

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 17

Preface:

Last week we looked at chapter 16 of the book of Acts. There we saw Paul going out on his second missionary journey, taking Silas with him. In Lystra, they met up with Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek man. In order to make his ministry more effective among the local Jews, Paul decided to circumcise Timothy. This was not to secure his salvation, but to avoid offending Jews to whom they intended to witness.

We also learned that the Holy Spirit guided them by preventing them from going to the areas where they wanted to minister. Because of this guidance, they met up with Dr. Luke, and Paul received his vision of a man from Macedonia calling the team over there. Following Paul's vision, they went to Philippi where they met Lydia and other Jewish women who were praying every Sabbath. Lydia became the first Christian convert in all of Europe.

On their way to the prayer meeting, Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl who was performing fortune-telling by means of the demon. When her owners knew that they could no longer make money off her fortune-telling, they stirred up the town and eventually Paul and Silas were thrown in prison. While in prison, they were singing hymns when God provided an earthquake that opened all the cell doors. But, when the jailer saw that nobody tried to escape, he recognized the power of God and because of Paul's witness he asked Paul and Silas how to be saved.

Paul and Silas in Thessalonica

Acts 17:1-9

¹Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³explaining 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." ⁴And 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. ⁵But 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. ⁶And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Notes:

Paul and Silas didn't remain in Amphipolis or Apollonia very long. Apparently this was because these cities were too small and neither one had a synagogue. **Slide 2** Instead, they continued on to Thessalonica where they went to the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths. I'm sure they would have stayed longer than three weeks if they hadn't been kicked out of town by the jealous Jews. **Slide 3** This seems to be a pattern for Paul. We are told here that while attending the Sabbath meetings, Paul did four things, he "reasoned," he "explained," he "proved," and he "proclaimed." The word translated "reasoned" is *dialegomai*, from which we get our English word "dialogue." It means to speak back and forth with someone. We would call it a "discussion." "Explained" is from the Greek word that means "to open the understanding." And the word translated "proving" means "to lay the facts side by side" so as to make it clear. In other words, Paul explained the facts of the crucifixion and resurrection, laying them side by side, proving that Jesus is the Messiah and that his death on the cross accompanied by his resurrection is proof that He is our Savior. And, finally, Paul "proclaimed" that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

As a result of Paul's persuasive presentation, some of the Jews in the synagogue and many of the Greek proselytes, as well as a lot of the leading women of the city became Christians. But – just like in other cities where Paul had ministered, the local Jews became jealous because of the number of people who left the Jewish faith and converted to Christianity. And – just as had happened previously, the Jealous Jews stirred up the town and caused a riot, like they did in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. However, in this case, they couldn't find Paul, so they captured Jason (at whose house Paul apparently had been staying) and took him before the authorities.

Their accusation was very revealing. They said, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." **Slide 4** What a compliment on the work of this missionary team. These men were saying, in effect,

these men have radically impacted our world and nothing seems the same.

But – I also like what David Guzik said in his commentary:

Actually, God was working through Paul and Silas to turn the world *right side-up* again.

But when you yourself are upside-down, the other direction appears to be upside-down!

Then they said that these people are saying that there is another king, Jesus. That's a big problem! The problem is that in the Roman world there is only one king and that is Caesar. News of any other king would have brought the entire Roman army after them and the city of Thessalonica would have been destroyed if the people were seen as serving another king. In fact, this ultimately is why both Paul and Peter were killed by the Romans, because they kept claiming that they serve King Jesus. **Slide 5**

Paul and Silas in Berea

Acts 16:6-10

¹⁰The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹²Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women

of high standing as well as men. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

Notes:

And – once again, we see that Paul had to flee to avoid being taken by the mob. He went to the next major city southwest of Thessalonica, which is Berea. **Slide 6** Upon arrival, what do you think he and his team did? They went into the synagogue and continued to witness that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Luke makes an interesting observation about the Jews in Berea. He says that they were more “noble” than the Jews in Thessalonica. The Greek word translated “noble” indicates someone who is “well-born.” **Slide 7** That is to say, they were of higher character than the Jews of Thessalonica. Luke tells us that they demonstrated this by searching the Scriptures daily to verify what Paul was telling them. Keep in mind that they didn’t have the New Testament, so they were searching through the Old Testament. Apparently, Paul was proving his case by quoting passage after passage from the Old Testament but these Bereans didn’t just take Paul’s word for it. They looked up the verses and examined them to verify Paul’s teaching. As a result, many of them believed, both men and women.

But, once again, the jealous Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea when they heard that Paul was preaching there and they stirred-up the crowds. **Slide 8** As a result, Silas and Timothy sent Paul away. This time they sent him by sea while the two of them remained in Berea to minister to the new Christians. The ship took Paul to Athens, and as soon as he arrived, he sent word back to Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens.

Paul in Athens

Acts 17:16-21

¹⁶Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So 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. ¹⁸Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Notes:

As Paul was waiting for his friends to arrive in Athens to assist him, he did what almost anyone would do, finding oneself in an historic city like Athens. He did the touristy thing and wandered all around the city. One of the first things Paul noticed about Athens was the fact that they had

many, many idols. One ancient historian tells us that there were about 30,000 idols in Athens. No, that's not a mistake, this historian claimed there were 30,000 idols in Athens. **Slide 9** Another ancient historian tells us that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man.

But tourism wasn't really Paul's thing; "reasoning" with the lost was his thing. There's that word again, reasoning. Paul enjoyed having a back-and-forth discussion with whomever he could. That's why we see him spending time in the synagogues and in the marketplace reasoning about religion with whomever would do so. Although the word *dialegomai* could refer to arguments, it appears that Paul's discussions were more intellectual, back-and-forth reasonings.

Athens was known for its philosophers. In fact, the very word philosophy, which means "lover of wisdom," was coined by one of the earliest philosophers, a mathematician, by the name of Pythagoras. **Slide 10** Greek philosophers thought about and theorized about many different ideas. They were the "thinkers" of their day. These self-proclaimed "intellectuals" considered Paul to be beneath them. They referred to him as a "babbler." The Greek word actually means "a seed picker." This is a reference to the birds who were constantly in the marketplace picking at seeds and discarded trash. It later was applied to people who picked up discarded items in the marketplace and re-sold them to make a living. By Paul's time, the term came to be used of a person who went around picking up new ideas, trying to impress others with how smart and informed he was.

These self-proclaimed intellectuals thought that Paul was teaching about a couple of new deities, Jesus and Resurrection. You see, these philosophers believed that a divine being could inhabit philosophical ideas, like the Resurrection, as well as material things. Since they had never heard of anyone rising from the dead, they wanted to know more about this new god. What we know now is that many of these 30,000 idols were actually possessed by spirit beings, what we would refer to today as demons, which is why God gets so jealous when man worships idols. Incidentally, the word that the philosophers used when they referred to "divinities" was *daimoniōn* (demons).

Therefore – Paul was taken to the Areopagus. In Greek this is actually two words, *areion* (the Greek god Aries, or Mars) and *pagos* (a large rock or a hill). Therefore, it is sometimes referred to as Mars' Hill. It is where the supreme tribunal of justice (their Supreme Court of their day) met. A place where they listened to the public proclamation of new ideas. Even today, the Supreme Court of Greece is called *Areios Pagos*. Our text says "they took him and brought him to the Areopagus." The word translated "took" means "to be taken by force." Apparently, Paul had no choice but to go with these philosophers.

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

Acts 17:22-34

²²So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³For 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. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶And 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, ²⁷that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸for “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.” ²⁹Being 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. ³⁰The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” ³²Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Notes:

When Paul spoke in the synagogues, he always started with Scripture and reasoned from the sacred text that Jesus is the Messiah. Since he was now standing in the presence of atheistic pagans, starting out with Scripture might be counter-productive. Instead, he pointed out how very religious these people were. Even ancient historians commented on how the Athenians were the most religious of all people. However, religion can either lead you to the true God or it can lead you away from Him. A religion is defined as a set of beliefs and practices performed by its followers in an effort to please their god. **Slide 11** Sounds like a definition of legalism, doesn't it?

While he had been wandering around Athens, Paul had noticed a shrine dedicated to “the unknown god.” He also had noticed that there was nothing to indicate that they had any knowledge of the true God, so he used this information to create a “hook” to get their attention. He said,

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He said, in effect,

This God who you don't know is the creator of everything. He even created all the nations from one man. He did this so that men would seek Him and try to find Him, even though He is not far from any one of us. Even your poets have a better understanding of God than you do. One of your poets told you, “For in Him we live and move, and exist,” and another said, “For we are also His offspring.”

Paul did not quote these poets because they were prophets or were in any way familiar with Yahweh, but because even in their humanity, they recognized some of the realities of this “unknown god.” Paul continues on:

And, because we are his offspring, we should not think of him as being made of gold or silver, or stone. We have all had a false impression of who He really is. In the past, He has graciously overlooked our ignorance of Him. But now, He commands us to repent of our false worship. He has announced that there is a day of reckoning coming, when He will see who has done what is right and who has not. And, He has identified the Judge by resurrecting Him from the dead.

As soon as He mentioned the resurrection from the dead, the crowd reacted, mocking and jeering at him. But others wanted to hear more and wanted Paul to come back and speak to them again.

Either way, they indicated that his speech was over, so Paul left. But some of these learned men were convinced to follow Paul and his teaching.

So What?

Paul's audience at the Areopagus consisted primarily of Epicureans and Stoics. Neither group believed in a God the way we do. Let's start with the Epicureans. They were atheists; they denied that God even existed. They denied a life after death. They believed that this life was the only thing that really exists and that, therefore, men should get the most out of it. They felt that pleasure was the highest virtue, and that pain was the opposite. Their motto (which still persists to this day) was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." They believed in living for the experience of the moment. This is a widespread philosophy in our day, although it is no longer called Epicureanism. The humanists of our day have taken the ideal of Epicureanism, living for pleasure and for the moment, but they have added to it the notion that we are masters of our own fate and are becoming more like our own gods every day.

The remainder of Paul's audience was made up primarily of Stoics. These people were pantheists. That is, they believed that everything is God, and that he does not exist as a separate entity, but is in the rocks and trees and every material thing. Their attitude toward life was one of ultimate resignation, and they prided themselves on their ability to make the best out of whatever came. Their motto, in modern terms, was "Grin and bear it! It is what it is." There are many people today who feel that the best thing they can do is to take whatever comes and handle it the best they can. They also believe that Christians use God as a crutch to help them navigate the difficulties of life. These Stoics were all proud fatalists, and there are many like them today.

When Paul complimented them at the beginning of his oration, he said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious." The word translated "religious" is an interesting word. It means "fearful of the gods." But – Paul used the comparative form of the word, so it means, "more fearful of the gods." In other words, he is saying that the people of Athens recognized that there are gods, but they are more fearful of them than trusting of them. This fear of their gods is what led to the various superstitions surrounding their gods. Finally, we have to recognize that the Greek word used here for gods is the same one that their philosophers used when they referred to their deities. It is the word *daimoniōn*, that is, "demons."

The Greeks of Paul's day feared their gods. And they did so for good reason, their gods were actually demons. We think of the ancients as being quite ignorant of the realm of the spirit world around them. And yet, we today are no less ignorant. Even Christians fail to recognize all of the spiritual activity that is going on around us today. We only see the material world and, as a result, we only think of the material world.

Paul in his letter to the church in Ephesus instructed them:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10-13)

No, I'm not saying that we need to spend more time interacting with the spirit world. On the contrary, we need to spend less time in the realm of demons and more time in God's presence. Ostensibly, that's why we come to church every Sunday, to spend time in God's presence.

Is that why you're here today? Are you here because you feel closer to God in church? Attending church is important for all Christians. It helps us re-focus our lives on the Creator God who loves us even when we are unlovely and unlovable. For those of you who feel closer to God when you are in church, you need to spend more time in church! Well, actually, no you don't. You need to spend more time outside these walls in close fellowship with our God. Many, many Christians today are as ignorant of our God as the Greek philosophers were of theirs. Actually, the philosophers didn't need a god, all they needed was a place to meet and talk.

Now What?

The gods of the Greeks didn't want a relationship with people. They simply wanted to be adored and worshipped by people. That's one of the key things that makes our God different. Yes, he wants to be adored and worshipped (and He deserves it). But – He also wants to have an ongoing day-to-day PERSONAL relationship with us. Consider this, Worship and praise through an intimate personal relationship is Christianity. Worship and praise without an intimate personal relationship is idolatry. I wonder how many idol worshippers there are in our churches today. And they call themselves Christians!

Let's pray.

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