Acts 17:2-3 As was his custom, Paul went to the Jews, and on three Sabbath days he led them in a discussion from the Scriptures, 3explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He also said, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”

I am going to tell you something that I find a bit disturbing. During this pandemic and the social distancing we are involved in I spend most of my time on Sunday mornings, where I would normally be conducting church, watching other worship services, specifically watching other sermons. Most of the time I hear exactly what I expect to hear but a number of times I am deeply disappointed in what I hear. Let me tell you why.

As a Lutheran, my understanding of God’s Word leads me to grasp that God’s Holy Spirit works in the souls of God’s people through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Notice I didn’t say, “God’s Holy Spirit works through the preaching of God’s Word.” What I said was something more specific. I said that God’s Holy Spirit works in us through THE GOSPEL in Word and Sacrament. This is known as “the means of grace.” The means of grace is the way that God tells us He is going to share with us his Holy Spirit and his grace and love. The means of grace is the Gospel. Notice that this Gospel can be found in the preached or taught Word and the Gospel can be found as the very power behind the sacraments of the Church. Clearly this tells us that the Gospel is something specific. It is not just preaching or teaching. It is not just that you use the Bible. It is not just that you throw the name of Jesus around. I believe the Gospel is something specific.

I am sure at this point you would like to know what I believe this specific Gospel is? *“The Gospel is the good news that God in love sent Jesus to take away the sins of all people.”* That definition is actually found in our Kuske Edition of Luther’s Catechism. It is a very simple definition. It is an important definition. It tells us that if we are not hearing about our sin and that Jesus came to pay for that sin because of God’s love for us, then you are not hearing the Gospel message! I believe every single sermon, in order to be of best benefit to the soul, needs to have that specific and pointed message of Jesus found in it.

In reality, as a Lutheran, I believe that every single sermon should have as its focus the Gospel of Jesus. The Lutheran sermon should ooze Jesus. The Lutheran sermon should emphasize Jesus and what He has done and accomplished for us because of God’s grace, mercy and love. Every time a sermon is done, every hearer should be able to clearly say, “I have heard the Gospel of Jesus for my salvation’s sake.”

Yet in some of the sermons I have heard that is not true! So here is my challenge to any who might hear my words, to anyone who declares himself a preacher of God’s Gospel, especially to any who call themselves Lutheran: After you are done preaching your sermon could you be sure that your sermon could not be used in any other church body? In other words, is your sermon so Lutheran that no other preacher would dare use it in his church? Or do you find that your sermon with little to no changes, could be preached in a Baptist, Methodist, Catholic or by any other Christian denomination pastor? Worse yet, could your sermon actually be used by a Rabbi or a Muslim as a sermon in their church? The only difference being that the name of Jesus be changed or that God always be called Allah.

I issue that challenge because I am a firm believer in the truth that there are only two religions in the world. There are the churches of work righteousness and there is the true Christian Church that proclaims clearly and absolutely the Gospel message of Jesus! Gospel as defined earlier! Because in truth if you are preaching nothing more than a work righteous religion, even though you are using the name of Jesus, you are not preaching the Gospel! You are not serving the Lord and His Son, our Savior Jesus.

I can guarantee that the Apostles Paul and Silas did not have to worry about this challenge. I say that because of what is said in our text for today. Let’s learn what makes the message of Jesus so awesome. Our theme will be: **JESUS IS THE CHRIST!**

Our text actually finds Paul and Silas involved in Paul’s second missionary journey. This journey took place from 49-52 A.D. and covered most of what I will call the Mediterranean world. They were out sharing the message of Jesus for the sake of souls. In our text, we hear that they have entered the city of Thessalonica and here, because of the presence of a Jewish synagogue, they stop to share the message that they believe is important for people to hear. Now in case you are wondering, Paul and Silas usually started mission work in the Jewish synagogues for two reasons. That these synagogues had as their base the Word of God found in the Old Testament and that Jesus was and is the fulfillment of that Word of God. In other words, it was a base, an easy starting point for the message they had. That’s why our text tells us this “was his custom.” It is how Paul has done things ever since he himself learned the truth of Jesus.

Now, did you pay attention to what was taught? These words are so important. The text says, **“He led them in a discussion from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He also said, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”** Yep, you guessed it. Let’s you and I understand exactly what these words mean because here is God’s Holy Spirit showing us exactly how souls were brought to faith in Jesus.

So what was the message of Paul and Silas and I believe every apostle and true preacher of the message of the Gospel? Point one: **“He led them in a discussion from the Scripture.”**

The message was centered on the Scripture. The message was based on what the Scripture said. Please note that we are actually talking the Old Testament in this case. The New Testament, while parts of it are completed and well known, is still being composed through the work of the Holy Spirit. I believe 13 of those 27 books are the work of the Holy Spirit through Paul. So when it speaks of the fact that they had a discussion from the Scripture it is rather clear that it is the Old Testament that is spoken of because the New Testament is not fully written yet.

That shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus made it clear in his ministry that the entire Old Testament was about him. Think about what happened with the two Disciples on their way to Emmaus. Jesus met them and the discussion is described as: **“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”** Sounds like Jesus and the two disciples here had the same conversation that our text speaks of. And it starts with the Scripture.

That’s because the Scripture is God’s Word. That’s because the Scripture, yes, even the Old Testament, reveals God’s plan and will in regard to sin and grace, damnation and salvation. From beginning to end it is a revelation of God’s saving work revealed in promises, prophecies, types of Christ and history. It is a book about Jesus, from beginning to end. So if you want to learn of salvation and eternal life, then the place to start is with the Scripture. And I will even say at this point that the New Testament is certainly also God’s Word that gives us even more clearly the truth and wonder of our salvation.

Point two: **“Explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.”** Here is the central message they focused on when it came to their discussion. Notice they are not discussing how to keep the law or exactly what God’s will and purpose for our lives is. Notice they are not focused on our good works or our abilities, on the Law of God and how we are to work to obey Jesus. The Scripture was used to focus on the Christ, specifically to focus on the fact that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.

That is one awesome statement. In other words, everything we need to know about the work of Jesus is already revealed in Scripture, yes, the Old Testament! But we get confused. We think the Old Testament is about the Law, about how to live God’s way and do things in accord with what God has revealed in his Law. That is the same mistake the Jews made. They decided that the point of the Law was so they could have a guide to show them how to get to heaven. It is not the purpose of the Law. The Law was about sin. The Law was about revealing, condemning and showing the total disparity that sin has brought to our world. The point of God’s law was to reveal sin and the fact that we could not, would not, and never will meet the standard of God for eternal life. We need to be perfect! Totally, absolutely, flawlessly, in thought, word and deed holy! We can’t do it.

But Jesus could. Jesus came to live the perfect life we could not and then Jesus became the perfect and atoning sacrifice for our sin. That sacrifice of Jesus was also a part of the Law, what we call the ceremonial law of God. That ceremonial law was always pointing to Jesus, to how the Christ would shed his blood, die for us and with that death atone for us, yes, redeem us from the problem of sin. A serious study of the Law shows that. Almost everything about the Law shouts and cries that someday, one day the Christ of God would come and He would take care of the problem of sin. That’s what our text is speaking of when it says they used the Scripture **“explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer.”** The law of God made it clear we needed a Savior. The Law of God foreshadowed the Savior and his work, namely that the Christ had to suffer and die to atone for our sin. That is the pointed, central theme of God’s Old Testament.

But that wasn’t all that was discussed. On the basis of the Old Testament the discussion also spoke of something else. Sometimes we miss the importance of this because of the way it is written, but it says, **“Explaining and proving that the Christ had to…rise from the dead.”** That’s right, another central point of even the Old Testament was the resurrection of the Christ. The resurrection was the way we would know who the Christ is. The resurrection would be the comprehensive and definitive action that would identify the Christ. The Christ would die and the Christ would return to life!

Now what does that statement say of those Churches today that don’t believe in the actual physical resurrection of Jesus? Did you know that the majority of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day probably did not believe in life after death? That was because their religious leaders had decided that since life after death couldn’t be proven, since heaven couldn’t be seen and since they had never seen anyone come back to life after death therefore none of it was true. Yet God’s Word said it was true! That’s that problem, souls stop believing what God’s Word says. Souls stop trusting in God and his power, His marvel and might and knowledge, yes, even to the point where we think it is all impossible. But it is not impossible with God. God can and has given us his pure, true and holy Word. God can and has revealed his truth and the wonder of his love. But recognize, as did Paul and Silas, that it is all wrapped up in Jesus as our atoning sacrifice and in Jesus rising from the dead! The Scriptures say it is so! Jesus said it is so! You just can’t ignore the death and resurrection of Jesus and still think you are a Christian!

Then the climax of what was taught. Did you hear it? **“This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”** Jesus is the one who fulfilled these words. Jesus is the one who suffered and died just as God foretold. Jesus is the one, the only one who died and has risen to life eternally. Therefore, Jesus is the Christ. He is the Savior God has promised. He is the one who gives eternal life and salvation. He is the one who atones for sin and grants, on the basis of faith, the gift of eternal life and salvation. Simply put: No Jesus, no salvation….Know Jesus, know salvation. It is all wrapped up in Jesus and His work.

Paul and Silas do not spend their time discussing how we are to live, what we are to do, how we can show our love and obedience to God and on and on. The Jewish religion had been doing that for centuries, yes, teaching work-righteousness instead of the Gospel message of salvation by grace through faith. Why would people have to come to faith in Jesus in order to be saved if it is all about how we live and what we do? Paul and Silas preached Jesus the Christ, the Savior from sin. They preached and taught that Jesus is it, the only way, the only hope of eternal life. If that weren’t true, why would there be a need for Jesus in a world filled with work-righteous religions?

It is Jesus who suffered for our sins. It is Jesus who paid the debt of our transgressions and iniquities by his wounds. It was Jesus who took the punishment that brought us peace. Peace because it is in Jesus that forgiveness and eternal life is proclaimed, in Jesus that we are reconciled, that we are declared released from damnation. Jesus is the Christ. He is our Lord and Savior and in him we find all that we need to be a child of God.

It is clear, we need the message of Jesus. We need to hear the gospel and rejoice in the sure salvation God has granted in Jesus. We need to stop thinking it is about what we do or are and to realize it is and always has been about the Christ, Jesus the Savior, our Savior who on the basis of his suffering and resurrection is declared the Christ of God. Lord, please help all our pastors to preach the awesome Gospel of Jesus so that every soul walks away and says: “I have heard the Gospel of Jesus for my salvation’s sake.” This is our hope and comfort, what our faith in Jesus is about. Amen.