

# Opening Grace, Part 1

## Act 17:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> 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." <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> But the Jews[a] 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. <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." <sup>8</sup> And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. <sup>9</sup> And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

## Sermon Notes

David Livingstone was one of the great missionary heroes of the Church. I have told you before about this man whose aspiration was to reach the heart of Africa with the Gospel. In doing so his body was tortured by thirty tropical fevers and the equatorial heat. Having been mauled by a tiger, his left arm hung limp at his side. But he stayed in Africa nonetheless. Why? Because his mind and heart had been opened by grace. On the one hand his mind was steadied by a text of Scripture. When asked near the end of his life why he was returning once again to Africa, he answered, "Because of these words, 'Lo, I am with thee always, even to the end of the age.'" On the other hand his heart had been opened by Christ's love to love others sacrificially. When asked once where he would go next in Africa, he answered, "I am prepared to go anywhere as long as it is forward."

## 1. Open-Hearted (1-9)

### A. Preaching

According to "custom" Paul began his ministry by preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica. However, in this city he taught for three Sabbaths in a row. Usually, he would have been run out of town after the first Sabbath. Luke's description of Paul's methodology over that time is vivid. Our text says Paul was "explaining and proving" that Christ was the Messiah. The word we have translated "proving" is *paratithemenos* and means "to set alongside." Paul would set the events of Christ's life, death, resurrection "alongside" the prophecies of the Old Testament in order to prove his points. He demonstrated that the Messiah "must" accomplish these tasks as Jesus had done, proving that he was the long-awaited Redeemer (Lk. 9:22; 24:26,44).

What I want you to notice in Paul's methodology is the dignity he extended to the Thessalonians by the careful way he taught them. Of course, he always taught in the same way but Luke's vivid terminology provides opportunity to make this important point. When we talk to other people about Christ, we must never talk down to them. They bear inherent dignity as image bearers of God. That means that we must take their questions and challenges seriously. We must afford them respect. And if they are sharing their worldview with us we must listen carefully

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enough to it that we can repeat it back to them plausibly. Then when we have listened to them carefully, we need to apply the Scriptures thoughtfully to their particular concerns and questions.

And that is true not just in dealing with non-Christians; whoever aspires to instruct another in the Word must do so lovingly and respectfully. We need to listen to one another carefully so that we can apply thoughtfully the encouragements or chastisements of the Word to each other in a helpful way.

### **B. Persuasion**

However, you notice that the results of Paul's preaching were not as successful among the Jews in Thessalonica as they were in Berea. Only some of the Jews believed. However, the results among the Gentile God-fearers were great. Notice Luke also informs us that many prominent women were converted as well.

Luke says that those who were converted "joined Paul." Literally, they "were allotted by God to Paul as disciples." In other words, though there were few at first, those who came became unreserved devotees of Jesus Christ and colleagues of Paul.

### **C. Proof**

Finally, God allows the Thessalonians' faith to be tested and proven to be true as he has done elsewhere. It is understandable that the Romans would have been intimidated by Paul's words because they had a strong eschatological dimension to them. They would have been threatened by his words that Christ would reign over all his enemies (1 Th. 1:9,10; 2 Th. 2:5-7).

The disciples would have been complimented by the accusation which read literally: "Those who are upsetting the civilized world have arrived here". T. R. Glover used to quote the child who said the Bible ends with *Revolutions* (Barclay, 139). May God so bless that we would be accused of turning the world upside down for Christ.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition there is a story about a priest named Father Demetrius for whom grace had opened both head and heart. The people loved Father Demetrius, a man full of the Spirit, and imbued with a special gift of teaching both by word and example.

In the city where Father Demetrius ministered a riot broke out resulting in vast property damage. One family in Father Demetrius' parish lost everything—food, furniture, and clothing. Father Demetrius volunteered to help by taking the youngest daughter shopping. First he met her basic needs for shoes, stockings, a dress and a coat. Then with what little money he had left, he took her to a jewelry store and bought her a ring.

When the people of the village heard of the extravagance, they criticized the priest behind his back. They said he should have used his head and bought more

practical things. They called him foolish. “He is a good man, a loving person” they said, “but he is so naïve to buy a ring, of all things, in a situation like this.”

Eventually Father Demetrius overheard their critical and patronizing remarks. Very quietly he responded, “I wanted to give her something that would help her know she is loved.”

Here was a man whose head and heart were opened by the Gospel such that he could be steadied in the midst of tragedy and generous in his love. Here is a man whose story endures because he loved well. He joins the ranks of people like the woman who poured out her alabaster jar of perfume on Jesus and the woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried them with her. It is an elite company of people whose minds have been changed by the Gospel and their hearts opened to love extravagantly. Will you join them too? Yield your mind and heart to Christ that he might use you bountifully.