but it is clear that Paul knew his war in this instance was not against mere flesh and blood. John Calvin helpfully says:

"Paul could nowhere erect the kingdom of Christ without some conflict, for so soon as any fruit of doctrine appeared, there arose persecution therewithal; but because he knew

² G Campbell Morgan. The Acts of the Apostles. Accessed online http://www.classicchristianlibrary.com/library/morgan_g_campbell/Morgan-Acts.pdf

that he was to war against Satan and the wickedness of the world, he was not only hardened against all assaults, but he was more encouraged more courageously to proceed.” Calvin’s Commentary on the Acts of the Apostle³

Hardened against all assaults, more courageous to proceed. O Lord make it so with us!
Like we learned last week from Pastor Levi, we follow a crucified king! Blessed are we when we are persecuted on Jesus’s account!

“The moments when we think we are losing are actually when we are winning. This is success redefined in the upside-down kingdom” Levi denBok

Ongoing opposition is tough, it’s exhausting. That is why we need to be like Paul,
CONSTANTLY PRAYING FOR FILLING AND REFILLING WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.
Missions and ministry are not just strategic problems that require intelligence and incisiveness to solve. They are spiritual battles that need to be fought with spiritual resources. So pray.
Prioritized this. Pray both personally and corporate. I’m convicted by what Luther once said:

“I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer!” Martin Luther

And take heart if you are under opposition for this is what our King says!

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven! Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:10-12

A Masterclass in Listening

Lastly, we turn to the Bereans, the Masterclass in Listening. This is often the most emphasized part of the narrative we are examining today. Often Christians are told: Be like the Bereans!

And for good reasons! Let’s remind ourselves what Luke says about these men and woman:

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.”
Acts 17:11-12

³ Commentary Upon The Acts of the Apostles By John Calvin. Edited from the original English translation by Christopher Fetherstone, By the Henry Beveridge, Esq. Access on OliveTree bible software

More noble minded than others. What exactly does that mean? Open-minded? “Nice?”

Agreeable? Again G Campbell Morgan is helpful here:

“The noble hearer is the man who appeals again and again to the Scriptures themselves, to find out if these things be true...*It is not the nobility of readiness to believe anything. It is the nobility of being determined to find out if human interpretation is in accordance with the actual scripture.*”⁴ G. Campbell Morgan

This is what we should strive for as Christ followers. Read your Bibles people! Weigh what is said. Is it really what the scriptures are saying? Sometimes I wonder about preaching something frankly heretical just to see what you guys would do! Boo me off stage? Have the elders accost me? Do we have shepherds hook for this around here somewhere?! I think the Bereans did! What is being commended here is discernment. Let’s see that and be discerning ourselves! Bring that attitude to church. Definitely bring that discerning listening to podcasts or reading books. Many “Christian books” out there are anything but Christian! Ask yourself does it square with good Bible interpretation?

So how do we become good interpreters? How do we listen well? A hugely important principle comes straight out of the text:

“Examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so”. Acts 17:11

Who here has ever heard the phrase: “let scripture interpret scripture”? It means don’t ever base an opinion or doctrine on only one text, and let the Bible clarify any passages which are their own are ambiguous and/or can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The best commentary on the Bible is..... THE BIBLE!

Secondly, that word EXAMINE used here means “investigate, examine, enquire into, scrutinise, sift, question”⁵ This implies careful reading of context. Good interpretation requires an awareness of context. For example, everyone knows the verse:

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11

⁴ G Campbell Morgan. The Acts of the Apostles. Accessed online http://www.classicchristianlibrary.com/library/morgan_g_campbell/Morgan-Acts.pdf

⁵ Olive Tree enhanced Stormg’s Bible Dictionary.

This is the kind of verse that shows up a graduation card, or a verse that might be quoted on an Anniversary Sunday. But are we aware of the context? This verse is the punctuation on a Divine sentence of judgement, specifically 70 years of exile! This is not a verse for sending out a youngster to university! This is a word of hope for someone recently sentenced, and about to prison and captivity! Good listeners pay attention to context. You get context by reading your Bibles! Front to back which apparently only 30% of evangelicals do. Daily Bread style devotions leave significant holes!

Thirdly, good listeners are also Students of the Bible. Think of that word examine. They take notes. They are aware of genre and history when they interpret the Bible. They read poetry like poetry, and don't force the literary conventions of documentary history on apocalyptic poetry! Reading Revelation like a chronological play by play is exactly this error and leads to crazytown interpretations like Harold Camping saying the world is going to end on May 21, 2011!⁶ This is a vast subject, so let me simply say this. Get informed! Church and the sermon are a great place to learn this! Every week a passage is read and as preachers we try our best to let the Bible speak. Another is getting a solid book on Bible interpretation, may I suggest one? "how to read the Bible for all it's worth" is a great start. It will help you get some of the tools you need to examine scriptures well.

Lastly, good listeners pray and seek the Holy Spirit to illuminate the scriptures. Listen to what Peter says about this:

“know that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” 2 Peter 1:20-21

Pray God will help you to understand! Pray that the Holy Spirit will lead you into right interpretation. This is so critical.

This is how to become like a Berean.

⁶ Many may remember the bulletins and billboards on HWY 11! Harold Camping

So in closing we have been given 2 things in our Reading in Acts today.

A Masterclass in missions, and a Masterclass in listening.

Let's resolve to follow in Paul's footsteps and

1. Stick to the assignment and trust God with the results
2. Always be ready for redeployment
3. Not be surprised by opposition

Let's resolve to be good listeners like the Bereans and let scripture interpret scripture. Read scripture in context. Become a student of the scriptures. And pray!