Making God Known  
Acts 17:1-4, 10-12, 22-25, 28  
SS Lesson for 11/22/2015

Devotional Scripture: Eph 1:15-20

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4. The proper response to the gospel is first to verify its truth, then to believe in Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord, no matter what the cost.
   A. We must verify the truth of the gospel by examining the Scriptures.
   B. We must believe in the gospel by personally trusting in Jesus as our sin-bearing Savior.
   C. We must submit to the truth of the gospel by following Jesus as Lord, no matter what the cost.

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson admonishes us as Christians to seek and use different ways of Making God Known. The study's aim is to understand that we should determine each person's spiritual awareness in witnessing to them. The study's application is to share basic Biblical truths with people in order to make God known to them. (Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 17:23

for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The journey from Philippi to Thessalonica was about 100 miles with Amphipolis and Apollonia at approximately 30-mile intervals on the Via Egnatia. Evidently there were no Jewish synagogues in the two towns where Paul did not stop. A synagogue provided an excellent point of contact for the gospel (cf. v. 10) so Paul remained at Thessalonica, modern Saloniki, to preach. The reference to three Sabbath days does not mean the missionary band stayed only three weeks in Thessalonica. Paul carried on the work with a Jewish emphasis for three Sabbaths and then turned to Gentiles and ministered to them for some weeks after that. This was the situation for three reasons: (1) The Philippian church sent money to Paul at least twice during this visit (Phil. 4:15-16), implying a longer lapse of time than three weeks. (2) In addition, Paul supported himself by manual labor (1 Thes. 2:9; 2 Thes. 3:7-10). This may indicate that considerable time elapsed before the aid from Philippi arrived. (3) Most of the converts at Thessalonica were not from the synagogue but were Gentiles steeped in idolatry (cf. 1 Thes. 1:9). Paul and Silas’ ministry in presenting the crucified and resurrected Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah) met with response:

some... Jews, many God-fearing Greeks (cf. 16:14, where the same Greek word is used of Lydia, who is called “a worshiper of God”; cf. the same word in 17:17), and not a few prominent women (cf. v. 12).

The gospel message was received by people of various nationalities and social positions. Luke evidently included this incident to reemphasize the continued Jewish rejection. Jason probably had provided lodging for Paul and Silas. The Jews were intent on finding Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. Thessalonica was a free city which meant it was sovereign in its local affairs and not subject to provincial administration in such matters. Besides local rulers, Thessalonica also had its own local assembly called the dēmos, the word translated “crowd” here (see the NIV marg.; cf. 19:30 [“crowd”], 33 [“people”] where the noun also occurs). Because the mob could not find Paul and Silas they grabbed Jason and some other believers and accused them before the city officials (politarchas, lit., “city rulers”). In Macedonian cities these magistrates formed the city council. The charge was specifically against Jason (possibly a relative of Paul; cf. Rom. 16:21) for harboring men who had caused trouble all over the world—obviously an exaggeration—and defied Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another King, One called Jesus. This latter accusation is significant for it shows Jews were behind the whole mob scene (cf. Acts 17:5); only they would have known enough about Paul’s theology to make such a charge. (Jews also accused Jesus of claiming to be a king”; Luke 23:2.) Furthermore it reflects Paul’s proclamation. As the Thessalonian Epistles indicate, Paul proclaimed that the messianic kingdom will be established at the return of Christ (1 Thes. 3:13; 5:1-11; 2 Thes. 1:5-10; 2:14; cf. Luke 23:2; John 18:33-37). The crowd and the polityarchs were in turmoil (etaraxan, “agitated, disturbed, troubled”; cf. John 11:33; Acts 16:20) probably because they could not find Paul and Silas (17:6), the source of the city’s problem. Probably the bond-posting was to guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave town and not return. If more trouble arose, Jason and the others would lose their money. This may explain why Paul was prohibited from returning (1 Thes. 2:18). In spite of this, the Christians at Thessalonica kept on boldly proclaiming the gospel (1 Thes. 1:7-10; cf. 2:14-16).
Under cover of night (cf. Paul’s other nighttime escape; 9:25) the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. Perhaps Timothy accompanied them or he may have joined them at Berea later (cf. 17:14). Berea was about 46 miles southwest of Thessalonica on the eastern slopes of a mountain. Berea was also on the way to Achaia, the province that corresponds to southern Greece today. Sophister was from Berea (20:4). As usual, Paul and Silas went to the... synagogue (cf. 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). The Berean Jews were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. They welcomed Paul’s message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. This differed from the Jews in Thessalonica only some of whom believed (v. 4), whereas most of them were jealous of Paul and stirred up trouble. The Bereans’ interest in the Word resulted in many conversions of both Jews and Greeks. Interestingly prominent... women in both Thessalonica and Berea received Christ (vv. 4, 12). Once again Jewish unbelievers (from Thessalonica) forced the expulsion of Paul. Stirring is from the same Greek word used in verse 8 to speak of being “in turmoil.” Silas and Timothy remained at Berea to help establish the fledgling church, while Paul went on south. Whether Paul went to Athens by boat or by land is not known. In either case some brothers accompanied Paul to guarantee his safe arrival. Paul told the friends to instruct Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens as soon as possible. It is clear from 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 6 that Silas and Timothy did rejoin Paul at Athens. Silas likewise was commissioned by Paul to leave Athens and then meet him at Corinth (cf. Acts 18:1-5).

The glory of Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. was fading in Paul’s day and even Athens, the proud center of Hellenism, was past its bloom. Even so, it was still a vital cultural center with a world-famous university. Many of its famous buildings were built during the days of its leader Pericles (461-429 B.C.). Beautiful as were the architecture and art forms, Paul could not enjoy them because he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. The art of Athens was a reflection of its worship. The intellectual capital of the world was producing idolatry. In this city Paul waged spiritual warfare on two fronts, the synagogue and the marketplace. In the synagogue he no doubt used his normal approach, proving from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah (cf. vv. 2-3). In that synagogue were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (cf. v. 4). In the marketplace (agora, the center of civic life) where philosophers debated and presented their views, Paul reasoned... with those who happened to be there. The primary antagonists of Paul in the agora were the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans, who followed Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), said the chief end of man was pleasure and happiness. This pleasure, they believed, is attained by avoiding excesses and the fear of death, by seeking tranquility and freedom from pain, and by loving mankind. They believed that if gods exist they do not become involved in human events. The Stoics, on the other hand, were followers of Zeno (ca. 320-ca. 250 B.C.) and got their name from the painted portico or stoa, where he traditionally taught in Athens. Pantheistic in their view, they felt a great “Purpose” was directing history. Man’s responsibility was to fit himself and align himself with this Purpose through tragedy and triumph. Quite obviously this outlook, while it produced certain noble qualities, also resulted in inordinate pride and self-sufficiency. When these philosophers encountered Paul, they began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, What is this babbler trying to say? “Dispute” is syneballon (lit., “to throw with,” i.e., to toss ideas back and forth). This differs slightly from what Paul did in the synagogues. There he reasoned (dielegeto, “discussed, conversed,” v. 17; cf. the same word in v. 2; 18:4, 19; 19:8). The word translated “babbler” is spermologos (lit., “seed-picker”). It described someone who, like a bird picking up seeds, took some learning here and some there and then passed it off as his own. Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. This response was due to their inability to grasp Paul’s doctrine of Christ and the Resurrection; it was totally foreign to their thinking (cf. 17:31-32). Areopagus, literally, “Hill of Ares,” was the meeting place of the Council of the Areopagus, the supreme body for judicial and legislative matters in Athens. In the Apostolic Age its power had been reduced to oversight over religion and education.

There is some question as to where this council met in Paul’s time. Some think it met on the traditional Mars Hill behind the agora and immediately west of the Acropolis. Others say it met in the Stoa Basileios, a building in the agora. The council wanted to know about Paul’s new teaching, which was strange to their ears. In Athens, the ancient world’s intellectual center, the Athenians and foreign residents loved to
The Athenians, who feared they might overlook venerating some deity they did not know about, dedicated an altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. When Paul referred to this, he did not emphasize the altar but their ignorance of the true God. Because God made everything, He is supreme over all—the Lord of heaven and earth (cf. 14:15; cf. Ps. 24:1). Such a great God does not live in humanly constructed temples, as the Athenians assumed their Greek gods did (cf. Stephen’s words in Acts 7:48-50). God is above human temples, but He is also self-sufficient and is not sustained by human provisions. This truth would appeal to the Epicureans who believed that what god or gods existed were above human events. The last part of the verse, dealing with God’s providing people with life (cf. v. 28) and material needs (cf. 14:17), suited the Stoic philosophy of aligning their lives with the “Purpose” of the Cosmos. Paul was thus beginning where his listeners were and was leading them from their inadequate concepts of the truth. From one man refers back to Adam. This would be a blow to Athenian pride; they were sourced in the same original Creation as everyone else! One purpose of this Creation was to populate the planet (Gen. 1:28). This sovereign God has omnipotently decreed the history (the times) and boundaries (the exact places) for the nations (cf. Deut. 32:8). Greece was not the only nation on earth! One of God’s purposes in revealing Himself in Creation and history is that people would seek Him (cf. Rom. 1:19-20). Though sovereign (Acts 17:24), He is also immanent and not so far removed that He cannot be found. To buttress his point Paul apparently quoted from Epimenides, the Cretan poet (whom Paul also quoted later in Titus 1:12): For in Him we live (cf. Acts 17:25), and move, and have our being. Also Paul quoted the poet Aratus, from Paul’s homeland Cilicia: We are His offspring. This second quotation was from Aratus’ work Phainomena. All people—Athenians along with all others—are God’s offspring, not in the sense that they are all His redeemed children or in the sense that they all possess an element of deity, but in the sense that they are created by God and receive their very life and breath from Him (v. 25). The Athenians’ very creation and continued existence depended on this one God whom they did not know! No such claim could ever be made of any of the scores of false gods worshiped by the Greeks. The conclusion is inevitable: since humans have been created by God, the divine Being, He cannot possibly be in the form of an idol, an image conceived and constructed by man (cf. Rom. 1:22-23). (“Divine being” translates theion, lit., “divine nature,” used frequently in classical Gr., but in the NT only here and in 2 Peter 1:3-4). This would be a revolutionary concept to the Athenians, whose city was “full of idols” (Acts 17:16) and “objects of worship” (v. 23). God overlooked human ignorance revealed in idol-making, that is, He was patient. Though people are under His wrath (Rom. 1:18) and are without excuse because of natural revelation (Rom. 1:19-20), God “in His forbearance (anochê, ‘holding back, delay’) left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” (Rom. 3:25). This parallels Acts 14:16, “In the past, He let all nations go their way”. All through time the Gentiles were responsible for the general revelation given to them; now with the worldwide proclamation of the gospel, the Gentiles are also responsible to special revelation. That response is to obey God’s command to repent of their sins. At this point Paul introduced a distinctively Christian viewpoint. His reference to the Man clearly looks to Daniel 7:13-14 which speaks of the Son of Man. This One, appointed by God the Father, will judge the world with justice (cf. John 5:22). The authentication of Christ’s person and work was His resurrection. Here again the resurrection of Jesus was preached. The idea of resurrection (cf. Acts 17:18, 32) was incompatible with Greek philosophy. The Greeks wanted to get rid of their bodies, not take them on again! A personal judgment
was also unpalatable to Greeks. The gospel message struck at the center of the Athenians’ needs. Interestingly Paul (vv. 30-31) discussed the topics of sin (“to repent”), righteousness (“justice”), and judgment (“He will judge”), the same areas in which Jesus said the Holy Spirit would convict people (John 16:5-11). To a Greek it was nonsense to believe a dead man could be raised from the grave to live forever, so some of them sneered. Others with more discretion said they wanted to hear Paul again on this subject. As a result a few men became followers of Paul and believed, including even Dionysius, an Areopagus member (i.e., a council member; cf. v. 19), and a woman named Damaris. Other women converts in Acts include Lydia (16:14-15), a few prominent women in Thessalonica (17:4), and a number of prominent Greek women in Berea (v. 12). Was Paul’s ministry at Athens a failure? This is difficult to assess. There is no record of a church being founded in Athens. Paul later referred to the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 16:15) in Corinth as “the first converts” (lit., “firstfruits”) of Achaia. (Athens was in Achaia.) How could this be if some were converted in Athens, as Acts 17:34 asserts? Probably the solution is found in thinking of Stephanas as the firstfruits “of a church” in Achaia. Also possibly the term “firstfruits” can be used of more than one person. If no church was begun in Athens, the failure was not in Paul’s message or method but in the hardness of the Athenians’ hearts.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Why are the Scriptures so important to the church? Why are certain words on a page (or screen) more important than others? What is the best use of Scripture? These questions are all related to the nature of authority when it comes to certain works of literature, the concept of using the writings of others as guides for our lives. This great Jewish heritage of Scriptures, sacred writings that have authority in the community and in the lives of individuals, has passed to Christians. We believe that God speaks through the books of the Bible, written by men but inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Part of today’s lesson concerns the Bereans, synagogue members who searched the Scriptures diligently to see if the claims of Paul about Jesus were true. May we never forget that God’s truth resides in the Scriptures, and that like those noble Bereans, we can search them ourselves to learn things of utmost, eternal importance.

One of the most interesting stories in Acts is about Paul and his experience in the city of Athens. That Greek city was famous for having been the home base of noteworthy philosophers in centuries gone by. Athens’ legendary reputation is summed up nicely by Robert P. Conway: Athens reached its zenith under Pericles (495-429 BC), who built the Parthenon, numerous temples, and other splendid buildings. Literature, philosophy, science, and rhetoric flourished; and Athens attracted intellectuals from all over the world. In Paul’s day, its prestige was challenged by Alexandria [compare Acts 18:24] and Tarsus [compare Acts 21:39; 22:3], but not in popular opinion. A factor often overlooked today is that ancient Athens was also a religious center (Acts 17:22, part of today’s study). The dividing line between philosophy and religion that is drawn by many today was unknown in the ancient world (and surely the two cannot be separated even now). That context meant that Paul’s preaching of the gospel outside the synagogue (17:17) required a different strategy than he used in Thessalonica, Berea, etc.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Making God Known in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4)

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.
2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.”
4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

**Scriptures studied (1-2)**

*Study so that we can correctly handle the Word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15)*

15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

*Study to find those things that are helpful (Acts 20:20)*

20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

*Study to help distinguish good from evil (Heb 5:14)*

14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

**Salvation proclaimed (3-4)**

*A salvation that God appointed through Jesus (1 Thess 5:9)*

9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*A salvation through justification by Jesus' blood (Rom 5:9)*

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

*A salvation that bring eternal life (John 11:25)*

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;

**Making God Known in Berea (Acts 17:10-12)**

10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.
11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.
12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

**God known through leaders (10)**

*Leaders that should seek the deep truths of the faith (1 Tim 3:8-10)*

8 Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

*Leaders that should teach only sound doctrine (2 Tim 1:13-14)*

13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.
Leaders that will have to give an account for those under their care (Heb 13:17)

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

God known through people believing (11-12)

Believing that all things are possible for Jesus (Mark 9:23-24)

23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." 24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Believing that Jesus is God's one and only Son (John 3:16-18)

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Believing the truth (Eph 1:13)

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

Making God Known in Athens (Acts 17:22-25, 28)

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you; 24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Explaining the unknown God (22-23)

Explaining by persuading others about God (Acts 26:24-29)

24 At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." 25 "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" 29 Paul replied, "Short time or long — I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Explaining by telling about what God has done for us (Ps 66:16)

16 Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.
Explaining about those things we know about God (Acts 4:20)
20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

Explaining the Creator God (24-25)

Creator of all things (Col 1:16)
16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Creator through whom all things consist (1 Cor 8:6)
6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Creator explained by Jesus Himself (Heb 1:2)
2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

Explaining the sustaining God (25)

God sustains by upholding those who fall (Ps 37:23-24)
23 If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; 24 though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.

God sustains from birth (Ps 71:6)
6 From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.

God sustains because He will never forsake His own (Ps 55:22)
22 Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Steven Cole

Jesus called people to take up their crosses and lose their lives if they wished to follow Him (Mark 8:34-35). The life of the apostle Paul gives us a concrete example of what that means. In our text, having just been mistreated in Philippi, he comes to Thessalonica and has the boldness to speak to them the gospel in the face of much opposition (1 Thess. 2:2). Driven out of Thessalonica, he does the same thing in Berea. Driven from Berea, he moves on to preach to the intellectuals in Athens. In Thessalonica, an angry mob accuses him and Silas of upsetting the world, or as some translations put it, of turning the world upside down and of proclaiming a king other than Caesar (17:6, 7).

In one sense, both charges were exaggerated and false. It was Paul’s accusers that were upsetting the world by stirring up mob violence. Paul exhorted his followers to live quiet and tranquil lives in all godliness and dignity (1 Tim. 2:2). And he also instructed believers to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-7). But there is another sense in which both charges are true, or at least ought to be true. Christians should upset the world or turn it upside down by confronting it with the gospel. And Christians do proclaim that Jesus is King or Lord of all, even of Caesar. Thus God wants us to upset the world for Jesus Christ.

To upset the world for Jesus Christ, we need to be men and women who are committed to Christ and the gospel.
1. The world needs to be upset.

Ever since the fall of the human race into sin, people have been in rebellion against the Creator and Lord of the universe. We are born in sin and we continue in sin unless we are upset by the gospel that confronts our sin. Sin has made the world stand on its head, and only Jesus Christ can turn it upside down, which makes it right side up again.

We live in a world that has brazenly cast off God. We have cast Him off as the Creator, insisting that science proves that we all evolved from pond slime through sheer chance billions of years ago. If God is not the Creator, then He does not need to be obeyed (Rom. 1:18). If man is the product of millions of years of chance, then he need not fear judgment or eternity ahead, because at death he simply ceases to exist. And so we can determine for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. There is no absolute moral truth, binding on everyone, except for the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth! Thus tolerance becomes our chief virtue.

On the common man’s level, “Dear Abby” epitomizes the world’s so-called “wisdom” apart from God. It is an evolving wisdom, blowing with the winds of the times. Years ago, Abby was against divorce, until the world voted for no-fault, easy divorce. Now, Abby even calls it a necessary good at times, and counsels women to leave their husbands out of self-respect. Forty years ago Abby would never have defended homosexuality. But when public opinion shifted toward tolerance, she now defends it and chastises any narrow-minded people who think that it is wrong. Just last week, I noticed that Abby was defending some people who invited their neighbors over to go nude into their hot tub. She acknowledged that a few may think that group nudity is morally wrong, and that others are hung up about the appearance of their bodies. But the implication was that those who are mature and sensible shouldn’t have any problem with it!

On a more intellectual level, the ACLU and the U.S. Supreme Court reflect a world in rebellion against God. These dear folks have made it legally acceptable to dance nude as an expression of free speech, but not to pray at high school football games! They have made it legal to kill perfectly good babies in the womb right up to the moment of birth, but to spare murderers on death row! A world that is so complacent in its brazen sin and rebellion against God needs to be upset or turned upside down!

2. To upset the world for Christ, God uses men and women committed to Christ and the gospel.

As you know, the apostle Paul was a man committed to stamping out Christianity as a false cult until, he was confronted by Jesus Christ. After that day, he was fully committed to Christ and to proclaiming the gospel of grace that had transformed his life. Christianity is first and foremost not a commitment to a religion or a bunch of religious rules; rather, it is a relationship with the person of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said that he had counted as loss everything in his life that had formerly been gain in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord (Phil. 3:8).

As a result of knowing Jesus Christ personally, Paul said that he did all things for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:23). He got beat up in Philippi, and rather than taking a breack, he traveled 100 miles to Thessalonica, went into the synagogue, and began arguing that Jesus is the Christ. When he was forced to leave Thessalonica, he moved on to Berea and did the same thing! The man was unstoppable in his commitment to preach the gospel of Christ!

Many have a false idea that there are two optional tracks in the Christian life. One track is the committed discipleship track. This track is for gung-ho types who have a masochistic bent. They give up the comforts of life, they live without many of the gadgets and toys that the rest of us enjoy, they give large portions of their income to the cause of Christ, and they devote themselves and their time totally to Jesus.

If that track is a bit much for you, then you can choose the comfortable Christian track. Comfortable Christians usually go to church on Sundays, unless one of their hobbies has a big event that day. They give a bit to help out the church. They volunteer some of their time to the cause, when time permits. For them, Christ and the church are a nice slice of life that help to make life more pleasant. But Christ and the church aren’t
the center of life, touching every area. These folks wouldn’t think of being inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel. But I never find Jesus offering this second track to any of His followers.

We’re not all gifted to preach the gospel in the same way that Paul was. We’re not all called to serve as missionaries in foreign lands. But we all are called to be fully committed to Jesus Christ. He commanded us all, not just missionaries and pastors, to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). He warns us about the church in Laodicea, which He will spew out of His mouth because they are lukewarm in their commitment (Rev. 3:14-22). To be nominal in our commitment to Jesus is not to be His followers at all!

But notice how much the Lord can accomplish with just a few committed followers! Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy were just four men traveling in an almost completely pagan world. They left behind fledgling churches that were decisively in the minority. And yet they upset the entire world for Jesus Christ! As John Wesley put it, “Give me fifty men who love nothing but God and fear nothing but sin, and I’ll change the world!”

3. To upset the world for Christ, God uses the message of the gospel.

Paul said, “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” (Rom. 1:16). Here, as was his custom, Paul went first to the Jews in the synagogue. When they rejected the message, he turned to the Gentiles. His heart’s desire was for the salvation of his own people, the Jews. If they repented and believed in the gospel, then they would fully embrace his efforts to reach out to the Gentiles. If they rejected the gospel, as they often did, then they had no basis for criticizing Paul for taking the message to those who would welcome it.

The gospel by its very nature is divisive. As Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). When the gospel is clearly proclaimed, it draws a line in the sand. People cannot be neutral. So here, as everywhere Paul went, he stirred up controversy and divided people. Some believed and followed Paul; others rejected the message and out of jealousy stirred up opposition. In fact, they were so vehement in their opposition that they followed Paul the 46 miles to Berea to stir up that city against him. They were especially jealous because Paul was drawing away from the synagogue the God-fearing Gentiles who were formerly attending the synagogue.

Before a person can believe in the gospel, he first must understand the content of the gospel.

A. The content of the gospel centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures (17:2). The word “reasoned” indicates a dialogue, where Paul presented the truth and then responded to questions or challenges from the congregation. He explained and gave evidence “that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” (17:3). “Explained” means to open. Luke used the same word of God opening the eyes of the men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31). “Giving evidence” literally means “to place before or alongside.” Paul would take one Scripture and place it alongside another Scripture to support and prove his point.

We learn several useful things here. First, the Scriptures are the sole basis for the gospel. When you witness, take people to the Bible. Sometimes we share a gospel booklet with people, and that’s okay. But make sure that they know that the verses come from the Bible. Have them read the verses out loud. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). If a person has never done so, encourage him to read the gospels, and as he reads to ask, “Who is Jesus Christ?”

That’s the second thing, that Jesus Christ is the center of the gospel. Jesus’ question to the twelve is the key question for every person, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). That is the main issue that people need to face. If Jesus is who He claimed to be, everything else follows. If He is not, then nothing else follows. It’s easy when you’re witnessing to get distracted with extraneous matters: What about the heathen who have never heard? What about evolution? Why is there so much evil and suffering in the world if God is good and
all-powerful? Etc. But the answers to those questions will not get a person saved. To be saved, a person needs to understand who Jesus is and what He came to do.

Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, which in his time was the Old Testament. Could you take your Old Testament and show a person that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ? Paul probably took them to Psalm 22, a description of crucifixion written hundreds of years before that was known as a means of execution. He probably went to Isaiah 53, where the prophet shows Messiah despised and forsaken of men, pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. The Lord caused our iniquity to fall on Him. He was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of Isaiah’s people. He rendered Himself as a guilt offering, justifying the many by bearing their iniquities. But His resurrection is implied at the end of that great chapter, where God says, “Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors” (53:12).

Paul probably also took them (as he did in his sermon in Acts 13:35) to Psalm 16:10, where Messiah says, “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.” He probably explained how the sacrificial system pictured Messiah’s death. He may have taken them to Abraham’s receiving Isaac back from the brink of death as an illustration of Messiah’s being raised up after He became the sacrificial lamb. So he argued forcefully from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Savior, who had to suffer for our sins and rise from the dead.

Why does the gospel upset people so much? When it is proclaimed rightly, it confronts people with their sin and it calls them to surrender their lives fully to Jesus as Lord. Unless God softens a sinner’s heart, he doesn’t like to be confronted by his sin or the thought of surrendering to Jesus as Lord.

B. The confrontation of the gospel centers on our sin and rebellion against Jesus as King.

The Jews thought that Messiah would be a conquering King who would deliver them from Rome and other enemies, but they didn’t like the notion of Him suffering and dying for sinners. That implied that they were sinners, but they viewed the Gentiles as the sinners! They liked the idea of a King who would make life comfortable for them, but they didn’t like the notion of a King who would confront their sin! But the gospel proclaims Jesus as both the Savior of sinners and the Lord of all of our lives. We have not faithfully proclaimed the gospel if we give out an easy message that dodges sin and lets the sinner continue as his own lord, “using” Jesus to make life more comfortable.

4. The proper response to the gospel is first to verify its truth, then to believe in Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord, no matter what the cost.

We see the proper response to the gospel by those that believed both in Thessalonica and especially at Berea.

A. We must verify the truth of the gospel by examining the Scriptures.

The Bereans “were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so” (17:11). They did not examine it as proud skeptics, trying to find reasons not to believe. They came at it with an open attitude, seeking after the truth.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not a matter of closing your eyes and leaping into the dark. Rather, it is based on the revelation that God has given concerning His Son. Neither is faith in Christ an emotional decision based on good feelings after a concert or an evangelistic sermon. If your faith is based on good feelings, it will not stand up under trials. Faith should rest on the revelation of the Bible regarding the person of Jesus Christ.
B. We must believe in the gospel by personally trusting in Jesus as our sin-bearing Savior.

We must recognize what the Bible declares, that we have sinned and stand guilty before the Holy God. But in His great mercy, He sent Jesus to justify all that would believe in Him by bearing the penalty that they deserved (see Isa. 53:4-12; Rom. 3:23-26). Thus the Bible commands us to believe in the Lord Jesus, promising that we will be saved (Acts 16:31).

C. We must submit to the truth of the gospel by following Jesus as Lord, no matter what the cost.

Jesus is the rightful King, even over Caesar! We must obey Him with every area of our lives, beginning on the thought level. Jason and the new believers in Thessalonica faced immediate persecution for their faith. But Paul had taught them before he was forced to leave town that as believers, we are destined for affliction (1 Thess. 3:3-4). We err if we lead people to think that receiving Jesus as Savior will give them a life of comfort and ease. It will give them much joy and peace, but only in the context of much tribulation (1 Thess. 1:6). This is why we must be convinced of the truth about Jesus before we put our trust in Him. A flimsy, emotional decision won’t stand up if persecution hits.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-43-upsetting-world-christ-acts-171-15)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Paul was prepared to engage the philosophers of his day. He was not shy about presenting the claims of Christianity in the inner sanctum of the learned—the Areopagus of Athens. Paul believed that truth would withstand any challenge and that it must be proclaimed and defended. When he worked with Jews with whom he shared a common understanding of the authority of Scripture, his appeal was on that basis. But when he spoke to Greeks who did not share that belief, he pressed his claims on the basis of logic and quotations from their own writers. The church needs highly educated Christians who are able to speak its message in all contexts. To be able to debate with philosophers as Paul did is not the calling of every Christian. But we must not settle for putting our faith in a box, apart from our intellectual life.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. The gospel was given to Jews first, but they still need to hear its message today (Acts 17:1 -2)
2. The Old Testament Scriptures prove the need for Christ's death and sacrifice (vss. 3-4)
3. We should be very concerned about understanding God's Word correctly (vss. 10-12)
4. People can be very religious without ever knowing the true God (vss. 22-23)
5. God created man, and He cannot be confined by man (vss. 24-25)
6. Even human wisdom can reason out that all things come from God (vs. 28)