

*When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. <sup>2</sup> As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go.*

*<sup>10</sup> As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. <sup>12</sup> As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.*

*<sup>13</sup> But 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. <sup>14</sup> The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. <sup>15</sup> Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.*

Last week we saw how Paul and Silas, and presumably also Luke and some others, were escorted out of Philippi because they were deemed trouble makers. However they had made converts among a few Jews and many Greeks. We shall see in later episodes and from Paul's letters that the Philippians were generous and supported Paul. His most favourable letter is to the Philippians. Continuing their travels down the Via Egnatia which ran down the coast to Athens, they came to Thessalonica, a large city, which had a synagogue. We can assume Amphipolis and Apollonia didn't have any synagogues and that they didn't stay there long. Thessalonica is about 110 miles south of Philippi, and had been a free city without a Roman garrison for over 90 years. It did have a synagogue, and a large number of Greek converts to Judaism, who had some familiarity with the Old Testament. What may surprise us today is how open the synagogues were to a visiting Jew who they didn't know who would be preaching that the Messiah had arrived. One of the things most churches do not allow is an unknown stranger wandering in and taking over the Sunday service, because they don't know what heretical stuff might be said. This openness got Jesus into trouble when he first began his ministry in Nazareth (Luke 4) because he said things they didn't want to hear. Paul on three Sabbaths was referring to the references we know that prove who Jesus is, convincing the listeners using reason... rational argument which assumed that the Scriptures were authoritative, and so the verses quoted could not be deemed as "problematic" or "erroneous", but rather that they be accepted as truthful and indisputably faithful to the original texts. Luke doesn't reveal what verses Paul quoted, but we know that Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament in his letters (over 180 times) to back up his assertion that Jesus is the Messiah. Rational debate is what the Greeks understood, and valued. The result was a few Jewish and many Gentile/Greek converts. Naturally the synagogue leaders would be put out that Paul had poached a large part of their congregation with his unorthodox teaching, in the same way church leaders today would be miffed if some stranger with new unorthodox ideas managed to lead away a proportion of their flocks to join a new organisation that opposed their traditional beliefs. Luke mentions "quite a few prominent women" as if this is unusual, which it probably was!

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This verse doesn't shed a very good light on the synagogue worshipping Jews. Being jealous is one thing, but gathering some wicked layabouts who hung out in the town centre, is not what pious Jews would do, being a

minority that most Romans and Greeks believed were outsiders because they refused to assimilate and join in worshipping the gods in the many temples to be found in every Greek and Roman city. Yet so assured are these Jews, that they can rouse enough people to start a riot. Thessalonica didn't have a garrison and nor did Roman cities have a police force.

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This crowd went to the house where Paul and Silas were supposed to be staying, and dragged out the homeowner, Jason, and converts inside the house. The accusation being made is similar to that in Philippi, with an added twist, that Paul and Silas were proclaiming another king, Jesus in opposition to Caesar. Rioters always attract spectators to see what's going on, and the crowd grows. Jason and the believers are put before the "politarchs" who were the city officials with authority. Since Jason and the others were citizens and not foreigners, so they were bailed rather than jailed.

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This time Paul and Silas are told to leave quietly without the knowledge of the crowd or officials under the cover of darkness. In all, they were in Thessalonica just three weeks. Berea is about 45 miles westward, probably two days walking. Again Paul and his companions head straight for the synagogue, where the texts referring to the Messiah are examined after Paul points them out to the Jews there, to see if what Paul said was true. For us these verses affirm who Jesus is, but today most Jews still reject them. While some have asserted that Isaiah 53 is ignored by most Jews, and their understanding of the text is that the "he" who was wounded for our transgressions is Israel, because Isaiah speaks of "my servant Israel" in chapter 52. This interpretation of the text is coloured by scholarly Jews not wanting it to refer to Jesus, in the same way that scholarly Christians will assert it refers to Jesus. Wherever there is some ambiguity, scholars will pore over the texts – some with Holy Spirit guidance, and many without! However there are none so blind as those who refuse to see what is in front of them. Many Messianic Jews today have come to Christ because they read Isaiah 53, and the other references to Jesus in the Old Testament in the same way that some Berean Jews were and many Greek men plus some prominent women. Everywhere Paul and his companions go, they make converts, who Paul sometimes revisits and sometimes leaves a record of a letter or two he wrote to these newly established churches.

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As usual the Jewish opposition arrives to stir up trouble. Again, it is Jews doing the rabble rousing. When Jesus preached to the crowds, the Jews who questioned his authority didn't have evidence to convict because of the miracles, the absence of law breaking, and they were a minority – the strict Pharisees and Sadducees were not well liked because they expected honour and respect which they did little to earn. After the death of Jesus, the disciples make the claim that the Jewish authorities killed the Messiah who is alive and seated at the right hand of Father God. This is too much for many Jews to bear, because no one rises from the dead and the Messiah they want didn't throw out the Romans to establish a free Israel with divine protection from enemies which surround it. Politically nothing had changed and the Messiah was supposed, even by the disciples who were with Jesus for a couple of years, to liberate and rule Israel. Rounding up a crowd of layabouts seems to have been pretty easy – and hidden in plain sight is the fact that a lot of people didn't have day jobs in the Roman world. The work was done by a section of

society, leaving many who were educated, literate, and interested in new things just chatting among themselves in the city centres, and enjoying a life of leisure.

Paul was sent to Athens to avoid further trouble with new disciples, while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. They would be doing the pastoral work while Paul was the main speaker, who would be much more recognisable than Silas and young Timothy. We'll see next week how Paul gets on in Athens, Greece's largest city with an even bigger population of non working men who spent their time talking, debating, seeking new knowledge and generally enjoying themselves.

How does this apply to us? The evangelistic model used by Paul, and others for centuries after him, which is to find a place where non-Christians gather, and just talk to them, is not really working today. We have a few, like Dave Workman of Open Air Campaigners, who set up in the street and talk to people. Last week the Beach Mission was also on the streets of Canterbury. However the results are not quite like those that Paul achieves, where many give their lives to Jesus – both Jews and Gentiles – so that a church is established almost overnight – certainly in a few weeks. We will have Franklyn Graham in the Excel Centre preaching the Gospel in August. We pray that many come to accept Jesus as Lord.

The Gospel message is not new anymore as it was then, because most people have some awareness of Christianity's existence, and they have chosen to ignore it. We can see that vested interests (like the Jews in their synagogue community, and some of the Romans and Greeks with their own religions) will oppose Christianity. The secular world opposes Christianity's beliefs, but is happy with its works. Street Pastors, Food banks, Debt Counselling, Helping the homeless etc are all much appreciated, but without the message of God's love, Jesus's promises of forgiveness, and a lifestyle change that comes with submission to God's ways.

We know that accepting Jesus as Lord and saviour, we can have the assurance of salvation, the assurance of forgiveness of sin, the assurance of God's love and the assurance that whatever happens to us, God is with us.