

After departing from Philippi, Paul had to choose whether to go backward or forward, whether to return to Asia and solidify the gains already made there or to press on into Europe. Determined to evangelize new regions, he went forward. He followed the road that led to Greece, first going through the towns of Amphipolus and Apollonia and then coming to the town of Thessalonica, an important port city about 3 days walk from Philippi and thought to have had about 200,000 residents including a large number of Jews.

As was his usual practice he went into the Jewish synagogue to preach. His strategy for reaching Jews was to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. So, for 3 Sabbaths, he reasoned with them and explained the Scriptures foretelling that Christ would suffer for our sins and rise again. Then he argued that the prophecy was referring to events that had already taken place – that a man had recently appeared who died and rose again exactly as prophecy required. That man was Jesus. The effect on his hearers was to force a decision to believe or not believe. Among the Jews, some believed, but among the God-fearing Gentiles, the number who believed was a multitude, including some of the prominent Jewish women.

Paul's success provoked an angry reaction among the Jews who did not believe. The root motive of their opposition was envy, as it had been years before when unbelieving Jews denounced Paul in the city of Antioch. Paul's opponents in Thessalonica foresaw that the followers of his religion would band together and choose their own leaders – that perhaps they would even turn away from the synagogue and its leaders. So, the Jews who refused to believe were afraid of losing power and influence. They were also angry because the apostles preached to the Gentiles that they might be saved. How strange that men should grudge others the privileges they would not themselves accept!

Neither rulers nor people need be troubled at the increase of real Christians although we do need to recognise that the devil can make religion the pretext for evil designs. Of this we must beware. History all too often shows religion as an excuse for war although the real reason is usually in relation to holding on to or increasing power and influence. This is the issue which is currently causing debate in China where the state is concerned that the rapidly growing Christian church may challenge the policies and controls exerted by the government. I would argue that their fears are unfounded. Even though the gospel has definite political implications, it makes Christians better citizens than before.

Their opposition was carried to an extreme showing that these Jews who prided themselves in keeping the law had no concept of true godliness. The law required justice and mercy, but the unbelieving Jews waged a campaign against Christ's apostles that can only be described as unscrupulous and vicious. They found allies among "bad characters from the market place". While most sources suggest that they were simply thugs one suggests that they may have been lawyers who, for money, would stir up trouble and present a case before the magistrates of the city. As one version of the Bible describes Paul and his supporters - "These who have

turned the world upside down". This sounds like an unintended compliment to the effectiveness of God's work through Paul and Silas. God willing people would say such things about the effectiveness of Christians today! Whoever they were, by gathering a crowd of citizens and haranguing them with false accusations against the men of God, they managed to whip up the whole city into a state of rage. With a vanguard of hooligans who loved violence for its own sake, they attacked the house where they expected to find Paul and his missionary team. It was the house of a believer named Jason. But the team were gone. Rather than go away empty handed, the mob seized Jason together with some fellow believers and dragged them before the rulers of the city.

Now they had to state charges serious enough to legitimise what the mob had done. The ringleaders cried out that the apostles were troublemakers, causing civil unrest wherever they went. Then they pressed their case further by alleging that the apostles were trying to set up another king besides Caesar; that is, they were traitors to Rome. Whether the accusers were distorting Christian doctrine deliberately, we do not know. But they succeeded in upsetting the rulers. After all, the rulers could not stand idly by if a dangerous conspiracy to overthrow Roman authority had gained a foothold in their city. Yet the rulers evidently decided that the charges were wildly exaggerated, for instead of taking Jason and his friends into custody, they released them after they posted a bond. Perhaps they knew that the accused men were otherwise of good report, with no record of any dishonest or disloyal conduct.

Seeing that Paul and his party were in danger, the believers in Thessalonica sent them on to the next city, Berea, (now known as Veoria) which was one step closer to Athens some 57 miles from Thessalonica. Paul's first move to evangelize Berea followed his usual pattern. He went to the synagogue and began to preach Jesus. Here, he found the Jews unusually receptive. Whereas at Thessalonica the number of Jews who believed was only "some", the number at Berea was "many". Also persuaded by the gospel were many upper-class Greek women and more than a few Greek men.

In accounting for Paul's success in reaching the Jews in Berea, Luke describes them as "more noble than those in Thessalonica." They were more noble, not because they held a higher position in society, but because they were more willing to dig for truth. They sat down daily with their copies of the Scriptures and examined them to see whether Jesus truly fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. They understood that the only reliable test of truth is whether it agrees with the Word of God. They would not accept Paul's teaching without checking for themselves. Because they exalted God, they did not fail to find that Jesus is God's Son.

With all their diligent searching and concern for the truth, the Bereans did not become sceptics. They received the word with all readiness. When Paul preached, they had open hearts; but also clear heads. Many people have clear heads but closed hearts, and never receive the word with all readiness.

For us also, our ranking in the eyes of men is not the same as our ranking in the eyes of God. Men accord us high status if we have money, or power, or education, or talent, or good looks. But nobility in God's sight depends solely on one criterion: whether we exalt Him. In other words, in the grand scheme of things, we are great only to the extent that we honour the greatness of God. The Bereans honoured His greatness by consulting His Word. In general, we honour His greatness by giving Him our love, and the proof of our love is obeying His will. Another example of the vast discrepancy between man's opinion and God's opinion is Jesus' comments on the poor widow who cast her last farthing into the treasury at the Temple. Probably no other worshippers at the Temple that day singled her out for praise. Probably few if any even noticed her. In the eyes of men she was of no account, an object of pity or even of scorn. All would have agreed that she was the least in social importance. None would have dreamed that, in God's sight, she was the greatest among them.

The devil was not willing to allow Paul's victory in Berea to go uncontested. He brought news of what Paul was doing back to his enemies in Thessalonica. Some of these rushed to Berea to stop him. They went among the people and trumpeted the same false charges that they had used before to turn public sentiment against the new religion. No doubt they alleged that Christians intended to challenge the Roman government. As before, these charges created the danger that Paul would be arrested and severely punished and perhaps killed. So, the new believers in Berea insisted that he leave town. Yet they realized that, wherever Paul went, his enemies would follow him and disrupt his work again. They therefore decided to keep his enemies from discovering his next destination. He left Berea on the road leading to the nearest sea port. Berea was the 5th city Paul had been run out of! His enemies would have assumed that he was leaving Greece and returning to Asia Minor. But then he changed course and headed towards Athens. In his company were some Berean brothers who came along to assure his safety. He left Silas and Timothy behind so that they might strengthen the new church. They could safely remain behind because the enemies of the new religion regarded Paul as their main target.

The Bereans found that it was not difficult to certify that Jesus is the Christ. God never makes it hard for us to find the truth. On the contrary, He is eager to show the truth to whoever seeks it. If men fail to find the truth, the reason is not that God is hiding it from them, but that they don't really want it. Our natural tendency is to embrace lies rather than the truth. Lies allow us to continue in the darkness of sin rather than expose ourselves to the condemning light of God's holiness. But if our hearts have been touched by that light which abhors our sin and we wish to forsake it, we will find that the light brings hope. By following the path that God will lighten before us, we will come to a Saviour from sin, to Jesus!