

Viral: Good News Spreads Fast



#8 Open to question – Acts 17:1-15

Intro – A hostile reception

Have you ever started a new job or joined a club and found someone there who's just irrationally hateful toward you - and you have no idea why?

How do you deal with something like that?

Humans have this strange capacity to get weird and worked up over other people who get in their space!

Today's next instalment in the adventures of the apostle Paul in the Book of Acts gives us an example of new arrivals who are met with irrational hatred.

The passage from Acts 17:1-5 breaks down neatly into three parts:

1. Paul pushes further west into Macedonia 1-4 (see Acts 16:9)
2. People in one city won't reason with Paul 5-9
3. People in another city reason & respond 10-15

1. Paul pushes further west vss. 1-4

Let's start at number 1. In verses 1-4 we read...

Paul and his companions then travelled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths¹ in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead.

Paul said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." Some of the Jewish people who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.

So here's what happened – After leaving Philippi under some duress, Paul and his friends **moved south-west** about 160 kms. They stayed true to the call of

¹ We see by some inferences in 1 Thessalonians that they stayed longer than the 3 weeks mentioned here. Perhaps Luke was emphasising the extent to which the message was of interest to some.

God Paul received in a dream to spread the Good News on the European continent (you can read about that back in Acts 16:9).²

They walked along the *The Egnatian Way*, a super-highway for trade and travel, with a couple of stops in back-packer hotels along the journey³ before reaching the great capital of Macedon called Thessalonica.

This was a quite different city to the roman garrison town of Philippi. Thessalonica was a free city; an important, thriving, multicultural market hub.

Paul followed his usual custom and went first to the local synagogue⁴. This gave him an open microphone on Saturdays, as it was customary to ask visiting rabbis to stand up at a synagogue meeting and share their views.

Luke's summary of what Paul said to the gathering is found in verse 3, and sounds just like what Jesus shared with his disciples after his resurrection.⁵ In short, Paul joined the dots between (what we call) the Old Testament and the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, pointing to Jesus as the Christ.

All was going along swimmingly. A few became Christians. But according to verse 4, many who "outsiders", who were not allowed to be synagogue members, but were listening in, also became Christians.

See again how radically inclusive the Gospel of Jesus is in these times.

2. People in one city won't reason with Paul vss. 5-9

That's when things got ugly in Thessalonica. In verses 5-9 we read...

But some of the Jewish people were jealous, so they gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd.

² Paul and Silas escaped a wrongful arrest in Philippi where God established the first European church, probably at Lydia's house - a Gentile woman born in Thyatira near Pergamum, and a manufacturer of expensive purple cloth (Acts 16:11-15, 40). The church included unlikely people such as the Roman jailer (Acts 16:31-40)

³ Amphipolis and Apollonia

⁴ In those times a synagogue could constitute as few as 10 Jewish men, but some cities (e.g. Capernaum in Galilee had a building devoted to Jewish religious meetings. Archaeological evidence has not yet been found to reveal what number of Jews may have inhabited that city in those days.

⁵ Luke 24:46

...They shouted, “Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world,” and now they are here disturbing our city, too. And Jason has welcomed them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus.”

Let’s look at these irrationally angry people for a moment:

- Verse 5 says they were “jealous”. Turns out some people actually *liked* Paul and his message, and this was perceived as a threat by some members of the synagogue.
- Verse 6 tells us they claimed Paul & Silas were “troublemakers” (along with some local guy named Jason). That seems a bit rich coming from people who hired a mob of troublemakers to make trouble!⁶ But the original Greek in verse 6 helps us to see it was the social revolution caused by the Gospel that upset them. Those hating on Paul hated the thought that “Outsiders” were radically included by God in the Gospel of Jesus.⁷
- In verse 7 they doubled down on their irrational hatred. It’s like they tweeted that Christians were “hurting the bible” and “hurting god” (By “bible” I mean the exclusive views of the haters, and by “god” I mean the emperor the haters had no regard for anyway). The claim of treason was such a trumped up charge. After all, Christ’s kingship was marked by humility and submission, and so too was Paul’s own teaching about Christ as king.⁸

3. People in another city reason and respond vss. 6-10

In one city we see anger, in another city, a different response altogether.

A deal was done with Jason and his friends to make sure Paul and Silas never returned to Thessalonica⁹. So Paul and Silas hit the road again, this time off the main highway, walking about 70km south to Berea. This was a small Hellenistic city, with some Jewish people, just north of Mount Olympus.

Let’s pick it up at vs. 10...

⁶ Verse 5

⁷ As Paul states in Galatians 3:28, the Gospel breaks down barriers humans love to erect based on such as gender, status, race, and more; something notably true about conversions at Philippi and Thessalonica.

⁸ E.g. Philippians 2:3-11

⁹ You can read Paul’s correspondence with the church there in 1 & 2 Thessalonians in the New Testament

... When they arrived [in Berea], they went to the Jewish synagogue. And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men.

In contrast to some at Thessalonica, Luke says it was in the nature of Bereans to explore and to reason with ideas and beliefs – a “noble trait” he calls it.

Paul's approach, here and elsewhere was to lay his ideas out alongside the common text that the people were studying. Then he would encourage dialogue to follow after his preaching.¹⁰

As we see in verse 12 many Jewish people *and* people from diverse backgrounds came to faith in this city.

But the irrationally angry jealous mob back in Thessalonica got wind of this and walked all the way to Berea to cause more trouble. Paul was whisked away to Athens, while Silas and Timothy stayed on to help the new church.

So(w) What?

Why is this passage in the Bible? What does it have to say to us today?

1. Firstly, some will reason, and some won't (Matthew 13:1-13)

That is to say, the events in Acts 17 ring true to what Jesus taught as a pattern in the parable of the sower¹¹...

- some people are gonna really love what they hear in the Gospel,
- some will be indifferent to it,
- some will pick and choose its good bits but may not hang around, and
- others will get really, really, antsy about what they hear- “It is what it is”

2. Secondly, the Gospel offers freedom and welcome (Colossians 3:5-11)

¹⁰ Many commentators are reluctant to take this idea too far lest it looks like Paul was open to changing his message, and because they want to preserve today's model of preaching. Yet there is so much to gain from this model of mission and such great evidence of Paul's humility and his confidence in the Gospel (Rom. 1:16).

¹¹ Luke 8, Matthew 13

Sometimes people get irrationally angry around Christians. Sometimes it's warranted – partly because evangelists like me can act like real jerks! But often, like in Acts 17, people get angry because they find out the Gospel is not just a private spiritual ideology, but instead is the grounds for a social revolution. It shifts the balance of power. It upsets the status quo. It welcomes outsiders.

- But, someone you know longs to see people welcomed and included in society, despite their race, status, gender, or background - then they're gonna love the Gospel of Jesus and want to find out more.
- If you know someone who is tired of the endless push to climb the social ladder or the pressure on them to amass more possessions to fit in, they're gonna love the Gospel of Jesus and want to hear more about the simplicity and freedom of grace and faith.
- If your neighbour's self-awareness is sound and they get that you can't do life alone and you need wisdom from above they're gonna love the Gospel of Jesus with its promise of divine company and help to navigate life and they'll perhaps want to learn more.

How great it is to learn that God sent His Son into the world with love and grace to cleanse and welcome any "outsider" and include all people in His promises by one means – faith alone, in that same Jesus Christ.

3. Be open to question (e.g. Acts 17:11)

Lastly, Acts 17 challenges the church, and individual Christians to be open to question and to engage in dialogue willingly about our beliefs, just as Paul was.

In our situation, we won't be invited to step up and comment on the Old Testament at a synagogue meeting in town! Yet, people will ask us, from time to time, to give our opinion or to share our views or express the basis of our hope in life, especially when we are discussing topics in common with our neighbours.

We can share a point aligned with the radical Gospel of Jesus on matters important to our friends. It's a loving thing to do. It might be about...

- how we should treat refugees, or
- what's needed for climate action, or
- how we should think about aid and relief to poorer communities, or
- matters of indigenous reconciliation, or

- pursuing peaceful relationships during locked-down.

Christians have insight on such matters in the light of Jesus being the Christ that others might be interested to hear. If we engage in dialogue and people want to explore more of what the Gospel has to say, that's great!

If not, let's be sure our approach has been one of humility, love and openness, to be sure we are not a reason people ignore or reject the Gospel (though some irrationally angry people may just react!). If we are humble and open, most people will respect that we have a view and may think about what God's love might mean for their lives too.

As the First Letter of Peter advised Christians long ago, so we might heed its words today...

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...” (1 Peter 3:15)

Steve Webster, August 2020