

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Prequel 2: Treasures from the Trials Acts 17:10-15

Introduction

If you ever wondered whether good can come from evil, or joy from sorrow, or life from death, just look at the cross and empty tomb of Jesus.

Last week we began our study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians with Luke's historical record in Acts 17 of how the church there began. You remember that not long after the gospel took root in the hearts of people there a violent backlash began. The faith of these newborn Christians was truly faith under fire. The missionaries would move on to avoid being a lightning rod for the church. But the believers there would continue to face hostility to the gospel.

The pushback they faced was not unusual. At the end of their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to visit disciples in the cities they had evangelized and that had encountered persecution,

Acts 14:22

Strengthening the souls of the disciples,
encouraging them to continue in the faith,

and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

The enemies of the gospel behaved much as Paul had before he was converted. They were aggressive in going after Paul and his companions, as our text this morning will reveal.

10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. **11** Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. **12** Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. **13** But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. **14** Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. **15** Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

The main trial of faith here—

Acts 17:13

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Here we go again. More persecution like that in Thessalonica from the same band of enemies. More danger. More trials. And you remember that when Paul and Silas first came to Thessalonica, they bore in their bodies the wounds of their public beating with rods in Philippi, along with the marks of the shackles they wore in the jail.

There is a cause worth being hated, hounded, and attacked for, so much so that Christ teaches us to rejoice when we are reviled and persecuted. It is a mark of authenticity. It guarantees great reward.

That said, no one enjoys the trauma of such persecution. Not even apostles. It is real danger, real pain, real stress. How is it possible to thrive in such a hostile environment? How did the missionaries survive with their faith under fire?

Part of the answer is to value the blessings God brings from such experiences. To this day He is master of taking trials and producing treasures from them. We see at least three of those treasures in this passage.

1. Brotherly Care (10, 14-15)
2. Ministry Expansion (10-11, 16-17)
3. Gospel Fruit (12, 34)

1. Brotherly Care (10, 14-15)

Our entrance into the crucible of trial—persecution or other forms of suffering—creates opportunity for our brothers and sisters in Christ to share in our suffering and to minister to our needs. This expression of practical love strengthens those who receive it and those who practice it. The fellowship of suffering draws us closer to Jesus and to one another.

If we neglect the needs of our brothers and sisters the apostles would question whether the love of God actually resides in us. That's because born-again people respond to suffering and need the way their heavenly Father does.

Acts 17:10

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.

Acts 17:14-15

¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to

come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

How Luke describes what the Christian brothers did for the missionaries is nearly identical. In the second instance, they sent Paul off while Silas and Timothy remained. It's possible that Paul was the main target in Berea because he was better known.

Consider who these brothers are. They are brand new believers. But they clearly have God's life in them. Already they feel a kinship and a sense of obligation to protect and care for the ones who gave them the gospel. Their concern for the missionaries' safety leads to prompt action to ensure it.

Sent them away by night to Berea
Sent Paul off on his way to the sea
Had persons accompany Paul to Athens
Paul directed that Silas and Timothy join him
as soon as possible

All these descriptions reveal the caring relationships among the believers. Not just affection for one another. But practical action that meets the need.

In your times of deepest need, the individuals that show they are glad to walk with you through the trial convey a love that is deeply satisfying to the human soul. *To love and to*

be loved produces the greatest pleasure we know. To experience such love in the face of severe danger and difficulty makes it priceless. It is a treasure forged from the trials.

Who has shown you this kind of practical love? Have you ever expressed your gratitude for their self-denial and care for you?

Who are the individuals you know are going through deep trial? How would God have you come alongside to care for them? Both you and they need you to do so. It is part of how God helps us endure when our faith is under fire.

2. Ministry Expansion (10-11, 16-17)

¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.

¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Paul's visit to Berea is somewhat atypical. Berea is not a big city. It is a little off the beaten path. Usually he targeted the larger population centers. In this case persecution pushed him into a less prominent area. But the ministry opportunity turned out to be

greater than the city from which he had been driven.

The times of disruption, the redirects, the delays, the obstacles and difficulties can feel like failure. It's easy to be frustrated, to wish for a smoother path, to resent the disruption of our plans. But *often we find that the very trials that seem to scuttle our mission turn out to advance it instead.*

That's what Paul will say to the believers in Philippi during his first imprisonment in Rome. Philippians 1:12

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

The mob attack in the temple precincts, the false charges, the 40 assassins bent on killing Paul, over two years in custody in Caesarea, having to appeal to Caesar because the officials wanted a bribe, shipwreck, house arrest—all this worked together for expanding Paul's gospel efforts not thwarting them. God works this way all the time. It's His M.O.

Arriving in Berea Paul goes back to his usual strategy. Synagogue first. There he will find those who value worship and the Word of God. But the Jews in Berea outshine those in Thessalonica. They are noble. Not that they studied the Scriptures. That's what people do

in the synagogue. It was that they were eager to receive Paul's teaching. Their earnestness led them to investigate the Scriptures daily to see whether what Paul was preaching about Jesus being the Messiah was true.

On occasion after a message I've encountered pushback trying to pigeonhole me as a follower of this or that theological tradition and taking exception to it. Usually with a sort of TV district attorney gotcha attitude in front of curious onlookers. Such pushback is usually not very beneficial to anyone.

The question is "what do the Scriptures actually say?" *Efforts to pigeonhole and polarize are generally less concerned with truth than with power or self-vindication. Noble persons—sincere truth-seekers—look down at their Bibles and ask themselves, "Is what I'm hearing what the text is saying or not?"*

Let the Scripture speak truth to your heart—especially on those occasions when it seems to be contradicting what you always thought was so or presenting truth you never considered before. Those are critical moments. They are the catalyst of spiritual growth and transformation.

That's what happened in Berea. Paul enjoyed expanded ministry due to the efforts of his adversaries. Who knows if he would have gone to Berea but for their hateful attacks.

They did hate Paul and the gospel he preached. So much so that when they hear of Paul's ministry in Berea they travel all the way from Thessalonica to attack him there. They succeeded in driving him out, but not in closing off ministry opportunities. Timothy and Silas remain with the believers, Paul is escorted south to Athens, one of the most influential cities in the empire. (Map Slide)

At the time Corinth was more significant politically and commercially, but Athens was the cultural center of Greece. Berea and Athens were nearly polar opposites in terms of importance in the Greek world.

Acts 17:16-17

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. **17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

In Athens Paul not only teaches in the synagogue among Jews but also engages in conversations and debates in the marketplace

among Greek philosophers. He ends up being invited to address the council of city fathers who govern the entire city. Talk about persecution backfiring!

Remember that the Jews were outraged because Paul was preaching to Gentiles the gospel of the Messiah. Their efforts to thwart his ministry opportunity only led to an even wider swathe of Gentiles hearing the gospel. Exactly opposite what they intended, but exactly what God accomplished through their evil tactics.

The treasure of expanded ministry was directly linked to the trials Paul encountered.

What trials are you facing?
Mistreatment for your faith?
Physical difficulties?
Relational conflict?

Keep your eyes open to the increased ministry opportunities these trials create. It is not uncommon that a trial causes you to encounter people you would never otherwise have met, to find gospel openings that would otherwise have been closed, to have impact on others in ways you never planned or expected. Don't throw away such treasures from the trials.

3. Gospel Fruit (12, 34)

Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

When we share the gospel, this result is what we long for. We plant, others may water, but God gives the growth. To see God at work through our gospel endeavors is one of the highest privileges we ever experience.

As in Thessalonica both Jews and Greeks believed, and both men and women, high standing and otherwise.

The same thing happened in Athens, a very different environment. Much more pagan, sophisticated, and skeptical. Yet look at the fruitfulness of the gospel there.

Acts 17:34

But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Both men and women, along with some very powerful leaders. One of the 30 city fathers trusted in Christ, along with a woman Luke names, Damaris.

The gospel seed produces a harvest in some of the most unlikely of places. *The Lord of harvest sends out his laborers. And He often*

uses the efforts of the enemy to send them places they never planned to go. But wherever they go the gospel goes, producing a harvest of souls.

Conclusion

"The world is just as scary as I thought it was, Your love makes me braver still."

J.J. Heller

The love of God for His people creates treasures from their trials:

1. Brotherly Care (10, 14-15)
2. Ministry Expansion (10-11, 16-17)
3. Gospel Fruit (12, 34)

Closing Song: Jesus, Draw Me Ever Nearer

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the cross of Jesus display God's ability to bring treasures from the worst of trials?
2. What does Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount about the value of being reviled and persecuted?
3. What are some ways our trials create opportunity for our Christian brothers and sisters to share in our suffering and to minister to our needs?
4. What example(s) can you share of a time when other believers cared for you in a time of trouble?

5. When have you seen God use your trials to expand your gospel opportunity?
6. Why do you think Acts calls those in Berea “noble” who eagerly received Paul’s preaching and examined the Scriptures to see whether what he was saying about Jesus was so?
7. How did the Jews’ driving Paul out of Berea (and thus to Athens) result in advancing exactly what they were trying to thwart?
8. Given the history of persecution in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, what impact has it often had on gospel advance? Judging from the rest of Biblical history and church history, how common is this result?