

Place: Lurgan Baptist 22:11:2011

Reading: Acts 17: 1-34

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

27. NECK DEEP IN GREECE

Clovis Chappell tells the story of a preacher that was given to doing eccentric things. The preacher had become discouraged with his church and finally told his congregation that the church was dead. He announced that he was going to preach at its funeral that night. He had a coffin placed at the front. Standing beside the coffin at the end of the service he said,

“ Now some of you may not agree with me that this church is dead. In order to convince you I am going to ask you to view its remains.” He placed a mirror in the bottom of the coffin and when the people passed by they saw the dead. One preacher wrote,

**Tell my deacons when I am dead
That they should shed no tears
For I shall be no deader then
Than they have been for years**

Present deacons accepted of course. It is possible to be living, yet not fully alive. John Powell in his book, **“ Fully Human, Fully Alive,”** says this, *“ Fully alive human beings are alive in their external and internal senses they smell the fragrance of each new day and taste the deliciousness of every moment.”*

Enthusiasm. Zeal. Drive. Vision. These are the characteristics of a person who is fully alive, a person just like the apostle Paul. Do you ever think we take the apostle Paul for granted ? Think about it. How many people in history have written a series of short letters that have been the source of countless books analyzing them and 2000 years later, millions of people gathering once a week to study what Paul wrote ? Who would ever dream of leaving such a legacy ? It must be true that the apostle Paul is the greatest spiritual leader in history outside of the Lord Jesus Himself. Yet we who have been for believers for a number of years can take this great man for granted. We can fail to marvel at his obedience, his perseverance, his courage, his spiritual and intellectual gifts from God, his love for the cause of Christ and for the Saviour Himself.

Studying his journeys is like taking a field trip on the subject of full living. So let's lace up our hiking boots and try to keep up with him on the next leg of his travels, the part of his journey in Europe where we find him and his companions, shall we say, neck deep in Greece. Now 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.

Following the Egnatian Way, the main highway through Macedonia, one of the special roads of the

Roman Empire, a road that was intended to provide for easy travel throughout the Empire, the three missionaries arrived in Thessalonica ready for action. It seems that Luke stayed behind in Philippi to further help the church that had been established there. We assume this because the, " *we*," references in the account suddenly change to " *they*," as if Luke were saying, " *They went on, but I didn't go with them.*" So Paul, Silas and Timothy waved good-bye to Luke and the new believers, and " *when they had travelled through Amphipolis and Apollonia they came to Thessalonica.*" (17:1) The journey from Philippi to Thessalonica was a distance of about 100 miles, and the narrative implies that they made the journey in about three days, stopping for the night at Amphipolis and Apollonia. You see, Paul's master plan for missions was to evangelise the main city of an area, leave behind him a mission-minded church, move on to another population centre, and leave the evangelisation of the rural areas to the converted nationals of the big cities. (19:10, 26, 1 Thes 1:8)

My Paul was right, go for the jugular vein, go for the city. Plant a thriving church there first, then reach out to the smaller towns and the backward tribes. Now Paul knew that Thessalonica our modern Salonika was a strategic city for the work of the gospel. The missionaries first sight of the city must have taken their breath away.

Thessalonica was the crown jewel of Macedonia, placed in a striking setting on the Thermaic Gulf by the

Aegean Sea. Behind it stood the majestic mountains of Greece, including the fabled Mount Olympus. It also lay right in the path of one of the major thoroughfares of the day and had a fine harbour, making it a chief centre of commerce and military strength. Nearby hot springs lent the city the ambience of a fashionable luxury resort. Moreover, Thessalonica had special privileges no other city in the region had, for this 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. So the first city that Paul and his companions came to on this leg of the journey was,

(1) **THESSALONICA: RESISTING THE WORD**

Someone has said that there are 1400 references to cities in the Bible, thirteen of which occupy a prominent place in the book of Acts. Two of them are Thessalonica and Berea. This was the main city in Macedonia having a population of about 200,000. It had been founded in the Greek period by a brother in law of Alexander the Great. It was a port city and therefore a centre of commerce and still is today. Here Paul laboured at his tent-making trade (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. Now notice from the context,

(a) **THERE WAS BOLD READINESS:**

You see no one will ever influence the world for Christ

who lacks courage, it is courageous people who make a difference. Do you recall Paul's words to Timothy ?
" *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*" (2 Tim 1:7)
Courage and boldness were essential to the impact of the early church, and there is no more consistent illustration of that than Paul himself. My the prospect of trials and persecution did not deter him from carrying out his ministry. Do you recall how he summed up his attitude to the elders at Ephesus ?
(20:22_24) The very incidents here at Thessalonica and Berea display Paul's remarkable courage. Paul, Silas, and Timothy had left Philippi in the wake of the riot provoked by Paul's healing of a demon-possessed slave girl. (16:16-40)

Indeed this second missionary journey was turning out very much like the first one. Do you recall how Paul had faced much Jewish opposition on his first missionary journey ? On the island of Cyprus, he was opposed by the Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus. (13:6) Leaving there, he went to Pisidian Antioch, where
" *when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.*"
(13:45) Later, " *the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts.*" (13:50) Then they went to Iconium where " *the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren.*" (14:2) Forced to flee from Iconium (14:5-6) Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra,

where Paul very nearly lost his life. (14:19)

My in spite of all this, and his recent persecution in Philippi at the hands of the Gentiles, Paul did not hesitate to courageously enter the synagogue at Thessalonica. What a man of courage Paul was. And such courage is built on faith, trusting God. My the key to courage is trust in the sovereign power and care of God and dependence on His strength. You see in any circumstance of life, Christians can be confident that
" *the Lord preserveth the faithful.*" (Ps 31:23) No wonder Paul wrote to Timothy, " *Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.*" (Eph 6:10) (a) But,

(b) *THERE WAS BIBLICAL REASONING:*

Look if you will at (17:2) Paul's method of proclaiming the gospel in a city was often to start at the synagogue because of the,

1. The Programme: Remember Paul was trained to be a rabbi and that gave him access to the " pulpit," in Jewish synagogues.

2. The People: Many Gentiles proselytes would be present at the synagogue.

3. The Parchments: the Scripture scrolls were at the synagogue which Paul could in preaching the gospel.

You see to have the right message, but not the boldness to proclaim it, renders it useless. On the other hand, to boldly proclaim error, as the cults do, causes even

greater harm. Proclaiming the truth with great boldness, as Paul did, cannot help but change the world. Now four key words in (17:2-3) describe Paul's approach to the synagogue congregation. First, he **Reasoned:** the Greek word translated " *reasoned,* " is the root for our English word dialogue. There was exchange, questions and answers, give and take, back and forth, much as we see in a seminar or class setting in our culture. He **Explained:** " *opening,* " the Scriptures to them. Luke uses the same word to describe the opening of the womb in (Lk 2:23) and in (Lk 24) where we read " and their eyes were opened and they knew him and he vanished out of their sight." (Lk 24:31) My Paul opened the Scriptures with clarity and simplicity, a priceless virtue that is not always appreciated.

A Bible College student once remarked after hearing a sermon by the great George W. Truett, at the First Baptist Church in Dallas Texas, " *So that is George Truett is it ? Why he didn't use one word I could not understand.* " Little did he know it but that young man paid Pastor Truett the highest possible compliment. His messages were clear and understandable. My simplicity can make all the difference between communication and confusion. Look at the other word. And **Proved:** " *alleging,* " that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. The word translated " *alleging,* " means " *to lay down alongside, to prove by presenting the evidence.* " Paul's goal was for people, Jews and Gentiles alike to see Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, to see that He was the Jewish Messiah for whom Israel had been longing. My can you imagine Paul

bringing to life such passages as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 ? " ***Jesus is the Christ,*** " he would assert again and again. Notice also Paul was careful to announce, " **preach,** " the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the message of the gospel. (1 Cor 15:1) My have you noticed that in the messages in Acts, you will find an emphasis on the resurrection, for the believers were called to be witnesses of His resurrection. (1:21-22 2:32 3:15 5:32) I hear preachers saying, " *Let's get people to the cross.* " Sure, but don't leave Christ on the cross, for the message of the apostles was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now notice what happened as a result of three weeks ministry in Thessalonica, Paul saw a large number of people believe, especially Greek proselytes and influential women. Among the men were Aristarchus and Secundus who later travelled with Paul. (20:4) But my these results did not bring joy to everyone. For,

(c) ***THERE WAS BITTER REACTION:***

Like magnets, some people are drawn closer to Paul's teaching and others are repelled by it. This illustrates the fact that what influences one person may not convince the next. You see, when we seek to persuade people with the gospel, we must then leave them room to respond according to their hearts desire. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Thessalonians that a large number of Greeks " *turned to God from idols.* " (1:9) and yet Paul had not mentioned idols in his synagogue sermons only Christ.

You see Paul's example teaches us to focus our witnessing on Christ, not peripherals, and to persuade but not manipulate non-believers to trust Him. My can you see the balance that Paul exhibited ? He presented solid facts about Christ, yet he still gave people the dignity and freedom to think, consider, and wrestle with their decisions. They could accept or reject the gospel, and unfortunately, many chose the later. For (17:5) tells us that the Jews are at it again. Soon Thessalonica was in an uproar, and unruly men descended on the home of Jason like flies on meat. With no day in court the missionaries are pronounced guilty, and apparently Jason's only way to protect their lives as well as the future of the Thessalonian church, is to sign an agreement guaranteeing that the missionaries would leave and never return. (17:9 1 Thes 2:18)

Here then is city number one. (1) Did you notice the tribute they paid to Paul and his companions in (17:6) ? " *These that have turned the world upside down are come hither.*" In effect the gospel was upsetting the world, not by turning people upside down, but by turning them right side up. My Have we lost the zeal that marked these first Christians ? Are we really serious about the task God has called us to do ? I mean, like Paul wherever you go, do things happen ? Are souls saved ? Are feelings stirred ? Are decisions made ? Are lines drawn ? Is the place turned upside down for Christ ? (1)

(2) BEREIA: RECEIVING THE WORD

I wonder, how these missionaries felt when they left Thessalonica ? Did they feel frustrated ? Were they downcast ? Where they ready to give up ? Are you ready to give up ? Perhaps some unsaved loved ones continue to show no interest in their eternal welfare ? Maybe, you sense your witness is meeting a brick-wall. Whatever, do you feel frustrated ? Then have another look at Paul, for this unyielding servant, moves 45 miles up the road and targets another town for the gospel. Now some might surmise that the Bereans were more nobly disposed than the Thessalonians because they were off the beaten track and had not fallen prey to the vices of metropolitan living. " *We who live in cities can come to some strange conceits,*" someone once said. But (17:11) gives us the true secret of a noble life.

" *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that were so.*" Look at,

(a) **THEIR RECEPTION OF GOD'S WORD:**

The name Berea or Berean has been used as much as any Bible name for Christian organizations. The reason is the compliment that the Bible pays these people. " *They received the Word with all readiness of mind.*" Or, " They received the Word with great eagerness." Their " *eagerness,*" carries the idea of rushing forward. They could not wait to receive God' message. My eagerness makes all the difference in the flavour, quality and nobility of our Christian lives. Ill:

J.I.Packer says,

" John Owen and John Calvin knew more theology than John Bunyan and Billy Bray, but who would deny that the latter pair knew their God every bit as well as the former ? All four, of course, were beavers for the Bible, which counts for more than a formal theological training." The Bible says, *" Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."* (Rom 10:17)

George Muller read the Bible over 200 times, and that certainly is primary reason he was such a man of faith. My are you constantly reading, digging, cross-referencing, comparing, rushing with eagerness to feed on the Word of the Lord ? Is God's Word your greatest treasure ? Can you say with the psalmist, *" Oh how I love thy law. It is my meditation all the day."* (Ps 119:97) (a) Look at:

(b) THEIR RESEARCH INTO GOD'S WORD:

" And searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so ...," (17:11) That is, they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. My are you following the example of the Bereans ? How dangerous it is for us to blindly accept what people teach without studying the Scriptures for ourselves. That is how the cults get started. My we need to eagerly but cautiously listen and compare everything to the touchstone of Scripture. Everything I say and you say must be confirmed by studying the Word of God. Isn't that a lovely phrase in (17:11) *" They searched the Scriptures daily,"* you see, the Scriptures were given a front seat by the Bereans. Many church members today would be searching our

ways to have a host of other things in the church for they are definitely not interested in the Word. Listen, when God's people get excited about God's Word then there will be blessing in God's work. Now the outcome of all this was predictable, for notice,

(c) THEIR RESPONSE TO GODS WORD:

Look if you will at (17:12) Many of the Jews believed and also a number of prominent people from Greek society. Isn't it encouraging to see how many of the elite members of various communities embraced the gospel.

My we should not be afraid to take the gospel to the highest levels of our own society. Now for the missionaries, these must have been satisfying days. Only **" some,"** Jews had believed in Thessalonica, but **" many,"** Jews believed in Berea. The whole town seemed to be responding to the gospel until, the unbelieving Jews started again. 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 also was sent on a special mission in Macedonia, and later both men met Paul in Corinth. (18:1-5) (1) (2)

(3) ATHENS: RIDICULING THE WORD

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.*” My 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. Athens was the leading cultural and intellectual centre of the western world. Athens had been home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the greatest ancient philosophers. The entire city, in fact, was a showcase of past intellectual achievement. This was the university city of the ancient world, filled with all the cynicism and snobbery of such a city. But the people of Athens still hungered for spiritual things. And that hunger was most evident in what Paul first noticed about the city, something that disturbed his soul. For while waiting for his colleagues to join him “*his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.*” (17:16) There were around 10,000 people living in Athens when Paul was there, but it is said there were some 30,000 statues of gods in the city, more gods than people. Petronius remarks that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. But Paul was determined to plant God’s flag of truth in this dark, idolatrous city, so he begins in familiar territory. Notice,

(a) HIS DISPUTE WITH THEM:

Look at (17:17) In 1941, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was invited to preach at Oxford University to a mostly student congregation. After the message, there was a question and answer time. Dr. Lloyd-Jones later learned that the first student to venture a question was

studying law and was one of the leaders of the Oxford debating society. He got up and with all the polish of a debater, said that he had much enjoyed the sermon, but that it left one great difficulty or perplexity in his mind. He really could not see how the sermon, which he admitted was well constructed and well presented, might not equally well have been delivered to a congregation of farm laborers or anyone else. *Then he sat down, as the crowd roared with laughter.* Dr. Lloyd-Jones responded that he really could not see the questioner’s difficulty. He admitted that he had regarded undergraduates and indeed graduates of Oxford University as being just ordinary common human clay and miserable sinners like everybody else, with precisely the same needs as farm laborers. And so, he said, he had preached as he had done quite deliberately. The students both laughed and cheered, and from then on, Dr. Lloyd- Jones had an attentive hearing. *Are you not thankful for those among us who can “ dispute,”* ? Paul disputed in the Synagogue at Athens and Paul disputed on the Square at Athens. And in no time at all, two groups of thinkers started reacting to this curious foreigner and his new teaching. *Now who were the Epicureans and the Stoics ?* Well, they were philosophers at widely divergent ends of the spectrum. The goal of the Epicureans was to experience pleasure and avoid pain. They were materialists with no thought of the spirit or eternal life. The Stoics believed not in pleasure but in self-discipline, self mastery. They believed self mastery came by being indifferent to pleasure and pain. They were pantheists, everything is God and God is everything.

Now the Epicureans said, "*Enjoy Life,*" and the Stoics said, "*Endure Life,*" but it remained for Paul to explain how they could "*Experience Life,*" through faith in God's risen Son. My can you picture them in their philosopher's robes stroking their beards as they circle Paul and size him up? Some of them shake their heads and call him a "*babbler,*" the word literally means "*seed-picker,*" and was used to describe "*one who picked up scraps of learning here and there and purveyed where he could.*" Others, though, are curious about Paul's teaching, especially about Jesus and the resurrection. As they consult with one another, they come to a decision: Take him to the Areopagus, sometimes called Mars Hill. If you ever have the opportunity go there for what a setting this was. Before Paul lay the Theseum, the wonderful Doric Temple. On his right was the upper city. Around him loomed thousands of statues and altars in gold, silver and bronze. My Paul stood amidst the symbols of departed greatness, with the gods of Greece staring down at him. Immediately, before him sat the most exclusive group of philosophers in the world. What a contrast. On one side stood Paul, divinely empowered, a man who had staked everything he had on his message. On the other side stood the Areopagus, sophisticated but indifferent. My Paul stood before this intimidating group of powerful philosophers absolutely alone. What would the "*seedpicker from Tarsus,*" say? Paul was about to give what F. F. Bruce has rightly called "*a masterpiece of communication.*"

(b) HIS DECLARATION TO THEM:

His approach was brilliant. He started where they were. He didn't start with the Creation, Old Testament Scripture, Christ or Sin, concepts that were foreign to his audience. Instead, he opened with a subject close to home, religion. He wasn't attempting to flatter them either, he was just stating as fact that a city displaying so many idols must contain people interested in religion.

Using the familiar, the subject of religion and their altar to an unknown God, he turned their attention to the unfamiliar, the subject of the living God whom they did not know. Paul cries "*Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.*" (17:23) He was proclaiming to them the God they did not know. Now in this message, which is similar to his sermon at Lystra (14:15-17) Paul shared four basic truths about God. Notice he spoke about,

(1) *The GREATNESS of God: He is CREATOR:*

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. 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 too great to

be housed in man-made temples (1 Kings 8:27 Is 66:1-2 7:48-50) but He is not too great to be concerned about man's needs. My can you imagine how the Council of the Aeropagus reacted to Paul's statement about temples, for right there on the Acropolis were several shrines dedicated to Athena ?

The Greatness of God: He is Creator. Jeremiah exclaims " *Ah, Lord God ! Behold Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and stretched out arm and there is nothing too hard for Thee.*" (Jer 32:17) My do you need to be reminded of that ? Have you a relative whom you feel is too hard to be saved ? A situation too complex to solve ? A problem too difficult too unravel ? Listen, there is nothing too hard for God. (1)

(2) The GOODNESS of God: He is PROVIDER:

For Paul says " *Neither is worshipped with men's hands as though he needed anything seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.*" 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 too God. My 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) (1) (2)

(3) The GOVERNMENT of God: He is RULER:

You see, God is not only the sovereign ruler of the universe but also the controller of the affairs and destinies of men and nations. Paul declares that He made " *of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth,*" (17:26) 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. My it's not the power of man but the government of God that determines the rise and fall of nations. " *The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men and giveth it to whomsoever He will.*" (Dan 4:35) My in a day of economic upheaval, political instability, and moral chaos isn't it good to remind our hearts that " ***God is still on the Throne.***" (1) (2) (3) but notice Paul spoke about,

(4) The GRACE of God: He is SAVIOUR:

For as Paul, brought his message to a close, Paul summarised the clear evidences of God's grace. For centuries, God was patient with man's sin and ignorance (14:16 Rom 3:25) This does not mean that man 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 everywhere to repent. 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.

Now my 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. So after Paul had disputed with them and declared to them, the true and living God we read of

(c) HIS DEPARTURE FROM THEM:

Look if will at (17:33) There were three different responses to the message. Some *Ridiculed it*: some would *Reconsider it*: some *Received it*. (17:34) Look at (17:34) This man was a member of the court at the Areopagite where Paul spoke. Do you know something ? The Lord can save anyone and once in a while the Lord saves someone who to us is an impossible case to encourage us to believe that nothing is too hard for the Lord. My when you consider the seeming meagre results in Athens with the greater harvests in Thessalonica and Berea, you may 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. **After all, one soul is worth the whole world.** My do we still not 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 ? Paul says,

“ Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called.” (1 Cor 1:26) He does not

say “ *Not any,*” but “ *Not many.*” My some are called, and God may use you to call them. Are you willing therefore to take the gospel to your “ **Athens,**” ?