

Acts of the Apostles – Chapter 17

In Thessalonica

17:1 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said.⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

Read Matthew 13:3-9.

3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

As we go through Acts 17 keep in mind that Paul is sowing the Gospel message to people with varying levels of understanding. The Jews had an understanding of God but the Greeks did not. In Thessalonica, Paul begins to preach the Gospel in a Jewish synagogue. For three weeks he reasoned with the Jews regarding Jesus as the Messiah/Christ. I picture Aristotle or Socrates sitting in the audience as Paul tries to “reason” with them. However, these Greek philosophers were around almost 400 years before Paul. In the synagogue, Paul encountered various types of soil. Those that accepted the message were good soil but those that rejected the message was soil with thorns that choked the message. Notice it wasn’t just the Jews in the synagogue. Those that heard the message were Jews God-fearing Greeks and even women.

17:5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.[a] 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

Here we go again. Just like in Philippi, the Jews became jealous or envious and started a mob and created a riot or uproar. I find it odd that there just happened to be evil men hanging around in the marketplace waiting to join a mob from the local synagogue. It makes me think of the “Brute Squad” in the movie “Princess Bride”. The New King James version says “these who have turned the world upside down.” Paul and Silas would have thought this was a compliment. The mob went to Jason’s house and attacked him and others that were with him. Paul and Silas were not there. They were guilty by association and they were arrested and had to post a bond to get out. The complaint against them sounded a lot like the ones against Jesus. The Jews are not getting the concept of a heavenly kingdom. One of the commentators pointed out that it was strange that people post a bond to make sure they appear in court but here the bond was posted to make sure that they leave town.

In Berea

17:10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

Again we see Paul leaving under the cover of darkness and they headed to Berea. This time the Gospel message was accepted by the Jews in the synagogue, as well as many Greek men and women.

17:13 But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

The non-believing Jews from Thessalonica behaved like the non-believing Jews from Psidium Antioch and Iconium on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14:19). They heard Paul was preaching the Gospel and came to Berea to cause trouble. This scene was a clear example of Satan attacking Christians when things are going well. It is strange, their beef must be with Paul because he was taken to Athens by believers and Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea.

“The fact that both Silas and Timothy remained there showed again that Paul had a passion for planting churches, not just making converts. It also showed that Paul didn't believe that he alone could do the work of teaching and strengthening Christians; men like Silas and Timothy also could.” (Guzik)

In Athens

17:16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

The Greeks had a reputation for collecting gods. They had their own gods and they adopted those of people they conquered, as well as those of the people that conquered them. Paul saw lots of idols in Athens. All translations say that Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

“Paul faced a challenging audience in Athens. It was a cultured, educated city that was proud of its history. It was an intellectual center, much like Oxford or Cambridge. Paul spoke to a city perhaps different than any other city he had preached in.” (Guzik)

17:18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are

bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

The Greek philosophers called Paul a babbler because he was preaching about Jesus and the Gospel message. They took him to the Areopagus which is the Hill of Ares or Mars, the God of War. We are told that “the Athenians and the foreigners like to spend their days telling or hearing about new things.”

17:22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul begins to speak to the Greeks. These men had no knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures or our God. Paul starts with their beliefs. Paul was taking time to prepare the soil before planting the Gospel.

“Athens was filled with statues dedicated to the Unknown God. Six hundred years before Paul, a terrible plague came on the city and a man name Epimenides had an idea. He let loose a flock of sheep through the town, and wherever they lay down, they sacrificed that sheep to the god that had the nearest shrine or temple. If a sheep lay down near no shrine or temple, they sacrificed the sheep To the Unknown God.” (Guzik)

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ 29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.

Paul starts talking about the “Unknown God” as the Creator who made everything in heaven and earth. He does not live in man-made temples. He does not need anything from men. He provides everything for men. To us, all these things have been taught to us but to the Greeks, this is contrary to anything that they have heard.

“This view of the world is very different from either the Epicurean emphasis on a chance combination of atoms or the virtual pantheism of the Stoics.” (Stott)

Paul told the Greeks that all men came from one man, Adam. Since God created us then we should seek him. Paul quotes some Greek poets, Epimenides the Cretan [600 b.c.] and Aratus [310 b.c.] to say that “We are his offspring.” By saying that God is NOT like gold, silver or stone, Paul is pointing out that the Greeks are worshipping idols without calling Idolaters.

17:30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Paul has moved from Genesis to Revelation. He covered the creation and is quickly moving to judgment. Paul brings up sin without calling it sin, he tells them that they can repent of ignorance or idolatry. Notice that Paul did not come out quote John 14:6. He says that there will be a judgment and God has appointed one man for judgment. The one man for judgment will be known because God raised Him from the dead.

“Paul seemed unable to preach a sermon without focusing on the resurrection of Jesus. For him, none of the Christian life made sense without the triumph of Jesus’ resurrection.”

17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

The sticking point for the Greeks was a resurrection. Some mocked Paul but others wanted to hear more.

“All Greeks thought that man was composed of spirit (or mind), which was good, and matter (or body), which was bad. If there was to be a life to come, the one thing they certainly did not want it cluttered up with a body.” (Boice)

Paul left the Areopagus but he had touched lives, specifically, Dionysius a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris in addition to others not mentioned by name.

“We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment.” (Stott)