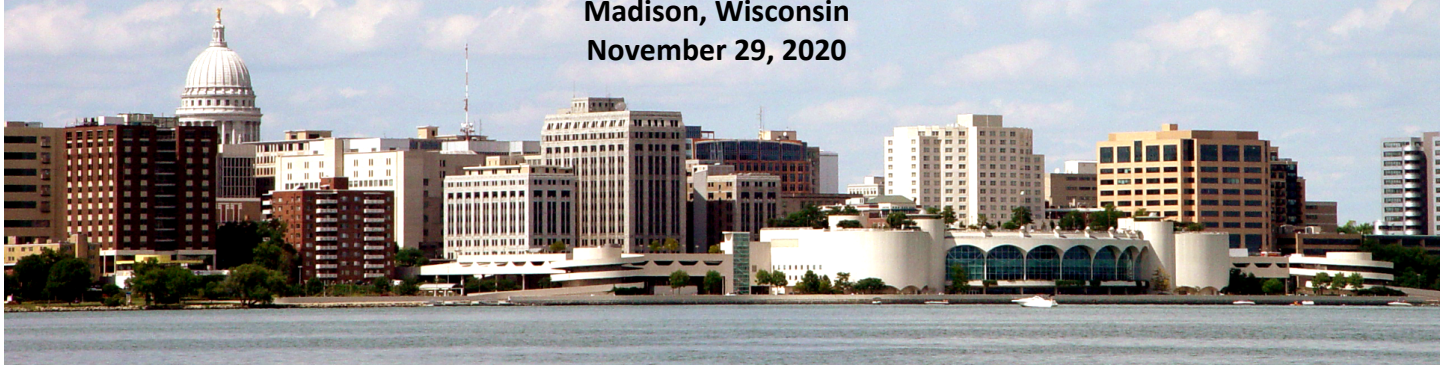


Upsetting the World

ACTS 17:1-9 • PART 1: PAUL'S METHOD

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with you this morning! As usual, I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, preferably from home; but, if you need those, we do have some available on the table in the entryway. And due to the outbreak that we're having in Dane County right now, we are trying to emphasize giving either through the mail or through the church website. To find that link, you can either go to the "Get In Touch" tab on the website or go to the announcement section. All of this is also summarized on the back page of our bulletin, which is emailed to all of our members every Saturday. If you have any questions, please get in touch. After our study of the word this morning, John (one of our shepherds) will lead us in the prayers for the Lord's Supper, and then we'll be singing "He Lives" (#220). So, if you are joining us from home or from your car, we are giving you a heads-up on the song, in case you would like to follow along in your own song book. By the way, I think it was last Sunday I learned that one of our families was joining us in the parking lot of a Taco Bell out in Dodgeville. Apparently, in addition to fire sauce, Taco Bell has some decent wi-fi. We take whatever we can get, don't we! But we are so thankful that those of you who are not able to make it here to the building are able to join in in whatever way is possible for you. And we are thankful for those in the congregation who have the skills necessary for making the service available online and on the telephone each week.

As our custom has been, we are starting this morning with God's plan for our salvation. God sent his Son to this earth to live a perfect life, but we killed him. Thankfully, though, God made a way for us to be saved, and he has told us about it in his word. After Jesus' death, he was buried, and he was then raised up on the third day. And in response, we are to believe the message, we must turn away from sin, we are to confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and then we are commanded to be baptized (immersed in water) for the forgiveness of our sins.

And once again, we have several examples today. I hope you are not getting tired of this, because this continues to be a highlight of my week – keeping an eye out for baptisms all around the world. Years ago, a childhood friend of mine started a website, "Baptism 365," and his goal was to highlight a baptism somewhere in the world every day of the year. He gave up after a while (I think he has seven kids, so he had some other things going on in his life that demanded more attention), but with social media it's quite easy to know when people obey the gospel.

The first one today comes to us from Alex Nwankwo, Enugu, Nigeria. I don't have the name of the person being baptized, but I'm sharing this for a reason. I've mentioned before that some of our brothers and sisters in Nigeria are dealing with persecution from Islamic extremists, and something in this picture caught my eye. Above their baptistery, you might notice some razor wire on top of the concrete wall. Many churches (especially in the northern part of Nigeria) have had to take some rather extreme measures to protect themselves from violence as they worship. But what we have going on in the bottom part of this picture is awesome! In spite of the threat of violence, at least one man has dedicated his life to following Jesus, and we are thankful.

The next example comes to us from Robin Williams at the Garza Avenue congregation in Dallas, Texas. Richard Simmons is the one being baptized here. At first I thought we had Richard Simmons being baptized by Robin Williams – that really caught my eye, but I think Robin Williams might be the wife of the preacher, the one who posted the pictures. And I'm guessing that this Richard Simmons is not the exercise guy. But we rejoice with Richard and the Garza Avenue congregation today.

We also had another baptism in Honolulu this past Friday, as Ricky Ferguson obeyed the gospel. Once again, there were kids everywhere for this, but I'm sharing a few screenshots from the baptism itself.

And then we had an interesting situation in Alabama, posted by Terry Francis, a gospel preacher. Just a few days ago, brother Francis had the unique opportunity of seeing his oldest son baptize his youngest daughter. And I thought that was so awesome! I feel like I have done this to my sister many times, but never in any official capacity! But how awesome this is: A brother and sister in the flesh are now brother and sister in the Lord, and so we rejoice with the Francis family this morning. And again, we share these examples by way of encouragement: What these people have done over the past few days, you can do this morning. If you have any questions or if you would like to study together, please get in touch.

This morning I'd like for us to start a two-part series of lessons based on a scene from the life of the apostle Paul on his Second Missionary Journey, as he passes through the city of Thessalonica in Acts 17. Many years ago, we studied with a man from China in a nursing home down in Janesville. We had a huge language barrier between us and struggled even to find books of the Bible. Ours was in English; his was in Chinese. But in trying to at least get to the same book of the Bible just by comparing the lengths of each book and their placement in canonical order, we came to what we thought should have been the book of Acts. So, we asked him what this book is called, and he translated it for us. He said, "This is the book of gospel action." And ever since that time, whenever I study the book of Acts, I think of it as "the book of gospel action." We have the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and in Acts we have all of that teaching being put into practice by the early church. In roughly the first 1/3 of Acts, we focus in on the preaching of Peter and John. But in the last 2/3 of Acts we start focusing on the conversion and then the preaching of Paul. He makes three missionary journeys, followed by his journey to Rome, where the book of Acts ends with Paul under house arrest.

Today and next Sunday, I want us to focus in on one of Paul's stops on one of these journeys, as he passes through Thessalonica. Most of us have maps in the backs of our Bibles (or we can very easily find something online). Feel free to do a quick search for a map of Paul's Second Missionary Journey, and you will very quickly find a map of that journey, and you will find that he passes through Thessalonica. In our Wednesday class, we've studied a few passages lately from Acts 16, as he passes through Philippi. So, on this journey, he goes from Philippi (where he baptizes Lydia and the jailer), then he goes to Thessalonica (where he is basically run out of town after a few weeks), and then he continues on to Athens and then to Corinth, before heading back home. Today, though, we focus on Thessalonica, perhaps the fourth-largest city in the Roman Empire at that time, with

a population almost the size of Madison. So, it was a huge and strategic city – not only as a seaport, but also as a key city along the Ignatian Way, a Roman road nearly 700 miles long, stretching across the entirety of northern Greece, basically connecting Rome to the rest of the world to the east. By now you have hopefully figured out that I’m showing a map of the Ignatian Way up here, and the giant yellow arrow is pointing to Thessalonica, at very roughly the halfway point across the Ignatian Way (or Via Ignatia, as it is sometimes called).

This morning, I want us to look at what happens in Thessalonica as something of a case study, and I want us to learn from Paul’s example. Today, we’ll look at what Paul does, and then next week I hope we can focus in how the people react to what Paul does here.

But first, let’s look at the text itself – Acts 17:1-9 – and as we study, we’re looking at an image from modern-day Thessaloniki, Greece. We’re looking from the harbor out into the Aegean Sea – but, we’ll cover this up for now, as we look at Acts 17, the account of what happens in this place nearly 2000 years ago – Acts 17:1-9,

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.

Again, as we make a first run through this passage today, let’s take a few moments to think about Paul’s method here. And he did have a method. Notice, in verse 2, how Luke (the author of this account) says that “***...according to Paul’s custom, he went to them...for three Sabbaths.***” So, before we get into what Paul actually does when he is here, let’s notice here at the beginning that Paul takes the gospel to the people. He doesn’t wait for people to come to him, but he goes to them “***according to his custom.***” So, Paul has a method. And the reason we’re looking at this is that Madison is a city much like Thessalonica, and Paul’s mission is our mission. We are both operating under the Great Commission. Our goal is to make disciples, and we do it just like Paul did it.

I. So, as we think about what happens here, let’s notice first of all that Paul REASONED FROM THE SCRIPTURES.

And if we were to look up the word Luke uses to describe what Paul does here, most of us (even as English-speakers) could probably recognize the word “dialog” here. In a sense, Paul “***dialoged from the scriptures.***” He had a conversation with these people. There was some back and forth. This isn’t purely a lecture, but he is having a discussion. I don’t know about you, but this is something I truly miss from our Sunday morning and Wednesday evening Bible classes. I miss the dialog. I miss the back and forth. I miss the discussions. And I say this, because

there is a value in bouncing ideas off of each other. There is a value in asking questions. There is a value in searching for clarity together. Yes, there is a value to preaching. But there is also a value to discussion.

Let's also notice, though, that this isn't just a discussion. But instead, this is a discussion that comes "**from the scriptures.**" Luke (the author) is referring to the Hebrew Bible, the word of God, the Law of Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets. Paul takes what these people already know and trust, and he establishes a dialog, he takes what they know, and he points them to Jesus. The word of God is the anchor of these conversations. The word of God is their authority. Everything goes back to the Word. I'm sure that Paul used illustrations, I'm sure he told stories to try to get a point across, but everything is tied to the Word. The Word is the foundation of everything he says. The word of God forms the church, not the other way around. And since the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, our dialog with the world needs to reflect this. Truth changes people. And so, when we get involved in religious discussions, whenever we communicate, let's make sure that we are reasoning from the Scriptures, just as Paul did.

II. As we go back to the text, let's also notice how Luke describes Paul as EXPLAINING (at the very beginning of verse 3).

When we explain something, we simplify or rephrase something in a way that makes sense. I've done quite a bit of explaining at the recount this week. As most of you know, I've served as an election official for nearly 30 years now, the past 20 years as a chief inspector in the City of Madison. Two weeks ago, the County Clerk's office emailed to ask whether I'd be willing to help with the recount. I said yes, and the next day they emailed again, asking whether I'd be willing to supervise the recount. Reluctantly, I agreed. But the point of this is that over the past 10 days, I've had to explain our process over, and over, and over again. And by the time I think I've explained it, we hit the lunch break, and a new crew comes in, and it starts all over again. I've had to explain election law to observers and attorneys – over, and over, and over again. To explain is to transmit knowledge in a way that can be understood. When the recount began, the Clerk's office gave me a huge binder on Wisconsin election law – the actual statutes and also a rather large manual on their procedures. I will admit that it is basically unintelligible by the average person. And so, we have had to explain. We give more information.

In terms of explaining the Bible, we bring in other passages. We define words. We describe local customs. We might think about what I did earlier when I told you we were going to be studying something that happened in Thessalonica. I didn't just leave it at that, but I told you that Thessalonica is similar in size to the City of Madison. I told you where Thessalonica is. I showed it to you on a map. I described the Ignatian Way. The Bible doesn't tell us that Paul walked on the Ignatian Way, but I felt that it would help us understand this passage. I went online and found a picture from the harbor in Thessalonica, to try to help this passage come alive – this is a real place with real people along an actual road on an actual harbor. In fact, it's funny to me that I'm trying to explain this passage right now by explaining how I am explaining it! And I'm hoping that the next time you read this passage or anything from the books of 1-2 Thessalonians, you might remember at least a little bit of this, and I'm hoping that it might make more sense. When somebody picks up a Bible for the very first time it's a bit overwhelming – pages and pages of cities, and names, and strange customs, and weird words – but over time as people explain it to us, things start to fit together. I'm thinking of Philip asking the Ethiopian Officer whether he understands what he is reading, and his answer is, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" The man from Ethiopia needed an explanation!

Literally, to "**explain**" is to "open." The word is used in Mark 7:34 to refer to Jesus "**opening**" the ears of a man who is deaf. Paul opened the Scriptures in Thessalonica. But do you know who else is described as "**opening**"

the scriptures? Jesus himself! You might remember the two men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 and how Jesus joined them on the road, but they didn't know it was Jesus. He disguised his appearance in some way. At this point, Luke refers to Jesus and says, ***"Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He EXPLAINED to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures."*** Then (in verses 31-32), at the breaking of the bread, Luke says, ***"Then their eyes were OPENED and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was EXPLAINING the Scriptures to us?'"*** This word for explaining or opening is found three times in this passage. So, Jesus (just as Paul does here) starts with Moses and the prophets and he ***"explains."*** He opens the word. And this leads to these men coming to an understanding of who Jesus really is. Paul is following the example of Jesus here, in opening and explaining the word of God.

The lesson for us is: Sometimes we need to explain things to people. We need to open the word of God in a way that helps people understand. We take what we know, and we share it.

III. This leads us to something else Paul does here, and that is: He **GIVES EVIDENCE**.

He gives evidence, ***"...that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead."*** Literally, to ***"give evidence"*** is to "set before," to lay it out for somebody. It refers to the presentation of information, as you might do before a judge or a jury. I want to deviate from our nice picture of Thessalonica for a minute, to share a picture from the recount this week. Over and over and over again, my job as a lead tabulator for the Dane County Clerk's office was to help manage the process, and a part of that was taking evidence to the Board of Canvas. The Board makes decisions and is made up of a Democrat, a Republican, and the Dane County Clerk (Scott McDonnell), who is a Democrat. At our tables, legal representatives from both sides would have the opportunity to make objections for various reasons – the lack of a signature on an absentee envelope, the lack of initials on a ballot, any number of reasons. When all the objections had been made for a ward or municipality, I would gather those up, take them to the lead attorneys, and then go with them to the Board. I would then take the evidence and lay it out before the Board. This is all livestreamed and witnessed by dozens of attorneys. I would lay the evidence out in front of the Board, and then I would step away and let them examine it.

I laugh every time I see this. You can see Scott McDonnell, the county clerk (standing, with the red vest), you can see the court reporter sitting down at the computer, facing away from us, you can see the Republican member of the board with her head in her hands ("What have I gotten myself into?"), and then you can see the Democrat rep on the board sitting back in his chair reading a book – this is not his recount, he's just making decisions. Then you have two of the lead attorneys making their case concerning the evidence I've just set before the board. And then you have my assistant, Rudy, there on the left, looking at me like, "What in the world are you doing taking a picture right now?" Anyway, I just laugh at this. The attorneys are not allowed to touch the evidence, so when they are done arguing and the Board takes a vote (usually 2-1 to override the challenge), I come in and take the evidence back to my crew to do whatever the board has decided.

My point in mentioning all of this is to ***"explain"*** what it means to ***"lay out the evidence."*** Remember: That's what this word means, "to place before." And so, when Paul ***"gives evidence,"*** he is laying it out. He's laying out the word of God in a way that allows these people to make a decision.

And specifically, we find in verse 3 that Paul is ***"...explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead."*** He's laying it out. And since he's in a Jewish synagogue, he's probably turning to passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 and Psalm 16:10, and he's making the argument: This applies to Jesus!

Jesus is the Suffering Servant. Jesus is the one whose body was not allowed to undergo decay. Jesus is the one who cried out, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** Here is the evidence: Based on your own documents, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God! Based on Moses and the prophets you respect and admire, Jesus had to suffer and rise again from the dead! Paul lays it out. He gives evidence. He opens the word and he points to it. The real power is not in PowerPoint. The real power comes in pointing to the word of God. Paul lays it out; he gives evidence.

Conclusion:

Today, then, as we think about what Paul does, he reasons from the scriptures, he explains, he gives evidence, and his message is, ***“This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”*** And we learn from this. We are looking at Paul’s method. And to reach the world around us, to reach our Thessalonica, we do what he did.

- We REASON FROM THE SCRIPTURES – we dialog, we discuss – we start where people are, and we move toward Jesus from there.
- We EXPLAIN – we open the word of God in a way that makes sense, we bring passages together, we share what we know about Bible places and customs – we simplify, we rephrase, and we guide.
- And finally, we GIVE EVIDENCE – we lay it out, we prove, we point to the word of God, we arrange a meeting between those we know and the word of God.

By the way, all of this is pretty much what we’ve been learning in our Wednesday classes over the past few weeks. We’ve been looking at a series of worksheets, not for our own benefit, necessarily, but giving us some tools to teach others – laying out in a logical way what we know about Jesus, what we believe about worship, and what we know about God’s plan for our salvation. This is something all of us can do. It is a great honor. It is an honor not reserved for preachers. But all of us have been given the privilege and the responsibility of reasoning, explaining, and giving evidence.

I hope you can join us next week as we look at how those in Thessalonica respond to Paul’s message, and I think we’ll see some similarities to how it’s received today.

As we close, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. You have been so good to us. Thank you for Jesus, and thank you for a way to come back. This morning, we are thankful for the example of the apostle Paul. We are thankful for his courage and skill in proclaiming the good news of your Son’s death, burial, and resurrection.

This morning, we come to you asking for your grace and mercy on sister Ruby as she recovers. Bless our members who are continuing to recover from the virus. We pray that you would hold up those who are caring for others – whether at home or in hospitals, caregiving can be so difficult, and frustrating, and lonely, and it keeps coming day after day. We know that you are a God who sees, even when nobody else does. And so, in an uncertain world, as we are surrounded by chaos and panic and despair and exhaustion (both physical and emotional), we are so thankful

to be able to come to you in prayer. You are a great and awesome God who brings peace into our lives. We pray that you would surround us with your loving care.

We pray that you would bless the parents in the congregation as they guide their children through these difficult times. We ask that you would give them strength and patience. We pray that our children will connect with wise and god-fearing friends who will help them get to heaven.

As our friends and loved ones travel and make their way home after the Thanksgiving holiday, we ask for your grace to bring us where we need to be. And wherever we go, give us opportunities to open your word to others – to reason, to explain, and to lay it out.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com