

RABBLE AND NOBLES

by Ray C. Stedman

Let's resume our study of how the most revolutionary message the world has ever heard moved into Europe and thus affected the history of Western civilization for some 2000 years. We began, you remember, in the sixteenth chapter of Acts with the story of Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy in the city of Philippi, and of the great earthquake that released them from prison with dramatic impact, and of how God used four distinct methods to break through the entrenched evil of that city and to implant a church there.

This is what God is always doing in human history. He establishes a bridgehead in the midst of entrenched evil, with its resultant violence and disaster, and, by that bridgehead, he begins to propagate the gospel and thus to clear up the situation.

The story moves on in Chapter 17, as Paul and Silas move west, leaving Luke and Timothy behind in Philippi for the time being.

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Appollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued 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." 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. {Acts 17:1-4 RSV}

Paul and Silas were following the famous Roman road called the Egnatian Way which crossed Macedonia and connected the Adriatic Sea with the Black Sea. The cities mentioned here all lie on that road. Here we see something of the apostle's strategy as he was led of the Spirit to move into various cities, passing through some and stopping in others. He always chose the most strategic center from which the gospel might reach out into the surrounding area.

In this particular region it was Thessalonica. A little more than two years ago I was there. I stood on the old Roman wall which formed the northern city limits and saw the old Via Egnatia winding down out of the hills into the city proper. In my mind's eye I could picture Paul and Silas and the little band of Christian brethren coming down that road into the city.

In this account it sounds as though this journey were a rather pleasant afternoon's stroll. But Amphipolis is thirty-three miles from Philippi, a day's journey on foot. Apollonia is some thirty miles from Amphipolis, another day's journey. Thessalonica is thirty-seven miles beyond Apollonia, and that is a full day's journey. So it took Paul at least three days to come from Philippi to Thessalonica. Notice Luke's wonderful way of encapsulating numerous facts. He dismisses a journey of one hundred miles with just a sentence.

When they entered Thessalonica they sought first a synagogue of the Jews. In the encounters Paul had with Jesus Christ, while giving him the gospel, the Lord also told Paul that it was his will that the gospel should go to the Jews first. So Paul always obeyed and went to the Jews wherever he found them in these cities.

In the synagogue he always began with the Scriptures, as he did here at Thessalonica. For three Sabbath mornings he reasoned with them out of the Scriptures. He was undoubtedly in the city much longer than three weeks. But he was limited to three weeks' ministry within the synagogue itself. He was soon excluded, as we will see, and had opportunity for only three Sabbaths of teaching there. If you wonder what he was doing the rest of the week, he tells us in Second Thessalonians:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were

with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. {2 Th 3:7-8 RSV}

He made tents all through the week. But on Saturday he went into the synagogue and taught the Scriptures. From them, he dealt with that great stumbling block to the Jews -- the death and resurrection of Christ. These people, like Jews all over the world at that time, were having a great struggle with Jesus of Nazareth. They could accept him as the Messiah as long as they were not confronted with the facts of his death. But a suffering, crucified Messiah was a great offense to them.

You see, they read their Scriptures much as we sometimes read ours. They picked out all the passages which they liked, and kept reading those over and over. Eventually they thought that was all the Scriptures said about the Messiah. They liked the passages which dealt with the majesty of the Messiah, with the time when he would come in his royal power and establish his kingdom over all the world and rule over the nations, subdue all enemies, cause war and strife to cease, and reign in triumphant splendor and glory. That is what they were expecting. But they ignored those passages which deal with a suffering and crucified Messiah, and with the necessity for a resurrection.

Some of the Jewish rabbis had actually come up with the idea that there were two Messiahs. One they called Messhiach ben David, i.e., Messiah the son of David. This was the glorious, triumphant king. Another they called Messhiach ben Joseph, from one Old Testament passage which some rabbis interpreted as teaching that a Messiah would be the son of Joseph, and that he would be the suffering One. Very likely this teaching is what John the Baptist referred to when he was in prison, discouraged, and he sent word to Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or should we look for another?" {cf, Matt 11:3}.

Paul showed them there is only one. "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ, the Messiah." I imagine he started with Isaiah 53:

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:5-6 RSV}**

What an impact he would have made with that passage! And perhaps he used Psalm 22, which opens with the words of Jesus from the cross:

My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? {Psa 22:1 RSV}

This psalm goes on to describe the sufferings of his death, the agony that he went through. Then he must have brought in the resurrection passages, like Psalm 16:

For thou wilt not ... permit thine Holy One to see corruption. {cf, Psa 16:10}

With passages such as these he reasoned with these Jews, proving that Jesus was the Christ. The account says, "And some of them were persuaded," and here we find three groups of people who responded to his message:

The toughest nuts to crack were these religious Jews. Religious people are always toughest, in any community. They are the ones most set in their ways, most prejudiced, most hard-headed, the hardest to reach, because they think they know it all already. He reached only a few of those.

But there was a great band of unprejudiced Gentiles, Greeks, who, tiring of the emptiness of their pagan philosophies, had come to the synagogue hoping to hear the truth about the Living God. They had been attracted by the Jewish Scriptures. They knew there was something here, but they had not yet become Jews

and were not yet circumcised. As these Gentiles heard the word of the gospel, they were tremendously impressed, and they believed.

Among them, Luke is careful to point out, was a group of the leading women of the city. You find that emphasis in several places in this book. The gospel had a particular appeal to women, especially to women of the upper classes who were prominent citizens of these Greek cities. There is a reason for that. These were educated women and were therefore instructed in the philosophies of Greece. But they had found that these Greek philosophies were dead and empty, offering nothing for the heart, nothing for the spirit within. They instructed the mind but did nothing for the soul. And further, they were philosophies full of voluptuous and degrading practices which left these women devastated and filled with self-loathing if they gave in to them. So they had turned from their philosophies to Judaism. But in Judaism they found themselves burdened with difficult and cumbersome regulations which again left them empty. Then the gospel came with the glad good news that, in Jesus Christ, there is neither male nor female, bond nor free, black nor white, nor any other distinction, that all the distinctions men make were broken down, all the middle walls of partition removed. These women responded joyously! They found a liberating, fulfilling, and satisfying glory about the gospel and they responded to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, inviting the Lord Jesus to enter their hearts.

So there was a tremendous impact upon the city because of this conversion of a great band of Gentiles including these leading women. That is God's way of moving into Thessalonica. He had these prepared hearts ready to listen.

The devil struck back immediately. But God permitted it because God always uses the devil for his own purposes. The next section shows us what occurred when Paul and Silas, with their preaching, had reached these people in the city:

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. {Acts 17:5-9 RSV}

Do you recognize a rather familiar pattern? Here are the tactics of the rabble who, unwilling to accept defeat at the hands of logic and reason, always resort to violence to accomplish their purpose. We are very familiar with that in our day.

This is exactly what occurred last week when President Nixon visited the city of San Jose and was assailed by just such a crowd using these very tactics to try to accomplish their ends.

We are told here that the Jews were jealous. They were unable to win against the power of the Scriptures and the logic of the apostle, and so they revealed the lawlessness in their own hearts by turning, literally, to "the loafers of the marketplace," young men who were what today we would call hoods or toughs, radicals, who knew how to manipulate a crowd.

In this they followed a classic pattern. They started a disturbance which attracted a crowd. When the crowd gathered around them, they inflamed them with emotional words and propaganda until the crowd was brought to a fever pitch. Then they gave them a victim to attack. They turned them against Paul and Silas, for no reason whatsoever. This is how easily a crowd can be manipulated. It does whatever its leaders direct. As these men were skilled at this, they were able to incite these people to an unprovoked and groundless attack upon these two men who were there preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. They came to lynch them.

But now, notice how God works. His hand was fully in control, and just before the mob arrived he sent Paul and Silas out for a cup of coffee or something. They simply were not there when the crowd arrived. So the mob had to be satisfied with dragging out Jason, the host, and some of the brethren, and bringing them before

the city authorities.

The charges against Paul and Silas are very interesting. There is a germ of truth in them, but, in the way they were intended, they are palpably false. They were charged with two things:

First, with being notorious troublemakers. "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." I do not know whether these authorities had heard about the trouble in Philippi or not. Perhaps they had. Or they may simply have recognized Paul and Silas as Jews and, since the Jews were in trouble in Rome at that very time, perhaps they identified them with that. But whatever the reason, what they said was true. These were indeed men who had turned the world upside down.

But what they did not realize was that the world was already upside down. When you turn something upside down which is already upside down, you turn it right side up. The world was turned upside down at the Fall, and it has been operating reverse ever since. That is why it never works right. In the final analysis everything seems to fall apart. Even the best efforts of men never seem to accomplish the solution of the dilemma. That is why we are still struggling with the same problems they wrestled with in the days of Noah, before the flood. Is that not amazing? No progress has been made, none whatsoever. Despite all our vaunted technology and abilities, we have made no progress in solving basic human problems. That is because the world is upside down.

But now the gospel comes in and turns it right side up. And as men and women respond to the gospel, that which God intended for man begins to be worked out in their lives. Peace and tranquility and prosperity and progress and harmony and love and grace -- all these wonderful things begin to flow out of a community which is operating in the fullness of life provided in Jesus Christ. So they were indeed men who turned the world upside down.

The second charge was that they were challenging Caesar's authority, that they were preaching another king -- Jesus. That reveals something of what Paul had been saying. He had been declaring the Lordship of Jesus, the fact that all men relate to him in some way. His spiritual kingdom encompasses the whole of humanity, and men live within that kingdom whether they like it or not. He is indeed Lord of all things, and men have a relationship to him. But of course these men interpreted that as a challenge to the authority of Caesar. They thought they were being political insurrectionists.

They finally settled the matter by taking security from Jason. That sounds as though Paul and Silas were released on bail. But, if that is the case, they became bail jumpers, because immediately they went away by night to Beroea. It is very difficult to think that Paul and Silas would do that. They would never try to cheat justice. This must mean that Jason had to give a certain amount of money as a guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave Thessalonica and never return. That is probably what Paul refers to in his first letter to the Thessalonians:

But since we were bereft of you, brethren, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face; because we wanted to come to you -- I, Paul, again and again -- but Satan hindered us. {1 Th 2:17-18 RSV}

What hindered him very likely was this guarantee against his return.

The next stop is the city of Beroea:

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Beroea; and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. {Acts 17:10-12 RSV}

Beroea is a very pleasant little city lying in the foothills of the Olympic Mountains, about sixty miles southwest

of Thessalonica. Dr. Dick Hillis and I had the privilege of standing on the steps of the synagogue where Paul preached in Beroea. This ancient synagogue has been excavated and it has been established that it was the actual one in which Paul preached. We took great joy in standing on those steps and trying to preach to each other. I also had the great privilege of entering the evangelical church there in Beroea. Going to the pulpit and finding the Greek Bible, I opened it to this very text:

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. {Acts 17:11 RSV}

This is important, for Luke carefully draws a sharp contrast here between the rabble in Thessalonica -- with their unthinking, prejudiced minds, and their emotional, impulsive actions -- and these Jews in Beroea, who were more noble. In what did their nobility consist? Well, not merely in receiving the word, but also in checking it out with the Scriptures. A noble person is one who has not only an open mind but also a cautious heart. He will not accept a teaching unless he checks it with the Scriptures.

That is what the Scriptures are for. They are your guide so that you can tell what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. And unless a Christian does this, he is lost in a sea of relativism, where he does not know what is right or what is wrong. Your mind becomes confused and blinded and you can be misled and manipulated, as the rabble in Thessalonica manipulated the crowd there, unless you have the nobility to check things out according to the Scriptures. That is what these Jews did, and it was a tremendous help. They checked up on the Apostle Paul.

This is something we ought to encourage. I happen to be in correspondence right now with a woman in Oklahoma City, who wrote me a few weeks ago after reading my book, "What On Earth's Going To Happen?" She took issue with something I said, and wrote me about it in a very nice way. My impulse at first, I admit, was to write back and to say, "You're quite wrong, why bother to argue? Take what I said." But I recognized that she was an honest person and that she was trying to discover the answer in the Scriptures. What appealed to me about her letter was that she was quoting other passages. I wrote back and patiently tried to explain what I meant. She wrote back immediately by return mail and quoted an authority. So I answered that, and she wrote right back again. I have now answered her third letter, but I do not hope to get the last word because, after all, she is a woman! But I have found her to be on a par with these noble women of Beroea who were trying to establish the truth from the Scriptures.

The value of this story to us, and the reason Luke includes it, is that we might learn the necessity of testing any man's word. Do not listen to just one man's tapes, or read only one man's books or messages. It is a very dangerous practice. You will be misled by his errors and you will not know how to recognize them. Never give yourself to following a single man. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "You who do this are carnal. You follow Apollos or Cephas or Paul, but we are all provided for your instruction. You need us all," {cf, 1 Cor 1:12, 3:22}.

Do not ever limit yourself to a single man's ministry, including mine. Do not read only the messages published here and take them as Scripture. Check them out in the Scriptures and with other teachers. Establish what the Word of God says. That is the authority. How delighted Luke is to commend these Beroeans for their nobility in doing this very thing!

The account concludes with a very familiar pattern:

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Beroea also, they came there too, stirring up and inciting the crowds. Then the brethren immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a commend for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. {Acts 17:13-15 RSV}

Here come the hounds of hell, panting down the road from Thessalonica. These Jews were not content to drive

Paul out of Thessalonica but they pursued him sixty miles away and now they arrive, employing the same familiar tactics. They move in and stir up the thoughtless crowds who are governed by their emotions and respond to anything which gets them mad. They set them upon Paul and Silas, and poor Paul has to slip out of the city again by night. I don't think he ever left a city by daylight. He came in by day, but he had to leave by night. He is on his way by sea to Athens now, leaving Silas and Timothy behind to establish the church.

That, of course, is the point of the whole story. Paul is free to leave because he has left a church behind. God has implanted a believing community who will be a bridgehead in the midst of the evil of that city, to arrest its corruption and dispel its darkness, as they operate in the freedom and liberty of the body of Christ, exercising their gifts and proclaiming the delivering truth.

Whenever you get a church operating like that you find that all the entrenched evil in a community is immediately under attack. There may be a stiff battle for a while, but, eventually, the forces of light will win and the community will begin to be delivered and will find itself set free. Light will penetrate the darkness and men will be able to think straight and act and react right, even though they are not yet Christians. The light of the gospel lifts the whole level of community life. That is why Paul was so concerned that these young Christians left in Beroea and Thessalonica would grow in grace, would understand the power committed to them, and exercise it to set these communities free.

When I was in Beroea it was interesting to me to find that the church which Paul implanted has now become the persecutor. The Spirit has had to break in afresh with a new body of believers who meet in secret places there today to avoid persecution and oppression by the church that Paul began. The Greek Orthodox Church, lineal successor to the church that Paul started in Greece, has now become sunken in apathy, liturgy and ritual, and dead orthodoxy, and is persecuting the fresh, alive, evangelical church of these areas. The church I visited was deliberately built behind a group of buildings in a little compound, where it could be partially hidden. The believers could not advertise their meetings, and had to meet secretly, at unscheduled times. They could not openly evangelize within the city but had to meet from house to house. Yet a very alive and fruitful work was going on in these cities. If you want to pray for Christians in Greece, pray for these evangelical believers in Thessalonica and Beroea today, who are still being persecuted.

This should indicate to us that any group can become the instrument of evil as well as good, if the life of the body in that group is not kept fresh and vital. When a group does lose its savor and its light, it becomes an instrument of evil and darkness, and God has to break in afresh, as he is doing in so many places in our day, and awaken a new body, pour new wine into new wineskins, so that the freshness and vitality of the gospel will not be hindered. God is doing that all over the world today.

Prayer:

Finally, brethren, farewell. Mend your ways, heed my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. {2 Cor 13:11, 14 RSV}

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