

WHY DID THE MESSIAH HAVE TO SUFFER?

Acts 17:1-34

Key Verse: 17:3

... explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.

In today's passage, Paul carries the gospel of Jesus Christ to three more cities in Greece: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. His audience changed each time, but his message was the same: Jesus is the Messiah. Still, he thoughtfully prepared the message in a way that his audience could understand. He was a great teacher and preacher. In the end, however, only those who had a right attitude towards the word of God accepted the message in their hearts. May the Lord help us to have a humble learning mind as we study the word of God!

I. IN THESSALONICA (1-9)

Look at verse 1. *When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.* There was great work of God in Philippi. Lydia and her family became believers and opened their home for the ministry. Paul and Silas suffered unjust imprisonment, but something wonderful happened because of it--the jailer and his family became Christians. A Christian community was firmly established in the city. Now the journey team traveled 100 miles west to Thessalonica. This city was founded in 315 B.C. by King Cassander of Macedon. He was one of the four generals who took over Alexander the Great's divided kingdom at his death. Cassander named the new city after his wife Thessalonike, a half-sister of Alexander the Great. In Paul's time, the city had a population of 200,000 and was the capital of Macedonia. A famous Roman highway called the Egnatian Way passed through the city. There was a Jewish synagogue there, indicating a sizable Jewish population. (Today, Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece with a population of over 1 million.)

Look at verses 2-3. *As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.* Paul began his preaching in the synagogue, as was his custom. On three Sabbath days over three weeks, Paul taught the Jewish audience about the Messiah. They had been waiting for the Messiah. Sadly, they did not know that the Messiah had already come. So what was Paul's message to them? He said, "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah." He reasoned with them from the Scriptures because the Jews were familiar with the Old Testament. The verbs "reason," "explain," and "prove" indicate that their Bible studies were in depth. With a broken shepherd's heart toward them, Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures." This phrase is repeated four more times in Acts (17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 26:25). Paul really wanted them to understand why the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. He probably quoted Isaiah 53:5, "... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our

iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus did not die as a victim of their leaders’ political intrigue. He was crucified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Paul probably also quoted from Psalm 16 in which King David talked about Jesus’ resurrection: “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay” (Ac 2:26-27). Paul’s message was very clear. Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Ro 4:25). His resurrection proved that he is the Son of God and our Lord. His cross and resurrection declared that Jesus is the Messiah. The Jews did not have to wait for the Messiah any longer. He had come! It was time for them to repent and believe the good news.

Paul reasoned with the Jews that Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead. We also must ask the question: Why did Jesus have to suffer the horrible death on the cross? Did Jesus do something bad to deserve such punishment? Absolutely not. Hebrews 4:15 says: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Jesus is the only person who walked on earth and never sinned. So why did he have to suffer? It was because of our sins—your sins and mine. 1 John 3:5 says, “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.” We have many problems in life. But sin is our real problem. Sin makes us sick in the soul. Sin breaks our relationship with God--the Creator of our lives. Sin fills us with guilt, shame, and fear. Sin wounds people and makes them wound others. Sin is so terrible that it demands the shedding of the innocent blood—the blood of the Lamb. This is exactly what Jesus did for us. He suffered for our sins. He put all our sins on him and died for us. He paid the price of our sins with his blood!

While on earth, Jesus said to his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mk 8:31). He used the word “must.” There was no other way. He had to suffer, die and rise again. St. Paul said, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst” (1Ti 1:15). However, to many people today, sin is not so serious. People would say, “Hey, I did something bad last night, but I feel fine today.” Sinful activities are considered fun. Worse yet, people consider sin as someone else’s problem, not their own. Almost two-thirds of Americans in a national survey said that they believe they will go to heaven. Only 0.5 percent said they were hell-bound. These statistics do not match with what the Lord said. When someone asked him if only a few people would be saved, Jesus said, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to” (Lk 13:23-24).

While traveling in New England, a pastor met a member of his church back home in Kansas. He asked, “How are things at home?” The man replied, “Pastor, my house was destroyed by a tornado.” With a frown on his face, the pastor said, “That’s sad, but not surprising. That’s why I warned you many times to live by faith. It was a punishment from God.” The man protested, “But Pastor, your house was also destroyed by the

tornado.” Then the pastor said, “Really? That shows how God’s ways are beyond our comprehension.” This sounds funny, but we should admit that it is our sinful pride that makes us look at the speck of sawdust in our brother’s eye while paying no attention to the plank in our own eye (Mt 7:3). Like St. Paul, we must remember it was for our sin that Jesus had to suffer.

What was the outcome of Paul’s preaching? *Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women* (4). There was great work of God among both Jews and Greeks, and also among both men and women. Then it happened again. Some other Jews became jealous. 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 believers 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.

Where God was working, Satan was also busy, trying to hinder it. Many uncommitted people changed sides. They were swayed by public opinion. But one man named Jason was different. Despite the persecution, he stood firmly on Jesus’ side. He opened up his house for Paul and Silas to stay. He knew the risk of going against the crowd and the city officials. But he did not waiver in his faith. He was willing to suffer for Christ. What happened to Jason’s life was no small work of God in Thessalonica.

II. IN BEREIA (10-15)

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea that was 45 miles west of Thessalonica. Berea was also a Macedonian city at the foot of Mt. Bermius. The city was not famous. But to Christians, Berea is beautiful forever because of the Bereans’ noble character. How did they earn such distinction? 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.”* Luke says that the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica. In other words, they were good Bible students. People have different attitudes toward the word of God, as the parable of the sower teaches us (Lk 8:1-15). People hear the same word of God, but only those with a good heart soil can bear much fruit. What can we learn from the Bereans?

The first thing we can learn is that we must receive the message with great eagerness. This requires a humble heart. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). A person who is poor in spirit is humble before the word of God. Such person hears the message with full attention. Those who receive the message with great eagerness do not look at their smartphones or think

about what they would do as soon as the worship service is over. They have ears to hear. They are eager to hear God. And they are blessed to hear the voice of God personally.

What else can we learn from the Bereans? They examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. When Paul explained to them why the Messiah had to die and rise from the dead, they verified it by looking up the Scriptures. They looked up Isaiah 53, Psalm 16 and other Scriptures to learn about Jesus. To them, the Scriptures were the final authority. They did not listen to political pundits or social commentators. They believed the Bible as the absolute truth. They studied the word of God every day, despite their busy schedule. They studied the Bible faithfully. This is what meant to be of noble character. May God help us to be men and women of noble character!

There was great work of God in Berea. Many Jews became Christians. A number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men also believed. But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them came to stir up trouble. They were persistent in hindering the work of God. Ironically, this resulted in spreading the gospel further, because Paul would not give up. He moved on to Athens. The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea (14). Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens, almost 300 miles away. Then they returned to Berea with Paul's instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

III. IN ATHENS (16-34)

Look at verse 16. *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.* Compared to Berea, Athens was a very famous city. It was the birthplace of democracy and the Greek culture. It enjoyed its glory in art, philosophy and literature. It produced great philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The city boasted enormous marble buildings, many of them dedicated to the mythological gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, and Athena. Today, thousands of people visit the city everyday to see the impressive ruins such as the Parthenon on the Acropolis. But St. Paul was not there as a tourist. Instead, he saw the city with God's eyes. He was "greatly distressed" because the people there were idol worshipers. He had a shepherd's heart for them.

How did Paul help the people in Athens? He reasoned with them in the synagogue and at the marketplace day by day. As he preached the word of God, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him (18). Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) held that pleasure was the chief goal of life. On the other hand, Stoics were called the "the Pharisees of Greek paganism." Stoicism was founded by Zeno (340-265 B.C.) who taught his disciples to train themselves to be in harmony with the course of the universe in order to attain happiness. The focus of both philosophies was to live the best life possible on earth. By the time of Paul, these philosophies had degenerated into temporary gratification and human pride. They had a bad influence on the people in Athens. Luke comments that *all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas* (21).

So what was Paul's message to the Athenians? Verse 18 says that he preached the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. What was their reaction to the message? They called Paul a babbler and his message a new teaching. They said, "You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean" (20). So they invited him to a meeting of the Areopagus, which is a rocky hill located near the Acropolis. The Romans called it "Mars Hill." Many nobles held regular meetings there. What did Paul say to them? He was greatly distressed by their idolatry, but he did not begin his preaching by rebuking them. Rather, he first praised them. He said, "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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*. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (22-23).

Given the background of his audience, Paul started his preaching by teaching them who God is--the Creator and Sovereign Ruler of the world. He said, "*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else*" (24-25). Paul then told the Greeks that it was time now for them to abandon their idols and worship the true God. Look at verses 30-31. "*In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.*" Paul proclaimed the resurrection of Christ. He invited them to repent and believe the good news. He also warned them that the day of judgment was coming. Jesus would come to judge the living and the dead. They should not spend their time doing nothing but talking about the latest ideas.

Paul's preaching in Athens was somewhat different from his message to the Jews in Thessalonica. He did not quote any Old Testament Scriptures. Instead, he used their unusual altar dedicated to "an unknown god" as a conversation starter in order to introduce the one true God who sent his Son to be their Savior. He met them at their eye level, and spoke to them in a way they could understand. He even quoted Greek poets. In verse 28, "In him we live and move and have our being" was a quote from the Cretan poet Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.). "We are his offspring" was a quote from the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus. This shows that Paul studied the Greek literature to understand his audience. We learn that we must also study many subjects to understand our Bible students so that we can help them with the word of God more effectively.

Despite his efforts, their response to his message was lukewarm. Some of them sneered at the idea of resurrection. Athenians were proud of their civilization. They were not as noble as the Bereans. Still, some people opened their hearts to God. Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris, and a number of others believed (34).

Paul did not wait for Silas and Timothy in Athens. He moved on to Corinth. He did not face persecution in Athens. If he were looking for easy time, he would have stayed there. But his goal was to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who had open hearts.

In this passage, we asked why Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead in order to become the Messiah. He suffered because of our sins. Remembering this grace of salvation, we must study and obey the word of God as the Bereans did. May God help us to be great Bible teachers as we share the message of Jesus Christ with young people of our time!