

The Ministry of the Preacher Acts 17:1-3

Well we come and begin chapter 17 this morning, and this chapter is probably most famous for Paul's ministry in Athens. But that comes in the middle of the chapter and there are two other cities that he visits first. The city of Thessalonica and also the city of Berea. And it is incredible that much of the information of Paul's ministry in both these cities and he has roughly the same pattern. There are two episodes in both cities. First, Paul goes into the synagogue and preaches Christ in which there is the response. People come to Christ. Then the second episode is the opposition that arises against the message of Jesus. It is a familiar pattern all the way through the Book of Acts.

And look at verse 1 here, "**Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.**" Now this is a large swath of territory. It takes in about 102 miles or about 165 kms. But the goal is to get to Thessalonica, which is another major city in Macedonia. Paul and his associates went to major cities whether Philippi, Ephesus, Athens, or Thessalonica, these are the places that many times had not only synagogues but more importantly people. Churches established in these areas could reach the areas and towns and villages around them. And I do find it interesting that after he had this meeting in Jerusalem where Paul is known to have his ministry among the Gentiles, when he comes into these cities he seeks out if there is one a synagogue. And it is here that he and those with him begin their ministry.

And it is amazing if you ever look at posts or advertising for churches looking for a pastor what many times is required. We are looking for someone who is energetic, works well with people, can build a team around him, has a likeable personality, and able to work through problems and difficulties, able to lead music and use modern media. And it is not that many of these qualities are not necessary, but when you look at Paul's credentials they were so different. What stands out is not only his ability to suffer for preaching the gospel, but his absolute conviction that the Scriptures were none other than the Word of God. And therefore they had an authority. They came from God. They needed to be understood and proclaimed and preached and taught. God has given us the Scripture, and the scriptures are truly the source which teach about God, about ourselves, and most importantly about Jesus Christ. We are blessed when we hear the scriptures explain, expounded, and Jesus of the scriptures announced to our ears and hearts. Do we recognize that great blessing?

But we should also recognize that the duty and delight of all of us is not only to know the Scriptures but to give the Scripture. This passage really explains the heart of Paul's ministry and what should be the heart and ministry of any pastor or shepherd of God to the people of God, but it also should describe our hearts to make known Jesus Christ. We are always passing on knowledge of something to others. It might be how to cook, or might be soccer or baseball skills. It might be something academic such as how to read or some historical facts. And many of these things we pass on to others, and to our children and the ones we love. And there is value in all of those things.

But how often are we passing on the truths of Christ? Whether we sit in a service like this or in a Sunday School class or on Wednesday night Bible study, how often do we take what we have learned and seek to reason with others, explain to

others the significance of Scriptures? We can pass on so much to others, but can you think of anything more valuable than the Scriptures — the very words of God? Can you think of anything you can pass on to your children or those who you love than the cherished truths of Jesus Christ?

I want us to look at a couple verses and seek to understand not only Paul's ministry but the centrality of the Word of God in his ministry. Because we are to be people of the book, and this Book really has been given to us by God our Maker, our Lord, our Creator, and you think we would not only be consumed with knowing and hearing it, but also giving it. So I want us to see a couple of things about this ministry of Christ that certainly pastors and teachers can seek to emulate and cultivate but what all of us need to be doing in the lives of those we love. We need to learn to love well. We not only live for Christ but proclaim this Christ through the Scriptures. So what do we need to see?

1. We need to see the message proclaimed. V.2-3a.

Notice what Paul used here. It was not some sort of philosophy or some general truth that all people seem to know. It was not some other authority or something that was taught in the Roman circles. But what he taught and preached and proclaimed was the Scripture. This was the basis of all that he said in the synagogue and this is the basis of all that he taught. And the Scriptures have a dual nature. It is both the production of humans, but more importantly the production of God. God moved in the hearts and lives of certain individuals, and used their backgrounds and trials they were going through to produce the very words and truths that he wanted produced. The Scripture are truth and they are authoritative truth. They provide the truth about God and the truth about Christ. Are you thankful for hearing the Word preached? Are you overwhelmed that you can and actually get to read the Scriptures — the very word of God? And if you are thankful, you will know because you will want to proclaim it.

So look at verse 2 again, and notice Paul's use of the Scriptures, **“And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”** We see Paul comes to the city of Thessalonica which had a population of 200,000 individuals, which would make it a major city at this time. So when Paul went in he had a particular custom or habit, and that is to take those who happen to be present and reason with them the truths of Scripture. Now reason could mean that there was back and forth debate, or it could mean just that he tried to answer questions people often have. And the idea of teaching and asking question was very much a part of synagogue learning. And there are two thoughts here. One is that we need to know the truth of Jesus Christ through the Scriptures that we can answer objections from others. This is our Christ, and this is our hope. Listen to 1 Peter 3:15, **“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”** Why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God? How do you know Jesus arose from the grave? How good is good enough to go to heaven? How do you know Jesus was truly the Messiah? Is sin really that big of a deal? We as believers should be able to give a reasoned answer for the hope that is in us. It is not good enough to just say — we just believe.

And the other aspect here is our belief in the Scriptures and what they teach about life, death, eternity, and God all make sense. It is a reasonable belief. It is not something that is fanciful or so mystical that it is so hard to see or hard to understand. Our sin is easy to see, God is easy to see, and as we look at the Old Testament the coming of Christ, and the necessity of him coming is so easy to see. It is not that you have to leave your mind at the door if you want to really believe what the Bible teaches. These arguments of the apostle Paul would be intellectual and reasoned responses. And his whole authority in these reasoned arguments were the Scriptures.

And look how he continues in the next verse, “**explaining and proving.**” These two words are so important and bring out the glory of biblical exposition. Some people think that if God opens the heart of individuals and salvation is all of God then there is no explanation that is need. Just quote some Bible verses and then move on. But God uses human instruments who love him and desire others to love him to provide clarity through the study and explanation of the passage and also what it means in your life. In other words what it means and how it is applicable to your life. And Paul was preaching a particular message, but that message came right from the Scriptures. His conclusions were based solely on the Scripture. And his convictions toward those who were listening were not only the Scriptures are God’s Word, but the proper understanding and conclusions were essential in the life of his hearers. It was life and death as far as knowing the message of this book. The glory of God was apparent not by what we do but according to what Christ has done.

We realize the glory of Scripture and the work of Scripture to do a work in us with verses like Hebrews 4:12, “**For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**” We realize this word, and the God of this word can do a work that no other instrument can do. It can expose our hearts and lives. It is active to show us who God is and who we are. And we glory in his living word and God’s ongoing work that is done through the simple process of the word being preached and taught to us. And do we love that teaching? Do we love and look forward to hearing God through preaching and teaching, and coming into his presence and being changed from one degree of glory to another?

Because, it is so easy to miss the great blessing we have of not only a copy of God’s Word for us to read, but having the Scriptures preached to us. It is so easy to be in awe of God as we hear him explained and even his will for our lives exegeted through the Scriptures. But it is just as easy, especially when we have this ongoing ministry to lose that sense of awe of God — that sense of glory that this is my God! We can be around these glorious truths and read them but we miss the glory of them. We miss the grace given to us not only to have these truths preached to us but also to share them with others. And there is a way in which we can see if these truths are living and active in our lives, to see if we still have that awe of God in hearing and seeing all that he is for us. And that way is — are we sharing the truths about God and eager to share? Are we testifying to those outside of Christ, and are we rehearsing these truths with those who know it best? We talk and communicate what we love most. If we love sports — then we will talk about sports for hours on end. If we love fashion then we will track about the latest styles and maybe our latest acquisitions. But whatever is most

precious to your heart you will talk about and share. If someone listened to your talk, what conclusion would they come to that you love most?

Again, here is what we see, Paul goes to these places to proclaim what he sees is most necessary in the lives of these individuals, even at great risk to his very life. And he proclaims it from the depths of his heart. We listen and take in, but what are our lives proclaiming? What message are we giving what is most necessary in the lives of our children or spouse or coworkers or whoever? There really is a message of such glory and necessity to proclaim.

2. We need to see Jesus. V.3.

It is incredible that we can be so consumed with the various different branches of theology that often we miss the main message. And the message is Jesus. Think about if you were in the synagogue and you heard Paul for three successive Sabbaths, and someone came up to you and said what is his message about? What is his main subject? And it would have been evident that you could say it in one word. His message is about Jesus! His heart and passion is all about this Jesus of Nazareth. And I find that really convicting, both as a preacher and as an individual. If people heard my preaching for any length of time, would they say it is about Jesus? And as an individual could people spend time in my present, could they spend time in your presence and come to the conclusion that your life is about not self, but Another!? It is about this one who truly came and lived that perfect life. It is about not only his death but his resurrection. And this one is alive forevermore! And the promises that he will never leave me or forsake me. The promise that this life is transitory but I will one day be with him, and that glory and delight and fulfillment is beyond all comprehension. Is that what people see from my life or your life? Is that what they hear when we speak? Or is it a different message? This is the centre and the all of Paul's ministry.

He reasoned and proved and proclaimed from the very Scriptures the truths about this Jesus. Look at the verse, and really take in the message here, **“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.’”** Now notice what he proclaims and proves. He opened the Scriptures and proved beyond any doubt that not only did Jesus die and was raised from the grave, he not only showed the facts that these things happened, but notice in the verse that it was necessary. These things had to take place. And certainly they were necessary because the Old Testament records or prophecies about Jesus' suffering, dying and resurrection. For example, Isaiah 53:10, **“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”** We see both here the death of Christ through the will of the Father, but also that his days are prolonged after his death. He shall see his offspring. The will of the Father will prosper in his hands. And we are the very testimony of that prospering through the life and death and resurrection of Christ.

And the meaning of “necessary” is that there is no hope without the death and resurrection of Christ. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. We realize because God is holy there has to be a payment for sin. And that payment is

none other than the death of Christ. He is able to pay that infinite penalty that I owe because I have sinned against Him who is of infinite value but because Jesus is of infinite value, He comes and gives his life. It is a message that should always amaze us. If someone sacrifice greatly to give us life, if they donated an organ, or ran into a fire to extricate us, think of the love and bond we would have toward that person. Think of the gratitude we would have. We would count it a privilege and honour to be in their presence. But think of the gospel. He came to save us from the eternal peril of the penalty of sin — that just penalty that is so horrendous to even think about. He left heaven, lived that perfect life, and then actually died in your place — his robes for mine, the guiltless for the guilty, the righteous for the unrighteous. And we are even told that he loved us before we ever love him. Does that Gospel, does the truth of Christ's death still send a chill down your spine, a chill down the back of your neck? No one will ever or has ever loved us like Jesus. When you are in that place — he is the preeminent one in your life. Nothing else can be. This is why these early Christians could risk so much because there really was nothing at risk. Jesus is mine and always will be.

You think the message cannot get any more sensational or better but it does. Because the death of Jesus always has to be coupled alongside the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection there is no good news. If the wages of sin is death, and Jesus never rose than we would never know if the death of Christ was enough. But death could not hold him. The payment has been made and therefore we know that the death of Christ truly has justified us, given us that holy standing forevermore. My Jesus is alive, and the implications are not only will I be forever with him, but death cannot hold me. I will have a glorified humanity patterned after his, where I can praise and enjoy my Jesus forever with all those who have trusted in him. Can you think of any better hope? Christianity is founded on the necessary truths of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Without these truths we are people most miserable. But because they are true, we are the exact opposite. And we are always forward looking — looking above the horizon for that day we will be with our Lord and Saviour?

Think of who Jesus is, because the third thing Paul proclaimed about Jesus is not only did he die, not only did he rise, but saying, **“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”** Christ is not his last name, but this is the anointed one. This is the One whom all the Old Testament Scriptures point to as far as his coming. This is the one who will come and be born of a virgin. This is the One who will come as fully human but also be fully divine. He will have a beginning but also his goings forth are from eternity. This is the one that Isaiah prophesied about, and don't let the familiarity of this verse rob you of the glory of it in Isaiah 9:6, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** Did you get that? A child will be given but this child will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God (God is eternal, he fills all time and space), Everlasting Father (One with the Father and everlasting with him), Prince of Peace (this is the one who brought us peace and that peace is first and foremost between us and God). This is Jesus! This is the one who Paul announces, who we announce and celebrate. He is our all, our hope, our joy that all we can do is sing about all that he is for us!

So three truths about Jesus — he really did die a cursed death. He didn't just appear to be dead but was dead and three days in the tomb. We see that he really did rise. Paul knows. He might have been in Jerusalem studying under Gamaliel when he first heard about the resurrection of Jesus. But the resurrected Christ appeared to him on the Damascus road. He appeared to so many that there were none that refuted the truth that Jesus is alive. And then that Jesus is none other than the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. He is the Messiah — the Christ. He is none other than God in human flesh. He has the right to give eternal life to all those who trust in him. He is head over the church, and no one could ever snatch us out of his hands.

Now here is the question — do you think those are truths worth celebrating? Do you think this Jesus is worth praising and proclaiming? Do you think that this one is worth living for and delighting in? Do you think it is really worth living for a One like Jesus? Oh the glory of the message should consume us brothers and sisters. Don't lose your awe. Don't lose the wonder of who Jesus is and what he has done and is doing for people like us. No one ever loved us like Jesus, oh the wonder of it all, just to think that this Jesus loves me. The outcome of a life that has this overwhelming awe of Christ is a life of living Jesus and truly proclaiming Jesus. If you are struggling, turn to Christ, turn to the Word. This is what Paul preached, and the truths of Christ are there to capture our hearts and minds so that we become not only followers of Christ but we cannot help to speak of the One we love. Fill your heart with this glorious knowledge of Christ — it will change your life and your testimony. This is the ministry of the preacher, this is the ministry of all of us!