

# *“Aiming for Upside Down”*

Acts 17:1-9

October 25, 2015

## **INTRO:**

How is it that you arrived here today?

Literally... How did you end up here today?

Why didn't everyone show up with you?

Most people end up wherever they aim to go.

## **PREVIEW:**

- A. Context** (v.1)
- B. Christ-likeness** (v.2-3)
- C. Christians** (v.4)
- D. Christ-lessness** (v.5-8)
- E. Conclusion** (v.9)

## **BIG IDEA:**

**EVERY Christian has been blood-bought with  
Christ's cross... saved, sent, & Spirit-filled  
TO turn this world upside down  
for the glory of God!**

# I. CONTEXT

## *Paul and Silas in Thessalonica*

**1***Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to **Thessalonica**, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.*

*“Now”*

- Transition statement of Luke...
- Literary sorbet... change & clean pallet
- A new chapter of the same Acts account

*“they passed through”*

*“Amphipolis & Apollonia”*

*“they came to **Thessalonica**”*

- Parallels with St.J, Kent Island, Uganda...
- Capital city... hub of influence
- 3 rivers converge

*“where there was a synagogue of the Jews”*

## II. CHRIST-LIKENESS

2And **Paul went to them**, as was his **custom**, and on three Sabbath days he **reasoned** with them from the Scriptures, **explaining** and **proving** that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This **Jesus**, whom I proclaim to you, **is the Christ**.”

*“Paul went to them”*

*“his custom”*

*“he reasoned with them”*

*“from the Scriptures”*

*“explaining & proving”*

*“it was necessary for the Christ to suffer & rise...”*

*“and saying”*

*“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you IS THE Christ”*

### III. CHRISTIANS

**4**And **some of them were persuaded** and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great **many** of the **devout Greeks** and **not a few** of the **leading women**.

*“some of them”*

*“were persuaded”*

*“and joined”*

*“as did a great many of God-fearing Greeks”*

*“and not a few of the leading ladies”*

### IV. CHRIST-LESSNESS

**5****But** the **Jews were jealous**, and taking some **wicked men** of the rabble, they **formed a mob**, set the **city in an uproar**, and **attacked the house of Jason**, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

**6**And when they could not find them, they **dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities**, shouting, **“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”** **8**And the people and the city authorities were **disturbed** when they heard these things.

*“But”*

*“the Jews were jealous”*

*“and taking some wicked men” (scoundrels)*

*“they formed a mob”*

*“set the city in an uproar/riot”*

*“and attacked”*

*“the house of Jason...”*

*“seeking to bring them out to the attacking crowd”*

*“they dragged Jason... brothers to the authorities”*

*“shouting...”*

***“These men who have  
turned the world upside down  
have come here also...”***

*“and Jason has received them...”*

*“...ALL are acting against the decrees of Caesar”*

*“saying: **There is another King, Jesus!**”*

*“...people & city authorities were disturbed...”*

## **V. CONCLUSION**

**9** And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

**CLOSE:**

- A. So... what are you REALLY aiming at?**
- B. *“What do you want?”* – Jesus, the Christ**
- C. Results are the byproduct of aiming.**
- D. To not aim is to aim... aimlessly.**
- E. Almighty God is NEVER aimless... nor should any cross-bought Christian ever BE!**

# Let's Pray

## **NASB:**

*1*Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. *2*And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, *3*explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." *4*And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. *5*But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. *6*When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; *7*and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." *8*They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. *9*And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

## **Responding to God's Word**

### [Acts 17](#)

**This chapter describes Paul's ministry in three cities and how some of the people in those cities responded to the Word of God.** These

pictures are snapshots, not murals, for Dr. Luke did not give us many details. However, as we study these three different responses, we can certainly see our modern world and better understand what to expect as we seek to witness for Christ today.

## **Thessalonica—Resisting the Word (Acts 17:1-9)**

**Following the famous Egnatian Way, Paul and Silas went 100 miles from Philippi to Thessalonica.** (Timothy is not mentioned again until [Acts 17:14](#), so he may have remained in Philippi.) As far as we can tell, they did not pause to minister in either Amphipolis or Apollonia.

Perhaps there were no synagogues in those cities, and **Paul certainly expected the new believers in Philippi to carry the message to their neighbors.**

**It was Paul's policy to minister in the larger cities and make them centers for evangelizing a whole district** (see [Acts 19:10, 26](#); and [1 Thes. 1:8](#)).

Paul knew that **Thessalonica** (our modern Salonika) was a strategic city for the work of the Lord. Not only was it **the capital of Macedonia**, but it was also **a center for business**, rivaled only by Corinth. It was located **on several important trade routes**, and it boasted **an excellent harbor**. The city was predominantly Greek, even though it was controlled by Rome. **Thessalonica was a "free city,"** which meant that it had an elected citizens' assembly, it could mint its own coins, and it had no Roman garrison within its walls.

Paul labored at his tent-making trade ([Acts 18:3](#); [1 Thes. 2:9](#); [2 Thes. 3:7-10](#)), but on the Sabbath ministered in the Jewish synagogue where he knew he would find both devout Jews and Gentiles, "God-seekers" and proselytes. This witness went on for only three Sabbaths; then he had to minister outside the synagogue. We do not know exactly how long Paul remained in Thessalonica, but it was long enough to receive financial help twice from the church in Philippi ([Phil. 4:15-16](#)).

**Read 1 Thessalonians 1 to learn how God blessed Paul's ministry and how the message spread from Thessalonica to other places. It was not a long ministry, but it was an effective one.**

Four key words in [Acts 17:2-3](#) describe Paul's approach to the synagogue congregation. First, he *reasoned*, which **means he dialogued with them through questions and answers.** He *explained* ("**opening**") **the Scriptures to them and proved ("alleging") that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.** The word translated "**alleging**" means "**to lay down alongside, to prove by presenting the evidence.**" The apostle set **before them one Old Testament proof after another that Jesus of Nazareth is Messiah God.**

**Paul was careful to announce ("preach") the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the message of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1ff).**

**In the sermons in Acts, you will find an emphasis on the Resurrection, for the believers were called to be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32).**

*"Christianity is in its very essence a resurrection religion. The concept of resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed." - John Stott*

As the result of three weeks' ministry, Paul saw a large number of people believe, especially Greek proselytes and influential women. Among the men were Aristarchus and Secundus, who later traveled with Paul ([Acts 20:4](#)). Luke's phrase "**not a few**" ([Acts 17:4](#), [12](#)) is one way of saying, "**It was a big crowd!**"

But these results did not bring joy to everybody. **The unbelieving Jews envied Paul's success** and were grieved to see the Gentiles and the influential women leaving the synagogue. **Paul hoped that the salvation of the Gentiles would "provoke" the Jews into studying the Scriptures and discovering their promised Messiah (Rom. 11:13-14), but in this case, it only provoked them into persecuting the infant church.**

The Jews wanted to drag the missionaries before their city assembly ("the people," [Acts 17:5](#); see [19:30](#)), so **they manufactured a riot to get the attention of the magistrates. Unable to find the missionaries, the mob seized Jason, host to Paul and his friends, and took him and some of the believers instead.**

**The Jews' accusations were similar to the ones used at the trial of Jesus: disturbing the peace and promoting treason (Luke 23:2). Their crime was that of "saying that there is another king, one Jesus."**

The Greek word translated "*another*" means "*another of a different kind,*" that is, a king unlike Caesar.

When you read **Paul's two Thessalonian letters, you see the strong emphasis he gave in Thessalonica on the kingship of Christ and the promise of His return.** Of course, our Lord's kingdom is neither political nor "of this world" ([John 18:36-37](#)), but we cannot expect unsaved pagans to understand this.

**The kingship of Jesus Christ is unlike that of the rulers of this world. He conquers with ambassadors, not armies; and His weapons are truth and love. He brings men peace by upsetting the peace and turning things upside down! He conquers through His cross** where He died for a world of lost sinners. He even died for His enemies! ([Rom. 5:6-10](#))

The mob was agitated because they could not find Paul and Silas, so they settled for second best and obtained **a peace bond against them. Jason had to put up the money and guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city and not return.** It is possible that Jason was a relative of Paul's, which would make the transaction even more meaningful ([Rom. 16:21](#)). ***Paul saw this prohibition as a device of Satan to hinder the work (1 Thes. 2:18), but it certainly did not hinder the Thessalonian church from "sounding out the word" and winning the lost (1 Thes. 1:6-9).***

### **Berea—Receiving the Word (Acts 17:10-15)**

Under cover of night, Paul and Silas left the city and headed for Berea, about forty-five miles away. It does not appear that Timothy was with them, as he was probably working in Philippi. Later, he would join Paul in Athens ([Acts 17:15](#)) and then be sent to Thessalonica to encourage the church in its time of persecution ([1 Thes. 3:1ff](#)). Since Timothy was a Gentile, and had not been present when the trouble erupted, he could minister in the city freely. The peace bond could keep Paul out, but it would not apply to Paul's young assistant.

Paul went into the synagogue and there discovered a group of people keenly interested in the study of the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, they met *daily* to search the Scriptures to determine whether or not what Paul was saying was true. Paul had been overjoyed at the way the people in Thessalonica had received the Word ([1 Thes. 2:13](#)), so these "noble Bereans" must have really encouraged his heart. All of us should imitate these Bereans by faithfully studying God's Word daily, discussing it, and testing the messages that we hear.

God used His Word so that many people trusted Christ. One of the men who was converted was Sopater, who later assisted Paul ([Acts 20:4](#)). He may be the same man (Sosipater) who later sent greetings to the Christians in Rome ([Rom. 16:21](#)).

Once again, Satan brought the enemy to the field as the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and stirred up the people (note [1 Thes. 2:13-20](#)). How did these men hear that Paul and Silas were ministering in Berea? Perhaps the growing witness of the Berean believers reached as far as Thessalonica, or it may be that some troublemaker took the message to his friends in Thessalonica. Satan also has his "missionaries" and they are busy ([2 Cor. 11:13-15](#)).

The believers in Berea outwitted the enemy by taking Paul to the sea and putting him on a ship bound for Athens. Once more, Paul had to leave a place of rich ministry and break away from dear people he had come to love. Silas and Timothy later joined Paul in Athens, and then Timothy was sent to Thessalonica to help the saints there ([1 Thes. 3:1-6](#)). Silas was also sent on a special mission somewhere in Macedonia (Philippi?), and later both men met Paul in Corinth ([Acts 18:1-5](#)).

### **Athens—Ridiculing the Word (Acts 17:16-34)**

Paul arrived in the great city of Athens, not as a sightseer, but as a soul-winner. The late Noel O. Lyons, for many years director of the Greater Europe Mission, used to say, "Europe is looked over by millions of visitors and is overlooked by millions of Christians." Europe needs the Gospel today just as it did in Paul's day, and we dare not miss our opportunities. Like Paul, we must have open eyes and broken hearts.

*The city.* Athens was in a period of decline at this time, though still recognized as a center of culture and education. The glory of its politics

and commerce had long since faded. It had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, but it was not the influential city it once had been. The city was given over to a "cultured paganism" that was nourished by idolatry, novelty ([Acts 17:21](#)), and philosophy.

"The Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature," wrote Conybeare and Howson in their classic *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. "It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement, and was entirely destitute of moral power" (pp. 280-281). The Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that, in their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like humans than gods; and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was "wholly given to idolatry," and it broke his heart.

We today admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul's day, much of this was directly associated with their religion. Paul knew that idolatry was demonic ([1 Cor. 10:14-23](#)) and that the many gods of the Greeks were only characters in stories who were unable to change men's lives ([1 Cor. 8:1-6](#)). With all of their culture and wisdom, the Greeks did not know the true God ([1 Cor. 1:18-25](#)).

As for novelty, it was the chief pursuit of both the citizens and the visitors ([Acts 17:21](#)). Their leisure time was spent telling or hearing "some new thing." Eric Hoffer wrote that "the fear of becoming a 'has been' keeps some people from becoming anything." The person who chases the new and ignores the old soon discovers that he has no deep roots to nourish his life. He also discovers that nothing is really new; it's just that our memories are poor ([Ecc. 1:8-11](#)).

The city was also devoted to philosophy. When you think of Greece, you automatically think of Socrates and Aristotle and a host of other thinkers whose works are still read and studied today. Newspaper columnist Franklin P. Adams once defined philosophy as "unintelligible answers to insoluble problems," but the Greeks would not have agreed with him.

They would have followed Aristotle who called philosophy "the science which considers truth."

Paul had to confront two opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens, those of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We today associate the word *Epicurean* with the pursuit of pleasure and the love of "fine living," especially fine food. But the Epicurean philosophy involved much more than that. In one sense, the founder Epicurus was an "existentialist" in that he sought truth by means of personal experience and not through reasoning. The Epicureans were materialists and atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure. To some, "pleasure" meant that which was grossly physical; but to others, it meant a life of refined serenity, free from pain and anxiety. The true Epicurean avoided extremes and sought to enjoy life by keeping things in balance, but pleasure was still his number one goal.

The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one "World God." They were pantheists, and their emphasis was on personal discipline and self-control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most important thing in life was to follow one's reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. Of course, such a philosophy only fanned the flames of pride and taught men that they did not need the help of God. It is interesting that the first two leaders of the Stoic school committed suicide.

The Epicureans said "Enjoy life!" and the Stoics said "Endure life!" but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God's risen Son.

***The witness.*** "Left at Athens alone" ([1 Thes. 3:1](#)), Paul viewed the idolatrous city and his spirit was "stirred" (same word as "contention" in [Acts 15:39](#)—"paroxysm"). Therefore, he used what opportunities were available to share the Good News of the Gospel. As was his custom, he "dialogued" in the synagogue with the Jews, but he also witnessed in the marketplace (*agora*) to the Greeks. Anyone who was willing to talk was welcomed by Paul to his daily "classes."

It did not take long for the philosophers to hear about this "new thing" that was going on in the *agora*, and they came and listened to Paul and probably debated with him. As they listened, they gave two different responses. One group ridiculed Paul and his teachings and called him a "babbler." The word literally means "birds picking up seed," and it refers to someone who collects various ideas and teaches as his own the secondhand thoughts he borrows from others. It was not a very flattering description of the church's greatest missionary and theologian.

The second group was confused but interested. They thought Paul believed as they themselves did in many gods, because he was preaching "Jesus and Anastasis" (the Greek word for "resurrection"). The word translated "preached" in [Acts 17:18](#) means "to preach the Gospel." Those who say that Paul modified his evangelistic tactics in Athens, hoping to appeal to the intellectuals, have missed the point. He preached the Gospel as boldly in Athens as he did in Berea and would do in Corinth.

***The defense.*** The Council of the Aeropagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the "new doctrine" Paul was teaching. They courteously invited Paul to present his doctrine at what appears to have been an informal meeting of the council on Mars' Hill. Paul was not on trial; the council members only wanted him to explain what he had been telling the people in the *agora*. After all, life in Athens consisted in hearing and telling new things, and Paul had something new!

Paul's message is a masterpiece of communication. He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. Having aroused their interest, he then explained who that God is and what He is like. He concluded the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ.

Paul opened his address with a compliment: "I see that in every way you are very religious" ([Acts 17:22](#), NIV). They were so religious, in fact,

that they even had an altar to "the unknown god," lest some beneficent deity be neglected. If they did not know this god, how could they worship him? Or how could he help them? It was this God that Paul declared.

In this message, which is similar to his sermon at Lystra ([Acts 14:15-17](#)), Paul shared four basic truths about God.

***The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24).*** Every thinking person asks, "Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?" Science attempts to answer the first question, and philosophy wrestles with the second; but only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three. The Epicureans, who were atheists, said that all was matter and matter always was. The Stoics said that everything was God, "the Spirit of the Universe." God did not create anything; He only organized matter and impressed on it some "law and order."

But Paul boldly affirmed, "In the beginning, God!" God made the world and everything in it, and He is Lord of all that He has made. He is not a distant God, divorced from His creation; nor is He an imprisoned God, locked in creation. He is too great to be housed in man-made temples ([1 Kings 8:27](#); [Isa. 66:1-2](#); [Acts 7:48-50](#)), but He is not too great to be concerned about man's needs ([Acts 17:25](#)). We wonder how the Council members reacted to Paul's statement about temples, for right there on the Acropolis were several shrines dedicated to Athena.

***The goodness of God; He is Provider (v. 25).*** Men may pride themselves in serving God, but it is God who serves man. If God is God, then He is self-sufficient and needs nothing that man can supply. Not only do the temples not contain God, but the services in the temples add nothing to God! In two brief statements, Paul completely wiped out the entire religious system of Greece!

It is God who gives to us what we need: "life, and breath, and all things." God is the source of every good and perfect gift ([James 1:17](#)). He gave us life and He sustains that life by His goodness ([Matt. 5:45](#)). It

is the goodness of God that should lead men to repentance ([Rom. 2:4](#)). But instead of worshiping the Creator and glorifying Him, men worship His creation and glorify themselves ([Rom. 1:18-25](#)).

***The government of God: He is Ruler (vv. 26-29).*** The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems and needs of men. But the God of Creation is also the God of history and geography! He created mankind "from one man" ([Acts 17:26](#), NIV) so that all nations are made of the same stuff and have the same blood. The Greeks felt that they were a special race, different from other nations; but Paul affirmed otherwise. Even their precious land that they revered came as a gift from God. It is not the power of man, but the government of God, that determines the rise and fall of nations ([Dan. 4:35](#)).

God is not a distant deity; "He [is] not far from every one of us" ([Acts 17:27](#)). Therefore, men ought to seek God and come to know Him in truth. Here Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being." Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes, "For we are also His offspring." Paul was not saying that all people on earth are the spiritual children of God, for sinners become God's children only by faith in Jesus Christ ([John 1:11-13](#)). Rather, he was affirming the "Fatherhood of God" in a *natural* sense, for man was created in the image of God ([Gen. 1:26](#)). In this sense, Adam was a "son of God" ([Luke 3:38](#)).

This led to Paul's logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and the temple rituals, but also the folly of all idolatry.

***The grace of God: He is Saviour (vv. 30-34).*** As he brought his message to a close, Paul summarized the clear evidences of God's grace. For centuries, God was patient with man's sin and ignorance (see [Acts 14:16](#); [Rom. 3:25](#)). This does not mean that men were not guilty ([Rom. 1:19-20](#)), but only that God held back divine wrath. In due time, God sent a

Saviour, and now He commands all men to repent of their foolish ways. This Saviour was killed and then raised from the dead, and one day, He will return to judge the world. The proof that He will judge is that He was raised from the dead.

It was the doctrine of the Resurrection that most of the members of the Council could not accept. To a Greek, the body was only a prison; and the sooner a person left his body, the happier he would be. Why raise a dead body and live in it again? And why would God bother with a personal judgment of each man? This kind of teaching was definitely incompatible with Greek philosophy. They believed in immortality, but not in resurrection.

There were three different responses to the message. Some laughed and mocked and did not take Paul's message seriously. Others were interested but wanted to hear more. A small group accepted what Paul preached, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved. We wonder if the others who postponed their decision eventually trusted Christ. We hope they did.

When you contrast the seeming meager results in Athens with the great harvests in Thessalonica and Berea, you are tempted to conclude that Paul's ministry there was a dismal failure. If you do, you might find yourself drawing a hasty and erroneous conclusion. Paul was not told to leave, so we assume he lingered in Athens and continued to minister to both believers and unbelievers. Proud, sophisticated, wise Athens would not take easily to Paul's humbling message of the Gospel, especially when he summarized all of Greek history in the phrase "the times of this ignorance." The soil here was not deep and it contained many weeds, but there was a small harvest.

And, after all, one soul is worth the whole world!

We still need witnesses who will invade the "halls of academe" and present Christ to people who are wise in this world but ignorant of the true wisdom of the world to come. "Not many wise men after the flesh,

not many mighty, not many noble are called" ([1 Cor. 1:26](#)); but some *are* called, and God may use you to call them.

Take the Gospel to your "Athens."

- **Bible Exposition Commentary – Be Daring (Acts 13-28).**

## **Establishing Churches in Thessalonica and Berea**

### **[17:1-15](#)**

Paul, Silas, and Timothy proceeded from **Philippi to the major seaport city of Thessalonica some 100 miles distant** (vv. [1-4](#)). **Thessalonica was then (as now) the second largest city in Greece**, with a population estimated at 200,000. It was founded in 315 B.C. by Cassander on the site of ancient Therme and named for his wife, who was a step-sister of Alexander the Great. When the Romans first took over Macedonia in 167 B.C., it was made capital of one of the four divisions. It became the seat of government for all of Macedonia in 148 B.C. when that region was reorganized into a single province. As a reward for siding with Antony and Octavian in the battle of Philippi, Thessalonica was given the status of a free city in 42 B.C., which meant that it had local autonomy. Its government consequently followed more the Greek than the Roman pattern of administration, as is reflected in the text of Acts. At Thessalonica Paul was perhaps intending to follow the pattern of establishing himself in and working out of the major population centers, a pattern clearly pursued in Corinth and Ephesus later. **In this instance his mission was cut short by strong opposition** (vv. [5-9](#)).

From Thessalonica the three missionaries went to Berea (vv. [10–15](#)). Their reception was more favorable, but Paul was again forced to leave because of opposition aroused by Jews who had come from Thessalonica. Overall, in the description of Paul's ministry in these two cities, a familiar pattern of initial acceptance and rising opposition repeats itself. At Thessalonica the Jews initiated the resistance to Paul's witness, as was the case at Pisidian Antioch ([13:50](#)) and Iconium ([14:2](#)) on his first missionary journey. At Berea the opposition was instigated by Jews coming from Thessalonica, just as previously Jews from Antioch and Iconium initiated his difficulties at Lystra ([14:19](#)). There is also a reminiscence of the experience at Philippi, as the case against Paul was presented before the city magistrates ([17:6](#); cf. [16:20](#)). This would happen again at Corinth ([18:12](#)), and perhaps the appearance before the Areopagus is to be seen in this light ([17:19](#)), although almost certainly in this instance not as a formal trial. In these appearances before the local officials, the Lord's words at the time of Paul's conversion were very much fulfilled: he was Christ's witness before the Gentiles and their rulers ([9:15](#)). In the consistent opposition Paul's ministry encountered, the remainder of the Lord's words were also fulfilled: Paul suffered for the sake of the name of Jesus ([9:16](#)).

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica is told with the utmost economy. The basic pattern of initial witness in the synagogue is set forth (vv. [1–4](#)). The pattern continues with the picture of the opposition to Paul ([17:5–9](#)), this time filled out by the significant role played by Jason. The summary of the work in Berea is even briefer ([17:10–15](#)). From a literary perspective, Luke assumed the preceding Thessalonian narrative and did not repeat. For instance, he did not repeat the *method* of Paul's witness in the synagogue ([17:2–4](#)). He could assume the reader would know that the same basic procedure was followed at Berea. What was different at Berea was the response of the Jews there, and this was what he elaborated ([17:11](#)).

### **(1) Acceptance and Rejection in Thessalonica**

## 17:1-9

**17:1-3** The journey from Philippi to Thessalonica followed the Via Egnatia through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia. Each of these cities was about a day's journey apart when traveling by horseback. Luke gave no time frame; and if the company traveled by foot, one would have to assume the 100-mile journey took more than three days and that there were other stopping places than the two major towns Luke designated on their itinerary.

Amphipolis was some thirty miles southwest of Philippi. Formerly capital of the first division of Macedonia and a "free city," it was important for its strategic position, controlling access to the Hellespont and the Black Sea. **It would have been a significant place for witness, but Luke did not indicate that Paul carried on any mission there or anywhere else along the route to Thessalonica.** He simply indicated these as stopping places, Appollonia being the next mentioned, some thirty miles from Amphipolis and thirty-eight miles from the final destination of Thessalonica.

**Once arrived in Thessalonica, Paul followed his usual pattern of beginning his witness in the synagogue.** This continued on three successive Sabbaths (v. 2). This is the only time reference in the Thessalonian narrative, but one would assume from Paul's Thessalonian correspondence that his initial ministry in Thessalonica was of somewhat longer duration. **The pattern of Paul's synagogue preaching** as indicated in vv. 2-3 is very much that of the preaching to Jews in the earlier portions of Acts. It **consisted primarily of scriptural pointers to Christ from the Old Testament.** Luke described this as reasoning with them from the Scriptures. This is further elaborated as "explaining" and "proving" that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead.

**17:4** "A large number" of the Thessalonian Jews were persuaded by Paul's Old Testament expositions (v. 4), some also of the "God-fearing" Greeks who attended the synagogue. Among the latter group were a number of prominent women. 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. One should also note the prominence of Silas in this section, particularly in connection with the synagogue witness (vv. 4, 10).** He is usually in the background, with the focus being on Paul. It could be that in mentioning him in these synagogue contexts, Luke wanted to remind us of his connection with the Jerusalem church and the Jewish-Christian endorsement of Paul's mission.

**[17:5](#) Verses 5–9 depict the opposition to Paul's ministry in Thessalonica initiated by the Jews. They are described as being "jealous," perhaps at the number of God-fearing Gentiles whom Paul was attracting away from the synagogue and into the Christian community. The Gentiles' presence in the synagogue probably gave the Jewish community a degree of acceptance in the predominantly Gentile city and probably also some financial support. One should not, however, get the impression that it was always the Jews who opposed Paul. In chaps. 16–19 there is an equal balance between opposition initiated by Jews and that begun by Gentiles. Even in this instance, it was ultimately the Gentile populace who opposed Paul. Beginning with the gang of ruffians who hung around the marketplace, the Jews succeeded in rousing the Gentiles into mob action against Paul and Silas.**

At this point **Jason entered the picture. We know nothing more about him than his role in this scene.** Evidently Paul and Silas had been lodging with him. Consequently he probably was a convert and may have been a Jew since Jason was a name often taken by Diaspora Jews. It is also possible that he shared Paul's trade. Later in Corinth Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were of the same trade as he ([18:3](#)). In any event, the crowd did not find the missionaries at Jason's. Possibly they had learned of the riot and had fled elsewhere.

**[17:6–7](#) So Jason served as Paul's proxy and was dragged before the city officials (v. 6).** Luke's description is very accurate, using the term

“politarchs” for the officials, which is the precise term that occurs for the local magistrates in inscriptions uncovered in Macedonia. ***Three charges were leveled against the Christians. The first was directed against Paul and Silas: they “caused trouble all over the world.”*** This was a rather nebulous charge—“troublemakers.” The **second** was directed against Jason: he was ***harboring these troublemakers***. The **third** was directed against Paul and Silas and, by implication, Jason as their host. They were said to be ***“defying Caesar’s decrees.”*** This was a dangerous charge. To defy Caesar would be pure sedition. But what decrees were they defying? Probably the final clause in v. 7 is to be seen as an explanation of the charge. ***They were claiming that there was another king than Caesar—Jesus. This was virtually the same charge leveled at Jesus (cf. Luke 23:2–4; John 19:12, 15). Jesus claimed a kingdom not of this world, and Paul and Silas spoke of the same.*** But to a Roman, the charge sounded very much like a breach of the oath of loyalty that every person in the empire was required to render to Caesar. ***The magistrates had to take note of this charge.***

***17:8–9*** The magistrates showed a great deal of discretion in handling the charges. They evidently did not take the charge of sedition too seriously, but they were quite aware of the commotion and were responsible for maintaining order. ***They evidently decided, much like the Philippian magistrates, to preserve law and order by banning the troublemakers from the city. Jason was required to post bond, depositing a sum of money that would be forfeited should there be any sequel to the civil disturbance.*** That meant the absence of Paul and Silas.

***Paul may have been referring to this ban in 1 Thess 2:18 when he spoke of “Satan’s hindrance” to his returning to the city.***

## (2) Witness in Berea

### [17:10–15](#)

When the three missionaries left Thessalonica, they also left the Egnatian Way, the route they had been following since they first landed in Macedonia at Neapolis ([16:11](#)). This main east-west highway went northwest of Thessalonica to Dyrrachium on the Adriatic. It was the main land route to Rome. At Dyrrachium travelers would take a boat across the Adriatic Sea to Brundisium in southern Italy and from there north to Rome. It has been suggested that Paul might have entertained the idea of taking this route to Rome even as early as this point in his missionary career. In his Letter to the Romans ([15:22](#)) he spoke of his having “often” been hindered in coming to them. The hindrance at this time may well have been the news that the emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome ([18:2](#)). Whatever the case, Paul headed in another direction at this time, going southwest to Berea and well off any main thoroughfare.

[17:10](#) About fifty miles from Thessalonica, Berea lay on the eastern slopes of Mt. Vermion in the Olympian mountain range. In a somewhat remote region, Berea was the most significant city of the area, having been capital of one of the four divisions of Macedonia from 167–148 B.C. It evidently had a sizable population in Paul’s day. The journey from Thessalonica began in the nighttime because of the hasty departure. By foot it would have taken about three days.

[17:11–12](#) On arriving in the town, the witness began, as it had in Thessalonica, in the synagogue. The Jews of Berea, however, were of a different breed. Luke described them as being “more noble” than the Thessalonians. He 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. They did not accept his word uncritically but did their own examination of the Scriptures to see if they really did

point to the death and resurrection of the Messiah as Paul claimed (cf. [17:3](#)). This was no cursory investigation either, no weekly Sabbath service, as at Thessalonica. They met daily to search the Scriptures. No wonder so many contemporary Bible study groups name themselves “Bereans.” The Berean Jews were a “noble” example. And many of them found out for themselves that Paul’s claims were true and so believed (v. [12](#)). Many Greeks also believed, not just men but prominent Macedonian women as well, just as in Thessalonica (cf. v. [4](#)). Some of these may have been worshipers of God attached to the synagogue. Some may not have been. One would assume that Paul would not neglect his witness to Gentiles of pagan background even in a situation like Berea, where the synagogue was so unusually open to his message.

[17:13–14](#) This ideal situation did not last forever. It was soon broken by Jews from Thessalonica who heard of Paul’s successes in Berea. They stirred up “the crowds” in the city against Paul, evidently not the Jews of the city but the general Gentile populace, just as they had done at Thessalonica. Evidently this time the main attack was on Paul, the primary preacher of the word (v. [13](#)), since Silas and Timothy did not have to leave town with him (v. [14](#)).

That Paul had to flee Berea and finally wound up in Athens is clear. How he got there is another question. If one follows the Western text of Acts, he traveled to Athens by sea. The generally most reliable manuscripts, however, have Paul going “as far as the sea.” This is followed by the NIV, which translates “to the coast.” A third group of manuscripts (the Byzantine text) reads that Paul was sent “as to the sea.” This latter text has been followed by a number of commentators who argue that Paul was using a “diversionary tactic,” making *as if* to go by sea but then hurrying down to Athens by the coastal road. Even the “as far as” text could also allow for his not taking a boat but rather following the coastal road to Athens. It is obviously not a serious matter in any event.

**17:15** Of more significance is the question of when Timothy and Silas joined Paul in Athens. [First Thessalonians 3:1f.](#) indicates that Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica from Athens. This leads many scholars to argue that Luke must have been in error in seeing Paul as traveling to Athens alone; Timothy was with him and was then sent from Athens back to Thessalonica. Obviously both Luke and Paul may have been right, each giving only part of the picture. Paul may have traveled to Athens alone, summoning Timothy and Silas to join him there as soon as possible ([Acts 17:15](#)). They did so, and then Paul dispatched both from Athens, Timothy to Thessalonica ([1 Thess 3:1](#)) and Silas to parts unknown. One can never be dogmatic about any such harmonization for which the text itself gives no specific warrant, but the possibility of some such simple solution guards against overhasty conclusions about the unreliability of a text. In any event, Timothy and Silas did finally join Paul in Corinth ([Acts 18:5](#)).

- **New American Commentary**

## **Witness at Thessalonica**

Though absolute monarchies hold sway over very few peoples today, many still live under totalitarian rule. When the Christian gospel invades such an environment, an authority struggle automatically arises. For the Thessalonians, Theophilus and his fellow seekers, the call to bow to King Jesus in repentance directly challenged Caesar's absolute rule. Luke's account helps us all learn how to count the cost of citizenship in the kingdom of

## God.Christ the King Died and Rose Again (17:1-4)

Proceeding south and west along the Via Egnatia, Paul and Silas travel thirty miles to Amphipolis, the capital of the first district of Macedonia; a further twenty-seven miles to Apollonia; and finally thirty-five miles to Thessalonica, the capital of both the second district and the whole province. Though he may want to distance himself from Philippi in Macedonia's first district, Paul is also making a strategic choice by targeting Thessalonica. This city was uniquely situated to serve as a center for the spread of the gospel to the whole Balkan peninsula (see Rom 15:19; 1 Thess 1:7-8). A seaport on the Thermaic Gulf, Thessalonica linked sea and land routes to the rich agricultural plain of the interior of Macedonia. So today, missions strategists rightly target world-class cities and key cultural groups so that the gospel, once taking root there, may naturally spread to whole peoples and whole nations.

Instead of recounting a speech, Luke describes Paul's pattern of verbal witness through a series of clauses (Acts 17:3). They form a rhetorical syllogism, a pattern of persuasion familiar to any first-century schoolboy (Kurz 1980). By deductive logic, Paul propounds major and minor premises, using irrefutable proofs (*tekmerioi*: evidence from authoritative texts and witnesses; compare Acts 1:3). Taken together, these premises lead by necessary logic to the conclusion, the speaker's goal in persuasion. The witness pattern is

Major Premise: The characteristics of the Christ (Messiah) are that he must suffer and rise from the dead (17:3a).

Minor Premise: Jesus modeled these characteristics in his death and resurrection (Kurz [1980:179] believes this premise is referred to in the clause *I am proclaiming to you*, 17:3b).

Conclusion: *This Jesus . . . is the Christ* (17:3b).

What stands out here is the role of the Old Testament and the interconnected nature of argumentation and proclamation in the process of persuasion. It was a matter of *explaining* (*dianoigo*; Lk 24:32, 45-46) *and proving [from the Scriptures]* the major premise (the Greek word order permits us to take this phrase with these verbs instead of with *reasoned*, as the NIV). *Proving* (*paratithemi*) was "demonstrating by setting evidence side by side"--God's authoritative Word (such as Ps 2; 16; 110; Is 53) next to the premise that it was the divine plan that the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead (compare Lk 9:22, 44; 17:25; 18:31-33; 24:26, 46; Acts 2:31; 3:18; 13:27-29). Paul's argumentation aimed to overcome Jewish preconceptions about the Messiah as a victorious king with an eternal reign who neither suffers nor rises from the dead.

The proof for the minor premise comes in the form of proclamation (*katangelo*, the solemn declaration of a completed happening; 16:21; 17:13, 23; Schniewind 1964:71).

*With boldness Paul bears witness to the historical events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection... Witness must always be pursued in this way. There is a time for dialogue, a time to deal carefully with the questions and doubts of those who hear our witness. But there must also be proclamation. The gospel is, after all, good news from God about what he has done in Christ, not the distillation of the best of human religious reflection.*

A few *Jews*, possibly Jason (17:7) and Aristarchus (20:4) among them, *a large number of God-fearing Greeks* (there is not a redundancy here separating the men into two groups, pagans and God-fearers; contrast Stott 1990:272; compare Acts 13:43) and *not a few prominent women* (compare 13:50; 17:12) *were persuaded*. By the power of the Spirit Paul's reasoning has helped them understand the situation for themselves. As a result,

they are able to make a free decision, in this case to embrace Jesus as their suffering and risen Messiah (Kemmler 1975:133; compare 26:28). And they immediately changed identities and *joined* (literally, "their lot was cast with," implying divine saving choice; compare 13:48) Paul and Silas as brothers and sisters in the kingdom of King Jesus the Christ. King Jesus Is Mightier than Caesar (17:5-9)

The Jews who did not believe, in their misdirected zeal for the glory of God and the law (compare Rom 10:2), take measures to thwart the gospel's advance. They "set the city in an uproar" (*ethoryboun*; compare cognate *thorybos*, Acts 20:1; 21:34; 24:18; Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 18.65; it is more extensive than NIV's *started a riot*). They gather the rabble lounging in the marketplace and form them into a mob (compare Plutarch *Parallel Lives: Aemilius Paulus* 38.4, who represents the *agoraioi* as agitators).

The mob moves to Jason's house, looking for Paul and Silas with the intention of bringing them to trial before the free city's citizens' assembly. Not finding the traveling preachers, they drag some of their own citizens, Jason and some of the *brothers*, before the local city officials (*politarchai*, a term found only in inscriptions; Thessalonica had five or six). Possibly they feel it more appropriate to arraign their own citizens there. Maybe they suppose that the citizens' assembly would be more lenient with their own than the officials charged with public order. The charges are threefold: public disturbance--causing *trouble all over the world*; harboring disturbers of the peace; and *defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus*.

The forties had been a turbulent decade for Rome in dealing with the Jews. In A.D. 41 Emperor Claudius wrote a threatening letter to the Alexandrians, saying he would take measures against Jews who were "stirring up a universal plague throughout the world"

(Sherwin-White 1963:51). In A.D. 44 there were public disturbances in Palestine in the wake of Herod Agrippa I's death. In A.D. 49 Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of public disturbances in the Jewish community at the instigation of "Chrestus" (Suetonius *Claudius* 25.4; see comment at Acts 18:3). Though the Jews themselves had caused the uproar at Thessalonica, their trumped-up charges of public disturbance made sense within the Empire's current political climate.

The charge of defying Caesar's decrees is best understood against this background. "Augustus and Tiberius had been very sensitive about the activities of astrologers and other prognosticators and had issued decrees forbidding predictions and inquiries affecting the affairs of state or the emperor's personal well being" (Bruce 1988:325; Dio Cassius *Roman History* 56.25.5-6; 57.15.8; Tacitus *Annals* 6.20; 12.52; compare 14.9). Paul's eschatology could be easily twisted into declarations about a coming monarch who will displace Caesar (1 Thess 1:9-10; 2 Thess 2:5-8). Since Thessalonica would want to maintain its status as a free city through loyalty to the emperor, and since the local officials are charged with preserving order and making sure the imperial decrees are respected, the charges understandably throw the crowd and the city officials into turmoil (*tarasso*, 17:13; compare 12:18; 19:23).

From Acts 17:10 we can surmise the officials took bond from Jason and the others to ensure two things: there would be no more public disturbances, and Paul and Silas and their preaching would be gone from the city (Longenecker 1981:470). If either condition is not met, the bond will be forfeited (contrast Lake and Cadbury [1979:206], who see the bond involving Jason's denial of involvement with Paul and Silas; the forfeiture would occur if that were found not to be true). The practical result is Paul and Silas's forced departure from Thessalonica.

Although the persecutors had been the real disturbers of public order, the gospel always has an unsettling, even revolutionary effect on those who hear it. It calls for a repentance that means bowing to King Jesus in total allegiance. Totalitarian rulers, whether Caesar or modern-day overlords, cannot peacefully coexist with King Jesus or his kingdom subjects.