



DEVOTIONAL

Someone once offered me a job by saying, “Tony, I want to change the world. And I want you to help me.” That sounded like a great goal, but it wasn’t unachievable. Not in that case. Some think talk of world change is triumphalistic, idealistic, and naive. They believe the world is fine the way it is. Comedian Stephen Colbert, in a parody of the traditional commencement address, told Princeton grads, “You can change the world. . . . Please don’t do that, OK? Some of us like the way things are going now” (Mulvihill, “Stephen Colbert”). And while others may admire the idea of changing the world, they are too complacent to go about it. Christians, though, are expected to be a part of a Christ-centered, kingdom-advancing movement. We are to give ourselves over to impacting the nations for Christ’s sake.

We, like the missionaries of Acts, should be dedicated to influencing world change. This idea is at work in Acts 17. According to verse 6, Paul and his mission team had already “turned the world upside down” by the time they reached Thessalonica. New Testament Professor C. Kavin Rowe titles his work on Acts *World Upside Down*, and I believe that’s an apt title for the book of Acts as a whole. Rowe writes, “Acts narrates the formation of a new culture” (Ibid., 140).

In the first half of Acts 17, we see the primary way they went about upending the world: they proclaimed Christ, not Caesar, as King. The preaching and teaching of the Christ-centered Scriptures impacted the world in a big way because if Jesus is Lord— and He is— then everything changes. In this section we find the Word of the Lord spreading into two more cities. In Thessalonica and Berea, King Jesus was proclaimed, embraced, and exalted. John Stott comments on the centrality of Scripture in these short stories: Luke chronicles the Thessalonian and Berean missions with surprising brevity. Yet one important aspect of them, to which he seems to be drawing his readers’ attention, is the attitude to the Scriptures adopted by both speaker and hearers (Message of Acts, 274; emphasis added) .

Indeed, these passages provide a wonderful example of how to teach and receive the Scriptures faithfully. We have already noted some unique strengths of Paul’s teaching; what’s particularly exciting about these stops is the way the churches received the Scriptures. Their willingness welcomed whatever changes God desired. Many today speak of the need to be “Berean Christians”— that is, Christ followers who carefully examine what’s being taught rather than just accepting everything that a teacher says. In light of the fact that many Western Christians spend little time in the Word and are largely dependent on hearing one sermon a week in order to receive biblical training, a “Berean revival” could be wonderfully helpful. In time Paul would commend the Thessalonians for their exemplary reception of the Scriptures, too: We constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13; cf. 1:6) .

Both the Berean and Thessalonian churches, then, have much to teach us— particularly in terms of how we should hear, consider, and obey God’s Word. To visit Thessalonica, Paul and his mission team first travel about a hundred miles southwest from Philippi. Due to opposition, the mission in Thessalonica gets cut short, so the team travels onward about fifty miles west to Berea. Accounts of ministry in these two cities are brief. In fact, we find out much of what can be known about the church in Thessalonica from Paul’s letters to them. Despite the brevity of the visits, however, helpful applications and needed inspiration for Scripture-saturated, Christ-exalting ministry exists within these passages.¹

OPEN IT

1. **Take some time to have some fun imagining you were “king for a day.” What one pet peeve or irritating thing would you rid the world of and why?**

READ IT

Acts 17:1-15

EXPLORE IT

2. **What did Paul do as soon as he entered the city of Thessalonica?**
3. **What did the mob do to Jason, and why did they do it?**
4. **What did the mob accuse Paul and his companions of doing to the world?**
5. **What does Luke say about the Bereans, and why does he give them this compliment?**

¹ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 5206–5219). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

APPLY IT

In the passage before us, Paul and Silas travelled 160 kilometres from Philippi to Thessalonica. They did so because they were eager to preach (1 Thessalonians 2:1–2). Though they were probably nursing recent wounds, they were eager to take the risk and repeat their evangelistic efforts in Thessalonica, a very strategic city. The words of David Livingstone are appropriate to describe Paul’s attitude. When Livingstone was asked where he was prepared to go, he answered, “I am prepared to go anywhere, so long as it is forward.” The idea of turning back never occurred to Paul. And so he and Silas made a beeline for Thessalonica, passing hurriedly through Amphipolis and Appolonia on their way. After perhaps a two- or three-day journey, they eventually arrived in Thessalonica (modern day Salonika), a city at the time of some 200,000 inhabitants.²



6. At the end of Acts 16 we see that Paul and Silas have been beaten and jailed for sharing their faith. What would cause them to press on knowing there was a good chance that more trouble was ahead of them?

7. While we enjoy great freedom in our country, many Christians find it difficult to be open about their Christianity and the Gospel. For what reasons might this be the case? Are any of the reasons you listed valid ones?

² Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/eager-to-preach-eager-to-hear/>

Thessalonica was an important city for several reasons. One reason is that it was directly on the Egnatian Highway, and so it became a major cosmopolitan city. It was perhaps the fourth most important Roman city of the day. It was here that Paul would once again preach the gospel and, as in Philippi, plant another vital local church. Paul would eventually write two inspired letters to this church and the content of those letters would fill in some of the gaps left in the record of Acts 17. But in Acts 17 we also read of Paul's ministry in Berea, where he, as at Philippi, was forced to leave Thessalonica. Here, he was likewise eager to preach, but unlike in Thessalonica, those in the Berean synagogue were eager to hear. That is, in Thessalonica, many of the Jews to whom Paul preached were closed-minded, whereas in Berea the majority were fair-minded as hearers.

- 8. Paul saw the city of Thessalonica as a strategic city where the gospel could go forth in new and exciting ways. Think about where you live. What unique opportunities do you have to reach people for Christ?**

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 (Matthew 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 (Revelation 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

- 9. Our passage here in Acts along with many spiritual revivals of the past show us that God can use a small group of committed believers to change the world. Do you believe that this is still true today? What would it take for such a group to see such an impact in the Chicagoland area?**

Is every follower of Christ called to radical commitment, or just those called into formal ministry?

³ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-43-upsetting-world-christ-acts-171-15>

10. What does total commitment to Christ and the gospel look like in a person who is not gifted as an evangelist or missionary?

As we have seen elsewhere in our studies, Paul had a particular missionary strategy in the cities that he visited, and that strategy usually involved a synagogue. Things were no different in Thessalonica. *“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews”* (v. 1). There was always method to Paul’s ministry. We read, as we have before, that “his custom” was to go first to the local synagogue. This was also Jesus’ custom (Luke 4:16). His strategy, as we have seen, involved going first to those who might be the most receptive. That is, he initially evangelised those who had an old covenant theological and biblical foundation upon which he could build. And so we see that Paul’s strategy was to go to a key city and head straight for the key centre: the synagogue. As a travelling rabbi, he knew that he would receive at least an initial invitation there. And in Thessalonica, he lasted a bit longer than in many other places: They tolerated him for about three weeks. If we are eager to share the gospel then we will make a plan to *do so*.⁴

11. Paul went and preached where he thought people might be more receptive to hear the gospel. What are some indicators or signs that someone is receptive to the Gospel?

12. Paul had a plan as to how he was going to go about evangelizing. How might planning help you in your evangelism? What things might be part of this plan?

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.⁵

13. Paul didn't always preach to a captive audience. Instead, he would start conversations that he hoped would turn to spiritual things. Read John 4:7–26. What does Jesus use to take a random conversation and turn it to one relating to salvation?

⁴ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/eager-to-preach-eager-to-hear/>

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-43-upsetting-world-christ-acts-171-15>

14. What types of things can we use in our culture and happenings today to spark spiritual conversations? What things must we be careful of in the process of doing that?

Second, Paul expounded the Scriptures (v. 3a). The word translated “explaining” means “to open thoroughly” or “to expound.” It means, as it is translated here, “to explain.” When Paul met with people at the synagogue he not only read and quoted Scripture, but also explained what he read so that his hearers would be in a position where the Lord could open their hearts (16:14) to the expounded Word. There is a lovely illustration of this in Luke 24:27-45. There, Jesus expounded the Word and opened the eyes of His listeners so that they would see Him—quite literally! Such is the goal of all evangelism. Such is the goal of all preaching and teaching; that is, if it is biblical. We learn here that preachers need to labour hard to be sure they know what they are talking about. They need to labour so as to make sense of the Word. They cannot casually speak without actually knowing what the text is about. They must have done their homework so that they are able to explain and convince people of what God is saying in His Word.⁶

15. How comfortable are you with sharing about the Bible with others? How much training is necessary before a person is ready to tell others about it?

What types of homework or training can we do so that we might be more prepared to share the truth of Scripture?

Some Jews “joined” Paul and Silas, and a large number of God-fearing Greeks believed. A number of “leading women” also believed. John Polhill says, that Luke singled out the influential female converts in the Macedonian congregations (cf. 16:14 and 17:12), is very much in keeping with inscriptional evidence that in Macedonia women had considerable social and civic influence (Acts, 360–61). We should be encouraged here. God still converts people through faithful, Christ-exalting exposition. Trust in the power of the gospel and proclaim it!

The conversion of so many made many Jews “jealous” (v. 5), something that had also happened in Pisidian Antioch (13:45; cf. 5:17). The disgruntled Jews recruited some thugs in order to stimulate public outrage against Paul and Silas. They stormed the house of Jason, who had opened his home as a gathering place for the new church and had extended hospitality to Paul and Silas. When the attackers couldn’t find the missionaries (Johnson, *Let’s Study Acts*, 321), they attacked Jason and other brothers and brought them out before the crowd (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:14–15). The mob leveled three charges against the Christians. First, they essentially called Paul and Silas troublemakers (v. 6). Second, they condemned Jason for harboring the pair. And third, they declared that the men were acting contrary to Caesar’s decrees. This was untrue, but it was a strategic ploy. Rebellion against Caesar was pure treason.⁷

⁶ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/eager-to-preach-eager-to-hear/>

⁷ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 5285–5298). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

16. While the Gospel is good news, what about its message can cause the world to see it as trouble? How do we discern whether people are troubled by the message of the Bible and not just our unproductive methods of proclaiming it?

Paul traveled about fifty miles to Berea at night. The journey would have taken about three nights to complete. Luke records Paul's visit with great brevity, noting the Bereans' devotion to the Word. As usual, Paul starts off in the synagogue proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. The response of the Bereans to the teaching of the Scriptures is exemplary. Notice four commendable qualities in their actions.⁸

THE BEREANS STUDIED THE SCRIPTURES OPENLY

Verse 11 says the Bereans were more "noble" than the Thessalonians. On this John Polhill comments, He [Luke] used a word *eugenesteros* that originally meant "high born" but came to have a more general connotation of being open, tolerant, generous, having the qualities that go with "good breeding." Nowhere was this more evident than in their willingness to take Paul's scriptural exposition seriously (Acts, 363). The Bereans, then, had a teachable attitude. Their hearts were open, not hardened. Here is the first step in becoming a student of the Bible: approach God's Word with humility, saying, "Teach me, oh God." Psalm 119 is filled with similar cries (e.g., vv. 12, 18, 27, 33–36, 66, 125). James told the Christians, "*Ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*" (James 1: 21).⁹

17. What things can harden our hearts from hearing God's word? On the flip side, what things can a Christian do to be ready to hear the Word as the Bereans did?

THE BEREANS STUDIED THE SCRIPTURES EAGERLY

These Berean citizens were serious about what they were learning. Peter urged Christians to study the Bible with the same "eagerness" and passion a baby has for milk: "*Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the word, so that you may grow up into your salvation, if you have tasted that the Lord is good*" (1 Peter 2:2–3). Oh, that churches would be filled with people longing more for biblical food than for Sunday-morning cotton-candy entertainment, funny stories, and pithy anecdotes! May God grant us a Berean appetite for the Scriptures.¹⁰

18. What does eagerness for the Scriptures look like? How does our eagerness affect how we listen to the preaching of God's Word?

⁸ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 5340–5351). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

THE BEREANS STUDIED THE SCRIPTURES CAREFULLY

Luke also commends the Bereans for their spiritual discernment. They weren't gullible. They listened to Paul and then proceeded to do their own homework. They examined Paul's claims about the Messiah to see whether they were true. It's easy to be drawn in by a charismatic teacher. Paul, in fact, rebuked the Galatians for accepting the false gospel of false teachers rather than weighing their messages against the Word. The Bereans provide us a positive example of examining what is being taught (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 6:2-10; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 2:18-27; Jude 3-23).¹¹

19. What does Luke's mention of the Bereans' fact checking of sermons tell us about sermons in both the 1st and 21st centuries?

What types of preaching and popular doctrines should we be fact checking today?

THE BEREANS STUDIED THE SCRIPTURES DAILY

This group of people did more than study the Bible on the Sabbath. They met every day (cf. Acts 2: 42-47). Because Paul's claims had eternal ramifications, they spent time pondering them daily.¹²

20. Looking back at each of the characteristics of the Bereans, which one comes easiest for you and which one seems to be the most difficult to master?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups