



Message #39
“WE.....THEM”
(Acts 17:1-9)



An interesting note (though not the reason for the message title)...Acts 16 saw Luke include himself in the team, “We”. The last sentence of Acts 16, as the team departs Philippi, sees him refer to the team as “They”. Does this mean Luke was no longer with the team? Did he go ahead of the team...or stay behind in Philippi? We don’t really know.

But we do know that Paul and his team continued on from Philippi and travelled southwest to the major city of Thessalonica (modern Thessaloniki).

Some Background Context:

Thessalonica became a famous city in the ancient world as a result of controversies involving its territory and military activities. It was used as a base by the military forces of Pompey “the Great” during his civil war with Julius Caesar in 49-48BC (Caesar would defeat Pompey before going on to take the role of Emperor).

Thessalonica became not only a business-friendly economic environment and free city, but also a refuge for the Jews after their expulsion from Rome sixteen years previously.

When Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica, they went to a synagogue (as was Paul’s habit/strategy) to engage with the local Jewish population.



It would appear that the Jews were, at least initially, open to discussion and debate so Paul attends over a period of three weeks to present his case (the Gospel). The preaching material is familiar:

“The Messiah is Jesus, and He died and rose from the dead. All of this was seen in the Old Testament Scriptures.”

Obviously Luke only gives us a summary of what Paul said; there would have been much more quoting of Scripture and some debate about what those Scriptures meant.

This message that Paul preached was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23). For them, the Messiah would come to release Jews from Roman oppression and then establish a new nationalistic state. So the picture that Paul painted of Jesus as the Messiah just did not fit into the Jewish mindset and perspective. The claim that Jesus – who died on a Roman cross instead of conquering Rome – was the Messiah offended the Jewish worldview.

But Paul did not compromise on this at all. He continued preaching that Jesus was in fact the Christ (Acts 17:3). Ultimately, as was often the case, the Jews, generally, rejected Paul’s message and opposed him as the messenger.

If Paul was called to be God’s messenger to the Gentiles, why did he even bother with the Jews?

Does this point alone challenge you in your own life and witness? How?

When he later wrote to the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 2:9) he reminded them of how he had worked “day and night” to support himself rather than to be a burden on anyone. Paul was a tentmaker and this is where we get the term “tentmaker” from to apply to modern-day missionaries who go to other countries and people groups and work amongst the people as doctors, teachers, engineers etc. It is an important point in missiology.....to become a part of a community and one with the people you are witnessing to. Ministry and mission is not about creating divisions (We – Them) but of bridging the gaps and building relationships....just like Paul did in Thessalonica. We have to be careful that we do not “write-off” people just because they do not readily accept our message. After all, God did not write us off even when were at our most sinful (Romans 5:8).

We see a number of important points in this time of ministry in Thessalonica.

Paul (and the team) had **COURAGE**; their message was based on solid **CONTENT**; there were **CONVERTS** to their message; and there was **CONFLICT** because of the spiritual response.

COURAGE

Paul was a man of courage. Everywhere he went he seemed to be on the end of persecution and opposition. he had been beaten, imprisoned, stoned, flogged and kicked out of towns already. But he kept going on the mission that he had received from the Lord. Where did his strength come from? It came from the Lord.

Do you find it hard when you face opposition because of your faith? What can you learn from Paul?

Read **Psalm 27**. David also trusted in the Lord and drew his strength and courage from God.

Do you find it hard to trust God in your times of struggle? Do you tend to rely on your own strength?

CONTENT

Paul did not promote his own opinions and ideas. He proclaimed the truth of the Scriptures.

Here in Thessalonica, the message of the Gospel was not proclaimed on the back of miraculous healings or other significant spiritual activity. Instead, Paul “reasoned” with the Jews (and others) by giving evidence and arguments for the truth of the gospel. Are you able to do the same?

What steps could you take to improve your ability to present the truth of the Gospel?

1 Peter 3:15 tells us to “*always be prepared to have an answer for everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.*”

Do you like having the opportunity to share your faith, or are you uncomfortable doing so? Why?

CONVERTS

Luke tells us that there was a positive response to the preaching of the Gospel with “some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and a number of prominent women” coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Thus was formed the nucleus of the Thessalonian church.

Read what Paul later on had to say to, and about, the church in Thessalonians...**1 Thessalonians 1:2 – 2:20**.

The Thessalonian believers are described as being Paul’s glory and joy. Why does he call them that?

CONFLICT

Successful evangelism will always be met by fierce opposition. Paul and the team (and the new believers like Jason) were, again, victimized by others (in this case, “jealous Jews”).

Why do you think the preaching of the Gospel attracts so much opposition, then and now?

What can you, personally, learn from this account of Paul in Thessalonica?
