THIS JESUS IS THE MESSIAH

Acts 17:1-34

Key Verse: 3

“…explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said.”

Today’s passage records Paul’s on-going second missionary journey in three cities—Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. It is Paul’s custom that he goes to the synagogue to reason with the attendees from the Scriptures or visits market places or public squares to preach to the pagans if he cannot find a synagogue. Let’s see how Paul serves in these cities and how the Holy Spirit works through him.

First, at Thessalonica (1-9). Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonian province about 155 km from Philippi. Look at verses 2-3, **“As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said.”** Paul went into the synagogue where the Jews and the Greeks who were converted to Judaism came to worship. What did he do there? He had Bible studies from the Scripture. In particular, he reasoned from the Scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer and die and rise again from the dead. It was because the Jews believed, taught and waited for the conquering victorious king Messiah, not the suffering Messiah. The Old Testament actually describes both the conquering victorious King Messiah and the suffering Messiah. But the Jews who had suffered under the rules of pagan empires ignored the suffering Messiah and longed for the One who would come and conquer their enemies and deliver them from their sufferings. Paul reasoned, explained and proved that the Messiah had to suffer first and rise from the dead, and then will come back as the victorious King and Judge. Perhaps Paul quoted Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 53, many psalms and many other prophecies that talked about the Messiah’s sufferings. He then proved that Jesus indeed suffered and died just as the Scriptures had prophesied. Paul finally proclaimed that Jesus is that Messiah who suffered and died for the forgiveness of our sins and rose from the dead to give us eternal life.

Now take a moment and pay attention to Paul’s Bible study strategy. His strategy was grounded in the Scriptures. He was like a best chef to make the word of God so delicious and nutritious to the soul. His main dish was the Messiah, and his seasonings were reasoning, explaining, proving, and proclaiming. Instead of delivering the one-sided sermons, he reasoned, dialogued, discussed with them who could have questions and answers freely until they were convinced by the help of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. In this way, Paul helped them to have right view of the Messiah and finally proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah exactly prophesied in the Scriptures. Let us have Bible study by reasoning and dialoguing with one another from the Scriptures until we fully know and accept the truth. May we grow as excellent Bible teachers who can handle word of truth correctly like Paul.

What was the outcome of these Bible studies? Look verse 4. **“Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.”** Wow, in such a short period, a large number of God-fearing Gentiles accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Only some of the Jews were persuaded. According to 1 Thessalonians 1, however, through these Gentile believers, the church at Thessalonica was born. They became a model to other believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

According to the author Luke, the Jews in Thessalonica were not open-minded toward the Scriptures (11). They hardened their hearts and tossed out the truth and God’s gift of salvation. Furthermore, out of jealousy they rounded up some gangsters and started a riot. This mob raided Jason’s house to drag Paul and Silas out to the crowd, but could not find them. So they dragged Jason and other believers before the city officials, accusing that Paul and his companions caused trouble all over the world and Jason welcomed them in his house. Later, the city officials took bail for Jason and other believers and released them. There are always two responses toward the gospel message. Some receive it and others are enraged by it. The angry Jews wanted to get rid of Paul after having Bible studies through which they learned the truth. Their response was not reasonable and it was the work of Satan. But the devil’s work cannot thwart God’s work. In fact, the church always thrives under persecution. The church at Thessalonica grew strong in the midst of severe persecution.

Second, at the city of Berea (10-15). If we learned how to be effective Bible teachers through the work of God at Thessalonica, now through the work of God at Berea we can learn how to be good learners of the Bible. Berea was a small city about 70 km south-west from Thessalonica. On arriving the city, they went to the synagogue again. Look at verse 11. **“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”** This is the author Luke’s comment from his keen observation. The Berean Jews were of more noble character. According to NLT version, they were more open-minded. Luke provides two reasons why they were of more noble character or open-minded. Firstly, they received the message with great eagerness. They came to Bible study with an expectant heart. They listened to the message without prejudice or suspicion. They didn’t doubt or resist the gospel message. They frequently uttered, “wow” and “amen” while hearing the message. Secondly, they examined the Scriptures every day if what Paul said was true. After hearing the message, they didn’t stop there, but examined and searched the Scriptures every day to make sure that what they heard lined up with what God had said in the Scriptures. They didn’t check up on the person Paul but on the message that Paul preached through the Scriptures. They believed that the Scripture, and Scripture alone is the final judge of all teaching: “Sola Scriptura” that the reformers kept as the foundational principle.

What is the Scripture? The Scripture is the self-revelation of God. If we want to know God, we must go back to the Scripture and learn of him. If we want to know about Jesus, about the world, and even about ourselves in God’s sight, we ought to come to the Scripture. That was why Paul reasoned with people from the Scriptures and the Bereans examined the Scriptures. Let us have a new heart and attitude toward our Bible study as the Bereans had. Let us receive God’s word with great eagerness and let us diligently search and examine the Scriptures with the principle of “Sola Scriptura.”

Paul’s Bible studies in Berea bore abundant fruits. Many Jews and Gentiles believed in the Messiah Jesus. But the angry Jews from Thessalonica came all the way to Berea, agitated the crowds, and stirred them up. So Believers hurriedly escorted Paul alone and took him to Athens.

Third, at Athens (16-34). Athens was one of the most famous cities of ancient times, the center of philosophy, literature, art, wealth, civilization, and magnificent temples. The Athenians were the most cultivated and refined of Greece and yet the most thoroughly given to idolatry. So there was a saying, “It was easier to find a god at Athens than a man.” How ironic it is that the people with Grecian learning and civilization worshipped countless idols.

Looking at the magnificent city, Paul who was from a remote town Tarsus must have been astonished. He was alone there and was waiting for Silas and Timothy who were left at Berea to come and join him. While waiting for them to come, he went on a tour of the city to understand the city and the Athenians. But instead of being amazed by the beautiful city, he was greatly distressed, because he saw that the city was full of idols. A man I know is living in a Buddhist nation as a missionary. Every early morning, he got distressed because he heard the loud Buddhist chanting from the public speaker on the street. So he made a decision to get up very early morning and pray loudly to God in his basement. Paul, the overcomer in faith, might have been filled with passion and spirit to hallow God’s name by challenging the people and city of idols with the gospel message.

Look at verse 17. **“So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.”** Paul alone went to the synagogue and reasoned with Jews and Gentiles there. He also visited the marketplace day by day and reasoned with anyone there. He was busy to do Bible studies here and there. He was crazy to bring the gospel to this idolatrous city. All by himself he served Bible studies in the synagogue and the marketplace with passion and zeal. He had the Bible study with anyone in the city.

Now look at verse 18. **“A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”** Paul happened to meet and debate with the two opposing group of philosophers—the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans believed that pleasure is the only good, and pain is the only evil. So they sought happiness through avoiding all pain and pursuing pleasure physically and mentally—not necessarily hedonistic pleasure. The Stoics pursued moral intellectual perfection through being indifferent toward emotions like fear, envy, or pleasure.

These philosophers took Paul and brought him to a large meeting place called the Areopagus. They said to Paul, **“May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”** Paul then preached to them in verses 22-31. He first told them that the Athenians were very religious because he saw numerous idols in the city, including ‘AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Many idols implied that they were very religious. AN UNKNOWN GOD implied that they didn’t know the true object of worship. Paul’s understanding of the Athenians was amazing, and it came from his shepherd heart for the Athenians and his strong desire to bring the gospel to them. Everyone is religious since God created everyone in his image. But many people do not know the true object of worship? Who is the true object of worship?

Look at verses 24-28. Paul started out by telling them that God is the Maker, and not the one who was made. God was not created by humans. He is the one who made human beings and everything else that exists in all the universe. So unlike human made idols God does not live in temples and shrines. God owes no one because everything comes from him. He does not need anything from us. Because he is the Creator, God gives everyone life, breath, and everything else. He created mankind from one man Adam and all people came from Adam. God is also the present Ruler of mankind by determining the course and periods of human history, as in the rise and fall of nations. Why does God do all these things? Paul said in verse 27, **“God did this so that they (mankind) would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.”** We see here that God earnestly wants us to seek him, reach out for him, and find him by seeing his amazing creation and his on-going rule even today.

In verses 29-31, Paul stressed that we should not think of God as the human-made idol and that God commands all people to repent and live as his people. God has set and fixed the day of his righteous judgment and as the proof of God’s set judgment, he raised Jesus Christ from the dead and he will judge the world. Paul’s message to the Athenians began with the creator God and finished with the God of final judgment and salvation. Our God is the Creator, Preserver and Ruler of all creation. God raised Jesus from the dead and appointed him as the judge of the living and the dead. Therefore, we must repent before this God and put our trust in God sincerely.

Today, we heard the three distinctive messages. Out of three, which one was spoken for you? May we retain God’s message given to us today and bear fruit by the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.