

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

### Message #39

### Acts 17:1-15

The one horse that is credited with causing a resurgence in thoroughbred horses was a horse named Secretariat. Secretariat won the Triple Crown (Kentucky Derby, the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes) in 1973. Secretariat has been called one of the greatest horses ever born into this world. One thing that made that horse so special is that he loved competition. He loved to race. It is said that he would actually look at other horses and in a race, he would pull up along side them and then go into another gear and leave them in the dust. He had the heart of a champion.

The instinct of a champion or warrior is to take on worthy opponents. They have a title to defend, a job to do and they go after it. Most people, who want to play life safe, do not travel with their engines “at full throttle.” But every now and then you cross paths with a champion who will not and cannot be stopped.

That is the way life was for the Apostle Paul. Paul was a champion for Jesus Christ and the grace of God. He never played it safe. He never took it easy. He was fully alive and fully active and he was on the move all the time. Difficulties and hardships didn't faze him. He kept going and he kept communicating the truth. He did it when he was with others and he did it when he was alone. Never is that point more evident than when we come to this 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts.

The first major city Paul ministered to in Europe was Philippi. A church was formed with a handful of women. Then Paul was falsely accused, arrested, beaten and thrown in jail. He was begged by the leaders of the city to leave the city (16:39), which he did (16:40). When Paul left, he went to more cities and what we discover is this:

**PAUL TRAVELED TO DIFFERENT CITIES AND ACCURATELY TAUGHT THE WORD OF GOD AND GOD USED HIM TO ACCOMPLISH POWERFUL THINGS; BUT HE EXPERIENCED RESULTS THAT WERE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE.**

If you accurately communicate God's Word, there will be times when you will not be popular. There will be times when some won't like you or your message. Don't let it faze you and don't let it stop you. You keep at it. You stay faithful. You communicate God's truth and you will finish a champion.

Now in these verses there are two main city ministries that are spelled out here:

**CITY MINISTRY #1 – Paul's ministry in Thessalonica. 17:1-9**

Paul and his team had been used in some remarkable ways in Philippi and it was time for them to move on. The team traveled on a 500 mile Roman road called the “Via Egnatia.” So they headed southwest and traveled for about thirty-two miles and came to the city of Amphipolis and probably spent the night. The next day they traveled another thirty-two miles and came to the city of Apollonia and probably spent the night.

The next day they traveled the final thirty-six miles and they came to their target city located 100 miles from Philippi, the city of Thessalonica (modern day Saloniki).

Again it is interesting to note that Paul did not target every city that he passed through. There is no record he sought to evangelize anyone in the first two cities because he was being led by God to a specific city, Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a very large and populated and rich commercial city. It had a population of about 20,000 people. It was the capital city of one of four Roman districts in Macedonia. Thessalonica had and, according to Hackett, still does have a large population of Jewish people. It is clear from the first verse that there was a Jewish synagogue located in Thessalonica. Apparently when Paul and his team arrived in Thessalonica, they were eventually housed by a man whose name was Jason (**17:6**), who apparently was quite a rich man, because he will pay money to get him and others out of trouble (**17:9**).

In **Acts 17:2**, Paul's custom was to do his best to try to reach the Jews first. His strategy is spelled out for us. There are four key words used that describe a Pauline type of ministry: "reason from the Scriptures" (**17:2**); "explain" (**17:3a**); "give evidence" (**17:3b**) and to "proclaim" (**17:3c**). These words would all indicate that he did not try to get people to repeat some words in a prayer or force belief. He went after thinking minds. One other thing these words prove; Paul did not try to entertain people or coerce. He taught them.

**(Ministry Tactic #1)** - Paul would go to the synagogue for three straight Sabbath days.  
**17:2a**

The first thing Paul would do in a new city was to try to make some contact with spiritually-minded people in order to communicate God's grace truth. A natural place was a synagogue. He would go to a synagogue for three straight weeks, not to see what they did with the Bible but to teach them the Bible. When people visit our church and say they are looking for a church, we will usually tell them to do a couple of things. First, we tell them to pray and ask God to guide them and second, we tell them to come for about three to four straight weeks to see what we do with the Bible. Paul apparently had a similar ministry philosophy.

**(Ministry Tactic #2)** - Paul would reason with them from the Scriptures. **17:2b**

Evangelical Christianity has often "denigrated reason." Sometimes Christians quote Bible verses without any reasoning attempt at all. The word "reason" (διελεξατο) means to pick out and distinguish things in order to verbally argue and discuss a point (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 108). Paul could take the Hebrew O.T. or the Greek Septuagint and open it up for people. He knew the Scriptures and he could unlock them so people had to think. He is not just winging it. What he did required careful, prayerful preparation. You would never hear Paul say, "I had such a busy week, I didn't have time to prepare." He always carefully prepared before he opened his mouth.

This word "reason" means that Paul knew that people have minds and can think, and if a ministry is to actually challenge a person's mind and heart it must carefully, accurately and systematically open up the Scriptures.

Humans have the ability to systematically reason and if you expect to reach thinking people, you must reason with them and unlock truth in a reasonable way.

**(Ministry Tactic #3)** - Paul would explain, give evidence and proclaim that Jesus was the Christ, the Jewish Messiah and the suffering Savior . **17:3**

Being in a Jewish synagogue, this would be a key priority to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and that is exactly what Paul did. Paul communicated a simple syllogism to these people:

- 1) It is predicted in the Scriptures that the Jewish Messiah must suffer, die and resurrect.
- 2) Jesus did suffer, die and was raised from the dead.
- 3) Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

The Jews could not imagine that their Messiah would have to suffer because they expected their Messiah to conquer. But before He can give Israel her Kingdom or give us heaven, He must die on the cross to give us the righteousness we need.

The word “explain” (διδασκαλεῖν) means to present something in an understandable way to the mind. This word carries with it the idea of completely opening up something so that it is very understandable to all who listen (*Ibid.*, p. 110).

I read of a student who went to hear one of the great Bible scholars and after hearing him said “so that’s him. He didn’t use one word I could not understand.” That is what Paul did. He made the complexity and the theology of Scriptures understandable and simple. It is not that Paul did not teach deep things; it is that he made those deep things understandable.

The word “give evidence” (παρουσιάζω) means to place side by side proof and evidence before a person (*Ibid.*, p. 343). This is like placing evidence before a jury. Paul did not just wing it and stand up in front of people and tell stories, he very carefully opened up the Word of God. He backed up his doctrine and theology with the Scriptures.

The word “proclaim” (κηρύσσω) means to verbally declare something as a herald. To proclaim truth with authority (*Ibid.*, p. 233). Truth is, if we are to reach people we must open our mouths and there ought to be an authoritative ring to what we are saying. We don’t have to be obnoxious, but we do need to be stable.

So what we actually have described here is a preaching ministry that is carefully opening up God’s Word so that every mind may be challenged. Paul would explain and give evidence that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and he would give evidence that Jesus had to suffer and die and then be raised. That was Paul’s strategy. These were Paul’s tactics that he used in Thessalonica and he generated two kinds of responses:

**(Type of Response #1)** - The positive responses. **17:4**

This kind of teaching ministry produced three very positive results:

**Positive Result #1** - Some Jews were persuaded and believed and joined Paul and Silas.  
**17:4a**

The word “persuaded” is very appropriate in view of the previous words that describe what Paul did. This particular word means that their minds were won over. They listened to the evidence and they were persuaded to trust in and have confidence in what Paul was teaching (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 350-351). Paul laid out the biblical evidence in an authoritative way. He was very careful to make it very understandable that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, Savior, God and King. As a result, some of these Jews believed in Jesus Christ and the grace of God.

**Positive Result #2** - Many Greeks were persuaded and believed and joined Paul and Silas.  
**17:4b**

Now notice the contrast between “some” Jews and “a large number” of Greeks. This is important because the vast majority of people who come to faith in the Church Age and the Grace Age are not Jews, they are Gentiles. There is a temporary blindness on Israel right now so that not too many come to Christ.

Also something else to observe here, notice the emphasis on “God-fearing,” not “God-mocking” (Acts 16:14). Those who are ripe to respond to God’s Word and God’s grace are those who fear God and not those who mock God.

**Positive Result #3** - Many leading women were persuaded and believed and joined Paul and Silas. **17:4c**

Women are critical to the Grace Age and the church. Notice these were “leading” women. These were women who were considered “first” in Thessalonica. In Philippi, God saved a leading business woman named Lydia and now in Thessalonica, God saved several key women.

God was working through His Word and He was saving people and forming a new church, and you may be sure negative things would happen:

**(Type of Response #2)** - The negative responses. **17:5-9**

If you are doing God’s will and accurately proclaiming God’s Word, there will be conflict with a grace-rejecting and God-mocking world. This same ministry that caused people to love Paul also caused some people to hate Paul. There are five negative results that Paul’s teaching ministry caused:

**Negative Result #1** - The religious Jews are jealous of Paul. **17:5a**

Now the thing that motivated these religious Jews to turn against Paul was “jealousy.” Paul was accurately opening up the Word of God and the grace of God and they could not do that and they were jealous of the results. They were jealous of how God was using Paul. People were responding and growing and a church was forming and they were jealous.

Paul also had a grasp of grace and they knew nothing about it. They were dedicated to O.T. Law and their legalism and Paul is teaching pure grace and that made these Jews mad.

**Negative Result #2** - The religious Jews solicit wicked men. **17:5b**

The language used here means these were bad men. They didn't work; they hung around the marketplace all day as a bunch of lazy thugs. Some Thessalonians were known for laziness (II Thess. 3:10-13). A.T. Robertson called them "bums." William Arnot said in any large city you always have a large quantity of "scum." These people are not interested in truth or facts.

It is easy to emotionally excite these kinds of people. Every election year some politicians go find people just like this, some of whom have never had too many intelligent thoughts ever and get them all emotionally charged to go to the polls and vote.

**Negative Result #3** - The religious Jews emotionally stir up a mob of people. **17:5c**

They actually form a mob of people to stir up things against Paul. People didn't just quietly disagree, they tried to get as many people as possible to silence Paul and stop Paul.

**Negative Result #4** - The religious Jews go to Jason's house to arrest them. **17:5d**

Jason is the name of a Christian who ends up in Corinth, who was a loyal friend to Paul (Romans 16:21). The goal is to stop Paul and his team. They would just as soon see Paul dead.

**Negative Result #5** - The religious Jews arrest Jason and make false charges against Paul. **17:6-7**

Now Jason is being hauled into this court because he welcomed the Apostle Paul and his team into his home. To them he is harboring a criminal.

According to **verse 6**, the grace Gospel that Paul was preaching had "upset the world." The message Paul was proclaiming to the world was upsetting it and turning it upside down. It sure does upset the world that teaches works salvation. You preach pure grace and it is a message that does upset people.

The charge against Jason is that he is harboring seditious political subversives. Now we may notice in **verse 7** that they make up a lie and say that they are all acting contrary to Caesar and were promoting the idea that there was another king, Jesus. They were not telling people not to honor Caesar; they were just revealing that Jesus is the King of Kings.

I read of a minister who got in trouble for speaking out against the abominable sin of homosexuality. They branded him as a guy promoting hate against the homosexuals. He did not say they could not be forgiven. He did not say they could not be saved. He simply told the truth; homosexuality before God is a vile sin that is abominable. But when people want to stir up others, they spin it their way.

Jason put up some bail money or paid a fine and they let him go. Paul ended up leaving Thessalonica and headed to Berea. He viewed this as an act of Satan that moved him elsewhere (I Thess. 2:18). But when he left, there was a good congregation and a good church established (I Thess. 3:6-10).

## **CITY MINISTRY #2 – Paul’s ministry in Berea . 17:10-14**

About 50-60 miles or so to the southwest of Thessalonica was another city named Berea. They started their trip there in the night. In Philippi they worshipped in the night because they were locked in jail (16:25); but leaving Thessalonica they walked in the night so they wouldn’t get locked up again and beaten.

When they finally got to Berea, which would have taken a minimum of two days, they went to the synagogue of the Jews (17:10).

Now Luke is careful to point out that the people of Berea were more “noble-minded” than those “emotionally-minded wicked people” of Thessalonica. The people of Berea were eager to hear the Word of God and they would examine the Scriptures daily (17:11) to see if the things Paul communicated were true. Here are two keys to tremendous growth: **(Key #1)** - You have a mind eager to hear God’s Word; **(Key #2)** - You have a mind that examines everything you hear in view of Scripture.

Again we see Paul’s approach; he communicates the Scriptures and the people can look and see it teaches exactly what Paul was teaching.

The Bereans were opened-minded people, not closed-minded when it came to truth. These were not gullible people. They were teachable and they wanted to know the truth of God’s Word. They put their religious, political and social agenda aside and wanted to know truth.

According to **verse 12**, **many** Jews believed and also **many** prominent Greek women and men believed. There is no respect of persons with God; all are lost and all need salvation. It does not matter if you are male or female from the upper class or lower class; we are all equal in that we are all sinners and we all need the grace of God. This is a paradise for ministry. Thinking people from all walks of life are loving truth and loving the Scriptures. This is the kind of place Paul would love. Any true teacher loves this environment. But he will not be there for long.

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned of the impact Paul’s preaching of God’s Word was having in Berea, they made the fifty mile trip to Berea to stir up crowds against them there (17:13). The tactics of these Jews had worked in Thessalonica, so they figured they could use them in Berea.

According to **verse 14**, immediately the believers sent Paul to Athens and Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. So the first split of the missionary team occurred over security purposes for Paul. The early church took measures to protect the ministry. They didn’t just have Paul stay in Berea and say God will protect him. They got him out of there as quick as they could. According to **verse 15**, Paul was escorted to Athens and then he told them to go back to Berea and tell Silas and Timothy to come as soon as possible.

It won’t matter where you put Paul, because he will just keep teaching regardless of where he is. Paul has the heart of a champion for God and no matter if things are positive or negative, he gets a job done for the glory of God. He lived his life on “full throttle” for the grace of God.