Acts 2024 Juan Seo (Sep 1, 2024)

**THEY RECEIVED THE MESSAGE WITH GREAT EAGERNESS**

Acts 17:1-34

Key Verse 17:11

**Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.**

We are currently learning about the Apostle Paul’s second missionary journey. Last Sunday’s message was about his missionary work in Philippi. Do you remember how we can participate in God’s mission? Number one, through prayer; number two, by sharing the gospel with one soul; number three, by praising God even in the midst of trials. Today, we will learn about God’s work in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. The Apostle Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in these three cities. Interestingly, the outcomes were different in each city.

Let’s first take a look at the work in Thessalonica. In verses 1-2, we see that Paul’s mission team entered the Jewish synagogue according to their custom. They attended the synagogue on three Sabbath days. It seems that Paul’s mission team stayed in Thessalonica for about four weeks. How did Paul present and share the gospel? Verses 2b-3a say, “He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.” The verb 'reason' here is the Greek word 'διαλέγομαι (dialegomai),' which can be translated into English as ‘dialogue.’ Dialogue is an exchange of ideas, thoughts, or opinions between two or more people. It is different from a one-sided speech. Paul took a dialogical approach rather than giving a one-sided speech. This means he shared and exchanged thoughts and opinions with his audience. He used the same approach in Berea and Athens as well (17).

So, why did the Apostle Paul choose to share the gospel through dialogue rather than a one-sided speech in the European cities of Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens? This was because Paul considered the cultural and social contexts of his audiences. One of the ways to differentiate cultures is by distinguishing between Apollonian Culture and Dionysian Culture. Apollonian Culture is associated with the god Apollo, who represents order, reason, and discipline. It emphasizes logic, structure, individuality, self-control, and the conscious mind. On the other hand, Dionysian Culture is associated with the god Dionysus, who represents chaos, emotion, and ecstasy. It emphasizes instinct, passion, communal experiences, and the transcendence of individual boundaries. While it may be oversimplified, Western culture is generally classified as Apollonian Culture, and Eastern culture as Dionysian Culture. Paul understood that the people in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens had a culture that leaned more towards reason and therefore, he approached them through reasoning and dialogue.

When we share the gospel, it is very important to present it in a way that makes it understandable to the listeners by clothing it in their cultural context. If we do not properly adapt the gospel to the cultural context of those who hear it, they may not fully understand it. Traditional Korean culture is familiar with a hierarchy, where people tend to consider it a virtue to accept the teacher's teachings without questioning them. On the other hand, people from traditional American culture are accustomed to an egalitarian approach, where they tend to question, research, and understand the teacher’s teachings for themselves before accepting them. When I attended classes at seminary with an Irish professor and mostly white students, there were constant Q&As and discussions during class. However, when I once attended a Korean-language class, no one asked questions, and the professor conducted the class with a one-sided lecture. Although I am Korean, I was quite culturally shocked by the experience, as it had been a long time since I attended a Korean class. However, this is a matter of cultural differences, not a question of the superiority of any particular culture. When we share the gospel with American college students who have grown up in American culture, the way we approach them is crucial for a fruitful gospel ministry. Young American students may prefer a conversational Bible study method rather than a lecture-based approach. The gospel may be communicated more effectively to them in this way.

The Apostle Paul explained and proved from the Scriptures that ***“the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead”*** (3). The core of his message was, ***“This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah.”*** We, too, can have conversations on various topics during our Bible studies. We can talk about our life stories, the concerns and difficulties we are facing, the various interests we enjoy, and others. However, through those conversations, we should preach the core of the gospel—that Jesus is the Messiah.

What was the result of Paul preaching the gospel in Thessalonica? It was positive. In particular, the fact that a large number of God-fearing Greeks accepted the gospel was a remarkable event. Moreover, quite a few prominent women accepted the gospel. On the other hand, there was also strong opposition in Thessalonica. Other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. They went to the house of Jason, intending to drag Paul and Silas out to the crowd. But when they did not find Paul and Silas there, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials. They said, ***“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house”*** (6b-7a). They recognized that Paul and Silas had caused trouble all over the world. This might sound like an exaggeration, but considering how the gospel of Jesus Christ stirred the entire Roman Empire in a short time and had a great impact on the whole world in human history, we can say that their accusation turned out to be true. The opposition also made a political accusation, saying that Paul, Silas, and the Christians were ***“all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus”*** (7b). While it is true that Christians worship Jesus as King, Jesus is a spiritual king, not a political one. As a result of their statements, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Afterward, Jason and the others posted bond and were released.

What happened in Berea? Paul and Silas fled Thessalonica at night and went to Berea. Once again, they entered the Jewish synagogue. The Berean Jews were very different from the Thessalonian Jews. Look at verse 11: ***“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”*** Here, 'more noble character' can be interpreted as 'more open-minded.' The Berean Jews were more open-minded to the gospel of Jesus Christ compared to the Thessalonian Jews. Their more open-minded attitude was shown in that they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Although they accepted the gospel message with great eagerness, they did not accept it blindly. They examined the Scriptures every day for themselves. They checked whether Paul’s teachings were true. And when they confirmed that his teachings were indeed true, they accepted them wholeheartedly. They were truly intellectuals with deep spiritual desires. What was the result? Many Jews, along with prominent Greek women and many Greek men, came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Compared to Thessalonica, a much greater work of the Holy Spirit occurred among the Berean Jews.

It is very important that we have a serious attitude toward studying God's Word and that we receive them with great eagerness. When we do this, we can deeply understand the essence of the gospel, receive salvation, and continue to grow within the gospel. I encourage you to verify whether what I am saying is true and whether it is based on the Bible as you listen to my messages. If you think there are things I have said incorrectly, please come to me to point them out and ask questions. Since I have many shortcomings, misunderstandings, and I can make mistakes, I am ready to accept it if I am found to be wrong. And if I do not fully understand your point or if I believe I am correct, I am willing to have discussions based on Scripture until we reach mutual understanding. I earnestly hope that our NY UBF members will be open-minded like the Bereans, deeply studying and understanding the Scriptures and accepting the truth. When studying the Bible, rather than simply accepting what your Bible teacher says without any constructive criticism, I encourage you to verify through the Scriptures whether what your Bible teacher is teaching is correct. Engage in dialogue, ask questions, and discover the truth together. It is also important not just to know the Scriptures intellectually, but to reflect on our lives in light of God's Word, repent of our wrongdoings, and apply God's Word in our lives. By doing this, we can fully digest the truth of the Bible and stand firmly on it. Writing Bible reflections can greatly help in this process. Gathering with trustworthy friends to share Bible reflections will also be very beneficial in edifying each other's faith.

When a great work of the Holy Spirit occurred in Berea, the work of Satan also arose. The Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and agitated the crowds, stirring them up. The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast for safety, while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. In this way, Paul was taken to Athens, which was more than 300 miles away. Considering that the distance from Flushing to Washington D.C. is about 230 miles, we can see that Paul traveled a long distance to escape the Jews from Thessalonica.

The ministry in Athens is recorded longer than the ministry in Thessalonica or Berea. This may be because the way Paul preached the gospel in Athens was different from how he did in the other cities. It was because Paul's audience was different. In Thessalonica and Berea, he mainly preached to Jews and God-fearing Greeks, whereas in Athens, his main audience was Athenians. Paul was greatly distressed in Athens because the city was full of idols. Paul's perspective on Athens seems to be quite different from ours. If we visit Athens, we might be amazed by the grandeur and beauty of Greek civilization. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the opportunity to visit Greece, so I cannot speak from personal experience. However, based on my research and watching YouTube video clips about Athens, there is so much to see, such as the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Ancient Agora, the Temple of Olympian Zeus, etc. Many people, including Christians, visit Athens as tourists to see and enjoy these ancient architectural wonders. However, the Apostle Paul did not take any pleasure in seeing Athens' grand temples. On the contrary, he was greatly distressed by the idolatry of the Athenians.

What did Paul do in response? He went into the Jewish synagogue and reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. He also went to the marketplace day by day to preach the gospel to the Athenians. At that time, Athens was home to many philosophers who enjoyed engaging in philosophical debates anywhere, including the marketplace. You know the meaning of philosophy, right? It comes from the Greek word 'philo+sophia,' which means 'love of wisdom.' The Athenians were people who loved and sought wisdom. However, not knowing the true wisdom that comes from God, they became idol worshipers. When Paul preached the gospel in the marketplace, called the Agora in Greek, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. The Epicureans were pleasure seekers who aimed to avoid suffering and pain in the pursuit of satisfaction and happiness. The Stoics believed that the highest good in life is to live in accordance with reason, controlling one’s emotions and desires. When they heard Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, they said, ***“What is this babbler trying to say?”*** and ***“He seems to be advocating foreign gods.”*** Originally, 'babbler' referred to small to medium-sized birds that chatter noisily, but it came to be used to describe someone who talks excessively, often without making much sense. They considered themselves superior intellectuals and dismissed Paul as nothing more than a babbler. The Epicureans, who pursued pleasure, could not accept the story of Jesus suffering and being crucified. And to the Stoics, who were taught to accept fate, the resurrection of Jesus seemed like an absurd idea.

They did not accept the gospel of Jesus Christ at all. However, being curious about a new idea, they took Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus and gave him an opportunity to speak. The Areopagus, which means 'the hill of Ares,’ who is the god of war, is located to the northwest of the Acropolis. The supreme court of the republic met there. Verse 21 provides a description about the nature of the Athenians and the foreigners living there: ***“All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”*** They were people with a strong intellectual curiosity. They enjoyed hearing and discussing the latest ideas. However, it seems they were not prepared to live lives devoted to the truth. They appeared to be intellectual pleasure-seekers.

Paul's sermon in Athens is considered a good example of contextualization in cross-cultural missions. He begins by praising the Athenians for their religiosity: ***“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious”*** (22). The Athenians worshiped numerous gods, including the twelve Olympian gods. To introduce God the Creator, Paul speaks from his own experience: ***“For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD”*** (23). In Athens, there were indeed many altars with the inscription 'To an Unknown God.' So, Paul refers to this unknown god and begins to speak about the true Creator God. Paul's sermon can be divided into several stages. First, God is the Creator. Second, God is the ruler of history. Third, God created humans to seek Him. Fourth, the age of ignorance is now over. Fifth, the day of judgment is coming. Sixth, God raised Christ from the dead.

What was their response to Paul's message? Some of them sneered at the message of the resurrection. But others said, ***“We want to hear you again on this subject,”*** but they did not accept the gospel. However, some people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. Some people say that Paul's sermon in Athens was a failure. However, I believe that Paul presented the gospel in a way the Athenians could best understand. The problem was that the Athenians didn’t have enough spiritual desire to accept the gospel.

We can compare the attitudes of the Thessalonians, Bereans, and Athenians toward the gospel message. In Thessalonica, some Jews were jealous and became persecutors of the gospel. They opposed the truth for their own benefit. The Athenians had an interest in the truth, but they used it more for their intellectual pleasure rather than to live by it. They enjoyed learning new knowledge, but they regarded the truth as just another interesting piece of knowledge. They were not ready to abandon the vain knowledge of the world in order to submit to the truth. In contrast, the Berean Jews were people who sought, discovered, and obeyed the truth based on the Scriptures. They examined the Scriptures every day and received the message of the gospel with great eagerness. Shall we read verse 11 together? ***“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”*** The Holy Spirit works on such people, and the door of salvation is opened to them. I pray that we may be like the Bereans, loving God's Word, examining it daily, accepting it, and putting it into practice. Amen.