



Catalog No. 1268

Acts 17:1-12

Twenty-sixth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 25th, 2005

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE-DOWN

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

Holy words long preserved
for our walk in this world.
They resound with God's own heart
Oh, let the Ancient words impart.

Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength, help us cope.
In this world, where e'er we roam,
Ancient words will guide us Home.

Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.¹

I have been singing this song all week. The lyrics speak powerfully to the passage we have come to in our studies in the book of Acts. Following the message, we will sing it together.

We are looking at the second missionary journey of the apostle Paul, having reached the seventeenth chapter. The missionaries have just departed Philippi. Paul, Silas and Timothy now make up the team. Luke, the author, remained behind in Philippi, so the pronouns revert back to the third person.

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. (Acts 17:1 NASB)

A casual reading of this verse could lead to the impression that this was but a day's walk, but it was a journey of 100 miles, taking at least three days to complete. It was about 30 miles to Amphipolis, 35 more to Apollonia, and about the same distance to Thessalonica. The trio walked along the Egnatian Way, the great Roman road. Luke does not record anything about what occurred in those cities. One has the impression that they were just passing through them. Some of the apostle's strategy might be evident here—being led of the Spirit to pass by some cities and stop in others. He may have gone to Thessalonica, knowing that the entire region could be touched through a church there.

Thessalonica, the largest city and the capital of Macedonia, was the most influential metropolis in the region.

Located on the seacoast, it was a large center of trade. Travelers from Rome to Asia would have to go right through Thessalonica; thus for the apostle's purposes it was a very strategic city.

And according to Paul's custom, he went to them and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. (17:2-4)

Paul's letters to the Thessalonian church indicate that he remained in the city much longer than three weeks—a few months at least. But his ministry in the synagogue lasted only three Sabbaths. That wasn't all he did. The letters of first and second Thessalonians indicate that he worked night and day as a tent maker so as not to be a burden to anyone. But on the Sabbath he went to the synagogue and reasoned with them from the Scriptures.

Notice the phrases Luke uses to describe Paul's ministry. First, he "reasoned with them from the Scriptures." The word dialogue comes from the Greek word translated reason here. Paul dialogued with them, asking and answering questions.

Luke also says that Paul explained and gave evidence. "Explained" literally means "opened." It's a very strong word, used in Luke 2 of opening the womb, and in Luke 24 of a spiritual opening of the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. They said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was opening the Scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:31-32).

In Thessalonica, Paul literally opened the Scriptures to them with clarity and power. He gave them evidence linking the Jesus of history with the Christ of Scripture. He read the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and showed how Jesus fulfilled them to the letter,

particularly concerning how the Messiah would suffer before he would reign.

Paul and his listeners held something in common. These Jews venerated the Hebrew Scriptures. They loved them and believed them, and that became the basis of Paul's argument. He reasoned with them concerning the facts of Scripture. He appealed to their minds in a reasonable, rational discussion. As Josh McDowell would put it, he gave them evidence that demanded a verdict.

And it bore fruit. Convinced by the apostle's careful arguments, a few Jews believed, together with an impressive number of God-seeking Greeks and some prominent women. Here again are these noble women, showing up as they did in Philippi. They will surface again in Berea. The influence, faith and godliness of women lay at the center of the early church, and it continues to be true in our age.

But the reaction was not all favorable.

But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. (17:5-9)

The majority of Jews responded with jealousy. Notice that their resistance to the truth came from their hearts, not their minds. Angrily they went to the center of town to recruit some local thugs, like a modern street gang. These locals had nothing against Paul and Silas; they didn't even know who they were. But, always ready for a fight, they became the agents through whom these Jews acted. Setting the city in an uproar, they came to the house of Jason, Paul's host, and sought to bring Paul and Silas out. But Jason had already sent them off somewhere.

The Jews dragged Jason and some of the other brothers before the city officials, accusing the evangelists of having caused trouble all over the world; or, as the RSV translates it, they had "turned the world upside down." They didn't realize it, but they had it backwards. The world has been upside-down ever since Adam's fall, which is why even

the best efforts of men can't solve basic human problems. When you turn something over that is already upside-down, you turn it right side up. That's what the gospel does. It enables us to live right side up in a topsy-turvy world.

But these agitators didn't see it that way. They appealed to the authorities who, we learn, simply "received a pledge from Jason," and released them—a seemingly lenient reaction given the riotous conditions in town. But it's possible that these authorities saw through this attempt by the Jews, who had no real case or charges. So they asked Jason to post a bond, probably saying that Paul would never come back to the city.

This may be what Paul means in his first letter to this church: "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us" (1 Thess 2:18 NIV). Paul probably tried through legal channels but was unable to return there. At the time, he attributed that to the hand of Satan. But the sovereign hand of God was over it all. The lack of apostolic presence certainly didn't hurt the church's influence or power. Paul goes on to say in 1 Thessalonians: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it" (1 Thess 1:7-8 NIV). The gospel had gone out all over Greece because of you, says Paul. It had a tremendous impact because the people in Thessalonica took it seriously and began to proclaim it everywhere.

Ray Stedman used to say that the Church would do much better if it got rid of all the pastors, because the tendency is to let the professionals do everything. After all, as I've said before, we get paid to be good, but you're good for nothing! We're supposed to tell people about Christ, to counsel and teach the Bible. That's our job. But that isn't the New Testament picture. Back then, there was no distinction between clergy and laity. There were no professionals. Every person in the body has a spiritual gift and all are involved in the work of the ministry, teaching, counseling, encouraging, serving, witnessing, as God has gifted them.

So Paul left, and the church began to grow.

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they re-

ceived the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. (17:10-12)

Paul and the team traveled southwest, about 50 more miles to Berea. Unlike Philippi and Thessalonica, Berea was not a cultural hot spot. It was off the beaten track, a bit of a cow town. Berea was a very pleasant city in the foothills of the Olympic Mountains. The abundance of springs in the area gave the city its name, which means “place of many waters.” As was their usual practice, Paul and Silas began their ministry in the synagogue.

There are probably hundreds of churches that have the word Berean as part of their name. The church that I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago, which my in-laws attend, is Berean Bible Fellowship in Atascadero. Such churches take their name from these Bereans, who were noble because they had an attitude that the Jews in Thessalonica did not have. Now notice that Luke is not comparing the two churches. He is contrasting the attitude of the Jews in Berea with those in the synagogue in Thessalonica.

In verse 4, Luke says that “some” of the Jews in Thessalonica believed, but here “many” believed. The reason that more believed is two-fold. First, they had open minds. They listened eagerly, with unprejudiced minds, hearing the message on its own terms, letting it speak. They were enthusiastically receptive to truth. But secondly, they combined that openness with a cautious discernment. Luke says they searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. What things? The things that the apostle Paul was teaching. Paul told them that the Hebrew Scriptures say that Jesus is the Messiah. Their response was, “Where? Show it to me.” They opened up the scrolls and searched for themselves. Luke says that is a noble thing to do, a kingly task. Unfortunately, at times we have identified faith with being naïve and gullible. We’ll swallow anything as long as it sounds like truth.

Paul told Timothy, “Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim 2:7 NASB). There certainly is a supernatural element to understanding Scripture. The Spirit of God has to open our minds to understand. But it begins with reason. We need to ask hard questions of the Scriptures, and we should never discourage anyone from doing so. Paul treated others with respect and dignity. He didn’t demand that they swallow what he said simply because he said it. He gave other people room to think and challenge his viewpoint. I admire that so much, but I must admit that I find it

difficult at times to practice, particularly with those I love. One of my sons is in the process of evaluating his own faith. He is asking some very difficult questions, for which I don’t have satisfactory answers.

When students are disturbed by something they’ve heard in the classroom and they want to think it through or think out loud, we should never shut them down. God has given us minds to think. We shouldn’t immediately dismiss an argument of a non-Christian simply because we think he can’t know the truth. Truth is taught in secular settings. If it’s true, it’s God truth. All truth comes from God, and we can acknowledge truth wherever we hear it. So we don’t need to be cynical and critical.

We need to examine all that we hear in light of the Scriptures. And we need to do that whenever we hear someone teaching, even a respected evangelical teacher. Don’t just accept what someone says because he is a pastor. Our authority comes not from man, but from the word of God. When Paul went around sharing the good news, he preached the Scriptures. That is our authority. Don’t accept whatever anyone teaches from this pulpit as if it were from God. Anybody can be way off. We are fallible. We make mistakes.

It’s amazing how many things we believe simply because we were told that is what the Bible teaches, but we have never checked it out ourselves. Now I am not saying that we should be negative and ornery all the time. We should be gracious and accepting and loving. But we need to check out what people say about the Scriptures. The only authority we have is the Old and New Testaments.

In closing I would like to reflect on the centrality of the Scriptures and Paul’s commendation of these Berean Jews: the nobility and value of open, hungry hearts, and secondly, of cautious, discerning minds. Earlier in the service we read a verse from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians:

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe (1 Thess 2:13)

I am struck by Paul’s phrase, “our word was not the word of man, but the word of God.” That is a very bold statement of authority about their writings. These words here are indeed the writings of men. Paul used the language of men, the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of men. He wrote out of his own rabbinic background. And

yet, as he puts it, what he wrote on the page is indeed the word of God.

The other apostles believed the same thing. Peter and John both believed that their words were the words of God. Throughout history, God has always communicated through human beings who look, speak and behave just like we do.

The Scriptures are new to some of you. Perhaps you are a new believer or you are in the process of becoming a Christian and you are still trying to figure how all the pieces fit. If that is true of you, the notion that God's word is revealed through man's word may be difficult to grasp.

Have you ever wondered what the words Holy Bible mean? "Bible" is the Greek word for books, *biblia*. There is nothing special about that word; actually it means papyrus. Byblos was an ancient Phoenician city in which papyrus reeds imported from Egypt were made into paper. Holy is something else. We all have different images of what that means. We think of someone separated from us, someone very different and other-worldly, with a long face and drab clothes. But the word holy means to be set apart, to be separated for a special purpose. Therefore, the words Holy Bible simply mean a book that is set apart and different, a book that is unique, unlike any other.

This leads us to ask, In what way is the Bible unlike any other book? Our translations are in English words and we read those words just like we read any book or piece of literature. We don't read them diagonally or upside-down. We expect poetry to sound like poetry, history to be history. We apply the normal rules of grammar and syntax that we apply to any language. How then is the Bible different? Its uniqueness is not found in its size, age or cultural background. The uniqueness of the Bible lies in the fact that it is God's word! It claims to be God's word spoken through men.

And because that is at the core of what we believe, the Scriptures are central in everything we do here. That's why the sermon is such a central part of our Sunday service. That's why we may at times appear to be a little academic.

That's why we preach through entire books of the Bible rather than merely relevant topics of the day. Our job as pastors is not to make up sermons. It is to simply say again what the apostles have already said. That is why the exposition of Scripture is such a powerful means of

changing hearts—because we are simply saying again what the apostles have said. I don't have authority to command you to change something. I can't control your life and demand that you behave in certain ways. All I can do is encourage you to listen to what the apostles have written.

That's why we have an intern program—to train people how to study this book. That's why we have Monday night classes. That's why we have men's and women's Bible studies during the week. Because we believe the Bible is God's word, communication from the heart of God, we believe there is value in studying the Scriptures.

Its divine origin explains its human profit. The Bible is essentially a handbook on salvation. Its effect is to save us, to transform us. Our desire is not merely to grasp truth, but that truth might grasp us.

Its primary purpose is not found in science, or even history, but in redemption. The whole Bible is an unfolding of God's plan of redemption: man's creation in God's image, his fall into sin, God's continuing love for him in spite of his rebellion, and his eternal plan to save man through his covenant of grace with a chosen people, and the culmination of that plan in Christ. None of this would be known apart from revelation. Since the Bible is a book of salvation, and since salvation is through Christ, the Bible focuses its attention on Christ.

So I commend to you these ancient words. May you cultivate open, hungry hearts to humbly receive truth, and with that hunger, may you cultivate cautious, discerning hearts, checking everything you hear with the touchstone of Scripture.

Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.

1. Lynn DeShazo, *Ancient Words*. © 2001 Integrity's Hosanna! Music.

© 2005 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino