3 Responses to the Word

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Preacher: Tim Suffield

[0:00] Good morning, friends. My name's Tim. I'm part of the team here at Harvest Church. We are now going to open the Bible and continue our series in the book of Acts.! We're going to be in Acts chapter 17. Just while you turn there, we've had quite a remarkable week as a church.

Lots of you have been part of that. Our three days of prayer and fasting that we called Rooted and Fruitful. So many of you turned out for different prayer meetings, lots of faces we saw that we don't often see.
And the Lord's been really kind to us. We've encountered Him together, I think, in quite special ways. He's spoken to us some key things that we need to think on and act on in the coming season. If you brought a prophetic word at one of the prayer meetings and you haven't yet emailed that in, could you? Because that would really help us out. Because there are a couple that I'm like, someone said something like that. And I'd love to see it written down. That would be very helpful. But God's really good to us. As we focused on being rooted in His Word and fruitful in the Gospel and the Spirit, these are the things that He's saying to us in this coming season.
[1:12] Let's keep pressing in. Let's keep encountering His Spirit. Let's keep seeing what He would say to us. Let's keep praying together. Okay.

So we're going to be in Acts chapter 17. We are picking up in what is sometimes called Paul's second missionary journey. This is what Sean kind of did the first bit of last week.
So, again, I've got quite a big chunk. We're going to go to three different places. This will be a little bit of pace. But the thing to be noticing, as Paul goes to these three different cities kind of down the edge of Greece, the question I'm going to keep asking, there's so much in these passages, so much we could ask.
The question I'm going to keep asking is, how do the people here respond to God's Word? And therefore, how are you responding to God's Word? Okay.
So we're going to keep looking for their responses to what God is doing as He travels from place to place to place. So let's start. Acts chapter 17. We're going to start in a place called Thessalonica, which is a kind of port city, I think, on the edge of Greece.
[2:17] I've flown to the airport and can tell you nothing else about it. But read from Acts chapter 17. Now, when they 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 have turned the world upside down. They've come here also.
[3:30] 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.

And when they'd taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. We'll pause there. Paul, he arrives. So he's been in Philippi. He was in prison there.

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They kind of let him go after the riot. He's badly bruised and beaten him and Silas. They arrive in Thessalonica. He starts what he always does. He finds first a synagogue of the Jews. And he starts to open the Bible to them.
Open what we call the Old Testament. And it says he reasoned with them that, well, surely the Christ that you're expecting, this Messiah, that words mean the same thing, surely it was necessary for him to die.
And it says, look, oh, it says he'll die on a cross. And that we'd expect that to save us from sin and from shame and to defeat death itself. And oh, he'll also be God.
[4:35] And he kind of opens slowly the Old Testament and shows them that all this is true. And then he says, by the way, this man, Jesus, that's him. And many are persuaded.

We see some Jews are persuaded. Some of the Greeks who are with them, these are people who are sort of curious. They're looking in. They're hanging around the synagogue, but they're not Jewish. They're persuaded. Some of the leading women are persuaded.
That means like elite or wealthy, so leading in kind of society. They're persuaded. Lots of people are persuaded by the word of God. And another group of people, largely Jewish, are jealous and hostile.
The text says they're jealous. We can see they're hostile by their actions. Are you persuaded by the Bible? Is that how you feel when you look at it?
Does it make you feel hostile? I'm in a room like this. Hey, you've come to listen to me talk about it. Not lots of you are going to feel hostile, but I wonder sometimes. Parts of the Bible make you, hmm, I don't know about that.
[5:44] Like it sticks in your craw. And these Jews who are jealous, they whip up a mob. It says of rabble, which is a term for like day laborers who are hanging around the market and don't have anything to do because there's no work today.

So they're just, haven't got any work today. Haven't been able to find anything to do. They're looking for something to entertain themselves. And so they're just going to whip them into a rabble. The Bible calls them wicked men.
At this point, Paul and Silas have probably not healed from the last riot, which is less than a week ago. No, sorry, three Sabbaths, it says they're with them, doesn't it? So we're talking maybe three, four weeks ago, the last riot.
They're probably still battered and bruised from that one. Here's another one coming. And they find themselves, actually this time slightly on the edge, of another riot in another city about what they're saying.
And they're accused by the Jews towards the Roman authorities of sedition or treason or trying to overturn the government.
[6:53] Because they say, they say that there's another king. They're speaking, therefore, they're speaking against Caesar. They're saying Caesar isn't the emperor. This Jesus guy is.

The thing is, they're kind of right. That is what they're saying. I mean, they say, hey, these guys cause unrest. And then they raise a mob, which sort of makes it true, which is unfortunate for them. But what they say they're teaching is what they're teaching. If we read Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, first letter to the Thessalonians, which you can find later in the Bible, which is what he wrote later to this church, it's all full of the idea that Jesus is king.
Now, he doesn't come out and say, therefore, Caesar is not. But it's very heavily implied. The gospel's surprisingly political. Jesus is king.
And funnily enough, that makes some Roman people quite cross. Because he is proclaiming another king. Are we persuaded that Jesus is the king?
[8:08] Not in like a sort of, oh, well, we sing it in the songs and like maybe one day kind of way. But that he's king. Now, over this world, over this church, and over you, he's king.

The Bible says you are not your own. 1 Corinthians chapter 6. You are not your own, but were bought at a great price by him.
You're not your own. You don't belong to yourself. Your body isn't yours. You don't get to choose what you do with it. Your life isn't yours. You don't get to choose what you do with it. The king says. And then we have to follow. Oh. Are you persuaded of that? And they're accused, Paul and Silas, of, as they're described, in fact, as men who have turned the world upside down.

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Wow. Would that someone would say that of us. Men that have turned the world upside down. You see, the thing is, the Bible does that.
[9:22] If you receive the word and you believe it, you'll find that your world is flipped upside down. All your categories change.

The way that you behave changes. Okay, slowly, yes. And it's difficult, yes. And you're transformed slowly by the power of Jesus and the renewing of your mind through the scriptures. Yes. And it's a step-by-step thing.
And it's not all at once. Yes. And Jesus is so open-armed towards you about that. And he's like, come on, another step. Yes. But ultimately, like, world upside down. Complete change.
Is that actually true of you? Has your world been turned upside down by the Bible and by Jesus? Or, if you're really honest, if someone looked at your house and your life and they got right into the nitty-gritty that they don't usually see, and they looked at your neighbor who doesn't follow Jesus' house and life and got right into the nitty-gritty, would they look quite similar?
I think for some of us, perhaps they'd look remarkably similar. But the Bible says our world is supposed to be turned upside down. And yes, some stuff will always look the same.
[10:34] But if you got right into the nitty-gritty, say, if someone got to open your bank account, for example, they'd be like, oh, wow, yes, they follow Jesus, clearly. Or they got to know what you think about this and that and the other.

They'd be like, oh, yeah, okay, I can see that you're thinking in a very different way to me about these things. The Bible's supposed to turn our worlds upside down.
It causes riots when we take it seriously. Does it? Are we persuaded? Are we hostile?
And then Paul moves on. Because, to be honest, it's getting pretty hot in Thessalonica, and he's not that keen on being beaten again. And so, verse 10, the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.
Where they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue. So, thinking here is, it's essentially the law doesn't really travel from city to city at this time. So, you can basically escape the problem by leaving.
[11:39] So, they leave. It seems sensible. Go on to another place. They do not go on to the most obvious next big city. They get there eventually. They go to a slightly out-of-the-way place. They're like, we're going to preach the gospel, but we're going to be strategic.

Let's go somewhere where it might be a little bit less violent to start with. And these guys aren't going to be able to immediately follow us. So, they arrive in a little place called Berea.
And it says, verse 11, Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica. So, by that, what Luke's doing is, he doesn't mean they have higher status.
But he called people in Thessalonica rabble. And he's calling these people noble. And both of them actually have to do with their response to the word. Their response to Paul's preaching in power. Their response to the Bible. So, it's not, they're not noble because of birth or wealth or anything like that. They're noble because of their response. We know that because the next thing he says is, they received the word with all eagerness.
[12:40] That is different. Examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them, therefore, believed with a few, not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea.
But Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens. And after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come as soon as possible, they departed.
Let's pause there a moment.
So, we arrive in this place called Berea, a little place. Slightly more in the mountains, not on the coast. And the people here are called noble because their response is that they receive the word with eagerness.
Not just persuaded, but eager. They're like, ooh, give it to me. I want this. Tastes good. Tell me more. And their response then is to go, hang on.
[13:47] You tell me that the scriptures that I've been following for a long time teach all these things. Let's check. And they diligently, day by day, look in, as it were, their Bibles, which is our Old Testament.

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And they're checking. Now, they don't have a book like this. Books haven't really been invented. Certainly printing hasn't. But they have scrolls in the synagogue. So, they all gather together. They read it out. And they talk about it. They're like, was what Paul said true?
They check. And the Bible wants you to know, this is really good behavior. They're described as noble for it. We should be checking carefully, does the Bible say what I'm being taught?
Does the Bible say what Tim is teaching me? Does it? Let's look. Let's check. Please. Be like these people in Berea. Respond with eagerness, but examine the scriptures daily to see if these things are so.
Check. Is it true? Does it say it? This is how we should live. We should live, as it were, with open Bibles. Very literally, right now while I'm talking, ideally, we would have open Bibles.
[14:55] So that we can see. Now, hey, we put it on the screen. Oh, it's gone down. That's fine. But we put it on the screen for visitors' sake. But if you're able to bring a Bible, we can get you a Bible if you've not got one. Absolutely. But if you can have your Bible open in front of you, it helps you.

Is what I'm saying true? Did the bit before what I just said, does that adhere with what I just said? I'm preaching quite a big passage today. But if it was a small bit, what does the next sentence say? Does it contradict what I just said it says?
Let's check. Let's read it carefully. The greatest gift that you could give to a preacher is to have your Bible open while they are speaking. And have your nose in it.
That's the thing I love to see most. It is wonderful. If you can, have your Bible open. A physical Bible tends to help you more than one of these black brick, bricks of Babel thing that we keep in our pocket.
But it's less distracting, in essence. It's not designed to be a distraction device. But either way, have the Bible open in front of you. See what we're saying.
[15:58] Bring your Bible to church with you. It'll help you out. And then the rest of your life as well, think, oh, what does the Bible say? I wonder if that thing I've seen in the news, I wonder if the Bible says something about it. It will. Speaks to everything in the whole world.

I wonder if that problem I've got in my life, I wonder if the Bible says something about it. It will. Now, the thing is, you might go, but I don't know how to. Amazing. Well done for realizing that.
That's great. We need to become the kind of people who know how to read the Bible. And we have to do that in community with good guides. And we need to gain a few skills in order to read the Bible.
That is true. It is occasionally difficult. Some parts are easier than others. All of that is true. But it is a thing worth giving yourself to. To learn how to read these texts.
To learn how to read what God is saying to us. So that we can live in the way that God would have us live. So that we can receive the words eagerly.
[17:01] Let's be people like that. Open Bibles in our lives. Applying everything that we do to the Bible. Or asking of everything that we do.

What would the Bible say? And therefore, what does Jesus say about what I'm doing? And whenever you're like, I don't know, ask someone. Ask for wisdom.
Learn to read together. That's the kind of church we want to be. We've spent a week saying we want to be rooted in the word. That's what that means. And it's as we're rooted in the word that we become fruitful in the gospel and the spirit.
And then Paul moves on to Athens. Reading from verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that a city was full of idols.
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. It's a slight change in strategy here.
[18:06] He goes first to the synagogue like he always has so far. But he also finds this marketplace full of people who want to talk ideas. He goes there too. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

And some said, what does this Babylon have to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities or strange gods. 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.

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Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who live there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. Paul arrives in a city that he says is full of idols.
And this passage in Athens, there's another section I'll read in a minute, but is so rich you could preach a whole series in it. And I'm literally going to skim over the surface and look at how do I respond to the word. There's so much we could learn from it.
[19:11] Maybe read at a home. Maybe have your Bible open in front of you and dig. But he goes to the marketplace. They call him a babbler. So they are responding in arrogance.

They're like, what is this guy saying? The phrase of the word literally, babbler, is seed picker. They're like, he's like a guy who just picked up all these bits.
And he's trying to help. They don't make any sense together. He's just, he's like if you've met a conspiracy theorist. You're like, they've picked up three true things. And they've come up with a conclusion that is wild.
That's how they felt about Paul. They're like, he's picked up these bits. It doesn't make any sense. Because the way he's put things together is blowing their categories. It doesn't make sense to them.
This is the home of Western philosophy. This is where the wise people are. And they scoff at Paul. And he speaks to these two big schools of philosophers, Epicureans.
[20:11] They are basically the people you can meet on any university campus in the UK. They believe that you should do everything you can to make yourself happy. And you should take pleasure at every possible juncture.

And that pain should be endured but largely avoided. Do things that make you feel good. That's Epicureans. I bet you've met some people like that. And he talks also to Stoics. Who are people who say, work hard.
Work hard. And be better. In fact, Stoicism has been on the rise in the last ten years. Particularly on YouTube. Lots and lots of especially young men watching Jordan Peterson.
And then lots of other younger guys who are essentially, they're Stoics. Work hard and be better. These are the two big schools in Athens. And he talks to both. And they both scoff at him. Why do they scoff?
Well, particularly because he, and it becomes clear in the letter section as well. But particularly because it keeps talking about the resurrection. Utterly confusing to them. They don't understand it.
[21:11] Lots of reasons they don't understand that. But the thing is, the resurrection undermines both these ways of thinking that are very common even today. Oh, I should just do what makes me happy.

But the thing is, if a man rose from the dead, that means that maybe there's a world after death. Maybe you should do what makes you happy in the long run. Maybe they're right about something. Maybe pleasure is good to seek in the long run. And that might require you to follow Jesus now. Because that's the way that you'll be happy forever. And then actually, a small bit of difficulty now, perhaps, might lead to pleasures forevermore.
As we learn in the Psalms, sit at the right hand of God. But for the others, the Stoics were like, work hard and be better. The resurrection says, no, no, no, you don't understand. You're dead. Working hard isn't going to help you.
You need someone to raise you up. You can have that. Do you want to meet him? So the both major ways they thought in Athens, both major ways we still think today, the resurrection says, you're right about something, but you got it wrong.
[22:16] And people found this difficult as they listened to Paul. It undermined them. But lots of them have questions. They said, we want to know more about this. That is a good response to the gospel we've seen or to the word.

We've seen people who respond saying, oh, I want to know more. And we've seen people who respond saying, I am very hostile to this. But it's good if you're like, I am not sure. Ask questions. Even if you're like, I've been a Christian for a long time, but parts of the Bible, I don't know. Ask questions. God loves your questions. He loves your questions. If anyone's ever told you you're not allowed to ask questions, then to them.
Ask questions. The Bible can stand up to any question you want to ask it. We have to learn to be a church where questions are respected and honored, and we try to answer them with the words.

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And sometimes we won't know the answers, and that's okay. We take people back to the words. Except in Athens, they're questions mixed.
[23:17] Some of them, I'm sure, are genuine, honest questions. But we read in verse 21, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. Their questions are more like, I just want to, I just like to have my ears tickled.

Luke's trying to make a joke. He's like, they call Paul a seed picker and a babbler. Actually, that's them. That's what they're like. They act like, I don't know if you're the kind of person who spends a lot of time reading comments on Facebook or YouTube.
In essence, that's what the Athenians were. Just like, oh, tell me all the arguments. Just enjoy in listening to it all. Stick some reactions in there. Great. The thing is, what they want to do is they want to add the Bible to their existing system.
In essence, they're like, oh, let's pick up another little something to add it in. And you can't do that. Why can't you do that? We've already heard why. Jesus is king. And he brooks no rivals.
It turns the world upside down. You can't actually add Christianity to what you already believe. It's follow Jesus or don't. And some of us here will have been following Jesus for a bit, but kind of what we've tried to do in our lives is just sort of add him in along with everything else.
[24:30] And it's like, eventually, that's not going to work. Something is going to have to give. One way or the other. I strongly recommend that you let it give by going, I'm just all in with Jesus.

It's much better for you in the long run. And then let me read you the last section, and then we're essentially drawing to a close. So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, at the Mars Hill, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.
Sounds like a compliment. It's very double-edged. 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. 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 towards him and find him.
[25:48] Yet he's actually not far from each one of us. Did you know that? It's not far from you. If you don't know him today, you can just meet him. For in him we live and move and have our being.

He's quoting a famous philosopher of the Greeks. And even as some of your own poets have said, for we indeed are his offspring. He's not quoting a famous Greek poet. 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.
Then the times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he's fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.
And of this he's given assurance of all things by raising him from the dead. One day Jesus will judge the world. How do you know? He rose 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. As Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed. Among them also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.
[26:58] This is the word of the Lord. There's so much in that passage that I am not going to pull out. But notice what he does. With the Jews in the synagogue, he opens the Old Testament and says, Jesus.

With pagan philosophers, he says, look at your own philosophy. That bit is true. And let me show you how that leads you to Jesus. They don't know the Old Testament.
They're not going to believe it. So he finds what's true in what they're saying. And he helps them see how that leads them to Jesus. But either way, what's the heart, the faith, the resurrection? Because that changes everything.

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How do we know Jesus is king? He rose from the dead. How do we know Jesus will one day judge the world? He rose from the dead. How are all our categories turned on the head? Because he rose from the dead.
Why should we follow him wholeheartedly? Even if the world says this, and we're like, the Bible seems kind of old-fashioned. Wasn't this written in the desert thousands of years ago? It's like, yeah, maybe. But he rose from the dead.
[27:57] So it's the truest thing you've ever seen. So follow him. And the ways they respond are the three ways that we've seen people respond across this.

Some mock. Please don't do that. Don't mock the Bible. You might be tempted in your heart to mock certain parts of it. Don't do it. Some say, we'll hear you again. That's better.
If that's where you're at, okay. Keep listening. Keep hearing the Bible. Keep asking questions. And others say, oh, we believe. Amazing. Follow what it says. Can I have a band, please?
In a moment we'll sing. But the question for you is, where are you? The question I keep asking is, where are you? How are you going to respond? If you're tempted to mock, repent.
But if you're like, I've got questions. God loves your questions. Ask them. But all of us should aim to respond to the words with eagerness, if we can.
[29:00] And do what it says. The question for each of us, every day, really, is, do you believe this book? Because in it we find life.

He has the words of life. Where else would we go? He has the words of life.

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