JESUS IS THE CHRIST

Acts 17:1-18:22
Key Verse: 17:3

"...explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said."

In last week’s passage, we studied the first half of Paul’s second missionary journey, entitled, "Called to preach the gospel." We learned that when Paul absolutely obeyed the world mission command of God, God could do his great work through Paul and open the way for the gospel to come to Rome. In order to obey the world mission command, Paul had to endure many kinds of hardship. But deprivation did not make Paul or his companions bitter. Instead, they remembered the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and rejoiced to see how God was working through them to soothe and heal the wounded consciences of their Gentile sheep. Paul’s second missionary journey took him into Macedonia and Achaia, the Roman colonies in Greece. In this passage, we see how Paul did his best to proclaim the gospel to Gentile people. Many times he failed, or had to steal away at night because of fierce opposition. But God encouraged him and gave him the victory in pioneering the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. May God help us to believe that Jesus is the Christ. May God convince our hearts that God wants all men everywhere to be saved and receive eternal life through faith in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, three sabbath days in Thessalonica. Paul and Silas had begun their second missionary journey with the intention of spreading the gospel in ever-widening circles from Antioch. But the Spirit of Jesus blocked their progress to the East and the province of Asia. What is more, Paul received a vision at night of a man of Macedonia, begging him to come and help the people of Macedonia. Paul and his company acknowledged that God was calling them to go into Europe with the gospel. But their journey was not easy. Already in Philippi, Paul and Silas had been beaten, arrested and shackled in prison. In spite of such severe hardships, one church had been established in the home
of Lydia. This church became Paul’s base of operations for bringing the gospel to the rest of Macedonia and Achaia. One person who receives the grace of God sincerely and with a thankful heart is God’s base of operations in our community.

Though Paul and Silas were badly beaten, they did not stop for a rest or vacation. They moved on from Philippi, going through Amphipolis and Apollonia until they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went in to the synagogue and on three sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. Here we see that Paul first brought the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks of Thessalonica. Paul had a broken shepherd heart for his own people, the Jews. What is more, the Jews were God’s chosen people, entrusted by God with the law and the prophets, as his prayer for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God’s undying hope for his people was that they would become a source of blessing for the whole world by filling the world with the knowledge of God and God’s promises. They were the ones to whom God had given the promise of the Messiah, the Savior of the world. So Paul faithfully went to each synagogue on his journey, in order to proclaim there the good news about Jesus Christ.

Look at verses 2 and 3. “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.” Paul emphasized the Christ’s mission on earth to suffer for our sins and to rise from the dead as our Savior and Lord. The Jews’ common conception of the Christ was as the military Savior of the nation of Israel, who would take away their nation’s disgrace by destroying the Roman empire and establishing Israel as the world’s superpower nation. In short, they wanted a Savior who would save them externally, changing their worldly circumstances without changing their inner man. They were too self-righteous to acknowledge that they were slaves to sin. Even Jesus’ own disciples had such a hope in an earthly messianic kingdom. It seemed that their hopes were dashed when Jesus was arrested by the Jewish authorities and
crucified by Pontius Pilate. But God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. Jesus’ suffering on the cross had seemed so meaningless to his frightened disciples. But when the Risen Jesus appeared to them and convinced them that he was alive, they understood from Scripture that God’s hope was greater than that of restoring the nation of Israel. The Christ’s mission was to save his people from their sins and to give them eternal life in God’s kingdom. God’s hope was that through the Christ’s suffering as the ransom sacrifice, the sin of the world could be paid for in full. God’s hope was that through his resurrection, all people everywhere could be freed from the power of sin and death, and live by faith in the Christ in holiness and righteousness all their days.

Isaiah 53:4 and 5 says: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” It was God’s will to crush his servant, the Christ. He was laid in the tomb with the wicked, but God would exalt him and make him the victor. Isaiah 53:11 says, “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.” In order to bear the heavy burden of our sins, the Christ had to suffer and die. But it was not for his own sins. It was so that he could bear the sins of the world. God, in his infinite justice, would not leave his Christ in the tomb. In Psalm 16:10b, David proclaimed: “nor will you let your Holy One see decay.” He would be exalted to God’s right hand, leading the liberated captives of sin in his train (Ps. 68:18). Psalm 110:1 says, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” The Scriptures declare that the Christ had to suffer for our sins, and then rise from the dead for our justification.

What does the Christ’s suffering and resurrection mean for all mankind? According to the prophet Jeremiah, his death and resurrection would establish a new covenant relationship between God and men. Jeremiah 31:33 and 34 says, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother,
saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” According to the prophet Joel, all men could be freed by faith in the Christ from the power of evil spirits when they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Joel 2:29 says, “Even on my servants, both men and women I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” When God’s people live by the Spirit, and not by the law, there is vision and there is true equality among men and women. As Job and Daniel proclaimed, we have God’s precious promise that we will meet our redeemer in the flesh, and we will rejoice with him in his kingdom. And according to Isaiah, it was too small a thing for the Christ to redeem only Israel. He would redeem all the Gentiles as well, as a light for all peoples on earth. The Christ had to suffer and die. It was to free us from sin and death, and make us God’s precious children, his servants of his world salvation purpose on earth, and heirs of his kingdom in the kingdom of God. How could God sacrifice his one and only Son for sinners? God’s love and grace are too great for us to fathom. But it was foretold by God, and it was fulfilled.

Look again at 17:3, “...explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.” The man Jesus of Nazareth was sent by God into this world as a helpless baby laying in a manger. At the age of 30, he went out into the world for three years in order to proclaim the fulfillment of God’s promises and the coming of the kingdom of God. He healed the sick and preached the good news to the poor. But as his popularity rose, so did the religious leaders’ jealousy. Finally, they arrested him, brought him to trial, and had him crucified as a political criminal by the Romans. They thought that they would never see him again. But they were wrong. God raised this Jesus from the dead, and caused him to be seen by the apostles, the ones God had chosen to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Acts 2:36 says, “Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Paul himself had been a self-righteous Jew. He considered it his greatest mission to destroy the church of Jesus and preserve Judaism
and a nationalistic hope for Israel. But the Risen Jesus humbled himself and came to Paul to stop his murderous activities. He should have crushed Paul even as the US wants to crush Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. But the Risen Jesus did not crush Paul’s body. Rather, Paul himself was crushed in his inner man by the weight of his own sin when he stood in the presence of the Risen Lord Jesus. No one can face the full brunt of his own sin, let alone the sin of the world, and survive. But the light of Jesus’ presence exposed all of his wretched sins in a moment. He had to become a mental patient because of his shame and guilt. But the Risen Jesus instructed his servant Ananias to baptize Paul into Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Risen Jesus forgave all of Paul’s sins, and called him to live as his suffering servant in proclaiming the gospel to the Gentile world. Later, Paul testified in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

There is a lot of wisdom in the world about how to live a good life, to enjoy peace and prosperity, and to be a blessing to others. All of these things are good. But there is only one whom God has appointed as Savior, Lord and Christ. He is the Lord Jesus. Whoever believes in him will receive the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and a living hope in the kingdom of God. Whoever does not believe stands condemned for his sin. No act, heroic or innocuous, can save us from the condemnation our sins deserve. Salvation is by faith. Salvation is God’s grace to those who believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us receive God’s salvation into our hearts today. Let us proclaim the Christ, Savior and Lord, to a world lost in sin.

Because of Paul’s message, a few Jews and a large number of God-fearing Greeks accepted Jesus as Christ the Lord. What happened next? The Jews of Thessalonica were offended by Paul’s clear presentation of the gospel. They were jealous that he was proclaiming salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike. So they rounded up some bad characters and together with them accused Paul of causing trouble all over the world, and of defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus (5-9). They made Jason a scapegoat, for he offered Paul’s team hospitality.
Second, noble Bereans (17:10-15). Paul and Silas were sent away at night. On arriving in Berea they went to the Jewish synagogue and preached the gospel of Jesus, overcoming the hardships they had received in Thessalonica. What was the Berean's response to Paul's preaching? They were not offended that he proclaimed God's love and mission to the Gentiles; they listened to Paul's message. Look at verse 11. "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." Here we see the key importance of Bible study in the lives of God's people. Zeal in serving God is not enough. We must study the word of God in order to know the truth. We must study the word of God until we can deny our own idea of what it means to be a believer or a Christian, and we can accept God's way and truth for us. Most Christians don't want to have to study the Bible or be responsible for living in accordance with the truth. They want to have someone tell them that they are ok just the way they are. They want to fulfill the minimum number of rituals in order to be saved. But such people are not capable of accepting the salvation of God when it comes to them, because it does not fit their own worldly blueprint for salvation. We must know how to recognize our salvation when it comes. We must know how to come to God in God's way and for God's purpose.

When the Bereans thought carefully about Paul's message, many Jews repented and believed that Jesus is the Christ. They saw that their own idea was wrong, and that God's way was life and truth. Also, many prominent Greek women and many Greek men believed. The fruit of sincere Bible study is life and peace.

Third, the work of God among the sophisticated people at Athens (17:16-34). As we know well, Athens is the home of Hellenism and of many world famous philosophers. Denying God's existence, the Athenians started their thinking based on humanism. But when they did not fear God, everything became an object of fear to them. So they made their own kinds of gods and worshiped them. They were concerned that they had missed some gods, so they even put up an altar "to an unknown God." There were two groups of people: one was
the Epicureans, who, in contemporary terms, were "hedonists;" the others were Stoics who were too moralistic. These Athenians were curious about Paul's new ideas and wanted to hear him again. They spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas for their entertainment. Paul was determined to save them from idolatry and fear by making known to them the Creator God (24-28). He taught them that men must not worship idols made by human hands, but repent, so that they may be pardoned on the day when God will judge the world with justice. Paul also preached the resurrection of Jesus, whom God has made Christ and Judge. But his preaching in accordance with the Athenian's way of thinking (28) was not so effective. The Athenians mocked the resurrection, though a few believed.

Fourth, the work of God in Corinth (18:1-22). Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers as Paul was. After Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia to join him, Paul devoted himself exclusively to testifying that Jesus is Christ the Lord. But the opposition of the Corinthians was unbearable. Probably Paul felt lonely and was afraid. But the Risen Christ visited him and encouraged him. Look at verses 9,10. "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'" So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (11). Then Paul left Corinth accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Leaving them in Ephesus, Paul went back to Antioch. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.

In this passage we learn that in every place, to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:23,24 says, "...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." May God help us to explain and prove why Jesus had to suffer and why Jesus is Christ the Lord.