

REJECTED AND ACCEPTED

Acts 17:1-15

I. At Thessalonica. Acts 17:1-9.

Paul's ill treatment at Philippi did not discourage him, but he went to another field. This raises the question, Should one run away from difficulties? There is a difference between being cowardly and using good judgment. As proof that Paul did not run from difficulties, note that he created difficulties wherever he went. He was out of one riot into another. His Gospel always stirred up the devil.

Paul and Silas journeyed from Philippi to Thessalonica, a distance of a hundred miles. Thessalonica was the metropolis of the province of Macedonia, its most populous city, and the most important one so far visited by Paul on his missionary journeys. There were many Jews in Thessalonica when Paul and Silas entered its gates. In modern times there are said to be forty synagogues in the city, but in Paul's time there was apparently but one. To that one the missionaries soon made their way. It was Paul's custom so to do. Wherever he went Paul sought for the places of worship. If they had a synagogue he entered it. If they met in the open spaces, he worshipped there. This custom he inherited from his parents. They were strict Jews, and they trained their son to honor God and to observe the Sabbath. This is a good custom for any boy to have. When he accepted Christ as His Lord, he did not need to change this habit.

When an opportunity came to Paul he seized it. He did not force himself upon the people; the rulers of the synagogue always invited him to speak because he had a message from God. A man with a message from God can always get a hearing. He was looking for an opportunity to speak for Christ. He was in the right places for opportunities to find him.

The subject matter of Paul's preaching was doubtless what it had been throughout his missionary tours. He got his message out of the scriptures. That is the best place for any preacher to find his message. Life is too short and souls are too valuable for preachers to waste their time in the pulpits reviewing books for the entertainment of the people, or giving themselves to sensations, or trying to correct all the maladjustments of the social life. Preachers should have a message of life for dying men.

Paul declared that the Christ he preached was the Messiah the Jews had been expecting. This was an irritating subject. It could not be preached publicly without creating divisions and stirring animosities. It was a good way for Paul to become an unpopular preacher. If a minister would be popular he must let sin alone and not say too much about Christ.

Paul explained the Old Testament Scriptures, "opening and alleging" that they all pointed toward Christ. From these Scriptures he made the people see that the death of Christ was not an accident, that it was predetermined by the Father. He further declared that the resurrection of Christ was a vital part of the Divine plan and purpose.

In the second part of his preaching Paul endeavored to show that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled all the conditions of the prophetic writings and had an irrefutable claim to be accepted and worshipped as the long-expected Messiah and Saviour of the world. The story of the great life, and the tragic death, and the glorious resurrection, as Paul could tell it, must have been surpassingly interesting. Many were convinced

and believed. He had better results here than he had at Philippi. But he was not without opposition, as the following verses show. Verse 5ff. Those who believed consorted with Paul and Silas. They joined with them in the work. They did so in the face of persecution, and at great personal cost, but they were bold in their espousal of the cause of Christ. Believers in Christ ought to be bold in espousing his cause and never be cowardly. Some of the upper classes were saved, devout Greeks and noble women, and of these there were many. The Gospel makes its appeal to all classes, rich and poor, high and low.

Many of the Jews were not willing to share these Messianic promises and teachings, so they gathered a mob of the vilest elements of the population and set the city in an uproar. There are always some people who close their minds against the things they do not want to believe. Prejudice blinds many to reason, to facts, and to justice. There is no unbelief as hurtful as a willing unbelief. The Gospel Paul preached was based upon historical facts. If one desired the truth about such facts it could be easily ascertained; but there were some who spent more time in trying to dodge the facts than they did in learning the truthfulness of them, just as there are some now who spend more time trying to make their sins respectable than they do in correcting their wrongs. There were some who saw Christ in person after His resurrection, yet they refused to believe that He had risen from the dead. Such unbelief is a willing blindness.

These Jews were moved with envy. If you would know what envy will do for a person, read the story of these unbelieving Jews. They called on "lewd fellows of the baser sort" to support their cause. Envy turns men to such fellows for companionship. Envy never makes men seek the support of good men. It turns them to the haunts of wicked men just as water seeks its lowest level. Envy made these unbelieving Jews create an uproar. They gathered a great crowd of their own stripe to storm the meeting place of the Christians. They stirred up the whole city with a riotous speech. Envy does not seek peace -- it creates strife; it does not make for unity -- it causes disturbance. Envy made these unbelieving Jews assault an innocent man. The house of Jason was attacked, and Jason himself was dragged into prison because of their envy. Envy has no regard for honor, virtue, innocency, truth, or peace. It slandered the disciples and falsely accused them. It made these fellows say that the disciples had "turned the world upside down." There may have been an element of truth in their charge. The world had the wrong side up and needed somebody to turn the right side up. But this was not the meaning they gave it. They themselves had caused the disturbance, and they now tried to blame the disciples. Envy is a slanderer, and it makes men lie. The devil is a disturber, but he wants to disturb and then lay the blame on the people of God. Envy makes men do foolish things. It blinds men to truth. It fills the hearts of men with hatred. It poisons the understanding of men with prejudice.

II. At Berea. Acts 17:10-14.

Berea was a city of unusual beauty, with far-stretching views over the plain, which was intersected by a number of mountain-fed streams. The fugitives from Thessalonica received a more favorable reception in Berea than they had secured in the larger cities of Macedonia. Doubtless Paul preached in Berea the same truths he had dwelt upon in Thessalonica. The Berean Jews manifested a less prejudiced spirit than those in Thessalonica. Not all people hear the Gospel alike. Not all have equally open minds. Not all yield to the truth alike. Not all have the same degree of devotion. The people of Berea were more noble than were those of Thessalonica. Why were they? Thessalonica was on the highway of civilization while Berea was on the byway. It was off the highways of commerce. Wherein was the nobility expressed? Not that they quickly agreed with the Apostles, but that they gave serious consideration to what was told them. Their hearts were not filled with prejudice, but they were open-minded. All Christianity asks for is a fair hearing. They searched the Scriptures to see whether what the Apostles told them was in

keeping with the Word of God. Christianity offers nothing except such as is in perfect accord with the revealed will of God. The more the people search the Scriptures with open minds, the better Christians they will become. Their Bible reading was not a spasmodic thing, but they searched the Scriptures daily. It became a habit with them, and it is a good habit for any Christian.

The wicked men who stirred up the people in Thessalonica heard about the revival at Berea, and they came over to break up the meeting. The story of Christianity is a story of conflict and triumph. It is a continuous strife between the forces of right and the forces of wrong. Satan cannot be escaped; he must be fought and conquered.

Verse fourteen reveals the nature of the men involved. Paul was always a pioneer, blazing new trails, beating back the frontiers of life, discovering new fields and establishing new churches. Silas and Timothy were camp followers. They lived to give permanency to the work. If there were disturbances they tarried to quiet them. If there were half-finished plans they remained to complete them.

The Lord calls some men to be pioneers. They are not fitted for other types of work. They are restless by nature, are lured on by new visions, and hear the call of new conflicts. They are resourceful and have many new ideas, and they can initiate them; but they seldom remain to fulfill them. Such a man always needs a helper of a very different nature. He needs a quiet man who is not easily disturbed, a man who can gather up the fragments and piece them together.

Paul was a born fighter. He was never happier than when he was stirring up the town and making the rulers furious with rage. A more modest man and one with a less fighting spirit could not have blazed the new paths for Christianity that Paul did. We have some men among us who have that spirit. Some evangelists could not be successful pastors at all. They are too impatient, they have the wanderlust, they strike hard, and then have to move on. If there were not some men of more stable build to follow them and gather up the fragments, the work of the pioneer would not be worth much.

Some ministers are never happy unless they are in a fight. They feel called to straighten out all the wrongs in the town. Certainly if there were not some Silas or Timothy to stay behind and hold things together no good could come from it.

At many places where Paul preached and where great confusion resulted, he had to move on, but he very often left a good man to take care of the work begun. At Thessalonica Paul left Luke. At Berea he left Silas and Timothy. At Crete he left Titus. The trail-blazers usually attract more attention than the men who remain behind to carry on the work. But much credit is due the men who stay and build. The man who stays behind must be a man of patience, he must use great wisdom, he must be able to get along with men. It is one thing to preach a fiery sermon that will stir the whole town and then catch a midnight train; and quite a different thing to stay and back up the sermon and carry it on to a fruitful conclusion. The Lord needs both kinds of workers; the pioneer to lead the way, and the stable builder to give shape to His kingdom work.