Jesus is the Messiah

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.”

Last week we learned that when Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns in a prison of Philippi, there was suddenly an earthquake, and all of the prison doors flew open and all of the prisoners’ chains came loose. (Ac 16:25-26) A miracle happened when Paul and Silas trusted in God and praised him in a prison. In the middle of hardships, even in a dungeon, they did not give up, but fought a good fight against the power of darkness as Christian soldiers. God gave them victory and provided a chance for them to preach the message of salvation to a jailor and his household. (16:31) Recently we have been facing a global challenge because of the pandemic disease, COVID-19. It spreads so rapidly around the world and has killed many people and impacted our daily lives. People panicked and had no idea what to do. But we know what to do in this global crisis. We have to trust in God and hold his promise. Jesus said to his fearful disciples in John 14:1. “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.”* When I was very sick last year, God comforted me with Psalm 91, which says, “*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuse and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence….you will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday….If you say, “The Lord is my refuge, and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent…Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name…With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation*.” As the Psalmist said, God protected my life and saved me from the valley of shadow of death. Surely, the Lord will protect us from this coronovirus, and will be our savior. Amen! So instead of worrying, let us pray and sing hymns loudly as Paul and Silas did. The bad spiritual virus such as fear and doubt is bigger challenge than the coronovirus. Let us fight a good fight against these viruses by holding God’s promise and by praying and singing hymns as Paul and Silas did. Amen.

In today’s passage Paul’s second missionary journey continues in three different cities, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Let us learn how God used Paul and his companions for the gospel and what Paul’s message was in each city.

First, Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica (1-9) Paul and his companion came to Thessalonica passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia. Thessalonica is the largest and leading city of Maccedonia with about 200,000 populations. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. (3) His conclusive message was simple and clear, “***This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah***.” (3) Paul reasoned with them through the Scriptures. Here the verb ‘reason’(*dialegomai*) means, ‘discuss’ or ‘debate.’ In modern terms Paul taught them the Scriptures from Genesis to Malachi, explaining why Jesus is the promised Messiah and why he had to suffer and die and how he rose again from the dead. Here we learn Paul’s zeal and passion for the gospel. He did not give up teaching and discussing until the Jews were persuaded and believed that Jesus is the Messiah. As Bible teacher and missionaries we must have the same zeal and passion for the gospel as Paul did. Amen!

What was the result of Paul’s three week’s Bible study period in Thessalonica? Verse 4 says that 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. There was great work of the Holy Spirit in the city. But where the work of God was, there was the work of Satan which persecuted the apostles. Some unbelieving Jews were jealous of Paul; so they formed a mob from bad companies and started a riot in the city. When they did not find Paul and Silas, they held Jason and other believers in his house as hostage until they were released after paying post bonds. (8-9) Jason and other believers suffered in Paul’s place. But they didn’t feel bad. Rather, that night they helped Paul and Silas to escape to Berea. Later Paul showed his deep appreciation in his two letters, “*We always thank God for all of you…your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*.” (1 Thes 1:2-3)

Second, in Berea (10-15) Berea was a small city compared to Thessalonica. But the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica. How were they different from the Thessalonicans? The Bereans received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. In Thessalonica we learned the good attitude as a teacher from Paul. In Berea we learned the good attitude as students from the Bereans. They were eager for knowing the truth. They did not receive Paul’s message blindly, but rationally. The Scriptures are the Old Testament. The Old Testament and the New Testament were not the two different books, but one book about the Messiah. The Old Testaments contains God’s covenant about the Messiah and the New Testament fulfills the covenant that Jesus is the Messiah.

A Bible scholar compares these two books to a river. The Old Testament is the beginning of a river and the New Testament is the end of the river with the flow of God’s covenant about Jesus Christ. There are not two rivers, but one river of God’s redemptive history through Jesus Christ. The Bereans studied diligently by comparing Paul’s message to the Old Testament. What was the result of Paul’s teaching to the Bereans? Verse 12 says, “***As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men***.”

But Satan was like a witch in a movie who keeps trying to kill the good characters. They followed the apostles wherever they went. Verse 13 says that **when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up**. (13) Even though Satan tried to kill Paul through the evil people, God protected Paul from them. The believers immediately sent Paul to Athens while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. (14,15) Paul moved to Athens because of the persecution, but God used this as an opportunity for Paul to preach the gospel in Athens, the heart city of Greece.

Third, in Athens (16-34) Athens was the center of Greek philosophy, art, religion, literature, sports, and so on. Paul didn’t plan to visit Athens, but he came here because of the persecution. While Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. There were many statues of Greek gods and goddesses in the city of Athens. The name Athens was from ‘Athena’, one of Greek goddesses. So Paul reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace called ‘Agora’ day by day with those who happened to be there.(17) At that time in Athens there were two popular philosophical groups; Epicurean and Stoic. Epicureans said that pleasure is the chief purpose of life. Their life motto was ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’ On the contrary to the hedonistic Epicureans, Stoics were intellectual and rational, thinking that the spirit is good and flesh is evil. Paul debated with them. He debated with them in the city court called Areopagus. They asked Paul, “May we know what his new teaching is that you are presenting?” This was because Paul preached the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. (18) Verse 21 says that all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. They were like the young people of today who are talking about and waiting for the latest Samsung Smartphone.

What was Paul’s message to the Athenians? In verses 22-31 Paul told them to know who they were and whom they had to worship. Paul said that the Athenians are religious. That’s true. There were many Greek gods and goddess in Athens. Next, Paul said that they were ignorant because they did not know their true object of worship. Look at verse 23. “***For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and that is what I am going to proclaim to you***.” They were ignorant because they worshiped an unknown god. Some said that they are not religious, but spiritual. But they are ignorant because they do not know what they are talking about. This is because they worship themselves by saying that they are spiritual. Paul enlightened these ignorant Athens by teaching the true object of worship.

In his message Paul taught them who God is. First, our God is the Creator of the world. In verse 24 Paul 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***.” In Greek mythology the Greeks made God as human heroes and heroines. But God is not confined as a human in the temple or buildings built by them. Second, our God is the author of life. Look at verse 25. “***And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else***.” God gives life to everyone so that we can breathe and live. He is also the provider for everything. We are now in this global crisis because of the pandemic. But we have to remember that our God is the author of life, and our life belongs to him. We can overcome the fear of death if we believe that our God is the author of life and the Sovereign Lord over all things in all situations. Third, our God is the Sovereign Lord and we are his offspring. In verses 26-28 Paul taught them that our God made man, destiny, nations, history, and we are his people. Paul quoted two Greek poems from Epimenides (BC 600) and Aratus (BC 315-240) in order to support his message, “*For in thee we live and move and have our being…” “for we are also his offspring.”*  Fourth, our God asks them to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. In verses 29-31 Paul rebukes their ignorance and idolatry and asks them to repent. In verse 30 he said, “***In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent***.” Paul meant that our God endured man’s ignorance by his mercy and delayed his judgment until he sent his chosen one, who is Jesus Christ. Look at verse 31. “***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.***” How could they know that Jesus would come to judge this world with justice? When Jesus came to this world first, he came as a Savior. But only a few knew his coming. Jesus loved people, served sinners, and died for them. He died to saver sinners. On the third day God raised Jesus from the dead and made him the King of kings and the Lord of lords. When Jesus comes again to this world, he will come as the judge. All peoples of all nations will see his second coming. He will judge this world with justice. He will bring his people back to his kingdom and throw evil into the fire of hell. This Jesus Paul was proclaimed is the Messiah (Christ) and the true object of worship. Amen!

Last week we learned Paul’s message to the jailor in Philippi, who asked the way of salvation. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” (Ac 16:31) People on this earth who are struggling with the coronovirus may ask, “What must we do to be saved from this pandemic disaster?” I answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Through this difficulty we realize the limit of human science and technology. This is out of our control. Only our God can control it and stop it. Some people say that this virus is God’s judgment on Chinese government which persecuted Christians in China. If this is true, they must repent. As Paul said to the Athens, “*but now he commands all people everywhere to repent*.” (30) 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 says, “*When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land, or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and will heal their land.”*Amen! Salvation comes from the Lord Jesus. Let us pray that God may stop the virus and heal this land. Let us repent of our sins and turn our hearts to the Lord God, who is the true object of our worship. Let us stand firm by holding the promise of God. When fear comes, read Psalm 91. When fear comes again, sing hymns in loud until the Holy Spirit fills your heart. Amen!

Verse 32 says that **when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “*We want to hear you again on this subject***.” The Athenians became curious about Paul’s message because they had never heard about the resurrection of the dead. Those who don’t believe in the resurrection of the dead are ignorant. Those who believe in the resurrection of the dead are triumphant over the power of death because we believe our own glorious resurrection. Paul’s ministry in Athens seemed to be a failure. But this is not the case. God saved two Athenians, Dionysius and Damaris through Paul. (34) Paul’s ministry was fruitful and successful.