

# THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT: GOD'S WORD

by Steve Zeisler

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Before we begin our study, please take out your Bible and look at it. Think for a moment about the privilege it is to have communication from the heart of God. Think about the love of God that caused him to express himself, to make plain what is true and false. Think about the faith of those who were inspired by the Spirit of God over the centuries to write the documents in this book. Think about the courage of those in each generation who preserved, defended, and translated God's word, so that it comes to us in our own familiar tongue, available for us to understand.

We are studying the second missionary journey, which is recorded in five chapters in the middle of the book of Acts. The opening two sections of Acts 17 tell us the account of the evangelization of two cities in Macedonia, Thessalonica and Berea. Previously we have seen Paul and his companions founding a church in Philippi. They had received a miraculous call in a night vision from a Macedonian man saying, "Come and help us." Now this mission is moving on to Thessalonica and Berea.

In this chapter we'll see emphasis on the centrality of Scripture in our experience, on its profound ability to challenge unbelievers and to encourage those who already believe. Observe the way Luke writes of the opening of the Thessalonian ministry in Acts 17:2:

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures....

Now let's look at the corresponding introduction to the Berean ministry in verses 10-11:

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

The central place of reasoning from the Bible, of offering explanation and proclamation, of inviting examination, of wrestling with the text, of hearing the word of God speak to our hearts, is what we want to consider in this passage. I hope you'll find yourself more than ever encouraged to be a man or woman of this great book, someone who loves this love letter written to us from heaven.

In our previous studies we observed how the Lord did his creative work of changing relationships and expectations within the church. We also considered the creative and surprising work of the Holy Spirit converting a slave girl and Roman jailer.

Now before us in the first section of chapter 17 is not the unexpected, but what Luke calls Paul's customary ministry, which centers around the Bible. Let's read verses 1-15:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they

dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Notice that in verse 1 Luke is again writing in the third person (remember, in our study in the early part of chapter 16 [Discovery Paper 4482], he was writing in the first person, indicating that he himself had joined the team). Evidently Luke has stayed behind in Philippi and the others have traveled on.

It was about a hundred miles from Philippi to Thessalonica. Philippi was a great city and a strategic place for ministry, because it was a Roman colony and had a particular affinity for Rome itself and for Roman influence in the empire. Thessalonica would also turn out to be a strategic city, because it was the capital of Macedonia proper, it was the most influential city in its own region, it was on the seacoast, and it was a large center of trade. Looking at 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8, we realize that indeed this city was a critical jumping-off point for ministry elsewhere. Paul writes, "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia---your faith in God has become known everywhere." Paul passed by Amphipolis and Apollonia because they were less strategic, and he went to the city of Thessalonica because he knew the entire region could be touched through a church centered there.

## In search of God-fearers

The synagogue was always the place these missionaries started, if they had an opportunity to do so. Recall that Philippi had no synagogue, but normally the synagogue was their entrée point for evangelization and outreach in a given area.

It is helpful to understand why that was. The religion of the Jews, centered on temple worship in Jerusalem, was off limits to Gentiles. Jewish leaders were profoundly concerned to avoid the contaminating influence of Gentiles.

But the synagogue system offered the unique opportunity of making the Old Testament Scriptures available everywhere the Jews had been dispersed throughout the entire world. There were three things the Jews did in the synagogues, and Gentile people could join in and benefit from all of them. They would read the Bible, pray, and try to make some application to their lives of what they were reading and praying about.

Synagogues probably began during the Babylonian captivity, and are still prominent today among Jews. In the New Testament era the Bible was read most often in Greek. Every educated person in Paul's day spoke Greek. Gentiles could hear the psalms of David praising God. They could hear the law of Moses, which established righteous living and the holiness of God. They could hear the preaching of the prophets, calling for repentance. Gentiles whose hearts were warm toward God could hear these words that stirred, reassured, challenged, and opened their minds.

So in each new city Paul would go regularly to the synagogue to begin ministry, not so much to win Jews (though clearly he was glad for that to happen, too), but as the best entrée to win Gentiles. Ministry to Gentiles

was his calling. Many Gentiles, known as God-fearers, were already present in the local synagogue.

## **God's dialogue with people**

In going customarily to the synagogue Paul teaches us something about how to think of evangelism, about how to think about being Christians among non-Christians. Anytime we engage someone who does not know Christ in conversation and faith is the subject of discussion, we are always entering a dialogue that has already been going on. God has already been speaking to hearts. He has sown his speech into the very creation itself. He has already stirred either love or antagonism in every single person before we ever say anything. And men and women are engaged in either trying to find out more of him or running from him as fast as they can. We will never be the first person to speak a word of truth in anyone's life. It's our job to participate in the conversation going on between God and other people. Jesus wins souls to himself. God makes himself attractive. It is he who loves them more than anyone, it is he who has standards of judgment that they must answer to.

Think about the references, for instance, in Psalm 19:

"The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they display knowledge."

On Friday night my wife and I were in a setting where we could watch the moon rise over a hill. It was unbelievable---big, orange, full, silhouetting some trees for a time, then gradually rising higher in the sky, growing paler and smaller. I found myself thinking of God. In my case, I had the privilege of saying thank you, knowing who has made the heavens and the earth. But for someone who has not come to know the Savior, the moon is still speaking about the God who made it. It's still awakening possibilities for people who can't even articulate what they're feeling. God is speaking when the heavens declare his glory.

Paul makes the same point in Romans 1, although with negative implications. Verse 19: "...What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities---his eternal power and divine nature---have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...."

It's very often a distraction for us to speak about the church too much. Every now and then you'll hear public questioning of what the Christian church believes about affirmative action, domestic partners, modern tax laws, troops to Bosnia, or some other current issue. And church spokespersons will make some statement for or against. But a much more important job for us when anyone approaches us asking those kinds of questions is to say, "What is God saying to you? And how are you responding? Is there any way that I can help you understand why you're so resistant to the One who loves you, or help answer the hopes and dreams that you're articulating without knowing that you're doing so?"

## **Reasoning from the Scriptures**

Let's look now at how the Bible is at the center of all this. Verse 2 uses the broadest term: We are told that Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures. Verse 3 uses more terms that tell us about this engagement with the Bible: explaining, proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, proclaiming to them, and persuading them. These terms all speak of using the gift of intellect that God gave us in making us in his image. God thinks, and what the Scriptures call "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16) is available to us so that we can think as God thinks, approve what he approves, enjoy life with his standards, and avoid things that are dangerous. We can understand.

It seems to me an enormous tragedy that a wedge has been driven between intellect and faith for ordinary Christians. Christians of all people ought to be rational, ought to love truth, ought to be using their minds to think what God has taught them to think. Yet we very often get branded as irrational, foolish, superstitious,

and backward.

At Thessalonica Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explained, proved, proclaimed, and persuaded. Then at Berea his listeners' nobility is praised precisely because they wouldn't agree with him at first. They chose to examine the Bible themselves to see if Paul's teaching of it was accurate.

Throughout the course of most of human history, people who knew the God of the Bible and the truth of the Bible have elevated the educational experience and the minds of the people they encountered. Wherever the Jews went in the ancient world, they took with them the Law and thinking of God. Their influence was a challenge to ignorance and superstition. And wherever the church has gone it has raised the ability of people to think. The greatest universities have been founded by Christians. It was Christian scholars in the middle ages who preserved the thinking of not just Christian thinkers but of the Greeks and Romans and others, because they believed that it was reasonable to use one's mind in serving the Creator.

What has happened in our century, it seems to me, is that in most settings where intellectuals gather, thoughtful Christians who are appreciative of the mind God gave them have been denied the opportunity to enter thoughtful debate by the demand for a series of a priori assumptions:

- Nothing supernatural exists.
- Miracles don't happen.
- All religions are the same.
- Religion in general leads people to violent and crazy behavior.
- There are no such things as absolutes.

Having announced this set of first principles, skeptics then invite believing people to join the debate. But it's impossible to join that debate because we can agree to none of these first principles.

The Bible, this thoughtful love letter from God, this true testimony of the way things are, has a different set of beginning points:

- There is a supernatural Being whose influence cannot be measured by the five senses.
- Miracles do happen.
- Things invisible are most often greater than the things that are visible.
- We are created in his image and fallen in our own arrogance.
- The reason that our lives are so difficult, that we are both noble and tragic, is precisely that we are made in the image of God and we have shaken our fist at our Maker.
- There are absolutes that are clearly stated by the One who made everything.

If we start with this set of a priori statements, then Christians can freely enter into discussion of what makes life worth living, what is more valuable and what is less, what is right and what is wrong, and what is wise and what is foolish.

## **The Biblical explanation of life**

The second thing we're told in verses 2 and 3 is that Paul explained life to the Thessalonians. There is no better explanation of the human condition and the course of history than the Biblical explanation. How is it that the human race is so capable of advancing technology, building enormous monuments, creating great works of art, doing such glorious things, and at the same time engaging in foolish and wicked behavior? Some of the greatest geniuses are the most despicable personalities. What explanation do we have of the rise and fall of civilization over and over again? Advance is made, then a point of arrogance is reached, and civilizations decline, to the point in our own time that six- and eight-year-old children bludgeon a baby. What makes sense of the human condition? How can we believe in our own significance given the world as we experience it? How can we be really honest about what's going on inside of us, about who we are and what we've done, and at the same time have any hope that we'll ever amount to anything? And yet the Bible shows us that both are possible. We can be honest and hopeful at the same time. We have a power source for change that comes from an invisible God. The Scriptures explain the world better than any other source of explanation.

## **Proving, proclaiming Jesus is the Christ**

Next, it says Paul proved that the Christ had to suffer and die. That is, he went back to the prophets of the Old Testament and explained why Messiah would suffer before he would reign. So he proved that the story of Jesus matched the predicted promise of Messiah.

It says that he proclaimed Christ. That is, he told Jesus' story. He said, "Jesus was born of a virgin. He grew to manhood without sin, he taught the most amazing insights into human life that have ever been recorded. He gathered leaders around him, trained them, and left them behind. He willingly went to the cross and suffered as the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world. He was raised by his Father, and he now reigns." He proclaimed the news that went beyond the predictions of the prophets. He told them how the predictions were fulfilled.

I've always loved the title of Josh McDowell's book on apologetics, Evidence that Demands a Verdict. Proclaiming Christ is laying before people the evidence of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, telling what he said about himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It demands a verdict; we have to respond. When Paul reasoned, explained, proved, and proclaimed, some were persuaded and some were not.

### **Additional observations**

I want to make a few more minor observations for your consideration. The first is that Luke deliberately embeds opposites in this story. Consider the responses to Paul's reasoning from the Scriptures in Thessalonica. Some believed and were persuaded, others were jealous. Luke doesn't say that some were unpersuaded, or some found the point unreasonable. What he elucidates is that for most people, resistance to a clear presentation of the gospel is not generally intellectual but moral. Jealousy indicates a resistance of the heart, not the mind.

We see another opposite that is built into this story in the reaction of the mob. It says that Paul's detractors went and gathered a group of bullies from the marketplace. The worthlessness of this group contrasts with the nobility of the Bereans---the angry, jealous, irrational crowd versus those who eagerly sought to understand what God had said. Ray Stedman entitled his sermon on this section of Scripture The Rabble and the Nobles. Luke's deliberate contrast of noble-minded faith and irrational mob violence can encourage us to pursue "the mind of Christ."

A second observation I have is that the accusation that was made against Paul and Silas was both true and false. The Jews said, "They're turning the world upside-down, causing trouble everywhere." And secondly, "They're proclaiming a king in defiance of Caesar." What Paul and his friends were doing, of course, was turning the world right-side-up again. It was already upside-down. And the claim of allegiance to Jesus was not a direct threat to Caesar. Christians didn't want to assassinate Caesar and rule in his stead. They were, however, calling for an allegiance to Jesus that would change everything. Caesar wasn't threatened so much with being replaced by the gospel message as with being made less relevant. The more a life is conformed to Christ the less power any state has to promise, threaten, command or coerce. So allegiance to Jesus was not a direct threat to Rome, but the gospel was in fact changing the world.

Third, as we saw in the last message, women are again highlighted in Luke's telling of this story: not a few prominent women in Thessalonica and a number of prominent Greek women in Berea. The Berean women are mentioned before the men. Luke is not making a big point of this; it's not the heart of the story. But it is a repeated reference that we would be foolish not to take note of. The influence, faith, and godliness of women were at the heart of the early church, and we shouldn't expect anything else of any church in any age.

Lastly, pastors were left behind. The direct challenge of evangelistic proclamation led to both faith and resistance. Whether in Philippi or Thessalonica or Berea, inevitably the lightning rod, the public figure who stirred the most antagonism and the most concern was Paul, or Paul and Silas together. But public proclamation was not the only significant ministry being accomplished. We already noted that Luke stayed

behind in Philippi, presumably to nurture believers there. We're not told that Timothy made the trip to Berea at first, so he may well have stayed in Thessalonica for a time. It's very clear that when Paul left Berea, Silas and Timothy were left behind there to continue on in ministry. We might observe from this that we don't need to be alarmed when some leading figure is forbidden to speak. Very often the initial season of public ministry is followed by a private season of pastoral care in which people grow and win their neighbors to the Lord, and a low-profile, unsung, non-obvious revolution takes place.

The Word of God is at the center of these accounts. It is reasonable for us as Christians to use the gift of our mind to engage the word of God, complex and glorious as it is. We should be enthusiastic. The heart of ministry in both Thessalonica and Berea was the declaration of God's word. We ought to be stirred as the Bereans were to examine it daily and with eagerness because God is speaking.

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