

## ACTS 17.1-9: THE GOSPEL REACHES JASON AND HIS FRIENDS

It soon will be holiday time – indeed people are already going on their holidays. Many people are going to Greece this year – thanks to Greece’s economic difficulties, I’m told it’s now a cheap place for a holiday. And if you fly into Greece, then you may well fly into *Salonika*, the town the ancients called Thessalonica.

This morning I want us to focus on Paul’s visit to Thessalonica in AD 50. Paul wouldn’t have flown in by Ryanair or Easy Jet – he would probably have walked in. Gosh, has it ever occurred to you, that Paul must have been a pretty fit man.

As today, so then Thessalonica was a major city. It had a population of 200,000 people. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Unlike Philippi it wasn’t a Roman colony – Augustus had granted it the status of a free city. Politically it was an important city.

It was also an important city commercially. In part this was due to its *harbour*, which commanded trade across the Aegean sea. But even more it was due to *its position on the Via Egnatia*, which was the key land route between east and west. It is no exaggeration to say that the world’s traffic passed through Thessalonica.

Strategically, then, Thessalonica was just the kind of place where the Gospel needed to be preached. If Thessalonica could be won for Christ, Paul may have reasoned, then Christianity could be planted at the very heart of the empire.

We know from 1 Thess 2.9 that on their arrival Paul together with Silas practiced his old trade of tent-making. True, we know they received some financial support from their new-found friends in Philippi (Phil 4.16) – but they didn’t have enough money to be what we would call full-time missionaries.

But on his free day, we read that “**according to his usual habit Paul went to the synagogue**” (v2).

As today, so then, there were more *Jews* outside Israel than in Israel itself. At one stage over half the population of Thessalonica was Jewish. Indeed, I’m told that even in recent times the Jews formed a quarter of the population. I.e. Paul wouldn’t have preached to a half-empty synagogue. That synagogue must have numbered 1000s in its membership.

But it wasn’t simply to the Jews that Paul preached the good news of Jesus. Around every synagogue many *Greeks* used to attach themselves. These Greeks had become dissatisfied with the many gods of paganism and with the loose morality of pagan life. In the one God of the Jews and in the accompanying strict moral code they found something that lifted life to a new level. It was to these Greeks that Paul also preached the good news of Jesus.

## 1. THE GOSPEL CALLS FOR THOUGHT

There in the synagogue “**during three Sabbaths he (Paul) held discussions with the people, quoting and explaining the Scriptures and proving from them that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from death**” (vv2,3)

Paul “**held discussions**” (so GNB).

NIV translates: he “*reasoned with them*”. NRSV & REB: “*he argued with them*”.

The underlying Greek word (*dielexato*) is the word from which we get our English word “*dialogue*”. Paul “*entered into dialogue*” with his hearers in the synagogue.

Paul didn’t just preach a sermon and say ‘*There - take it or leave it*’.

Paul helped people to think through the implications of the Christian faith.

Then, as now, *conversion was a process*.

The fact is that most people do not become Christians the first time they hear of Jesus. It takes time for people to really understand what God has done for us in Jesus.

This is the reason for the popularity of Alpha courses - people are given time to think through the Christian faith. Indeed, one criticism of Alpha is that it does not give people enough time - some people coming from a non-Christian background need more than 10 weeks to come to faith.

Here surely is a good reason for us to be patient in our conversations about Jesus with our non-Christian friends - they need time to come to faith.

At Thessalonica, however, Paul appears to have had only 3 weeks to talk about Jesus. *In those three weeks he tackled three topics*. For all we know, he majored on one topic at a time, one for each of the three sabbath days he was in Thessalonica.

- First, he talked about *the death of Christ*. He showed, says Luke, how “**the Messiah had to suffer**” (v3). The death of Christ was Paul’s great theme. “**We proclaim the crucified Christ**”, Paul once wrote, “**a message that is offensive to the Jews & nonsense to the Greeks; but for those whom God has called, both Jews & Gentiles, this message is Christ, who is the power of God & the wisdom of God**” (1 Cor 1.23,24). Those who attended the synagogue at Thessalonica must have found it a strange message. “*What was so special about a man crucified?*”, they must have asked. “*Why, in one year, 100s of people suffered that cruel fate*”. Luke tells us that Paul was “**quoting & explaining the Scriptures**”. Among those Scriptures he would no doubt have pointed to Is 53: “**Because of our sins he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received**” (Is 53.5). Paul entered into dialogue with his hearers about the death of Jesus.
- Secondly, Paul talked about *the resurrection of Jesus*. This was Paul’s other great theme. In a world where there was no hope of life beyond the grave, all this talk of resurrection must have seemed strange. Dead men don’t rise. But on the basis of the Scriptures Paul argued that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. I wonder what Scriptures he used. Perhaps Ps 16 (see Acts 2.31; 13.35), where God’s servant says “**You will not abandon me to the world of the dead. You will show me that path that leads to life; your presence fills me with joy and brings me pleasure for ever**” (Ps 16.10-11). Paul entered into dialogue with his hearers about the resurrection of Jesus.
- Thirdly, Paul talked about *the person of Jesus* - “**This Jesus who I announce to**

you”, Paul said, “**is the Messiah**” (v3). I.e. Jesus is the one promised long ago and for whom the Jews had long been waiting. Jesus was no ordinary Galilean. Jesus was the ‘Christ’, the Son of God. As Paul was later to write to the Romans. “**The Good News was promised long ago by God through his prophets, as written in the Holy Scriptures. It is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death**” (Rom 1.3,4)]

There if you like is *the Gospel in a nutshell*. The Gospel is about Jesus, God’s Son, who suffered & died on a Cross, and who rose on the third day. It was this Jesus that Paul preached. It was concerning this Jesus that Paul entered into dialogue, arguing and reasoning with members of his audience. This is the Gospel too that we must share with our friends and neighbours.

## 2. THE GOSPEL CALLS FOR DECISION

There comes a time when *thinking has to end, and a decision has to be made*. Or to put it another way, there comes a time when along with the mind *the will has also to play a role*.

Luke tells us that in response to Paul’s teaching and arguing, “**Some of them were convinced and joined Paul and Silas; so did many of the leading women and a large group of Greeks who worshipped God**” (v4)

Some were “**convinced**” (GNB/REB). They were won over by Paul’s arguments and so “**persuaded**” (NRSV/NIV) of the truth as it is in Jesus.

[As Paul later wrote to the Thessalonians: “**When we visited you... you turned away from idols to God, to serve the true & living God and to wait for his Son to come from heaven - his Son Jesus, whom he raised from death and who rescues us from God’s anger that is to come**” (1 Thess 1.9,10)].

Their thinking turned to action - having reflected on what Paul had to say about Jesus, they turned to Christ. Having exercised their minds, they now exercised their wills and became followers of the Lord Jesus.

Amongst those who were convinced was a man called *Jason*.

**Jason** is a Greek name, but he may well have been a Jew. For many Jews of the Dispersion originally called Joshua assumed the Greek name Jason.

Interestingly in Rom 16.12 Paul refers to a Jew called Jason who was with him in Rome – whether or not he was the same Jason who was in Thessalonica, we don’t know. What is certain is that the Jason who became a Christian in Thessalonica was a guy with some money – he had a house of his own – it was there that Paul stayed – and it would appear that it was in his house that the first believers in Thessalonica met.

So in summary, a good number of people decided to believe in Jesus.

But *not all were convinced*. Some of the Jews became really angry with what Paul was preaching and ended up going on the rampage.

**“They set the whole city in an uproar and attacked the home of a man called Jason, in an attempt to find Paul and Silas and bring them out to the people”** (v5).

*Incidentally, do notice there is no middle way*

At the end of the day you either believe – or you don’t believe.

It’s a bit like catching a bus or a train. Some of you tomorrow morning may well be take a bus or train to work. Now you will either catch it or you will not.

There is no sitting-on the fence. If you do wonder whether or not you should get on the train, you’ll miss the train and you won’t travel by train!

Similarly in the realm of faith **there are only two ways**.

There is either the way to life, or the way to death. We are called to make a decision.

The very fact of not making a decision is in the end a decision.

It has been said that the way to Hell is paved with good intentions - paved with the intentions of people who intended to get round to becoming Christians, but for one reason or another put it off.

I wonder if there is anybody here who has yet to put their trust in Jesus. If so, then let me tell you that it is dangerous to put off deciding for him.

Don’t just think about Jesus - exercise your will and surrender your life to him.

### 3. THE GOSPEL CALLS FOR REVOLUTION

But to return to the story. On failing to find Paul & Silas in Jason’s home, some Jews dragged Jason & his friends before the city authorities, saying: **“These men have caused trouble everywhere! Now they have come to our city”** (v6 GNB).

At this point I much prefer the wording of the NRSV: **“These men have been turning the world upside down”**.

The underlying Greek word has revolutionary overtones. It is used for instance in Acts 21.38 to describe an Egyptian “terrorist” who **“started a revolution”**.

I.e. the Jews were alleging that Paul & Silas had not just caused trouble, they had begun to turn the world upside down, they had begun to start a revolution

No doubt the Jews intended this charge to be a condemnation of the early church - but **they could not have paid a greater compliment**. For the very charge admitted that the Gospel packs a punch - it has within it seeds of revolution.

**“These men have turned the world upside down”**.

Actually Paul would probably have said they were turning the world the right way up!

What an amazing claim - especially when you consider that the claim was made only some 20 years or so after the death of Jesus.

Before the Day of Pentecost the followers of Jesus had been but a handful of dispirited men and women. But by the 4C Christianity had conquered the world - it had become the official religion of Rome.

Alas today the Church so often seems to have lost the revolutionary character of the Gospel. But this is not the Gospel’s fault. For, where the Gospel is taken seriously, there you will find another story.

The fact is that *the Gospel packs power - power to change lives*. It is this that makes the Gospel far more revolutionary than, e.g., the Gospel of Marx or Lenin. A wise man long ago once observed that “*the man who goes out to change the world must be an optimist, but the man who goes out to change the world without some way of changing human nature is an absolute lunatic*”.

Conversion of the human spirit is not the detailed answer to all our problems, but it does provide a platform from which we can begin to tackle these problems. For the basic problem of today as yesterday is the greed, pride and self-centeredness of the human heart.

“**There is nothing else so deceitful**” as “**the human heart**” said Jeremiah, “**it is too sick to be healed**” (Jer 17.9). But it is here that the Gospel bites - for the Gospel can deal with sin - it can deal with our self-centeredness.

Jesus not only saves us from sin - he also enables us to turn our backs upon sin.

The Jews went on to make their charge more specific: “**These men... are all breaking the laws of the Emperor, saying that there is another king, whose name of Jesus**” (v7). i.e.. they were accusing them of treason - of being subversive.

Of course, this charge was totally untrue. Or was it? There was in fact some truth to the charge. For Christians there is “**another king**” - King Jesus.

When we become Christians we are called not just to accept Jesus as our Saviour, but also to make *Lord of our lives*.

When Jesus becomes Lord of our lives, the Gospel becomes not a sedative, but rather a form of social dynamite.

For with Jesus as Lord, our values change – new attitudes are formed. Our whole world is turned upside down. This has tremendous social implications - so much so that John Henry Newman could once write: “*The Church was framed for the express purpose of interfering (or as irreligious men will say, ‘meddling’) with the world*”.

But before it can have social implications, it must have *personal implications*.

*A revolution has to take place in your life and mine.*

That revolution begins as we turn over our lives to him.

In the NT the great symbol of that revolution is *baptism*.

For in baptism we not only identify ourselves with Jesus, we also express our resolve to follow him. In being buried with Christ, we seek to die to self - in being raised with Christ, we seek to live for him.

Although nothing is said of baptisms taking place Thessalonica, we know from the Book of Acts generally as well as from the rest of the New Testament, that baptism was part and parcel of the normal process of coming to Christ.

If you have not been baptised, then let me encourage you to *let Jesus start the revolution in your life too*.

To sum up: the Gospel calls for thought, for decision, and for revolution. Where, I wonder, are you on that scale?