

ACTS LESSON 17

Acts Chapter 17

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Memory verses for this week: *Phil 3:10 That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;*

Introduction: In Chapter 16, we saw Timothy being called into the ministry and joining with Paul, Silas, and Luke in Paul's missionary journey that took them into Macedonia. The chapter closed with the Philippian jailer being saved after Paul and Silas were put in prison for removing the demon that possessed the young lady there in Philippi.

These men were not concerned for the stripes they took for the cause of Christ, but sang praises to the Lord there at midnight in the jail. We commented about how our circumstances are never as important as how we respond to those circumstances. Paul had learned to look to God for his strength and could rejoice in both need and abundance.

1. Paul and Company in Thessalonica

Acts 17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:

Upon being expelled from Philippi; Paul, Silas, and Timothy journeyed further south down the Greek peninsula in the province of Macedonia. They likely used the Egnatian Way, a major Roman road which had been built through the region extending over 500 miles from Byzantium to Dyrrachium on the Adriatic Sea.

They traveled approximately 32 miles and "passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia." Amphipolis was a significant free city adjacent to the Aegean Sea. The fact Paul only 'passed through' would indicate he had no business there. Luke's comments would seem to indicate that Paul had no specific ministry in this city. In like fashion, he passed through Apollonia, another 30 or so miles further down the Egnatian Way.

Why he did not stop and seek to develop a ministry in these two large coastal cities is not mentioned by Luke. It may be there were no Jewish synagogues in either place and Paul sought to put distance between himself and the Roman

authorities at Philippi. It may be the Holy Spirit was leading him to an open door in the coming cities. In any event, Paul journeyed through both. They arrived at Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews.” Thessalonica was a great commercial city at the head of the Thermaic Gulf on the Aegean Sea. It was the capital of the second of the four divisions of Macedonia and was the capital of the entire province of Macedonia. Along with Corinth and Ephesus, it was one of the major cities of commerce on the Aegean. As a political seat, it ranked with Antioch of Syria and Caesarea in Palestine.

It was a strategic city and would become a sounding board for the gospel. Later Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians, noted, “From you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” In Thessalonica there was a synagogue of the Jews. However, in as much as there was only one synagogue in this great city, it might indicate the Jewish population was not great there.

It will become evident that in the church which would develop there, gentile believers would predominate. The further west the gospel traveled, the more gentile in nature the church became.

*Acts 17:2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,
Acts 17:3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.*

As a visiting Jewish dignitary, Paul went into the synagogue for three Sabbath days (i.e., three weeks) and “reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” Notice how Paul always looked for a synagogue. There, he found people conversant with the Old Testament scriptures as well as God-fearing gentiles. In so doing, he fulfilled his mandate to take the gospel to the Jew first (Romans 1:16). He also found people already seeking the God of heaven.

Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. The reference to “opening and alleging” may be a reference to the Scriptures mentioned immediately prior. It rather may refer to how Paul sought to open their hearts and minds to the truth of Christ.

The same word (dianoigw dianoigo) is used by Luke in his gospel at 24:45 referring to how Jesus opened the understanding of the disciples. The word translated as alleging (paratijhmi paratithemi) has the sense of ‘setting forth’ or of ‘explaining.’ His point was that it was necessary that the Messiah “needs

have suffered and risen again from the dead.” The idea of a suffering Messiah as set forth in Isaiah 53 puzzled the devout Jews. Their view was of an almighty conquering Messiah who would lead Israel to world prominence.

Indeed, the Messiah will ultimately subdue and rule the inhabited world. However, what they overlooked and did not understand was how He must first suffer, die, and be risen first. As Paul spent time in the synagogue at Thessalonica, the essence of his message was precise. The Scriptures had indeed foretold how the Messiah would so suffer, die, and rise again. “And that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you is Christ.”

The Greek word for Christ (Cristov Christos) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah. The whole point of Paul’s initial ministry in the synagogue at Thessalonica was that Jesus of Nazareth, “this Jesus,” was their long-foretold Messiah, the Christ.

We see that there was a synagogue of the Jews there in Thessalonica, just as was the case in most cities that Paul and his companions came to in their missionary journeys. We see Paul going in three consecutive sabbath days to reason with the Jews from the scriptures. When we reason with others about Jesus Christ, our words are a barren wasteland compared to the beauty and truth of God’s Word. If people will not believe the bible, we are foolish to think that human reasoning will reach them. It is by hearing of the Gospel that men and women come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

1 Cor 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

1 Cor 1:19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

1 Cor 1:20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

1 Cor 1:21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

Paul reasoned with them it says in verses 2 and 3 that Christ must suffer, then be raised from the dead, and that Jesus was the Christ prophesied to come throughout the Old Testament.

Acts 17:4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.

Some believed and consorted with Paul and Silas. Some Jews were ‘persuaded.’ In contrast however, of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of

the chief women there were not a few. The word translated as believed here (peiyw peitho) is not the common word translated 'believe.' Rather, it has the sense of 'being persuaded' (conjugated in the passive voice).

The reference to devout Greeks (sebomenon 'ellhnon sebomenon Hellenon), literally 'worshipping Greeks,' is of ethnic Greeks who were already seeking the God of heaven through the Jewish synagogue. It is noted that both men and "chief women" not a few also were persuaded. The mention of "chief women" (literally 'first women') probably refers to leading women in the community, certainly in the synagogue.

Evidently, pressure from the unpersuaded rabbis kept more Jews from turning to Christ. It is evident that the church at Thessalonica was mostly gentile. Paul indicates this in I Thessalonians 1:9 in that they turned to God from idols and in 2:14 when he refers to members of the church in distinction to the Jews.

We see that the preaching of Christ had results, in that some of them believed. When we witness for Christ, we should not be disappointed if only a few come to Christ. If we labored our entire life and only saw one soul come to Christ, it is a soul that is saved for eternity, and no value can be placed on a soul. We know the scriptures teach that all the money in the world can not buy the salvation of a soul.

It says that some of the Jews believed, that many of the devout Greeks accepted Christ as Savior, and many of the influential women believed also. This was a great accomplishment, for we find in Chapter 1 verse 9 of this book that many of these people were idol worshippers. They turned from those idols to serve the living God. They received the words of Paul not as the words of men, but as the truth, the true word of God. (Which they were.)

1 Th 1:9 For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;

1 Th 2:13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

We see these became followers of the churches of God which in Judea are in Christ.

1 Th 2:14 For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things

*of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:
1 Th 2:15 Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and
have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:
1 Th 2:16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved,
to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.*

The results were that this church sounded out with the Word of the Lord through out all of Macedonia and Achaia. Our church should be so on fire for the Lord that others hear of it far from our city. God does not want a church of lukewarm Christians, but people who are sold out and living an abundant and joyful Christian life.

*1 Th 1:7 So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.
1 Th 1:8 For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.*

II. Jewish Opposition at Thessalonica

Acts 17:5 But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

Exactly how long Paul was in Thessalonica, we are not told. His initial ministry in the synagogue lasted about three weeks though it would seem from comments made in his later epistles to the Thessalonians, his ministry there certainly was longer than that. Not only were gentiles, affiliated with the synagogue, won to Christ, but I Thessalonians 1:9 seems to indicate that numerous other Greek pagans with no association with Judaism were also won.

In any event, there would appear to be an interval of time implied between verses 4 and 5. Paul's ministry won over some Jews and many God-fearing gentiles along with common idolaters of the community. The unbelieving Jewish leadership (rabbis) were "moved with envy." The word translated as envy (zhlow zeloo) also has the distinct sense of 'jealousy.'

Though this was not the only motive of opposition from Jewish quarters of Paul's ministry, it was a factor. Not only did they disagree with Paul theologically, but through the hardness of their hearts, they were simply jealous that he could draw such a following. Mainline religionists then and to this day often are jealous of those who outstrip their efforts by simply going out and winning people to Christ.

They “took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company.”

The word translated as baser sort (agoraiov agoraios) is of note. It derives from the word agora which is the common Greek word for the marketplace. It came to have the sense of the ‘downtown’ of a city. Those who hung out there without employment as vagrants or ‘street people’ were called the ‘agoraivos.’ They would be the modern equivalent to homeless people or street vagrants. Their plight was not from economic hard-times, but rather from alcohol, drugs, and other forms of degeneracy. Moreover, the Authorized Version describes them as lewd.

The word so translated (ponhrov poneros) is the common word usually rendered as ‘evil’ or wicked.’ Implied in the phrase, “took unto them,” is that the rabbis may have paid some of these drunks to further incite a mob action. That is exactly what happened. They stirred up an uproar in the city. They then marched through the streets as a mob or perhaps in a ‘demonstration’ style and accosted the house of one Jason, searching for Paul and Silas. Little is known of Jason other than he had offered lodging to Paul. He evidently was a believer. Later, Paul would make comment about a Jason in Romans 16:21 as a kinsman. Whether this is the same Jason as here we do not know.

We see that the unbelieving Jews gather a group of people together to start an uproar in the city. We mentioned last week how that when a person hears the Word of God, and they come under conviction by the power of the Holy Spirit, they either respond and accept Christ, or they lash out against those who stand for the truth. God’s Word is the most powerful book ever written. After all things are destroyed, God’s Word will still stand.

Heb 4:12 For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Mark 13:31 Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.

Acts 17:6 And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;

Acts 17:7 Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.

Acts 17:8 And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.

Acts 17:9 And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.

The mob instigated by the jealous, unbelieving rabbis, not finding Paul, therefore drew (literally 'dragged') Jason before the political authorities. The word translated as crying (boaw boao) has the sense of 'yelling' as a mob would do. Their charge against Paul and Silas was that "these that have turned the world upside down are come hither also." The word translated as world here (oikoumenh oikomene) literally has the sense of the 'inhabited earth,' but practically, it was a reference to the Roman empire.

Word of Christianity's power was spreading through the Roman world, in part, from disaffected Jews. It was also at about this time the Roman Emperor, Claudius, had expelled all Jews from Rome, alleging a plot to overthrow the government. What might be implied is that the mob leaders were implying that Paul and Silas, as Jews, might be a part of such insurrection.

They further trumped up charges by distorting what Paul, no doubt, had taught. The very essence of the idea of the Jewish Messiah or the Christ was of a divine King. Jesus' realm in this age is spiritual. His ultimate kingdom would be literal and political after His return. Whether these charges were yelled by the rabbis or the other leaders of the mob, we are not told. However, the very idea of Jesus as King carried serious overtones of insurrection to the political authorities. Accordingly, they were troubled.

Though the mob could present only the slightest evidence, nevertheless the authorities could not treat charges of sedition lightly lest they be accused of complicity. They therefore took security (perhaps some sort of bond) from Jason and the other brethren that Paul and Silas would leave town and free them from this uproar. They were then released.

We see that they accuse Jason and the others of preaching and doing contrary to the decrees of Caesar. The truth was that Caesar was of little significance in contrast to the Kingship of Jesus Christ. One day all men and women will acknowledge that Jesus is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

Phil 2:9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

Phil 2:10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

Phil 2:11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

III. Paul and Silas at Berea

Acts 17:10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Acts 17:11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

The gravity of the situation is indicated in that “the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea.” They evidently had been in hiding. The brethren thought the situation so grave, they spirited Paul and company out of town during the night, possibly accompanying them as an escort. Paul’s personal ministry at Thessalonica was over. But it had been fruitful. A New Testament church had been established.

His epistles written perhaps five years later reveal a well-organized church whose only doctrinal confusion was eschatological. Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonian church seems to indicate they faced strong persecution after his departure. Nevertheless, the church seemed to grow and prosper. Later, when Paul would journey to Jerusalem, Aristarchus and Secundus, men in the Thessalonian church accompanied him (Acts 20:4).

Berea was a smaller town about fifty miles further down the coast. Paul lost no time in finding the local synagogue and going into it. Paul hastened to begin his ministry in Berea. It may be that Paul feared word would spread of his ministry there bringing opposition from Jews elsewhere, which indeed happened.

The Berean Jews (and perhaps gentile seekers, though not mentioned specifically) were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Luke records two reasons why they in the synagogue of Berea were more noble. (The word translated as noble {eugenhveugenes} has the sense of being of higher degree socially such as a nobleman might be.

Here, the application clearly is spiritual. They were of a higher degree spiritually. The reason will soon be evident. They were people already accustomed to personally studying the Scriptures. This always elevates not only the understanding, but spiritual character in particular. First, the Bereans received the Word of God which Paul preached “with all readiness of mind.” The word translated readiness of mind (proyymia prothymia) denotes an ‘eagerness’ or ‘willingness of mind.’

These willingly and eagerly received the Word of God. Such an open spirit toward the Word is a fertile field for the Holy Spirit to work and for the seed of the gospel to grow. It might be likened to the “good ground” which Jesus alluded to in the parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew 13:20,23. Their previous study of the Scripture had prepared their hearts. Secondly, the Bereans “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” They not only listened attentively and eagerly to Paul’s message of Christ, they themselves “searched the scriptures.” The word translated searched (anakrinw anakrino) has the sense of examining or investigating.

The foundation of their faith was to be the Word of God. Though they were favorably inclined to what Paul had to say, they sought to verify it from God’s Word. Indeed, they were noble spiritually.

For Paul and Silas’ protection, we see the brethren send Paul and Silas away at night to Berea, a place which was not of high importance like Thessalonica. But it was a place where a Jewish synagogue existed, and these people were more noble and had a readiness to learn about the scriptures. None are so ignorant as they who can no longer learn. As we grow older, we have to fight the tendency to believe we have all the truth and we do not need further teaching.

That is a trick of Satan. No man or woman has ever come to the total knowledge of God’s Word, and we can study until the day we die. I believe we will still be gleaning great truths from His Word. We see these in Berea received the Word with all readiness of mind and searched the scriptures daily to see whether the apostles were preaching the truth. God’s Word will reveal false teaching.

Acts 17:12 Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

Acts 17:13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people.

Acts 17:14 And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still.

Not surprisingly, “many of them believed,” including many honorable Greek women and men. Not only were Jews won to Christ in the synagogue at Berea, but also prominent Greeks from the community.

Unfortunately, word traveled back to Thessalonica and the Jewish community of Paul’s ministry and they responded quickly. Jewish agents traveled to Berea and stirred things up as they had done in Thessalonica. The brethren at Berea immediately sent Paul away. The implication of them using a ruse in giving the appearance of him departing by sea is noted. How Paul traveled on to Athens is

not noted. In any event, he slipped past his adversaries, no doubt with God's providence. Meanwhile, Silas and Timothy remained in Berea.

Evidently, the Jewish antagonists were satisfied to have driven Paul away and ignored his associates. They most likely remained to strengthen the new church there. Later, in Acts 20:4, Luke records that Sopater of Berea would travel with Paul on his journey to Jerusalem. However, there is no other comment again in the New Testament about the church at Berea. With such a spiritual foundation as already noted, the church without question continued.

In Paul's epistles, he usually wrote to deal with a problem in a given church, particularly of a doctrinal nature. It might be implied the church at Berea was so well grounded spiritually, Paul had no need to write to them (at least not under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost in addressing problems there.)

We see many of the people, after testing and proving the Gospel to be true, accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. But the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica don't quit. They show up again and stir up the people. This time, Paul is sent away to sea, but Silas and Timothy stay there in Berea.

John Calvin had this to say about these who hated the Gospel so much. "The Jews not only drove Christ out when he was presented to them at home but were maddened when they heard that he was being preached elsewhere. But in this passage we must not consider the fury of the nation so much as the desperate malice of Satan, who urges his people on to disturb the kingdom of Christ and to prevent people's salvation. When in our day so many furious people set themselves against Christ's faithful ministers, it is not men who cause the war, but Satan, the father of lies. And although the fighting does not always take the same form, Satan will never cease to weary those whom he knows to serve Christ faithfully, either openly or by insidious means or even with internal struggles."

If Satan can just get us to put salvation off another day... just one more day, it may be all it takes to send us to eternal damnation. None of us are guaranteed another day on this earth. So if you are lost and don't know Jesus as Savior, now is the accepted time. Don't let the father of lies mislead you.

IV. Paul at Athens

Acts 17:15 And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

Those who escorted Paul from Berea brought him all the way to Athens which was in the province of Achaia, in distinction to Macedonia where he had met so much opposition. They perhaps in so doing hoped to bring him to another province altogether where his enemies would not be as likely to pursue him.

Athens, though not the political capital of the region, rather was the cultural, educational, and philosophical center of the world. It was a city of liberal pagan elitism. It was a city of universities, the arts and croissant crowd, and the historical base of the great Greek philosophers of the past. Athens was the city of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Euripides, and other notable Greek philosophers. It was the city of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and Mars Hill. It was the academic, cultural, elitist city of the Roman Empire and it was pagan to its very core.

Paul upon arriving there sent commandment with his escorts as they returned to Berea for Silas and Timothy to join him “with all speed.” Further comment is made about Silas’ and Timothy’s arrival in I Thessalonians 3:1,6; Acts 18:5; and II Corinthians 11:8.

While Paul waited for his fellow laborers, “his spirit was stirred in him” in seeing the city given to idolatry. The sense of the word translated stirred (paroxunw paroxuneto) has the idea of being provoked. As Paul walked through this great city, seeing the sights, he could not but notice the endless idolatry. It has been estimated there were more than 30,000 public idols in Athens and countless other private ones in homes. It has been said that it was easier to find a ‘god’ in Athens than a man.

The Greeks believed the ‘gods’ to be quite finite and localized. Therefore, there were statues to denote the multitude of gods where it was hoped their beneficence would be found. These statues often were beautiful and were works of art in themselves. It is remarkable to this day how the ‘arts’ crowd of the world is utterly pagan. Moreover, the ‘art’ of the statues was often sensual in nature. As Paul walked through this renowned city, the Paris of the ancients, the cultural center of the world, his righteous indignation stirred his spirit.

We see that Paul encourages the brethren to send Silas and Timothy to him immediately once he arrives in Athens. It says in verse 16 that as he awaited their arrival, he was stirred in his spirit for the people as the whole city was given over to idolatry. We need to be so stirred for those around us who are being led astray by idolatry today. You might say that people don’t worship idols anymore. They may not setup a statue or a specific thing and bow down to it, but by our actions we find many find other things more important than the service of God.

If a fishing pole and a bass boat are more important on Sunday than being in God's house, I believe they qualify as a major distraction. Many will play 18 rounds of golf on Sunday morning, and never consider being in God's house to worship him. Is fishing and golfing horrible things? Not at all if done at the right time, but we still need to find time for God. This city here in Athens was totally given over to worshipping idols, and it moved Paul.

In J. R. Dummelow's Commentary on The Holy Bible, he gave some insight into the leading religious views of the day.

"Athens, though fallen from its former glory, was still the artistic and philosophic, and in many ways, the religious capital of the world. The city was full of temples and altars, and the people so devoted to religious ceremonies and mysteries that they merited the title of 'superstitious.' Athens, on account of its illustrious history, was held in honour by the Romans. It was allowed to retain its ancient institutions, but the democracy had long lost all real power, and the affairs of the city were administered by the aristocratic court of the Areopagus. (v. 19) Athens was famed for its university, the most renowned in the world, at which a large number of students from all parts of the empire were always in residence. As the original home of philosophy, Athens was the headquarters of all the chief philosophic schools. Among its sacred spots were the Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle, the porch of Zeno, and the Garden of Epicurus. The only two philosophies, however, which at this time exercised an important influence upon politics and social life, were Stoicism and Epicureanism, which, for this reason are singled out by St. Luke for special mention."

V. Paul is Called a Babblor by Philosophers

Acts 17:17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

Acts 17:18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblor say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

Paul being stirred began to reason first with the Jews in the synagogue of Athens. There evidently was not a large Jewish presence in this major city in as much as there evidently was only one synagogue. Paul likely spent time in the synagogue on the Sabbath. But he then engaged in debate the rest of the week "with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him."

The word translated as devout (sebomai sebomai) refers to those whom Paul ran into who publicly worshipped the numerous idols. In addition, he stopped and

witnessed to people in the market (agora) who would listen to him. It is evident his time spent in Athens began with witnessing in public to any and all who would hear him.

Word of this unusual Jewish preacher made its way to the philosophical elite of the city who made a point to meet Paul. Though there had been many major Greek philosophers and philosophies in Athens, the two prevailing philosophies of Paul's day were the Epicureans and the Stoics. Briefly, the Epicureans advocated a philosophy of 'enjoy thyself.' They sought to present a philosophical basis for hedonism—eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. They sought to drape their sensual, licentious lifestyle with the cloak of philosophical respectability. (To this day, the modern academic and cultural elites of the university and cultural scene try to justify their immoral, profligate living with the veneer of a philosophical foundation.)

The Stoics, by contrast advocated the philosophy of 'deny thyself.' They sought, through self-discipline, singleness of purpose and hard-driven regimen to achieve a higher plane of living. In some ways they would be similar to the ambitious, hard-driving, goal-oriented professionals of our world who will climb over anyone or anything in their quest for the top. Though the philosophers and philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics no longer are in existence, they still find their fulfillment in the modern ungodly world.

In encountering Paul, some of these cultural elites sneered, "What will this babbler say?" The word translated as babbler (spermologos/spermologos) literally means 'a seed picker.' It might be analogous to more modern terms such as a 'hayseed or hick.' In any event, it was highly uncomplimentary and reeked with an elitist condescension. The world never has had anything good to say about a 'fundamentalist.'

Others noted that he seemed to set forth "strange gods." The word translated as gods (daimonion/daimonion) is most commonly translated as 'demons' and was an idiom used by the Greeks for their pagan gods. It is noteworthy that even the pagans made a correlation between their idolatrous statues and the concept of demons. Little did they realize how accurate they were.

What piqued their interest was that Paul "preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection." The word translated as preached (euaggelizw/ euangelidzo) again literally means to evangelize. Though the whole idea of Jesus and the resurrection was foreign to these cultural, educated elites; it is indicative of what Paul did. He did not seek to enter philosophical discourse with them. He sought to evangelize them. Or, put another way, he sought to win them to Christ.

Notice once again, the pre-eminence given by Paul's message to the resurrection of Christ.

Acts 17:19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?

Acts 17:20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

Acts 17:21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

The pagans Paul to the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill. It was the place in Athens where major, cultural, political, judicial, and philosophical discourse took place. In modern terms, it might be likened to the civic center. These academics were not interested in the truth. Rather, their cynical intellects were curious about "this new doctrine."

As 'sociologists' of this day, their interest in Paul's fundamental doctrine was not because they were truly seeking. They were curious to hear what he had to say for their own academic purposes. They had heard of such preachers and saw an opportunity to listen first hand to a fundamentalist and broaden their educational experience. Now was their chance to enter into a debate with one.

Their whole existence was spent in "to tell, or to hear some new thing." Like the cultural elite of today, though they disdain the gospel in their hearts, they at times will listen to what these ignorant fundamentalists actually believe to satisfy their intellectual curiosity. University professors live for moments such as this.

We see as Paul went into the synagogues, he disputed with the Jews. In the market, each day he met with the people and told them the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ. We see in verse 18, that the philosophers said he was a babler, bringing forth a strange god. Many today consider those who preach the pure gospel unlearned and ignorant men. Those that put God before the pleasures of the world and tickling the ears of the congregation are not highly touted. But in God's eyes, they are of great price. We see that Paul is brought to Mars Hill and questioned concerning the doctrine that he preached. The reason it seemed so strange to them is that they did not know the true God. These were materialistic people who were atheists... they did not believe in God.

I heard R.C. Sproul on the radio say that a recent survey was done concerning Christianity, and he marveled at two of the findings.

It said 100 people were asked if they believed that God existed, and 95 of 100 said yes. (Far more than either he nor I thought would say yes.) He said the second question was "Is there absolute right and wrong?" Of this group, 75 said

that right and wrong was relative. In other words, of 95 who believed that there was a righteous and perfect God, only 25 believed that there is absolute right or wrong. How horrible. God has laid down the truth as to what is right and wrong, and we are to believe it. Satan has the world believing a lie that each man or woman can decide daily whether something is right or wrong. These in Athens thought that the things in the world came by accident and chance. Things do not happen by chance, but all things are upheld by God. The providence of God is what allows us to live and breathe this day.

Verse 21 says they lived to tell or to hear some new thing. Sounds like things haven't changed much in 2,000 years.

VI. Paul's Sermon on Mars Hill

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

Acts 17:23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

Paul begins by calling out “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” Whether he meant this as too religious or too superstitious, we know they were caught up in false beliefs. Paul got to the truth immediately. Some people won't drive down a street when a black cat crosses their path. What happens if a white and black cat crosses your path? It is silly to worry about things like this. These people were so superstitious that they had set up an altar to the unknown god. Paul tells them he was there to declare this unknown God to them.

Acts 17:24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

Acts 17:25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

Paul begins by noting the God of heaven is the one which “made the world and all things therein.” To the critic which questions the creation account in Genesis, it is evident that the Apostle Paul clearly believed it. For his audience of intellectuals, he begins with the foundation that God created all which is. The Greeks held that matter was eternal and had no beginning. They would be philosophically comparable to the modern evolutionists and their big-bang theory.)

Having laid that foundation, Paul proceeded to note that “he is Lord of heaven and earth.” The Greek idea of their gods was of limited, finite deities which occupied or lived near their various shrines denoting them. The idea of an

infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent Creator was something from which Satan had blinded their minds. Moreover, he addressed the pagan idea that a 'deity' lived in a temple constructed by human hands. The Greeks had the notion that their deities needed their assistance in presenting them sacrifices for food. Their presumed deity therefore would hopefully help them in return. Paul confronts this folly head on.

The omnipotent God does not need the assistance of human hands (which demonic deities did). Rather, the God of heaven is the source of 'life, and breathe, and all things.' He created not only the universe, but we who live and breathe thereon. Paul deftly pointed out that the God of which he preached was the Creator of the critical audience to which he spake.

Acts 17:26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

Acts 17:27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

Acts 17:28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

As Paul continued, he gives insight into how God has so ordered human civilization. First, He "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." All humanity is of one bloodline. Though there have developed races since Noah's day, nevertheless, they all are of the same 'blood.' The equality of the races is clearly implied. The word translated as nations (eynov ethnos) is whence the English word ethnic derives.

All ethnic groups, the world over, are of one blood and one ancestry (i.e., Adam). Moreover, God has "determined the times before appointed." The word translated as times (kairovkairos) has the sense of broad periods of time. It, on occasion, is translated as 'seasons.' Here it has the sense of 'ages.' Whether this is a veiled allusion to the various 'dispensations' (of which the pagan Athenians would be utterly ignorant) or to the more prosaic eras of history of nations coming and going is not clear. The latter is more likely.

In any event, God has controlled the ages of human history even before they happened. Finally, Paul indicates here that God has set "the bounds of their habitation." The various national boundaries of the peoples of the earth have been ordained and constrained according to God's divine purposes. Truly, He controls the nations and their destinies.

Paul continued that the various peoples of the earth therefore ought to seek the Lord if perhaps they might "feel him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us." What Paul implies is that unsaved people blindly grope for

God, as in the dark, though in His omnipresence, He is near. He noted that “in him we live, and move, and have our being.” Paul summarizes that God is the source of life, movement, and existence.

There is an ascending climax of our being which has its roots in Him. What clearly is implied is that apart from the God of heaven, we would not exist, much less have life or the freedom of movement which we enjoy. In Contrast of such a lofty thought to the dead, motionless idols which the Athenians worshiped, Paul’s transcending contrast surely was not lost upon them. He then quotes from a Greek poet (possibly Aratus of Soli in Cilicia circa B.C. 270) to further make his point. “For we are also his offspring.” The Hebrew Scriptures would make no great impact upon these cultural elites, so Paul quotes from a source with which they had familiarity to build his case.

Paul lays down the truth on how God made the world and all things in it. He declared that God did not dwell in temples made with hands today. And while God does not need anything from man, he gives us all life and breath, and all things. In verse 26, he tells them that God had made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth. He goes on to say how that God has determined the appointed time for each nation and set the bounds of their habitation. I wonder how much longer America will stand if our nation does not turn back to God.

Gen 9:19 These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread.

Gen 10:32 These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.

Acts 17:29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Acts 17:30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

Paul noted that we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver or stone, graven into art and used as man’s device. The word translated Godhead (yeiov theios) is the word to which the Greeks were accustomed in describing God. Paul used terms which they were likely to understand. Though their statues were often artful, cast in gold, silver, or carved in stone; they were of human origin and human thought. The word translated as device (enyumhsiv enthumesiv) literally has the sense of ‘thought’ or ‘design.’

Satan, through the ages, has advanced the idea that in the beginning man created God. Paul clearly alludes to this in culminating his case that God has not

been created by men, notwithstanding their creations of idols. Rather God is the Creator of men.

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent. Moreover, in times past God winked at this ignorance. The word translated as winked ('upereidw hupereido) has the sense to 'overlook.' Or forbear. Now, however, since the coming of Jesus Christ, he hath "commandeth all men every where to repent." The word translated as repent (metanoew metanoeo) simply implies 'to turn from,' in this case, from their sin and idolatry and turn to God. It literally means to change one's mind or heart.

Acts 17:31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Acts 17:32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

Acts 17:33 So Paul departed from among them.

Acts 17:34 Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

The urgency of this repentance is because God "hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness." The criteria and standard of God's coming judgment will be righteousness, nothing more, nothing less. The word Paul used which is translated as world (oikoumenh oikoumene) literally means the inhabited earth.

Though the Athenian Greeks may not have been patriotic Romans, nevertheless, Paul implied that their pagan world and cultural elitism would be judged by the God of heaven of which he spoke. Moreover, the assurance such judgment was coming was by "that man" whom God had "raised from the dead." Paul declared that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an assurance of coming judgment.

When the pagan professors and cultural elites heard him mention the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they dismissed everything he had said. Sin had so blinded their minds, they were oblivious to this truth. The Greeks believed in some sort of afterlife for the soul, but rejected any idea of a resurrection of the body. Some therefore mocked Paul. Others, perhaps slightly more courteously, put him off by telling him they might hear him again some other time. Paul left this audience of cultural elites. However, there were several which joined with him and believed. Two notable citizens, "Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris." Though Paul did not see many converts in Athens, those who did get saved were people of some stature.

We see Paul declaring that God is not far from any of us, and that we are all his offspring. Because of this, we should not view the Godhead as unto gold, silver, or stone graven by man. And while God had overlooked this ignorance earlier, today he commands all men to repent. God judgment is sure, and everyone will stand before God one day. When Paul spoke of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked him. But even at this, there were a few that heard the truth and were saved.

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Prov 4:18 But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

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