

Sharing faith * Acts 17:1-10

April 7, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 17, Acts 17:1-10.

As you turn to Acts 17:1-10, you may be thinking ‘Why are we looking at Acts 17:1-10?’ It’s not like it’s the beginning of anything; it’s not a really well-known or popular passage. Why are we looking at Acts 17:1-10?

Well, let me tell you. There are two reasons that we are looking at this passage.

One, I want to look with you at Acts 17:1-10 to introduce to you the church at Thessalonica.

Next week, we’re starting a series on the first letter that Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica - 1 Thessalonians – and I’d like for you to be able to picture that church as we unpack that letter. I’d like for you to be able to picture the people who made up the church and how it was that they came together to be a church in the first place. Sometimes it’s easy for us to think that the Bible was written as an abstract, theoretical work of philosophy, when in actual fact, it was written to be a real, honest-to-goodness help to real, honest-to-goodness people. Acts 17:1-10 tells us about those people and helps us to apply what Paul wrote to them in our own lives.

That’s the first reason – I want to introduce the church at Thessalonica; the second reason is to think with you about a very real conundrum.

I think we all get that it’s important for us to share our faith; I think we understand that God has given us a gift that we would like to share with others. But what happens when we share our faith and get rebuffed? What happens when we bear witness to Jesus and the person that we’re talking to tells us to ‘get lost’ or worse?

I don’t know how many times I’ve shared the Gospel with people, but I’ll tell you for a fact, the number of people who have rejected it is far greater than the number who have embraced it. Does that mean it’s not worth it? Do we just stop pointing people to Jesus when people aren’t interested? I know it can be pretty discouraging. Do we just give up when people turn down the Gospel? I think that this passage helps us to wrestle with that question, so let’s look at it together. Acts 17:1-10.

Acts 17 drops us right into the middle of the action. Maybe think of it like a TV show and Acts 17 is an episode of ‘Paul and Silas’ Amazing Race/2nd Missionary Journey.’ In the last episode, Paul and Silas had founded the Philippian church but that episode had ended on a cliff-hanger – they were kicked out of town – and as this episode (Acts 17) begins, Paul and Silas are on the road again, making their way around the Aegean Sea, sharing the good news about Jesus.

You can see that in verse 1. They walked for about a day and arrived in Amphipolis then walked for another day and came to Apollonia. Then one more day and then they arrived at Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.ⁱ

Now Thessalonica was an important city in that region. It was actually the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and it was classified a 'free city' which meant that they had certain privileges in the Roman Empire. They had their own government, they minted their own coins and they appreciated certain tax breaks.ⁱⁱ Thessalonica also had a natural harbour which is still in use today and its location on the Via Egnatia (the 401 of the Roman world) made it a major centre for trade and commerce. Across the harbour, Mt Olympus seemed to rise up out of the water and so Thessalonica was a major centre of pagan worship. But Zeus wasn't the only god in town; there WAS a synagogue and people there worshiped YHWH.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he made a beeline for the synagogue and began to share the Gospel with all who would listen. That's verse 2 –

2 As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" he said.

Now this is a really fascinating insight into how Paul presented Jesus to the people of Thessalonica. These verses tell us that it was a two-step process.

First, Paul met them on common ground. It was a Jewish synagogue and so Paul went to the Jewish Scriptures – the Old Testament – because both he and the Thessalonians could agree that it was God's trustworthy word. And he spent three Sabbath days in the Old Testament showing the people there that the Messiah that God sent to save His people would have to suffer and die and rise again.

A lot of people in the Jewish faith at this point thought that the Messiah would come in like a warrior king to triumph over his enemies and deliver his people,ⁱⁱⁱ but Paul used the OT to say, no, the Messiah, the Christ – literally 'God's anointed one' – will suffer and die and rise to rescue His people. That was step one, Paul established that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise.

Step two, Paul would point out that Jesus, who suffered and died and rose again IS the Messiah that they were all waiting for. Paul spent weeks, patiently working through the passages to show people that Jesus truly was the Christ and was truly worth believing in. And notice, he didn't say 'shut your brains off and just believe;' verse 2 he reasoned with them, verse 3, he explained and proved and backed up his claims by pointing them to Scripture.

And wouldn't you know it – verse 4 –

4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

This is the beginning of the church in Thessalonica. Prior to this moment, there was no church in Thessalonica. There was no steeple; there weren't even people. There were Jewish people and Gentile people, but no Christians. But then, these people heard Paul's testimony, applied their minds and hearts to thinking about Scripture, and through the nudging of the Holy Spirit realized that indeed Jesus WAS the Messiah that they were waiting for. And they put their hope in Him.

And look at who 'they' were.

First, there were some Jewish people who were persuaded that Jesus was the Messiah and they joined Paul and Silas. Then there were God-fearing Greeks; these were Gentiles who believed in YHWH and they too trusted in Jesus. And then there were 'not a few' prominent women; what a funny way of saying that. 'Not a few' means 'more than a few' – a bunch of prominent, wealthy and influential women put their faith in the Messiah too. (Quick sidebar – anyone who says that women had no power in the time of Jesus – they were just weak and dependent – point them to this passage. Women in this time and place to be prominent and influential in their own right and some of them joined the church).

This is the group that would become the church at Thessalonica: Jews, Greeks, women, men, people of influence, people without influence. They were all united as one when they received the Messiah. And notice, this is what we're talking about when we say 'the church.' It's not the steeple, it's the people. It's the community of believers who make it their primary purpose to faithfully walk with God together.

And I should probably add too that this is not the only group of people who believed. Paul was in Thessalonica for more than a month and Acts only tells us what he did on Sabbath days; throughout the week he was making tents and bearing witness to Jesus so that by the time he wrote his first letter to them, the church had grown to include even more Gentile people.^{iv}

Paul and Silas bore witness to Jesus; people believed them and became the nucleus of the church but not everybody was on board.

You can see that in verse 5 -

5 But the Jew[ish people] were jealous... They were sitting side by side with these people in synagogue, listening to Paul lay out the evidence that Jesus was indeed the Messiah they'd been waiting for and for whatever reason, they wanted nothing to do with it.

To be generous, I suspect that some just weren't convinced yet and that they'd maybe come around later, but Luke is pretty blunt here. 'They were jealous.' They (probably the MOST influential people in the synagogue) realized that if they received Jesus as Messiah, they

wouldn't be the big wigs any more. They'd have to give up power to other leaders, probably Christian leaders and they weren't down with that.

So what did they do? Verse 5 – 'They were jealous, so...

so they rounded up some bad characters (some ruffians, some ne'er-do-wells) from the marketplace and formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. (Jason was one of the people who HAD become a Christian and Paul and Silas were probably staying at his house).

6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers [fellow Christians] before the city officials, [and then they had the nerve to say: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house.

Hold on a second. Who's causing trouble here? Verse 5, the Jewish leadership grabbed a bunch of thugs and bullies from the marketplace and started a riot in the city and here they are trying to pin it on the Christians. They say:

"They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

Now this is where Thessalonica's relationship to Rome becomes relevant. Thessalonica is a free city. It is a privileged city, AS LONG AS IT'S FAITHFUL TO ROME. And if word gets out that there are people in Thessalonica preaching a higher authority than Caesar, well, that's not going to sit well with Caesar. He might revoke their privileges. And so the Jewish leadership and the civic authorities acted fast to nip this in the bud. Verse 8 -

8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.

9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

I kind of skipped over this earlier, but let's not let it pass by. Evidently, when Paul was at the synagogue in Thessalonica, there was a man there named Jason. He found Paul's evidence compelling, he heard Jesus calling his name and he turned from sin to trust in Jesus and become a believer.

And he wasn't the only one. We know from Acts 20:4 that there was another Thessalonian named Aristarchus who believed and later joined Paul's travels; another man named Secundus became a believer.^v Just think, there was probably a Bert there and a Mary, a Dan and a Val. There was no infrastructure, no pews, no traditions; just a bunch of people putting Jesus' interests first and walking with Him together.

Most scholars think that Jason must have been pretty well off – he hosted Paul and Silas while they were there - and the assumption is that once the Jews eventually kicked the Christians out of the synagogue, the newborn church probably met at Jason's home.

But believing in Jesus meant that Jason got dragged out of his own home, hauled up in front of the civil authorities and had to pay money as a promise of good behaviour, all because some Jewish people lied and said that HE was responsible for the uproar. What does it cost you to follow Jesus? Would you still follow Jesus if it cost this much? An important question to ask I think.

And Paul and Silas, they had to sneak away under the cover of darkness. Verse 10 it says
10 As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea...

They had just established this church; just started these people on their walk with Jesus and now they were forced to leave their new family behind.

But... they wouldn't let a little thing like that keep them from proclaiming the Messiah. Verse 10, upon arriving in Berea, what did they do? They went to Jewish synagogue to start the whole thing over again. But that's a story for the next episode of Paul and Silas' Amazing Race/Missionary Journey.

Let's stop and think about what's happened here.

If I were to summarize this passage, I think I would do it in three parts:

1. People proclaimed Jesus.
2. People embraced Jesus.
3. People opposed Jesus.

People proclaimed Jesus. Paul and Silas walked into town, went into the synagogue and began to show people that Jesus was the Messiah that they had all been expecting. They announced the incredible news that we celebrated last week – Jesus died and rose to redeem us from sin and restore us to God.

Some of the people who heard that news embraced Jesus. They believed the Old Testament - that God would redeem His people and they believed that Jesus was the fulfilment of that promise. They embraced Jesus...

But others opposed Him. And they didn't just say 'no thanks;' they dragged Christians out of their homes and hauled them up in front of the magistrates to shut them down.

But did it stop them? No. 1 Thessalonians shows us they kept on believing and we'll talk about that in the next few weeks. Paul and Silas, they just moved on to the next place. You could even argue that people's opposition to Jesus in Thessalonica spread word about Jesus' even further.

Those realities lead me to this conclusion: when you proclaim Jesus, some people will receive Him, some will oppose Him but Jesus will always build His church.

That's the idea that I want to leave you with -

When we present the Messiah, some people will receive Him, others will reject Him but Jesus will always build His church.

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When we tell our friends and loved ones about Jesus and they don't respond or they outright reject Him, it can be frustrating, it can be discouraging. It can be very easy to throw your hands up and say 'I've tried sharing the good news with other people and everybody keeps saying no; I'm just going to quit and give up.' It can be easy to think as a church 'well, we haven't had anybody new come to faith in awhile; I guess it'll never happen.'

This passage from Acts shows us that we shouldn't give up. For one, it reminds us that we shouldn't be surprised when people say 'no' to Jesus. It's bound to happen. Jesus Himself in His parable of the four soils implies that only one in four people will receive Him as their Saviour.

But that shouldn't stop us from presenting Jesus, even if people respond by opposing Him.

Some people will receive Him, others will oppose Him, our job is simply to present Him, knowing that Jesus will build His church.

I really want to drive that point home. The church at Thessalonica had a pretty inauspicious beginning; two guys showed up, reasoned with them from the OT and then got kicked out of town for their faithfulness. From a worldly point of view, that was failure.

But from Jesus' point of view, it was a success. Jesus established a church there. Through Paul and Silas and their ministry, Jesus rescued a whole group of people from the wages of sin and welcomed them into His eternal Kingdom. And we're going to spend the next few weeks growing in our faith by reading their letter (1 Thessalonians) together, all because people stood up for Jesus and He put down roots in Thessalonica. Opposition does not slow Jesus down; it's all a part of the slow and steady advancement of God's kingdom on earth.

Some people will receive Him, others will oppose Him, our job is simply to present Him, knowing that Jesus will build His church.

ⁱ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical commentary*, 503.

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1 Thessalonians* (BECNT), 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The thought of a suffering Messiah was foreign to pre-Christian Judaism, including first-century Judaism. No canonical OT text, and no pre-Christian Jewish text that we know of, associates suffering with the Messiah. Even the Pseudepigrapha, which develops messianic conceptions well beyond those of the OT, makes no mention of a suffering Messiah. There, on the contrary, Messiah will be a holy conqueror who will consummate the era of salvation, vanquish all enemies by the word of his mouth, subject the nations to the yoke of Israel, and sit on his glorious throne to judge earthly kings and rulers. True, the Servant of the Lord texts in Isa (esp. 52:13–53:12) depict a suffering righteous one, but the Servant of the Lord is never identified as Messiah, and Judaism never understood Servant of the Lord texts to refer to Messiah.” James Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Pillar) Luke 24:26, OliveTree Digital.

^{iv} “No doubt Paul engaged with such people in the market-place between Sabbaths and after he was excluded from the synagogue, but Luke is exclusively interested in his ministry to Jews at this point in his narrative.” David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar), Acts 17:4 Olive Tree digital.

^v Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; **and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus**; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. (Act 20:4 ESV)