

Acts 17

Resistance Training

Read Acts 17:1-4: We have been talking about how the church has been sending out evangelists and church leaders to build up and guide all of these impressionable new saints. This has been happening throughout Greece and Turkey. We have also talked about how the follow-on persecutions and affronts from locals and misdirected religious zealots have literally turned these churches into places of rioting and civil unrest. We see this today in America, as we endeavor to restore order and the rule of righteous laws to our land. I think that this is an unchanging pattern of spiritual warfare.

Things that seem to be a loss or setback often are not. Sometimes it is helpful to take a wide-angle view and recognize the patterns that seem to repeat themselves. This account is very typical of how solid saints are built up in their holy faith. There seems to be a necessary *battle hardening*. We all can benefit from some *resistance training*.

We begin this chapter by looking at the next stop at the Church of Thessalonica. Paul was now traveling with his companions from city to city through the coastal areas as well as inland Greece. He arrived at a city which we call Thessaloniki today. It is the second-largest city in Greece, with 300,000 people.



There are Jews here, but the biggest impact is going to be on the Greeks. The message is less about signs and more about reasoning. Even though Paul is sent to the Gentiles, he always makes his first message to the local Jewish synagogue. He also hits the marketplaces. Paul's career as a tent and sail maker allows him to fund his own missionary journeys. Paul teaches and shares his findings in the Jewish synagogue for three sabbaths in a row.

What was Paul sharing from scripture? It says that his message was that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah. Specifically, Paul taught that Jesus was supposed to be killed and then he was supposed to resurrect from the dead. It was all written in advance. Here are some verses that state that the Messiah was to be killed:

²⁶ *After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death (Daniel 9:26)*

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water; and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. ¹⁵ My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. (Psalm 22:11-15)*

Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people, he was punished. (Isaiah 53:4-8)

Paul also taught that the scriptures foretold that the Messiah would also rise from the dead, to be confirmed by Jesus' own words.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40)

Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17)

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. ² He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. ³ You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' ⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. ⁷ "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. ⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" ¹⁰ And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Jonah 2)

We know that wherever the gospel was given to the Jews that the strict legalists persecuted them as being blasphemers. Similarly, when the Greeks received the gospel, and they were persecuted by their local idolaters. Many of the idolatry supporters were in businesses that profited from that religion. It was like a local tourist industry guild.

We can also look at the pattern that the Thessalonian church had for years to come. 1 and 2 Thessalonians was written by Paul to this church. This church had to battle the local idolatry to gain traction in the community. The Greeks and Romans worshipped all of their mythological deities. In fact, the local neighboring town was called Apollonia (after Apollo). In addition, Cesar worship was prevalent and encouraged. Thessalonica had a temple dedicated to Cesar. Both of these local religions confronted and attacked the fledging churches.

You welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ 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, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1)

Read Acts 17:5-9: It is interesting how some people would not show a zeal for worshipping God; but they would travel long distances and wage war against those who held a different view of the scriptures.

For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³ Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. (Romans 10:2-3)

If they were a legitimate or corrective delegation protesting the Christian world view, then why did they need to enlist criminals to falsify their witness and perform character assassination? Insurrection was the card that the resisters of the gospel always played. In reality, there was no civil unrest, except for what the unbelievers ginned up. It was the surest way to incarcerate or kill the church members. It is of Satanic origin.

Read Acts 17:10-14: The further that we get from Jerusalem, the more we see how witnessing to Greeks and Gentiles is different than witnessing to Jews. The Jews were all about history and tradition and signs; but the Greeks were more like student debates.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22)

The Berean church is a church that we should emulate. They were very serious about knowing the scriptures and verifying all that was being taught. They did not respect the messenger. The scriptures were preeminent. That is a good church model. It must have been God's plan to keep Paul moving and keep Timothy and Silas with the local church. The agitators were sent by demonic influence but ultimately helped keep Paul's non-stop itinerary. He was forced to keep moving on.

Read Acts 17:16-34: Another reason that God may have used Paul for this job is for his intellect and ability to reason. His next stop was in Athens. Athens was like the ancient world's MIT. The city had many of the most famous philosophers, writers and teachers. The Areopagus was their forum to debate religions and similar concepts. It is as if Paul was having a world championship apologetics bout on their home court. Here is a listing of just a few of their famous residents:

NAME	CONTRIBUTION	TIME PERIOD
Socrates	Founder of Western philosophy; known for the Socratic method.	470-399 BC
Plato	Student of Socrates; wrote philosophical dialogues and founded the Academy.	427-347 BC
Aristotle	Student of Plato; contributed to many fields including logic, metaphysics, and ethics.	384-322 BC
Herodotus	Often called the "Father of History"; known for his work "Histories."	c. 484-425 BC
Thucydides	Historian known for "The History of the Peloponnesian War."	c. 460-400 BC
Euripides	Famous tragic playwright; known for works like "Medea" and "Hippolytus."	c. 480-406 BC
Sophocles	Renowned playwright famous for "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone."	c. 496-406 BC
Aristophanes	Notable comedic playwright; known for satirical works like "Lysistrata."	c. 446-386 BC
Demosthenes	Renowned orator and statesman; famous for his speeches against Philip II of Macedon.	384-322 BC
Isocrates	Influential rhetorician and teacher; contributed to the development of rhetoric.	436-338 BC

Paul was in the idol forum. They had all kinds of idols showcased in Athens. It was also the home of philosophy. Paul debated both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans were famous for trying to enjoy everything that made them feel good: food, wine, sex, experiences, etc.. They were the epitome of eat, drink and be merry, because there is no eternal state. The Stoics were the opposite. They advocated an austere and minimalist set of virtues. One thing that is often the case with the highly educated, is that they have a focus in their area of study; but frequently are blind to the big picture, or the practicalities at ground level.

Paul wisely looked around and studied these people. He was brought forward to share his ideas in the Areopagus. He wisely noted that they left a *placeholder altar* for any unknown god. After all, their mythological traditions included the wrath of the gods for not recognizing a god in their midst. This was their catch-all altar. Paul does not mince words, as he tells them that he represents the unknown God, whom they know nothing about. He adds that this God does not need men to make his altars. He is the creator of the universe. The Greeks had limited tales of how the universe was created. Paul added that this God made all men, and it is he who gives them life and breath. He also has decided in advance when and where all men would be born. It is this God who made all of the national boundaries. He added that the object in life is to find God who is near them. Paul quotes their poets Epimenides and Aratus in verse 28. Paul is good

at leveraging the predispositions of people to win some to Christ. Finally, Paul points to a coming judgement for sin and the resurrection of the dead. Some believed, while others were opposed.