

Sunday, June 14, 2026

Reception, Reflection, and Rejection

Acts 17

- When I was younger, I always thought that I would want to live in a big city.
 - Even when I was in college and I would be driving to school from home and my early years I would drive right past Charlotte on my way to Virginia and I would see the city skyline all lit up and it was one of my favorite sites
 - Then in my later years I would drive through Atlanta to and from school and the life and business of the big city just seemed exciting to me.
 - I had art in my first house of the Philadelphia skyline, and just loved the looks of the city so much
- However, the older I got and the more experience that I had, the more I came to conclude, I don't like city culture.
 - The first thing I hated was traffic, don't like that....the more I would be stuck in Charlotte and Atlanta traffic the more I never wanted to drive through those cities again.
 - Always having to pay for parking, was a bother to me
 - But also, other people are viewed more as threats than anything else, and you're just kind of lost in a sea of people
 - And I heard it explained, that the more people you cram into a space, the less individuals you have
 - And one of the things that I have learned about myself is that individualization is important to me. The way that I am wired, I like to see people as individuals not as a crowd
 - It's my strength-finders top 5

- And it seems that the attempt has always been
 - ever since even these bible times as we’ll see—for the social or political elite to dictate how these masses think and live...
- And they’ll refer to them as “free-thinkers” however no one better dare think differently them
 - We’ll see this to be the case in Thessalonica and even more so Athens
- But not so much in the smaller towns—like we’ll see in Berea
- So when reading through these passages I could help but think about the difference between the small town and the big city—and how I like where I am.
- ***“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.” 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. 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.”

-Acts 17:1-8 (ESV)

- Now, Thessalonica was the capitol of Macedonia. Last week we saw them in Philippi which was the largest city, but this the most important city in Macedonia to the Roman Empire.
 - This was a Harbor town where most of the goods would be imported and exported
 - And it had the most important road and trade route, arguably in the entire known world called the Via Egnatia that connected the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire
- Thessalonica was a major commerce center, transportation hub, that would be full of various cultures and ideas
 - This was the most connected city in the world, so Paul knew that if he could reach Thessalonica, he could reach people that would be going to every part of the Roman Empire

- And like his hometown of Antioch, Thessalonica was a free city so it was self-governed and anyone born there regardless of their religion or culture were automatically Roman Citizens
- Unlike Philippi, being the cultural hub that Thessalonica was there was a very strong Jewish presence there so there were Synagogues that Paul and Silas could visit
- And Luke tells us that for 3 weeks in a row, ***“[Paul] reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead,” -Acts 17:2b-3a (ESV)***
 - So Paul wasn’t just sharing stories and hypotheticals
 - When it says that he was reasoning, that word means: to think different things with one's self, mingle thought with thought—to ponder, revolve in mind—to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss

- So this is thorough, intentional, in-depth conversation that he is having with these Thessalonian's
- He's showing that this isn't just an idea, there is proof and evidence that you have been reading your entire life you just didn't realize it!
 - Because almost every Jewish decedent or believer, that anticipated the Christ or the Messiah anticipated this political warrior that would make Israel a leading world power and overthrow Rome or whoever was in charge of the world at the time when the Christ would come
 - This was supposed to be a great conqueror, so to hear that this Christ was to suffer and die—that seemed completely contrary to who they thought He was supposed to be
- Now anyone who was alive and having any Jewish connections in the world at this time as heard about Jesus, His crucifixion, and His alleged resurrection
 - But they don't know what to make of it all yet, and they have to be taught— and reasoned with— as to understand why Jesus' death and resurrection does indeed prove that He is the Christ
- Maybe Paul took them through Isaiah 53— when the prophet speaks of a Servant that would be rejected, suffer, pierced and crushed for the sins of others. He would die, He would pour out His soul to death! But yet, the prophet says, “He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days, the will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand”
 - Paul could reason with them, that Jesus was that soul poured out but He rose from the grave to prolong His days to carry out the will of the Father
- Maybe on another Sabbath Paul took them to Psalm 22 and how when David spoke of having his hands and his feet pierced, his body so beaten he could count his bones, how his clothes were gambled for while people stared

and gloated at him...and proved to them that that was actually a prophecy and foreshadowing of what they all know happened to Jesus on the cross

- Or also, Psalm 16 when David said, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, nor let your Holy One see corruption." —Paul could reason, well David died and his body has decayed, therefore he must have been speaking prophetically of One greater than himself who would die but not see corruption...that's Jesus!
- Maybe Paul walked them through the sacrificial system and how it pointed to Jesus' sacrifice...or the Passover in general and how Jesus was the sacrificial lamb
- There are literally hundreds of Old Testament prophecies that Paul could have taught and reasoned with them from that Jesus fulfilled...and what made his reasoning powerful was the fact that his reasoning was rooted in scripture

- He didn't just reason with them from his experience, his story, or his ideas...no— everything was based in the truth of scripture

- **SCRIPTURE-LESS REASONING IS EMPTY**

- Now a days, people are sharing their reasoning and their opinions and view points at a rate that we have never seen before because of how connected we are to the world through technology
- But how often is there a basis of truth attached to the reasoning of people?
 - The ironic thing is that one of the things that is reasoned the most is that truth is relative and that there is no such thing as absolute truth...to which all we have to do is ask the question— "is that absolutely true?"
 - But the reality is—any reasoning without a foundation of truth is actually just speculation because there will never be a resolution

- Let me give you an example: I heard Dr Tim Keller tell a story of years ago there was a lady who was a very famous academic and a self proclaimed atheist. And she was serving and studying in a certain region of Africa and she did not like the way that they treated women.
- There were no equality of rights for women in that area and when she tried to address this with the higher ups they essentially said, “Don’t you dare try to impose your western culture on us.”
 - And she couldn’t argue or reason with them, because she had to admit that as an atheist, she believed in relative truth and that each person and culture can define their own truth
 - So who was she to tell them that their culture was wrong on the way that they treated women? Her conclusion was that she didn’t have the right to do so, but she still felt passionately about women’s rights so she would fight for it anyway
- You see, without a foundation of God and the truth of His word—you can account for moral feelings, but not moral obligation
 - You can explain that you may feel a certain way about certain issues and see the world in a particular way because of how you were raised and where you grew up and the influences you had
 - But you can’t explain why there would need to be an obligation to live a certain way and follow a certain way of morality if you have no basis of truth to found your idea of morality on
- But when you have the guidance of the God who created everything and designed it to run in a specific way—then you have a foundation and an authority of which to base your reasoning for why you live your life the way that you do
- And if you don’t have that —your reasoning will always be empty

- You'll be able reason your feelings, but not your obligations
- You need to know and be able to reason from the scriptures:
 - *I see people all the time try and reason morality apart from scripture—and they seem to have no common sense*
 - *People try and reason their relationships, marriages, or parenting style apart from scripture—and their households are chaos*
 - *People reason love apart from scripture—and they're contradictory*
 - *People reason political views apart from Scripture—and they're just contentious*
- But when you reason with people from the scriptures—you're going to get the same responses that Paul got. And you'll get all three at some point or another
 - You'll get Reception, Reflection, and Rejection
- We see two of those here in Thessalonica
 - We see some of the Jews were persuaded—as were a great many of the devout or “God-Fearing” greeks, and not a few of the leading women—Luke says
 - It's interesting language that Luke uses—because it's crazy to me that they go to the synagogue to reason from the scriptures with the Jews who know the scriptures
 - But while a few of them were persuaded—a whole lot more of the greeks and prominent gentile women came to faith
- But it goes to show that sometimes the hardest people to reason with are the ones that know the scriptures, but don't know how to apply the scriptures
 - You'll see it all the time—people using passages from the bible to reason something that the passage was talking nothing about

- I've heard people use the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman as a way to reason this extreme gentle parenting
- Or people using "Judge not, lest you be judged" as a way to reason away personal moral accountability...when it was in fact supposed to be used for the opposite
- I've heard people use the story of the Good Samaritan to try to reason and affirm homosexuality
- Or those who have tried to use the incarnation of Jesus as a way to reason trans ideology
- However, they won't quote or reason through the passages that deal directly with parental discipline, general morality, the passages that condemn homosexuality, or God's design for sex and gender
- And whenever you are to challenge them or present clear truth—we can expect strong reactions
- Like when Paul very clearly states that Jesus is God, and He is the only way to salvation. And believing in Him and surrendering your life to Him is the only way to heaven and if you don't you will spend eternity in hell
- That truth will garner strong reactions
- Seeing that so many people are being persuaded by the Gospel and the truth of the Scripture—the religious elite get jealous, as we've seen time and time again
 - But these are the guys who had been dictating what the people thought and how they lived
 - They made money off of these people and these people kept them in power
 - And these guys couldn't reason from Scripture—so they result to what these things normally result to and that is: Lies and Violence
- Luke tells us that these leaders recruited what he calls "wicked men of the rabble" in this

translation—but these were unemployed loiterers, troublemakers, men who were easily recruited for public disturbances

- The greek lexicon refers to them as “idlers, loungers, hucksters, petty traffickers “
 - These are guys that just hang around the marketplace looking to stir up trouble and rip people off
- And this is who these religious leaders partner with because they themselves can't withstand the truth of the scripture that Paul and Silas are presenting
- So they incite a mob and go to the house of Jason who was hosting the apostles
- They don't find Paul and Silas there—so they drag Jason and some of the other believers that were there in his house to the political authorities and accuse them of political crimes

- Which we still see so often today—those who try to make spiritual issues, political issue in order to distort the truth

- But what they are accused of is one of my favorite descriptions of the Christians leaders that I have ever heard
- They say, ***“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,”***
-Acts 17:6b (ESV)
- That's what the truth of the Gospel does! It turns the world upside down!
- And we need more Christians today that are willing to reason from the scriptures in ways that will turn their world upside down
- That will allow the truth and the love and the mercy of Jesus Christ to turn every aspect of our lives upside down
- That will turn the way that we do business upside down
- That will turn the way we lead our families upside down

- That will turn the culture of our schools and our communities and the society we live in upside down
- And when we do that, there will be strong rejection that comes along with it—but there will be reception that comes as well, and whichever one we choose to give more of our focus to will be up to us
- But also there is a third response that we will see in Berea
 - So they allow Jason and those with him to post a bond and be released—but they sneak Paul and Silas out of town that night and they make their way to Berea
- ***“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. Many of them***

therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” -Acts 17:10-12 (ESV)

- Now Berea was a much different town than they had been in—they had primarily been going to big cities, but Berea was a much smaller town.
 - This city was inland away from the hustle and bustle from the major ports and trade routes
 - It was much less politically charged, less cosmopolitan
- And you can see just how differently they were received
 - Luke essentially says that these were some good-ole folks
 - But when he says that they were more “noble”—that literally means that they were more “noble-minded”

- When he says that they received the word with eagerness that word in the original language means to be “forward minded”
- So when Paul reasoned with them through the scriptures—it lead them first and foremost to reflection
 - In Thessalonica— the people more-so jumped straight to reception or rejection—in Berea the people took more time to process
 - They didn’t immediately discredit what they were being taught but they investigated it
 - They listened, examined, tested...and then many accepted
- This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes:

THE WISE SEEK WISDOM, FOOLS THINK THEY FOUND IT

 - Wisdom is not the pursuit of new ideas—its the understanding of what God has already taught
- Now there are aspects of what God has already taught that will be new to us as we continually learn and grow in our faith
- But the only way to grow in wisdom—is to search and examine the scriptures
- I love how these Bereans responded—they listened to what Paul had to say, but they examined the scriptures for themselves...that is truly free thinking now
 - And that is my prayer for everyone in our church—that you wouldn’t just take what you hear from the pulpit at face value, but you would examine the scriptures for yourselves!
 - Like the Berean’s examine them daily!
- That is where wisdom will truly be found, and yes we need sermons and books and commentaries—but we should never fall more in love with the interpretation of scripture than the scripture itself.
- So when we hear an explanation of the scripture that we have not considered before—

we don't need to immediately discredit it, but we should examine it for ourselves to see if the Lord leads us to a truth that hadn't seen before.

- But this pursuit of God's wisdom should be a never ending process in our lives.
- Proverbs chapter 2 is probably my favorite passage of scripture that talks about this:
- ***“[Make] your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of His saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and***

equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil...”

-Proverbs 2:2-12 (ESV)

- It goes on to say that seeking this wisdom from the Lord will protect you from bad influences, from making poor sexual decisions, will help you live a life that is healthy, good, and full of integrity.
- But at the very moment when we think that we have gained enough wisdom, and are smart enough—That we don't need to keep pursuing wisdom and understand all of the truth from scripture that we need to understand...
 - That is the very moment we become foolish and start making a lot of dumb decisions
 - It's also when we will start to believe that we can find wisdom in alternative places then just the Bible and the knowledge of God and His ways.

- And as we have already discussed that type of “wisdom” and reasoning is empty, has always been empty and always will be empty...but it will never stop the world from trying
- And probably the global hub for this type of “wisdom seeking” was the next place that Paul ended up going to.
- In the next few verses we see that the non-noble minded people from Thessalonica heard that they were sharing the Gospel in Berea and sent a mob after them again
- So they get Paul out of town, and send him to Athens and he’s going to hang out there until Silas and Timothy can join him.
- Verse 16 says: **“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” -Acts 17:16 (ESV)**
- I love to see Paul’s heart here too. Because most people would show up to Athens in complete wonder.
- Because Athens was one of the most famous cities in the entire world. It was known as the cultural center of antiquity.
- Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of Greece
 - This was the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle
 - It was the most influential city in the world when it came to philosophy, education, culture, and religious traditions.
 - One scholar pointed out that at this time—the ideas that were forged in Athens and accepted in Athens flowed out to the rest of society and it set the course for how people lived and thought.
- And the place that these ideas were formed was in what they called The Marketplace

- Which isn't what we would think of when we think of a marketplace— we would think of like a shopping center, which there was some of that there but just a small part
- Their marketplace was so much more than that
 - It was the commercial center, the political gathering place, the social hub, and the forum for public debate
 - It was the media center of the city, as well as the financial center and the Arts center
- This is where the greatest intellectual minds in the known world would gather to discuss, converse, and debate
 - And this truly was a city full of idols because they would have a place for every single god or religious idea that would come about
 - Most famously the Parthenon dedicated to Athena—the goddess of wisdom was gloriously built right in the center of the city
 - And there were the temples dedicated to Zeus
- Countless shrines around the city dedicated to local gods
- Cult monuments—scattered about to honor various roman rulers
- One was famously said "*it is easier to find a god in Athens than a man*"
- And Paul didn't sense awe and wonder at these gaudy structures and glamorous temples—he was heart broken by it.
- And verse 17 goes on to say: ***“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the***

Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” -Acts 17:17-20 (ESV)

- So Paul didn't just stick to the synagogues, he also reasoned in the Marketplace
- He had the confidence that the Gospel was powerful enough to withstand the dominate culture of the day
- And he's conversing with Epicurean and Stoics philosophers—who we talked about last week which were the two dominate forms of paganism at the time
- But these are thought to be the greatest philosophical minds of the day that he is conversing with
- One commentator said that Athens was like if you were to take every Ivy league school and

Oxford and Cambridge and put them all in the same town

- You had the smartest students and teachers in the world all gathered in one place
- And some of them write Paul off and just call him a babbler—but he draws enough attention that they bring him before the Areopagus—which were the elite of the elite intellectual minds.
 - These were the top dogs in Athens. This was like the Athenian version of the Sanhedrin.
 - And Paul gets put before them to present what he is teaching...and Paul speaks to them so brilliantly
- ***“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What***

therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” -Acts 17:22-23 (ESV)

- Paul, first and foremost is very respectful. He knows that their religions are just pagan emptiness and in many cases demonic....but he doesn't burn a bridge before he gets started
 - And he appeals to what they already know.
- He points out this altar to the unknown god—that was most likely made just to cover their bases by not offending any god that they may have overlooked when making all of their shrines
 - But Paul uses that as his Gospel-in
 - He doesn't just try to prove to them that God exists—he instead tries to prove to them that they have always believed in Him they just either haven't accepted it or realized it yet
 - He says that this isn't about trying to find something new, but rather coming to grips with what has always been true

- ***“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. Yet He is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.””-Acts 17:24-28 (ESV)***
- He tells them of the God, who made everything, is not dependent upon anything, is in control of all things, yet desires a relationship with His creation

- And Paul again, appeals to what they know and uses quotes from their own prophets to tell them that the answer for every philosophical debate that they have ever had can be found in this God he is presenting to them.
- He uses a quote from Epimenides to say, “In God—we live and move and have our being”
 - This is the what every human being has been looking for and trying to answer—our origin, our purpose, and our identity
 - We are His offspring, made in His image and we’ll never know who we are, where we come from, or where we are going without Him.
- Paul goes on to say: **“Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Divine Being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He**

has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.” -Acts 17:39-34 (ESV)

- Again, we see rejection, as some mocked. Reflection, as some said “we’ll hear you about this again.” And reception, as some joined and believed
- Including Luke naming one of the intellectual elites—Dionysius the Areopagite
- But again, the overarching theme of this passage is that life changing wisdom is not found in coming up with something new—but understanding what God has already declared

to be true and gaining a greater understanding of it.

- And this is completely countercultural to Paul's day and our day: Because much of our society can be described as the Athenians were in verse 21: ***"Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."*** -Acts 17:21 (ESV)

- I believe that Paul is actually presenting a very freeing way of life here because:

**- ALWAYS SEEKING SOMETHING NEW
EVENTUALLY GETS OLD**

- The problem with always needing something new, is that nothing is ever enough

- Whatever you have or whatever you have learned will never be good enough because deep down you know that whatever is new, eventually becomes old

- But there is this constant strive to be new, to be different, to be original

• CS Lewis once said something along the lines that the attempt to be original is one of the most unoriginal things

- What we need, isn't something new...but something tried and true

- And the amazing thing is, studies are showing trends that young adults today aren't really constantly seeking the latest and the greatest, but the reliable and traditional

- This is especially so among young men

• A Gallup analysis found that about 40% of young men from 18-29 report attending a religious service monthly or more

• Which is higher than Gallup has seen in quite some time

• But within this trend is the growing interest among this age group in more historic forms of Christianity

- An article in Christianity Today showed how Gen Z prefers authenticity over modernization

- While its not evident that the generation as a whole are flocking to the church in droves, studies show that those who are pursuing faith, especially the young men, have a noticeable attraction to more traditional and historically rooted expressions of Christianity.
- Research shows that there is:
 - A desire for stability— not something that changes all of the time
 - An attraction to institutions with deep roots and clear identity
 - They say that the generation has a fatigue of constant culture change
 - And there is a search for transcendence rather than excitement
- One article stated that it seems these young people prefer churches that feel more historic, rooted, and distinctly Christian rather than highly modernized
 - Young believers are no longer asking themselves “How can church become more like the culture?” but rather “What makes church different from the culture”
- Even the Washington Post reported that these young adults are actively seeking authenticity, stability, meaning, community, transcendence — worship that feels more sacred than entertaining.
- You see, this is why I have so much hope for the upcoming generation—and while many will look around the world and say we’re all going to hell in a hand basket
 - I think God is doing something
 - I think we are ready to see a generation of truly free thinkers who will search for actual wisdom
 - Who care more about purpose than entertainment
 - Who desire truth over something new
 - Who will take real responsibility in their lives rather than self victimizing, self diagnosing, and self medicating

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- And I think we should take a lead from the example of our young people—and get back to keeping the main thing the main thing, examine the scriptures for ourselves, reason everything that we do through the truth of the scriptures, and who knows what different parts of the world we may turn upside down.