

Acts 17 - John Karmelich

I'll start with my title: "Working in enemy territory". This message is for those of us who believe Jesus is God and Lord of our lives. With that said, realize those who haven't committed their lives to Jesus in effect belong to Satan. That includes family, friends and those we have relationships with. No, it does not mean we have to hate them or fear them, just to realize that we're always on the clock for Jesus and we're living in "hostile territory". I'm not saying this to frighten you, just to give us a perspective about what God called us to do as we go through our lives.

It would probably help at this point to give the stories told in this chapter in one paragraph. Paul (along with some traveling companions) is on his second missionary journey. He stops at a synagogue and he preaches Jesus (probably after the ritual aspects of the service when guests are allowed to speak). He's telling them about Jesus. After three weekly services, some join him and some don't. The members of the synagogue who don't like what Paul preached, raised an uproar and tried to kill him. Paul and Silas (his fellow Jewish-Christian companion) travel a good 50 miles off the beaten path to small town to try it again. Those Jewish people checked the scriptures and believed Paul. Then those from the previous town who wanted him dead showed up and caused problems. When things calmed down, Paul decided to travel to Athens (all of these places are in Greece). In Athens he gave a big sermon to the leading philosophers there about Jesus. Some believed and some didn't and well, that's the end of the chapter.

As I stated in the last lesson a key question to me is why these stories here are and what does God want us to learn from these stories? Essentially they are about Paul working his way through Greece as he is preaching the Gospel. During that trip he deals with persecution, some acceptance and rejection. Yes I know it's historically significant as this was the beginning of the Christian church in Europe and over a period of a few centuries the Roman Empire changes from multi-god to Christianity because of this!

Still I like to personalize this. Other than learning history, what's the application for you and me? Let's just say the answer is my lesson title: "Working in enemy territory". Whether we like it or not, we are saved not to kick back, live our lives and ignore God. We were saved to be a witness for Him and yes, we live in a world where a majority of people don't want to accept the Gospel message. Why is that? I would say they either don't want to be accountable to God or they want to prove their worth to Him by their "works". Either way, people are in big trouble for that! We are saved to explain the truth to them and to lead others to God so that people have no excuse of "they didn't know better when they heard of the truth of why we were created in the first place!"

At this point it's probably best to give more details about the chapter and that will how it applies to our personal life. Let's start with where we left off: Essentially Chapters 16-18 give details of Paul's 2nd of three missionary journeys recorded in the book of Acts. We last read of Paul in Philippi. (Everything's in Greece in this part of the book). We last read of Paul being arrested which lead to the conversion of the jail keeper and his family. The chapter ended with Paul leaving Philippi and we assume he figured, "OK besides the fact we were beaten for what we preached we started a new church here and converted people to the Gospel truth, it's time to hit the road again and win more people for Jesus!"

Paul's essentially traveling on a main road through Greece that was part of the Roman Empire. It led to the major cities. Chapter 17 opens with the fact Paul traveled through two small towns. We assume it was a desire to hit the next major city called Thessalonica. These small towns are listed as Paul's "rest stops" probably to indicate that either the Holy Spirit wants Paul to move on or he just felt led to go to the next major city. Anyway when he got there, apparently the first place Paul did was "set up shop to

preach Jesus" at a Jewish synagogue there. Why? Because Paul and Silas were both Jewish and it was customary to let guests speak after the normal service ritual. He spoke for weekly services in a row. I am sure Paul preached Jesus strictly from an Old Testament perspective to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. Obviously some, but not all believed Paul.

OK John, why should we care about all of this? It's not about making us experts on traveling in Greece and no, God doesn't require us to preach Jesus in synagogues. The issue is to realize we are all called to be witnesses for Jesus. Yes we need wisdom and boldness which is what I pray for daily. There may be people we can witness to that others can't relate to. I'm not saying we got to spend 24/7 preaching Jesus as much as I'm saying we need to be on the lookout for opportunities. We should know how to give the Gospel message so that when the time comes we're ready. Consider that the places listed in this chapter are at least 20 miles apart. What do you think Paul and Silas taught Luke and Timothy as they traveled from place to place? A good point is we always should look for opportunities to be a witness for Jesus and help others grow in their faith.

Back to Paul: Let's just say the Jewish leaders who didn't believe him, weren't crazy about what Paul's preaching as it hit them in the pocketbook! Those who opposed Paul raised a "fuss" that required Paul to hightail it out of town. He went 50 miles off the main road to place called Berea. A synagogue was there and Paul knew what he was called to do. At this place the Jewish locals studied the scripture and accepted the Gospel message. Of course, success breeds opposition! Jewish people from Thessalonica got word of what Paul was doing there and traveled the 50 miles to oppose him! It got so violent, Paul had to skip town ASAP to avoid any serious death threats.

The next major city on that Greek "highway" was Athens. If you are familiar with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it's their home town. This was a "college town" where philosophy was discussed Paul used it as an opportunity to preach Jesus. It bothered Paul that Athens had lots of statues and temples for all of false gods, so Paul figured "It's time to explain the real thing here!" His speech here is listed in the text, yet we don't get any specifics of his speeches in the last two Jewish locations. Why? Probably because the Gospel accounts are full of Old Testament quotes linking Jesus to their history as well as Stephen's sermon back in Chapter 7. I think Luke figured it was time to give Paul's non-biblical quoted speech he gave to a non-Jewish audience. Paul not only gave some logical evidence about God's existence but he also even quoted some famous Greek poets. It shows the importance of knowing one's audience and to even read a little of their writings! The epilogue is it lead to some converts. If you think this is not a big deal, consider that Greece's a Christian country today and the great change started with Paul preaching the Gospel message to its major cites there! If you think one man can't significantly change the world I present what Paul did in Greece in this section of the book. The "Greek story" continues in Chapter 18 as we'll discuss in the next lesson.

OK John, I have no plans to travel to Greece. Most of the places we go to have more churches than we can count. How does any of this affect us? Yes there are missionaries called to reach places where the Gospel message doesn't exist and many of us support churches who support such missionaries. That is a good thing and I'm not knocking it. Good for them and for your prayer and financial support. What's also to be realized as we study this section is that we too are called to be witnesses for Him. We live in "hostile territory". We must remember why we were created in the first place: To glorify God with our lives and be a witness for Him. Ask God how it is He desires to use you today. You'd be surprised the answers we get once we fully surrender our lives to Him! With that speech out of my system, it's time for the details of this chapter.

With that said, on the same page where you downloaded this summary is a more detailed lesson on this chapter. That one is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. If you want, you are always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John