

### **Living with the Story of Jesus**

During Hitler's reign in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, was safely away from the madness teaching at a seminary here in New York. He chose to return to his homeland to participate in the resistance for which he was eventually caught, imprisoned and executed. As a boy growing up in Germany, his favorite book was a collection of stories called *Heroes of Everyday*. It was filled with stories of courageous young people who, with selflessness and a clear thinking, often saved others' lives, sometimes at the cost of their own. Shortly before his execution, Bonhoeffer was reading *Plutarch's Lives*, a book that explores the courageous character of ancient men. Daniel Taylor, in writing about Bonhoeffer, draws this conclusion:

Can we doubt that Bonhoeffer's reading shaped his actions, including his decision to risk his life to save others? Ethics are more formed by the stories with which we surround ourselves, than [just] by the rules that are drilled into us. Tell [me] what stories you value, and [I] have a good start on knowing who you are and how you will act in the world. <sup>i</sup>

So, what are your favorite stories? What films, what TV shows, what books, what video games do you go back to over and over again? Do you think they're having a shaping effect on your character? If not, are you willing to ask a close friend what he/she think? I dare you.

At the halfway point of the apostle Paul's life, his favorite stories changed. The day he left for Damascus, he loved the story of how the religious rulers in Jerusalem had silenced Stephen, the follower of Jesus. By the time he left Damascus, his favorite story WAS the story of Jesus.

In Acts 17 we see Paul and Silas visit three different cities - Thessalonica, Berea and Athens - all part of modern-day Greece. In each city Paul told his favorite story; he couldn't help himself. In each city he got a different response. I think there's something important we can learn from each of these experiences. First...

#### **I. In Thessalonica, Paul Found Prejudiced Rejection.**

Why did Paul go to this city? Thessalonica was a commercial center in Paul's day. It stood at the intersection of the main roads that traveled east and west and north and south in the Roman world. The Holy Spirit, who sent him there, is a master strategist. Travelers by the thousands passed through Thessalonica each month on their way to every part of the empire. With a vibrant church there, the message of the gospel could spread like wildfire throughout the kingdom. So, Paul and Silas went to the Jewish synagogue, which it says, it was their "custom" to do.

**...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. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul**

**and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. (Acts 17:2b-4)**

Please notice that Paul's primary tool of conversation was Scripture. In fact, in all three cities, including Athens, the story Paul told was Jesus' story. He started in different places but he always ended in the same place, the resurrection of Christ. When you tell the story of Jesus, is that where you end? Sometimes as evangelicals we focus so much on the cross and Jesus' sacrifice that we skip the resurrection. I know I've been guilty of this. I want to be sure someone understands that Jesus died for them! But it's equally important for them to know that Jesus "rose again" for them. His dying isn't what distinguishes Jesus from other religious leaders, is it? No, they all died. Only Jesus rose again.

This is the "proof" that Paul is offering the people in all three of these Greek cities. In Thessalonica it says that "*...he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and PROVING that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.*"

But this "proof" will make some people angry. In Thessalonica, a small group of Jews became jealous. About what? Probably that Paul was winning over people from their synagogue to belief in Christ. They responded to the true story of Jesus by trying to throw Paul and Silas out of town – first by force, then by legal means. How did Paul and Silas respond? With force? With counter legal action? No, they just left. As Major General Oliver Smith told his men in the Korean War, "We are not retreating! We are simply advancing in another direction." The military definition of a retreat is "a withdrawal of troops to a more favorable position." Retreat is a far cry from surrender. In just a few years, Paul would visit Thessalonica again but this first visit was certainly not a failure. A new church was successfully planted there that would become one of the healthiest churches in the empire.

The second city they visited provided Paul and Silas with a very different response...

## **II. In Berea They Found Thoughtful Acceptance.**

**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. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. (Acts 17: 11, 12)**

As was true in Thessalonica, Paul goes to the synagogue where he finds a mixed group of mostly Jews, along with a number of "godly Gentiles." Again, Scripture is the centerpiece of their conversation. But here, it isn't just a few who understand the meaning of the story of Jesus, it's most of them.

Now, let's remember something. The New Testament hasn't been written yet. So, Paul is exclusively using the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Wouldn't it be fun to hear how he did that? Like, what Old Testament Scriptures did he use?

Well, in Hebrews chapter 1, we have an example of how to prove who Jesus is from the Old Testament. The writer refers to seven Old Testament passages that demonstrate that Jesus was the Son of God, that he was fully God and that He came to earth to establish His kingdom. The writer goes on to show in subsequent chapters that Jesus is the final High Priest and He came to enact a New Covenant, a

new agreement, through the shedding of His own blood, not the blood of sacrificial animals. The centerpiece of his argument is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah where God says:

**The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant... This is the covenant I will make... I will be their God, and they will be my people. ...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jer. 31:31, 33, 34)**

Now, we need to be clear about this New Covenant. God isn't saying in this Covenant that He's forgiving people "for free." No, He's saying that His forgiveness is very expensive, but the expense is borne by His Son rather than us. This is His "New Agreement" with us.

So, what kind of an "agreement" do you believe you have with God? Do you think that, since Jesus paid for your salvation, you then can do anything you want? Do you think that nothing you do has any impact upon salvation?

The late Paul Little, told the story of a young Christian woman he knew who signed a contract to teach in a public school. But when August came around, she received a better offer from a school closer to where she lived. So, she broke the original contract and took the second job. In speaking with the department chair of the first school, she told him that reason she was doing it was because she "had a peace about it." The non-Christian department chair said, "Isn't that lovely? She got the peace and I got the pieces." <sup>ii</sup>

In John 17, Jesus is praying to His Father just before He is arrested. First, He prays for the eleven disciples (twelve minus Judas). Then He prays this:

**My prayer is not for them (the eleven disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. (which would be us.) ...May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17: 20, 21)**

Did that young teacher sin by breaking that contract? Yes, she did. Ps. 15 says:

**LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? He...who keeps his oath even when it hurts... (Ps. 15:1, 2, 4)**

Will she go to hell for that? No, her salvation is secure. But the salvation of the department chairperson, it's HIS salvation that is now in serious jeopardy. Why would he ever be interested in a relationship with Christ, after seeing what that kind of a relationship produces? Your sin will not impact your salvation, but Jesus says it WILL impact whether or not other people believe that Jesus was sent by God.

The people of Berea were "more noble" than the Thessalonians not just because they searched the Scriptures to verify what Paul was saying. They were more noble because they "immediately" applied the Scripture to their lives. When the Jews from Thessalonica came to agitate the crowds...

**The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast... The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. (Acts 17:14, 15)**

Thoughtful acceptance of God's Word always includes faithful obedience. Finally, we see what Paul received from the people in Athens...

### **III. In Athens They Found a Willingness to Consider.**

In the first two cities, Paul's audience was a mixture of mostly Jews and a few Greeks. Here in Athens it's basically reversed, mostly Greeks and a few Jews. First, we are given a glimpse of the tenderness of Paul's heart. Verse 16 says:

**...he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.**

Have you been to Athens? Even if you haven't, you're aware, I'm sure, that the architecture was simply breathtaking. The Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Agora: each one a masterpiece of design. Even today when they are in ruins, tourists by the thousands flock to them. But Paul says nothing about them. What does he focus on? All he sees is the idols and the spiritual slavery they represent. The adjective translated "full of" literally means "smothered by." The city was drowning in idols and it broke Paul's heart.

What is it that breaks your heart? Your favorite team didn't make it to the Super Bowl? Is your heart broken because you can't afford to go on vacation this winter? Is your heart broken because you were turned down for a new job? Paul's heart was broken because he saw a city of strangers worshipping false gods.

We're talking in this series about crossing borders to tell people the story of Jesus Christ. We have maps up in the lobby of Hartford and Litchfield counties and we've asked you to put a dot on the map if you're consciously trying to reach out to someone. We have very few dots on those maps. Why don't we have more dots up there? Isn't it because we don't have broken hearts? We don't! Let me invite you to join me in something. Starting this week, I'm asking God to break my heart for people in these two counties. I don't think we will take even one step toward the border until God breaks our hearts for the people on the other side. Will you join me in asking God to break your heart?

Secondly, here in Athens, we see Paul engage people in a unique way with the Story of Jesus. He goes to the synagogue and he also goes to the marketplace, just as he did in the other two cities. But in the marketplace, something different happens. He's invited to tell the story of Jesus to the group that oversaw all religious activity in the city. It was called the Areopagus. Paul stands up in this meeting and delivers a kind of Gettysburg Address. Did you know, by the way, that at Gettysburg, President Lincoln wasn't the main speaker? He was preceded by a noted orator, Edward Everett from Massachusetts, who gave a two-hour speech. Lincoln was done in less than two minutes. Whose speech is remembered?

In Athens, the apostle Paul told the story of Jesus in just 13 sentences that probably took him no more than two minutes to deliver. It's a wonderful example of how to tell this story with great simplicity, but also great clarity. I want you to see how this was put together because it actually has a very simple design. I want you to see it so that maybe you could construct a version of the Jesus Story yourself.

First of all, Paul finds a positive connection to their culture. He speaks about the idols, not in a condemning way, but noting that they demonstrate their religious desire. Then he focuses on one of the false gods and uses it as a launching point to talk about the One, True God. Paul's message is that their religion is false but he begins by making positive rather than negative statements about it.

Secondly, Paul clearly describes how the God of the Bible is different from the Greek gods. The God of the Bible created everything. The God of the Bible is not

limited to a temple. The God of the Bible doesn't need anything from people but, to the contrary, He wants to give things to people. The God of the Bible wants to have a personal relationship with each person. Paul shows them that his God is totally different from their gods.

Thirdly, Paul explains simply how they could personally know His God and what will happen if they choose not to. He does this in two sentences:

**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, (their choosing not to know Him) but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.** (Acts 17:30, 31a)

Fourthly, he ends with the proof of the resurrection. Verse 31b:

**He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.**

So, here's Paul's simple formula for sharing the story of Jesus with anyone from any culture. Paul's Four-Part Telling of the Jesus Story:

1. Find a positive connection to their culture.
2. Describe how the God of the Bible is different from their god.
3. Tell how they could personally know God (and consequences if they choose not to.)
4. End with the proof of the resurrection.

Do you think you could do that? I think even a child could do that. In fact, here's an example of one who did! Tina Blessit's son, Austin, aged 9, had to have his tonsils removed. His doctor came into his room to tell him about the surgery and as he was leaving, Austin called out, "Hey, wait."

The doctor turned and said, "Yeah, buddy, what do you need?"

Austin said, "I really like your hat! And do you go to church?"

"No," the doctor said, "I know I probably should, but I don't."

Austin asked, "Well, are you saved?"

Chuckling nervously, the doctor said: "Nope. But after talking to you, maybe it's something I should consider." Austin said, "Well, you should, 'cause Jesus is great!"

When the surgery was over, the doctor told his mom that the surgery went well, but he needed to tell her something. He said as he was putting the anesthesia mask on Austin, he sat up and said, "Wait a minute, we have to pray!" So the doctor said, "Go ahead." Austin prayed, "Dear Lord, please let all the doctors and nurses have a good day. And Jesus, please let the doctor with the frog hat get saved and start going to church. Amen."

The doctor admitted that this prayer really touched him. "I was so sure he would pray that his surgery would go well. He didn't even mention his surgery. He prayed for me! Mrs. Blessit, I had to come down and let you know what a great little guy you have." A few minutes later, one of the nurses assisting in the surgery came out and said, "Some of the other nurses have been praying for that doctor for a long time. After your son's surgery, he tracked a few of us down to tell us about Austin's prayer. He said, "Well, girls, you got me. If that little boy could pray for me when he was about to have surgery, then I think maybe I need Jesus, too."<sup>iii</sup>

This is how we can cross a border with the story of Jesus. Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Daniel Taylor, "Story-Shaped Ethics," Daniel Taylor blog (8-8-11); source: Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), pp. 18-19

<sup>ii</sup> Paul E. Little, "Affirming the Will of God" (in *Great Sermons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 16

<sup>iii</sup> Tina Blessitt, "A Prayer Before Surgery," *Today's Christian* (July/Aug. 2006), p. 27