

Paul's Second Missionary Journey, Part 2

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How have you experienced opposition to your attempts to share your faith with others? How did you respond?

Read Acts 17:1–18:22.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help encourage you to continue in ministry despite frustrations, struggles, and even persecution. Ask Him to reveal to you how you can meet people where they are with the message of the gospel.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus don't give up sharing the gospel when there is opposition. They seek to meet people where they are and speak their language to connect the gospel to their lives.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Athens, Paul did an incredible job of connecting the gospel to Athenian culture, beliefs, and experience. It's a great model for us for how to share the gospel with people who are far from God, who don't know anything about Him. He started by going where the people were, even when it was outside his comfort zone. Then he spoke their language, using examples from their culture, history, prophets, and poets as points of connection to the gospel. Today, this would be like using modern movies, song lyrics, current events, or someone's own life experience to talk to people about how those things reveal the sinful condition of humanity, the love of God, and our need for His salvation. The goal is to meet people where they are, speak to their need for Jesus, and make connections to the gospel. To make the gospel relevant to their lives. To speak their language, not "Christianeze."

✦ MEDITATE

“In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *What opposition to your attempts to share the gospel have you experienced? What makes it hard to share the gospel in our culture?*

QUESTION *Reflect on the people you currently know who are far from God. What are some ways you can meet them where they are (their perspective, viewpoint, beliefs, struggles, doubts, experience, etc.) and make connections between the gospel and their everyday lives?*

In Acts 17:1 – 18:22, we see that Paul and Silas had great success with the gospel. But they also encountered great opposition among the Jews who saw the gospel as a threat to their tradition and religion instead of seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of it. We also see that Paul did an incredible job of witnessing to the Greeks in Athens, who had no background knowledge about God at all, meeting them where they were and finding points of connection with their language, history, and culture to show them the gospel. Overall, the message is to keep preaching the gospel in whatever way you can, in any way people will hear and understand. Even through opposition, even through suffering and persecution, keep preaching the gospel. This is our mission as the church.

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In this section, Paul continued his second missionary journey, experiencing both great success in spreading the gospel and great opposition from the Jews. In 17:1 – 15, at Thessalonica, many believed, but the Jews formed a mob against them and dragged their host, Jason, before the city authorities. Paul and Silas went by night to Berea, where many Jews examined the Scriptures for themselves and believed the gospel. But the Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up the crowds against them. Paul escaped but left Silas and Timothy at Berea. In 17:16 – 34, when Paul was in Athens, he was disturbed by the many idols there and reasoned both with the Jews in the synagogue and the Greeks in the marketplace.

The Greek philosophers asked Paul to present his views at the Areopagus, as they typically did with interesting new teachings. Paul used an altar “to the unknown god” he had seen and some of the words of their own poets to tell them that this God was the only God, and we are all His offspring. In Acts 18:1–21, Paul went to Corinth, where he worked as a tentmaker with a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. When the Jews reviled him, Paul shook out his garments and said he would only preach to the Gentiles from then on. But then the ruler of the synagogue became a believer, and God appeared to Paul in a vision, telling him to not stop preaching. He stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, until the Jews brought him before the new proconsul, Gallio, who refused to judge religious matters between Jews. Paul went to Ephesus, leaving Priscilla and Aquila to establish the church there, and returned to Antioch.

1. *Thessalonica and Berea: Success and Opposition*
2. *Athens: Meeting People Where They Are*
3. *Corinth and Ephesus: Success and Opposition*

[GOING DEEPER]

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 17:1–18:22.

1. Thessalonica and Berea: Success and Opposition

✦ READ ACTS 17:1-15

QUESTION *What did the Jews say about the apostles when they dragged Jason before the city authorities?*

QUESTION *How did the Bereans double check that what Paul was preaching was true?*

At the end of the last chapter, Paul and Silas had been imprisoned in Philippi, so they were getting used to opposition on their journey. When they arrived at Thessalonica, they went to the synagogue, and for three Sabbaths Paul reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures, explaining how Jesus fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah suffering and rising from the dead. Paul was an expert at the Old Testament Scriptures. Not only was he a Pharisee, but he has also studied under the very famous rabbi, Gamaliel, who was president of the Sanhedrin and was considered one of the greatest teachers in Jewish history. Some of the Jews were persuaded along with “a great many” of the “devout Greeks” (God-fearers) and many of the leading women. In Macedonia, women had more power, independence, and influence than in Israel.

But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they paid some of the idle, unemployed troublemakers who hung out in the marketplace to stir up a crowd against Paul and Silas. They raided their host, Jason's, house looking for them but couldn't find Paul and Silas, so they dragged Jason and some of the other believers before the city officials instead. This term for city officials, "politarchs," was unique to Macedonia. Rome gave them a free hand to run the city, but they had to answer to Rome for any inappropriate actions. The Jews accused Paul and Silas of defying Caesar's decrees by teaching that Jesus was king instead. Politarchs were required to enforce loyalty to Caesar.

Note what the Jews called Paul and Silas—"these men who have turned the world upside down." They meant it as a bad thing, but in light of the gospel, this is a great description! This is exactly what God's people are supposed to do, because the ways of Jesus are upside-down from the world. The way they said it—these men have come here too—means they had heard about Paul and Silas before they came and likely all the towns in their area were hearing about them. The apostles were having a major impact in the world!

When the politarchs heard this accusation, they were greatly disturbed and required Jason to pay a bond, a financial guarantee that they would not cause any further disturbances. As soon as night fell, they sneaked Paul and Silas out to Berea, a change in direction (south) from the way they had been going along the *Via Egnatia* (west). Paul was not deterred from sharing the gospel, but they did go a different direction.

At Berea, they also went to the synagogue and explained how Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament to the Jews there. But Acts says the Jews in Berea were nobler than those in Thessalonica because they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was teaching was true. In Thessalonica, the people had just listened to Paul's teaching on the Sabbath. At Berea, they searched the Scriptures 1) for themselves and 2) daily. They received the gospel "with eagerness," but they didn't have just an emotional reaction. They studied, prayed, and discerned whether what they were hearing was true. Instead of "some," like in Thessalonica, "many" of the Jews in Berea believed, along with many Greek God-fearers, both men and women. This shows us that when you really study the Scriptures, it is clear that Jesus is the Messiah!

Unfortunately, the same Jews who opposed them in Thessalonica heard they were having success in Berea and came and stirred up crowds against them there too. So, they immediately sent Paul away, but Silas and Timothy stayed there to teach the new Berean believers.

QUESTION *Why were these Jews in Thessalonica so threatened by the apostles?*

QUESTION *How did the apostles turn the world upside down? What kind of impact were they having?*

APPLICATION POINT #1 / The disciples were becoming known as “men who turned the world upside down.” When we are doing the Lord’s work and fulfilling His mission to spread the gospel all over the world, it will turn the world upside down. Because Jesus’s ways, the ways of His kingdom, are upside down from the ways of the world—humility instead of power, generosity instead of accumulating wealth, looking out for the vulnerable instead of looking out for #1, etc. If we blend in with the world around us, living the same way the world does, we aren’t shining the light of Christ to the world. We should hope people would describe us this way!

APPLICATION POINT #2 / When the Bereans heard the gospel, even though they were excited about it, they checked the Scriptures diligently to make sure it was true. Anytime we hear anything from a church leader, speaker, or teacher, we should always examine the Scriptures for ourselves. Even someone who seems like a great teacher can be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and even the most trusted pastor can accidentally get things wrong sometimes. We should always examine the Scriptures for ourselves!

QUESTION *In what ways is your life upside down from those around you? How could those looking at the way you live tell you are a follower of Jesus?*

QUESTION *How can you grow in your understanding of God’s Word for yourself, rather than just relying on what other people tell you about it?*

2. Athens: Meeting People Where They Are

✚ READ ACTS 17:16-34

QUESTION *Why was Paul's spirit provoked within him?*

QUESTION *How did Paul use their idol worship to preach the gospel to them?*

When Paul arrived in Athens, his spirit was “provoked” at seeing how many idols were in the city. He would have felt this way about idols as a Jew as well. This unique word is only used twice in the New Testament, here and in the description of love as not being “easily provoked” (1 Corinthians 13:5 NASB), though a related word is used about the “sharp” disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39) and how the church should be “provoking” one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24 KJV). It literally means to “sharpen beside” and is used in swordplay to describe jabbing at each other. Paul was cut to the quick.

In Greece, the city streets were lined with statues of men and gods, but Athens was especially decorated with hundreds of *Hermae*, tall square pillars mounted with the head of the god Hermes. Hermes was one of the twelve Olympian gods, the son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, and the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology. He was the god of several different things, but as the god of travelers, he was worshipped not only on special occasions but every time an Athenian stepped outside to travel anywhere, even across town.

In Athens, Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and every other day of the week he talked with whoever happened to be in the marketplace. Athens was known for being a center of Greek philosophy, and the marketplace was lively with debating philosophers. He began talking with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers:

- *Epicureans* taught that the highest good is pleasure, defined as the absence of pain. They rejected the notion of an immortal soul and believed death was the end of human existence. They advocated simple living, friendship, and freedom from fear, especially fear of death and gods. They believed if there were gods, they weren't involved in our lives and were therefore irrelevant. The Epicureans were only influential among the upper class.

- *Stoicism* argued that virtue is the only true good; external things (wealth, health, etc.) are neutral. They emphasized self-control, rational acceptance of fate, and living in harmony with nature. Stoics were more popular because they opposed worldly pleasure as the purpose of human existence. They criticized the Epicureans.

They called Paul a “babbler,” which literally means seed-picker, like a crow, but came to be used figuratively to call someone an idiot. They said he was preaching “foreign gods”—Jesus and “the resurrection,” which was also a woman’s name in Greek. They brought Paul to the Areopagus, a council that evaluated new teaching. Luke tells us that Athenians were known for doing nothing but telling or hearing something new.

When Paul spoke before the Areopagus, he started out by 1) complimenting them, which was typical for their culture and 2) meeting them where they were. He found something he had observed in their culture and used it to preach the gospel. Among their many idols, they had one altar to “the unknown god.” Long before Paul’s time (6th century BC), there was a plague in Athens and the people made sacrifices to all their gods, but nothing worked. After consulting the Oracle of Delphi, they asked for help from the prophet and poet Epimenides from Crete, one of the “seven wise poets” of ancient Greece. He brought some sheep to the Areopagus and released them. Wherever a sheep lay down, he marked the spot, and in those spots they made sacrifices to “an unknown god” and the plague immediately stopped.

Paul told them this unknown god is the God, the only God, Lord of heaven and earth. He is not like their gods; He doesn’t live in a temple made by man, nor is He served by human hands. He doesn’t need us; He is the one who gives life to us. He is the God of every nation; we are all His children. Paul also connected to their culture and their belief system by quoting the same poet who rescued them from the plague, Epimenides, saying, “In him we live and move and have our being ... we are His offspring.” This God is not made of gold, silver, or stone. He made human beings; we didn’t make Him. Paul spoke their language and used their culture, customs, and beliefs to meet them with the gospel where they were. Some who were listening mocked Paul when they heard about the resurrection of the dead. Others wanted to hear more. And others joined him and believed.

QUESTION *How did Paul meet the Athenians where they were to share the gospel? How did he “speak their language”?*

QUESTION *What does this tell us about how we should share the gospel with those who are far from God?*

APPLICATION POINT #1 / Paul didn't just stick to the Jewish synagogues; he went into the Greek marketplace. We can be a witness wherever we go, but we have to be willing to go where the people who need Jesus are. We can't sit at church and wait for them to come to us. Most unbelievers won't ever come into a church unless they have first had some kind of encounter out in the world with someone who shared their faith and invited them. We need to go out into the world, wherever people are, to share the gospel, even if it is somewhere outside of our comfort zone. We don't have to go in a preachy kind of way but just live out our faith and talk to people naturally about Jesus.

APPLICATION POINT #2 / Paul found a way to connect the gospel to the Athenian culture, belief system, and experience. When we speak to people about Jesus, we need to find out who they are, what they believe, and where they are coming from to learn how to speak their language and make connections to the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. We have to figure out how to show them Jesus is the answer they are looking for. If we believe our God is the one true God and the gospel is the only way to Him, then we must believe Jesus is the answer to whatever anyone is looking for, what they are missing, what they need. We just have to listen to them long enough to hear what it is and then help them make that connection to Jesus.

3. Corinth and Ephesus: Success and Opposition

✚ READ ACTS 18:1-22

QUESTION *What was Paul's relationship with Priscilla and Aquila?*

QUESTION *Why did Paul shake his garments out against the Corinthian Jews?*

When Paul left Athens, he went to Corinth, where he lived and worked with fellow Jewish Christians named Priscilla and Aquila, because they were also tentmakers by trade. During much of his ministry, Paul worked at tentmaking and preached the gospel in addition to his day job. He did this intentionally; he wanted to support himself because he didn't want to be a burden to his supporters (2 Corinthians 11:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). At times in his ministry, like when he was in prison, he did rely on church's financial support (Philippians 4:18). In the ancient world, the government did not provide prisoners with food and clothing. They had to rely on family and friends to provide for them.

Working as a tentmaker not only provided Paul an income but would have also given him opportunities to connect with people in the marketplace and then share the gospel. To this day, we often refer to pastors

who work a secular job to support themselves and do ministry on the side as “tentmakers.” This doesn’t mean Paul expected everyone to do ministry this way. When writing to Timothy, he told the people that those who labor in ministry deserve fair wages for the work they do (1 Timothy 5:18).

Priscilla and Aquila were Jews who had recently come from Italy because the emperor Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. Corinth was a very wealthy cosmopolitan city that was well-known for its sexual immorality, including temple prostitution at the temple of Aphrodite. Paul witnessed to these Aphrodite-worshipping Greeks in the marketplace, and every Sabbath he reasoned with Jews in the synagogue.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was able to focus completely on his ministry because they brought a gift of financial support from the church there. But the Jews opposed him, and Paul shook out his garments, which meant the same thing as “shaking the dust from your feet” (Mark 6:7–13). He told them he was giving up on them and only going to the Gentiles from then on. But when he left them, he went to the house of a Greek God-fearer named Titius Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue. The ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and his entire household believed and many more Corinthians with them. Right after he said he was giving up on the Jews, the ruler of the synagogue became a believer. Was that a sign from the Lord?

Just in case he didn’t get the message, God also appeared to him in a vision and told him not to stop preaching. God promised him that no one in Corinth would attack him. Both the conversion of Crispus and the vision from the Lord tell us that Paul’s reaction of shaking his garments wasn’t from the Holy Spirit; it was just his emotional reaction, which was totally understandable. They were “reviling” him, slandering him. Most of us would have reacted the same way. Though the apostles mostly listened to and followed the Holy Spirit throughout Acts, and they did some amazing things, they weren’t perfect. They were human. There were times they acted emotionally or immaturely, like when Paul split with Barnabas. Later, Paul changed his mind and didn’t really only preach to the Gentiles after this, because in the very next place, Ephesus, he went directly to the synagogue to teach.

Paul stayed in Corinth teaching the Word for a year and a half and no one attacked him until Gallio became proconsul of Achaia (51 AD), when the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the “tribunal.” The Greek literally says they led him to the bema, the “high place” or judgment seat, a platform where judges would sit to hear cases brought before them. While the English term “tribunal” implies a group of people, this was just one judge, Gallio. The bema was at the eastern end of the Corinthian forum, in full view of the public.

Before Paul could even respond to the Jews’ accusations, Gallio dismissed their case because it seemed to him like a religious dispute between the Jews, not a matter for him to judge. Gallio sent them away. The crowd beat Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, who had led the attack against Paul, right in front

of the bema where Gallio sat, but he ignored them. The Greek literally says, “Nothing about these things mattered to him.” On the one hand, this judgment was good for the church; the government would not interfere with their work, at least for the time being. On the other hand, it showed that the Jews were on the offense against them.

Paul didn’t leave Corinth immediately; he stayed “many days” longer. But then he left for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila along as coworkers both in tentmaking and in the gospel. When they came to Ephesus, Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue, but when they asked him to stay longer, he declined, saying he would return to them if God willed. He left Priscilla and Aquila there to establish the Ephesian church and returned to Antioch.

QUESTION *What does it tell us about Paul that he had such an emotional reaction to the Jews reviling him? What does it tell us about God that He told him to keep preaching to them?*

QUESTION *Why did Paul choose to support himself with tentmaking rather than financial support from churches? What are the pros and cons of this choice?*

APPLICATION POINT #1 / Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila worked as tentmakers to support themselves financially so they wouldn’t burden the churches. But they also taught that it was okay for pastors to be paid and that they should be paid a fair wage. Today, we see both styles of ministry —fulltime pastors, those who do it as volunteers in addition to their day jobs, and those who are bi-vocational. Throughout church history and in many countries, bi-vocational pastors have been more the norm than those who are fully funded by their churches. There are pros and cons to each choice. Any of those options is fine as long as the church isn’t being burdened financially and the pastor is being provided for, not taken advantage of.

APPLICATION POINT #2 / This also shows us that any believer can be a minister, even if we have “day jobs.” Scripture says if you have been reconciled to God, you are a minister of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17–18). All disciples are called to make disciples and be witnesses for Christ (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), not just the “professional” fulltime pastors. We are all called to preach the gospel as we go about our day-to-day lives.

APPLICATION POINT #3 / God told Paul not to give up, not to stop preaching, even if he felt frustrated, even if he felt they weren’t listening, even if he felt scared for his safety. We can’t give up, even if it feels like we’ve been telling people about Jesus for years and they’ve only reviled us in return. You never know what impact you are making, what seeds you are planting. We must continue to preach God’s Word even if we are rejected or persecuted. We may suffer for the gospel, but He is watching over us. Even if we die

for the gospel, which many of these apostles eventually did. For believers, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

QUESTION *How might God be calling you into other positions in ministry, either in addition to your “day job” or even as a career?*

QUESTION *Reflect on those you’ve shared the gospel with for many years, yet it seems fruitless. How can you stay encouraged to stay the course? How can you pray for them and for others to come into their lives to impact them too?*

[NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us that disciples continue to preach the gospel even through great opposition, and they think creatively about how to connect the gospel to their listeners’ culture, history, beliefs, and experience. This week, choose one person with whom God is leading you to share the gospel and ask Him to give you the right words to say to connect the gospel to their life in a relevant way so you can meet them where they are with the gospel.

[PRAY]

+Pray for the Lord to give you the courage and perseverance to preach the gospel regardless of opposition and the wisdom and creativity to meet people where they are with the gospel.

Dear Lord,

Fill me with a passion for sharing the gospel. Help me see the urgency of sharing the truth with friends, family, and everyone I encounter. Give me the courage and perseverance to share the gospel with others even if they reject, revile, or even persecute me. Give me the creativity to know how to make connections between the gospel and people’s everyday lives. Show me how I can meet people where they are, speak their language, and show them that Jesus is the answer to every need. Most of all, make my life a reflection of your love so people are drawn to your Spirit in me. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Now make a list of all the people who are far from Jesus who are already in your life. Pray over each one, asking God to show you how to connect with them, meet them where they are, and share the gospel with them.