

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH HIS WORD

Acts 17:1-15

INTRODUCTION

How do you think about the Bible? Is it a book of rules from God on how to live a good, moral life? Is it a compilation of really hard to understand theological ideas? Is the Bible the source of all the oppression of women and minorities, the cause of worldwide environmental degradation and the reason for most wars in the history of the world? Is it a spiritual book that can give you a personal, spiritual experience of God? Is it a book that tells you how to get to heaven and how to avoid hell? Is it a book of stories written by men in a pre-scientific, ignorant age who record their superstitious ideas about the nature of reality? Is it a manual for how to change the world, to refashion human societies and governments so that we live in a more just, more moral, more multicultural, more family friendly, more peaceful, more economically stable and prosperous world?

All of these and more are ways in which people think about the Bible. While there may be some truth in some of these various views of the Bible, none of them accurately describe what the Bible is. However, we do have in our passage this morning a view of the Bible that is accurate. We find out in this story what God thinks about the purpose of the Bible. Paul, Silas and Timothy, having been driven out of the Roman colony of Philippi, travel about 100 miles to the west, south-west to Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Upon their arrival, as was Paul's custom he goes to the Jewish synagogue in the city and spends three Sabbath days explaining from the Scriptures that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to be raised from the dead and then to show that Jesus, the son of Mary is the Christ. The Bible is given to us for the purpose of revealing that Jesus is the Christ and that only through faith in him can we be delivered from our sins and the wrath of God against our sins and brought into fellowship with the God who made us. In this passage we discover how we should relate to the Bible as it reveals to us the greatness and the glory of the person and work of Jesus.

MAIN POINT

God only saves people through Christ as he is revealed in his word, therefore...

I. We must show that Jesus is the Christ promised in the Scriptures (vv. 1-3)

The first thing I want us to notice is that there are five verbs that Luke uses to describe what Paul was doing in the synagogue in Thessalonica. He reasoned with them. That is, he used language and logic to prove certain ideas about the Messiah to be true and others false. He explained or literally "opened up" the Scriptures to them. The Bible was a closed book to these people until Paul came and explained it to them. He proved, like a lawyer proves his case in court that it was necessary that Jesus die and rise again. He proclaimed Jesus to them, like a news reporter proclaims the story of the secret life of a politician or the news of a celebrity's death. Finally, in v. 3, some of them were persuaded by his exposition of the Scriptures. That is, he convinced them that they were previously wrong and they now came to agree with his description of the nature of reality. All of these verbs point to the fact that Paul had a message that he wanted them to embrace. He was not there to simply tell them about his experience or the experience of others. He wasn't there to find out what they believed and affirm their good ideas about God. He had a message to declare and like a good attorney he had evidence to present as to why they should change their views and embrace what he was saying to them. His aim was to get them to acknowledge the ways in which they were wrong and to whole-heartedly grasp and trust in and agree with the message concerning Jesus that he was presenting to them from the Scriptures.

The reason I want you to see these verbs and to consider what this means about how the NT views the work of the church is because we live in a day where there are many voices from many different locations in the larger church urging us to abandon this kind of presentation of the gospel. Under pressure from the broader culture which views all truth claims as evil and intolerant many churches are adopting a non-confrontational approach to the teaching of the gospel. We are to engage people in a conversation. It is wrong in the view of many

churches to insist that people must agree with any propositional statements of truth. One website for one of these new groups describes themselves in this way, “We believe in God, beauty, future, and hope – but you won’t find a traditional statement of faith here. We don’t have a problem with faith, but with statements. Whereas statements of faith and doctrine have a tendency to stifle friendships, we hope to further conversation and action around the things of God.” Paul spoke to the people in Thessalonica using doctrinal statements about the necessity of Christ’s death and resurrection. He was not there to have a conversation in which all opinions were equally valid. He did not engage in some vague description about God and beauty. His reasoning destroyed all hope of friendship and actually provoked hostility. His goal was not to foster friendships or to have a conversation but to save sinners. It is a grave error to seek to form a church without clear descriptions of the truth that is revealed about Christ and his saving work in the Bible.

Luke tells us that Paul proved two things in that synagogue. First, he went to the OT Scriptures in order to demonstrate that those Scriptures teach that the Messiah, the Son of David had to suffer and to rise from the dead. Then, second, he told them the story of Jesus, of his suffering and of his resurrection thus proving that Jesus, the son of Mary is the promised Messiah. He is the Christ because he did what the OT said the Messiah would do, he suffered and he rose from the dead. Paul demonstrates that the purpose of the Bible is to set forth the person and work of Jesus Christ as God’s Messiah and the Savior of the world. Notice that Paul says “it was necessary” that the Christ, who is Jesus, suffer and rise again. Why was it necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead? We do not have time this morning to recount all the reasons for why it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise but I do want to identify two of those reasons.

The first reason it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise is because this was the Triune God’s eternal plan. If there is one thing that the OT clearly communicates it is that God is absolutely sovereign in his universe. There is nothing and no one that can resist his plans, his will. As the psalmist says (Psalm 33:10-11), “The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.” Or as the prophet Isaiah says, “Who can deliver out of my hand? When I act, who can reverse it?” In the opening chapter of the Bible, this sovereign God declared that the earth would be filled with men and women made in his image, perfectly expressing in the physical universe the glory of the invisible God, living in perfect fellowship with him, working for his glory in his world.

Nothing, not even human sin, can stop him from accomplishing his plan. As he cursed this world because of human sin he said to the serpent (Genesis 3:15), “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” From the beginning God said a male descendant of the woman would be wounded by Satan but this wounded one would destroy Satan and all his work. He tells Abraham that it would be through his “seed”, his descendants that all the family groups on the face of the planet would enter into his blessing. So in the NT we read that God’s plan has always been to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Or again that the formation of the church which is the body of Christ to manifest the glory of God was according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ (Ephesians 3:10-11).

My friends, the coming of Jesus into the world is the point of the whole universe. He is the fulcrum of history. From eternity God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit worked out the plan to bring the Son of God into the world as the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. There is no other event in the history of the universe that rivals the birth of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the betrayal and death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. No one and nothing is more impressive than him because his coming into the world is the reason the world exists because it is through him that God’s eternal purpose is fulfilled. If you miss him, you have missed the point of everything. We are not here this morning because we all are aiming at living a moral life. We are not here this morning because we are part of an army that aims to change the world. We are not here this morning to learn how to be better parents and husbands and wives or to have nicer families. We are here this morning to know and trust and love Jesus who is the point of everything.

The other reason for why it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead that I want to mention is because of who God is. God is both perfectly just and perfectly loving. The main questions that you ought to be asking as you read the stories in the OT are these: why did God let Adam and Eve live after their insolent rebellion and betrayal? Why did he let the old drunk Noah and his lecherous son Ham live? Why did he choose that coward, that selfish liar Abraham to be the father of many nations? How could he have loved Jacob, that deceiving, sniveling brat? How can God claim to be holy and yet use the lust filled, impetuous, irrational Samson to deliver Israel from the clutches of the Philistines? How can God claim to love righteousness when he doesn't wipe out the idolatrous, rebellious, murderous people of Israel but instead rewards them with his presence and a land of their own? How can God be just if he lets the rapist and murderer David go free? God's consistent love for and forgiveness of the wicked people in the OT calls into question God's justice, his holiness. How can God escape the charge of being a corrupt judge when he forgives such evil people? This is the question that screams out from the pages of the Bible.

The answer that the OT scriptures declare is that God justly forgives these guilty sinners because he punishes their sins in the suffering and death of the Messiah. Listen to just one of the places this is clearly stated in the OT: Isaiah 53:5-6, "But he (Christ) was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities... We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Paul summarizes the teaching of the OT in Romans 3:25, "God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this (killed Jesus on the cross) to demonstrate his justice because in his forbearance he left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." It is only at the cross of Christ that the justice of God and the love of God is shown. God proves he is not a corrupt judge when he forgives the rapist and murderer David because he punishes David's great sins in the death of Jesus. If you trust in Christ, God is able to love you because he punished your sins when he punished Christ and thus he is not a crooked judge when he lets you off the hook and rewards you with eternal life.

There is no other place you will find the person and work of Jesus described than in this book. This book is given to us so that God the Holy Spirit can show us the greatness and glory of Jesus as God's lamb, God's savior, God's king. This is the chief purpose of the church: to make plain from the Scriptures that it was necessary that the Christ, the Messiah suffer and rise from the dead and that the historical Jesus, this man who lived and died and rose again 2000 years ago is this Messiah.

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II. We must join ourselves to churches where the Scriptures are explained (vv. 4, 12 & 14-15)

Notice that after some of the Jews and a whole host of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women were persuaded that this Jesus is the Christ they all join themselves to Paul and Silas. What does that mean? It means that they left the synagogue and formed a new community. They joined themselves to the church, to that community where this Jesus was being proclaimed and worshipped as the Christ revealed in the OT scriptures who had to suffer and rise from the dead. This new community is described twice in our text as a family. These now are "the brothers". The church is a family that is united by our common faith in and love for this Jesus who is the long awaited Messiah. He is our savior and king and leader and shepherd and rock and refuge and lamb and lion and high priest and atoning sacrifice and peace and reconciliation and righteousness... our everything. We know him now by the work of the Holy Spirit, through faith as he is revealed to us from the pages of this book. You cannot know and trust and love Jesus without joining yourself to a church where this Jesus is revealed from the pages of this book. This is the center. Whatever else a church may do if it does not do this, if it does not show forth the majesty and glory of Jesus who is the Christ through the process of reasoning and explaining and proving and proclaiming and persuading from the Scriptures then it is not a church of Jesus.

Are you joined to a church where Jesus is shown to be the Christ from the pages of this book? That does not mean simply showing up on Sunday morning. It doesn't mean flitting around from church to church trying to find the best preacher or the best programs. It doesn't mean having a lot of Christian acquaintances and friends in lots of different churches and going to a variety of bible studies and conferences and listening to Christian radio. It does mean being joined into a fellowship of people who share daily in the greatness of Jesus as he is revealed in his book. It means being united to a local church by being united to the particular people in that church in the daily delight of seeing Christ revealed in his word. We share in that fellowship in our church on Sunday mornings and in small groups and in seminars and in our homes and in personal conversations and in email exchanges and Facebook contact and through twittering. This is what we aim to do all the time: to admire together the greatness of our great Savior through the pages of the Bible.

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III. We must expect resistance to Christ as he is revealed in the Scriptures (vv. 5-9 & 13)

Once again we see here that most of the Jewish people in the synagogue respond with jealousy when they see the large numbers of Greek people being persuaded and joining themselves to Paul and Silas. This jealousy, as we've noted before is not that they feel bad that people like Paul better than they like them. Rather, they are jealous for the glory of their Jewish way of relating to God. They cannot tolerate that Paul is telling people that Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob loves all these Gentile people without their submitting to the law of Moses. They view Paul as a heretic, a blasphemer for teaching that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah and that simply by faith in this Jesus all sins are pardoned and you are joined to the people of God. They are convinced that the OT does not teach it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise again. They believe the OT teaches that it is necessary for everyone to be circumcised and to eat kosher food and to obey all the laws and rules of the OT.

So these jealous people recruit men of dishonorable character, most likely by paying them money, to stir up a mob against Paul and Silas and these new Christians. The mob is incited by these men spreading the rumor that Paul and Silas are out to corrupt and overthrow the Roman way of life and that they are preaching treason, that there is another king named Jesus to whom allegiance is to be sworn rather than to the Roman emperor. Aroused by these false accusations the mob goes to the house of a man named Jason who presumably was one of the converts described in v. 4 and who, like Lydia in Philippi was hosting Paul and Silas. Having gotten wind of this plot of the Jews Paul and Silas were hidden away and so not finding Paul the mob seizes Jason and some other Christians and drags them before the governing officials where they make their accusations against Paul and Silas official. The officials require Jason and his brothers to post bond and they let them go. So that night the brothers take Paul and Silas and Timothy out of hiding and get them out of town.

While we are under command by our Savior Jesus to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves and to be kind to all men and to be gentle while we share the gospel, yet it is a grave error for churches to adopt methods of presenting the gospel that are designed to prevent non-Christians from reacting strongly to our message. Whether it is the "market driven, seeker sensitive" methods of the purpose driven churches or the hip, cool, laid back, conversational methods of the emerging churches, we must not judge our success on how comfortable non-Christians feel around us. While we must always consider how we might more effectively communicate the glory of Jesus to our particular culture, to have as our goal to present Christ in such a way that no one is offended or so that people like us, is a major mistake. On the other hand, to make our offensiveness to the broader culture the litmus test as to how faithful we are to the gospel is also a major mistake. If people are going to be mad at us, we want them to mad because they reject Jesus as the suffering and resurrected Christ.

We want people to reject us because they reject the way of salvation that is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, not because of our political affiliations or eating habits or how we educate our children. Let us ask God to make us winsome in our demeanor and actions as we faithfully seek to persuade others that this Jesus is God's Messiah and the only Savior of sinners.

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IV. We must eagerly receive the word and study the Scriptures for ourselves (vv. 10-11)

In vv. 10-15 Luke tells us about Paul's brief stay in the backwater town of Berea. In light of the fact that Luke has not told us anything about dozens of towns that Paul has passed through, why does he tell us about Berea? It would make perfect sense for him to describe what happens in the capital city of Macedonia, which is Thessalonica and then go right from there to the most famous city in Greece, Athens. But instead he wants us to know what happens in Berea. Why?

The answer is in vv. 11-12. The Jewish people in Berea respond differently than the Jewish people in Thessalonica and in every other place that Paul has already gone. They are, Luke tells us, more noble-minded than the Jews in Thessalonica because they "eagerly receive the word which Paul preaches and they daily examine the Scriptures to see if indeed these things are true." They are delighted with this message of forgiveness through Christ alone and they seek to find out from the Scriptures if it is really true that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise and is it really true that this Jesus is the Christ? Luke wants us to know that not all Jews reject Jesus. There is a believing Jewish remnant, chosen by grace and these folks in Berea are part of that remnant.

But mainly Luke is showing us the marks of conversion in the lives of people. He uses two words that the apostle Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 as he describes the evidence that someone has been born again, has come to faith in Christ. Paul writes: "The natural person (this is the human being as he or she comes forth from the womb of his or her mother) does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually judged. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one." Luke says these people receive the word with all eagerness and since Paul says that the non-Christian person is not able to receive the word then these must have been born of the Spirit. Also, the word translated "examining" in v. 11 is the same word that is used three times in 1 Corinthians and translated "judge". Non-Christians cannot correctly judge the truthfulness of the Scriptures because they do not have the Spirit of God. However, all those who are born of the Spirit can correctly judge the truthfulness of the Scriptures because they have the Spirit. Thus, Luke shows us that these Jews and Gentiles have been born of God's Spirit. The evidence is that they eagerly receive that word and they give themselves daily to examining the word for the purpose of understanding the glory of Jesus revealed there. These are two of the unmistakable evidences that you are a Christian. You eagerly receive the word of God as it is preached and taught in and through the church and you daily join in the examination of those Scriptures so that you can trust in and marvel at the glory of Christ revealed there.

I know that many of you do not like reading or have difficulty reading. It's hard for many of you to pay attention to long sermons or follow the discussions in small groups. However, if you are a Christian you are going to work at paying attention in these venues and you will make use of the enormous number of resources that are available. You can listen to the word of God through recordings. You can read and think about one verse each day. You can meet one to one with another Christian and ask them to help you to grow in your knowledge of the glory of Christ in his word. You can be honest in your small group about your difficulties and

ask for help. You can pray that God would enable you to eagerly receive that word and to daily examine it. I urge every person in here to do all you can to eagerly receive this word and to daily examine it to see the greatness of Jesus as your Lord and Savior. If you have come to believe that this Jesus is the suffering and glorified Messiah who is revealed in the Bible then you will seek to know him and love him more by examining these Scriptures daily.

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