



# BONDS OF LOVE BORN IN AFFLICTION

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 17:1–15

36th Message

Brian Morgan

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Last week Emily and I went to our granddaughter Reese's graduation from pre-school. Though it was a low-key affair, there was still a lot of anticipation and excitement as eyes of proud parents fixated on their little ones as they took their places on stage to sing. Behind them was a colorful paper curtain with all their names written on it. Above their names were the words, "Moving On." Being that Reese is extremely shy, it took a lot of gentle coaxing by her mother to get her to join the others on stage. Watching from the back, I wasn't sure if she was going to make it. Eventually she mustered the courage to let go of her mother's hand and found her place on the stage. But just as we breathed a sigh of relief, she accidentally stepped backwards off the platform and fell through the paper curtain—a parents' nightmare. Luckily there was still enough chaos and chatter in the room so that not everyone noticed. Her mother kept her cool and quietly picked her up off the floor and comforted her in her tears, while the teachers quickly went into repair mode and taped the curtain back together. Coming home I was reminded how graduation ceremonies evoke more emotion from the parents than they do the graduates.

The emotions we experience for our children run deep. We long for them to flourish and succeed in life. When they are placed on a public stage, we want them to be acknowledged and valued. In many respects their successes and failures affect us more than our own. This is the parent/child bond that God built into the very fabric of what the Bible calls "family." The same holds true for our spiritual children, as John writes, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

In our text today Paul and Silas, having been forced to leave Philippi after a shameful public beating and imprisonment, arrive in Thessalonica only to have their troubles follow them, resulting in an official ban preventing them from ever returning to the city. What is so surprising is that out of these afflictions, they form the strongest bonds of unaffected love and support from people they had only just met. Our question today is, "What was it that created such holy bonds of love in such a short period of time?" Or put another way, "What conditions are most conducive to making committed and faithful disciples?" To find out we must follow along with Paul and Silas as they make their departure from Philippi and after traveling through Macedonia they arrive at the city of Thessalonica.

## I. Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9)

### A. Preaching in the synagogue (17:1–3)

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom,

and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 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." (Acts 17:1–3 ESV)

Considering the fact that Paul and Silas had been severely beaten and endured a painful night in prison, it's amazing they had the strength and courage to carry on their ministry in Macedonia. Leaving Luke in Philippi, they travelled westward on the Via Egnatia for thirty-three miles to Amphipolis and then twenty-seven miles to Apollonia. Both were major cities, but they passed through them to get a safer distance from Philippi, and traveled another thirty-five miles to Thessalonica, the largest city and the provincial capital of Macedonia. Craig Keener writes,

As Macedonia's largest port and as a city lying close to the center of the Via Egnatia land route connecting east and west, Thessalonica was an important commercial center. Along with Corinth in Achaia, it was one of the two most prosperous mercantile cities in Greece. Its Greek character probably provided Paul and Silas easier access to it people than they had in Roman Philippi; its large population would also give them more opportunities to find members for the nucleus of a church.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica had a Jewish population large enough to support a synagogue. Upon arriving, Paul followed his custom of proclaiming Jesus first in the synagogue, which he did for three consecutive Sabbaths. Luke's summary of his message is similar to his earlier address in Pisidian Antioch, but with an added emphasis. Beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul was "explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead." N. T. Wright suggests, "Perhaps Paul's own sufferings had driven him back again to contemplate not only the sufferings of Jesus but the messianic nature, the Scripture-fulfilling nature of those sufferings."<sup>2</sup> Because the thought of a crucified Messiah had been the major stumbling block to the Jews, Paul spends a great deal of time establishing this fact as an **absolute necessity** in the plan of God, before he proclaims Jesus.

This was not a lens through which those in the synagogue used to interpret Israel's history. For Paul to change their traditional mindset would be no easy task. It would not suffice to merely put forward a few proof-texts, but rather it required traversing the entire sweep of salvation history, as Jesus had done when he instructed the two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ

should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:26-27)

In his suffering and vindication Christ embodies the nation of Israel in its repeated cycles of tribulations and vindication by God. N. T. Wright explains,

It was a matter of the entire plan of God, the whole sweep of the narrative, the story of Israel going into the dark tunnel of slavery in Egypt only to be rescued at the Passover, of David fleeing from Absalom only to be reinstated after the great victory, of Jerusalem being destroyed and the nation carried away to Babylon, only to be brought back and rebuilt after a tribulation everyone had thought would be final...in other words, of a story whose main themes were all about suffering and vindication, disaster and reversal, death and resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

These themes were not only evident in the comprehensive storyline of Israel's history, but they also consistently shaped the lives of Israel's leaders. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Hannah, David, Jonah, Hezekiah and Esther all, without exception, went through crucible of suffering and vindication, disaster and reversal, death and resurrection. So Paul would ask, what kind of messiah would this lead you to expect?

To put the final seal on his arguments, he would have set forth specific prophecies from Israel's prophets, particularly Isaiah's Servant Songs (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12), Psalms 2, 16, 22 and 110, and Micah 5, to name but a few. In this way Paul reasoned and insisted, “that it was a *divine necessity* for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” If you want to change someone's worldview, it does little good to attack their point of view with your contrary conclusions. What you have to do is begin with the facts of history in order to demonstrate how we got to where we are.

Once Paul had established this foundation, he then “told the story of Jesus of Nazareth: his birth, life and ministry, his death and resurrection, his exaltation and gift of Spirit, his present reign and future return, his offer of salvation and warning of judgment.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, he identified the Messiah who was promised in the Hebrew Scriptures in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” The Greek verb “proving” (*parithēmi*) means literally “to place beside” indicating that Paul simply and methodically “set forth” the fulfillment alongside the predictions.

#### B. The positive response to the gospel (17:4-9)

**And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. (Acts 17:4)**

As happened in the cities of South Galatia, the proclamation of the gospel brought a divided response. Paul's carefully reasoned arguments “persuaded” some of his Jewish hearers, plus a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and many “leading women.” These were wives of principal citizens with high social status and wealth. The fact that they were “persuaded” implies not merely intellectual ascent, but rather a radical shift in their thinking that led to a commitment to follow Jesus. Writing to them later Paul

writes, “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thess 1:4), with the result that they “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9).

#### C. Opposition and violence

**But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. (Acts 5-9)**

Those who were not persuaded became “jealous,” or better translated “zealous,” meaning that they were filled with “righteous indignation and concern for the honor of God and the law.”<sup>5</sup> Incensed at the way so many God-fearing Gentiles had responded to the gospel, the unbelieving Jews formed a “mob” by recruiting certain wicked men “of the rabble” (*agoraiōn*, lit. “belonging to the marketplace”).

Luke calls them *agoraiōn*, those who spent most of the day in the marketplace; usually these people were marginalized, unemployed day laborers. The term, when used more generally, means “loafer” or “lowlife rabble”; sometimes it also connotes still more fully, as here, “malcontents” or “agitators.” Some ancients complained about “the idle, disorderly, fickle mob”... easily exploited by demagogues.<sup>6</sup>

Their plan was to have the mob attack Jason's home where the missionaries were staying and to bring them out to “the crowd” (*dēmos*), or better translated, “the people's assembly.” The *dēmos* was a popular assembly ruled by “politarchs” who had the judicial authority to maintain order in the city and whom Rome would hold responsible for any disturbances of peace.

Unfortunately for the accusers, Paul and Silas had probably been alerted of what was happening and made their escape before the mob reached Jason's home. In their absence the rabble grabbed Jason along with some other Christian brothers and dragged them to the city authorities. The charges brought against Paul and Silas were more serious than those in Philippi. Being accused of “turning the world upside down” (disturbing the *Pax Romana*) by proclaiming an illegal religion (“against the decrees of Caesar”) that proclaimed a rival king to Caesar was equivalent to treason.

This is another example in Luke's writings of individuals saying more than they know. As Wright suggests, Paul would have admitted, “they were turning the world the right way up, because it was currently upside down...[and] Another king! Well, they really have got the message. Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't.”<sup>7</sup>

The charges were dangerous for Thessalonica even as a free city; if a city knowingly harbored enemies of Roman stability, the city could be censured and lose imperial benefactions.

Thessalonica had to be careful; the Thessalonians had lost their administrative seat under Tiberius about five years before.<sup>8</sup>

As their host, Jason was responsible for his guests' actions and he was forced to post a bond on Paul and Silas' behalf. Considering the weight of the charges, the punishment was light, but it did achieve two purposes. It put an immediate end to the unrest and guaranteed that the "troublemakers" would not return to Thessalonica.

## II. Ministry in Berea (Acts 17:10–15)

### A. Open minds and open hearts

**The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 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. (17:10–12)**

The brothers orchestrate a hasty departure for Paul and Silas to escape under the cover of darkness. Instead of continuing westward on the Via Egnatia, they turned south to the province of Achaia and travel fifty miles inland to Berea. Berea was "off the beaten path" where they were less likely to be found, but it was close enough to return to Thessalonica if they got word that circumstances had changed (1 Thess 2:17–18).

Despite the repetitive pattern of proclamation followed by rejection and persecution, Paul does not deviate from his custom and goes straight to the synagogue to begin their ministry. From Luke's account in Thessalonica we know what and how Paul taught. Once again, he carefully reasons his way through Hebrew Scriptures to establish that "it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead." Then tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, he identifies the Jesus of history with the Christ of Scripture, boldly declaring, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

The response by the Bereans was as unexpected as it was delightful. Their eager receptivity must have soothed Paul and Silas' spirits like refreshing oil on their wounds. When Paul gave them a new lens to understand Israel's story, they were not close-minded or threatened by his words. Instead they eagerly listened to what he was saying with a generous spirit. Though they were open-minded, they were not easily swayed. Like a good scientist, who subjects a new theory to rigorous and thorough testing before accepting it, so the Bereans were diligent in making a thorough investigation of the Scriptures, reasoning with Paul daily to see if what he was saying was true. Leaving no stone unturned, I imagine them sitting down with Paul and together tracing their way through the entire Hebrew Scriptures.

Because they were open to whatever they discovered in the Scriptures and because faith comes from hearing the word (Rom 10:17), **many** believed including "many Greek women of high standing as well as men." The positive response among the Jews was so overwhelming, if there was any opposition, they did not feel free to voice it. The believers also included many God-fearing Greeks, among whom Luke again makes notice of leading

women of high social standing. Of all the cities the missionaries ministered in, Berea proved to be the most receptive to the gospel. But sadly, the warm reception did not last.

### B. Riot and escape

**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. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. 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. (17:13–15)**

Having received the news of Paul's whereabouts, the Jews of Thessalonica send a delegation to Berea to apply the same strategy of agitating and stirring up the crowds with slanderous accusations that proved so effective in Thessalonica. Not wanting to risk another riot, the brothers quickly send Paul to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remain in Berea to continue to instruct the new church.

Not only do these brothers escort Paul to the coast, they book passage on the ship and accompany him all the way to Athens (300 miles) to ensure his safety. I suspect they viewed this not as a duty, but as a supreme privilege to serve and travel with the one they had come to love. Just imagine if you were privileged to sail for three days on the Aegean Sea with the apostle Paul. (Bernard Bell – sailing with Biblical scholars and archaeologists). You've already heard Paul's complete overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, which has given you a new lens on life. Everything you had ever hoped for has happened in your lifetime and in such way you never dreamed possible. Now that Paul is off stage, you are able to converse with him in ordinary conversation.

So many questions swirl through your mind, but before you can raise your voice, Paul asks you about your family. Though you weren't prepared to go into your painful past, there is a mother's gentleness in his eyes that draws you out, freely, completely. In the end, you feel washed in a great sea of acceptance that surrounds you. When you turn the tables and probe Paul's soul, you find unexpected vulnerability in a father's heart that was torn in two in Thessalonica by the decree prohibiting his return. The thought of not seeing his children again makes Paul mute. As you sit in nervous silence, a tear falls from his eyes. If you were brave you might hug him, but you can't.

It's time to eat. Your meals, though simple, become sacred with the wine and bread you managed to bring along. You sit in a circle of three, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. You sing a hymn under the canopy of the evening sky. A circle of three for three days at sea—like a dream you never want to end.

On the morning of the fourth day, the city of Athens comes into view. You get a lump in your throat. Like a good soldier, you've done your duty, but how do you say goodbye? There are no words, but you can feel a torrent of tears ready to rise and gush. Unashamedly you let them go, that's what real men do in the presence of one who gave his life for you. Then you feel those strong arms of the tentmaker's embrace. And he says in your ear, "When you return, tell the brothers and sisters that they are my

**hope and joy and crown** before our Lord Jesus at his coming. Yes, you are my glory and joy!” Paul disembarks the ship, then turns and shouts, “Make sure to tell Silas and Timothy to join me as soon as possible! The grace of the Lord be with you all!”

Going back to our original question, What was it that created such holy bonds of love in such a short period of time? Or, what conditions are most conducive to making committed and faithful disciples? First, it was Paul’s Spirit-filled proclamation of Jesus as the Christ through the Hebrew Scriptures. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32), Jesus’ disciples in Thessalonica and Berea would have responded: “Did not our hearts burn within us while Paul taught us in the synagogue, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” Second, their appreciation and love for Paul was magnified through his suffering. In both cities, Paul came to them out of his suffering, then boldly proclaimed the gospel to them in the midst of much suffering (1 Thess 2:2) and finally, was suddenly taken from them, creating even greater suffering. Suffering is a crucible of fire that transcends time and purifies our love. It is when we suffer that boys become men and, like soldiers in battle, they perform daring feats of loyalty, putting their lives at risk for a higher good. The result was that, though they were spiritually young, they were willing to take up their cross and follow their spiritual father’s footsteps. I can think of no greater tribute a father can give to his children:

**For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thess 1:4-7)**

1. Craig S. Keener, Acts, An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2537.
2. N. T. Wright, Acts for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 13-28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 76.
3. Wright, Acts for Everyone, 76.
4. John Stott, The Message of Acts, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 271.
5. Wright, Acts for Everyone, 77.
6. Keener, Acts, 2546-47.
7. Wright, Acts for Everyone, 78.
- 8 Keener, Acts, 2556.

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