

## Acts chapter 17

### Intro:

Paul, having received the vision of the man calling from Macedonia, had just left from the area of Philippi and is now making his way towards Thessalonica, a major city of Greece. Today the city is called Salonika. The other cities mentioned are all about a days travel on horseback from one another. Paul seems intent on getting to Thessalonica. Going to large cities that act as hubs seemed to be a pattern for him. Thessalonica had about 200,000 people. It would have been a good place to have the gospel spread to the entire Balkan Peninsula.

### Acts 17:1-4

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 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. 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.

Paul had a pattern. He went to major cities and then went to the synagogue of those cities to preach Jesus. He was consistent and followed what Jesus had said about the message being to the Jew first. It was what Luke called his custom.

His message centered on the cross, contending that it was in fact necessary for the Messiah to be crucified. The common teaching at the time was that the Messiah would come and destroy Israel's enemies and many Jews were looking for a conquering king, not a sacrificial lamb.

### 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

In response, some of them were persuaded; most of them were devout Greeks, but also many prominent Jewish women. Where the gospel is preached and lived, women flourish. These are prominent women, women of authority and status who would not have come to a weak gospel that relegated them to serving tea and being a first century Martha Stewart. This consistent in the book of Acts. In the last chapter we saw Lydia accept the gospel. Lydia was a wealthy, successful woman with houses in multiple cities.

Here are some references:

Acts 17:12 honorable women

Acts 18:18 Priscilla is mentioned first and is traveling with Paul.

Romans 16:1-3 Phebe was a servant of the church and again notice in verse 3

Priscilla is mentioned before her husband, this is highly unusual.

Romans 16:6

Philippians 4:3 women who labored with Paul

These are just a few references. The point is that the gospel is for women and is not to be oppressive. Men and women are equal in Christ. There are different roles and responsibilities, but women have a place in ministry.

Thessalonica was a strategic point, and a good place to see the gospel spread through the region. (1 Thessalonians 5:8) While Paul was in Thessalonica, he received financial support from the Christians in Philippi which allowed him to focus solely on the preaching of the gospel. (Philippians 4:15-16). They helped with this successful work among the Thessalonians.

### **Acts 17:5-9**

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. 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; Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they

heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.

Paul is opposed by a mob incited by envious people among the Jews. The same thing happened in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45, 50), Iconium (Acts 14:2, 5), and Lystra (Acts 14:19) on the first missionary journey. Jason was a Christian in Thessalonica whose house seems to have been a center for the church. When the evil men from the marketplace did not find Paul and Silas there, they attacked Jason himself and some brethren who were with him. They cried out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." When accusing these Christians before the rulers of the city, they gave an unintended compliment to the effectiveness of God's work through Paul and Silas.

They were basically charging them with insurrection and offending the Pax Romana (disturbing the peace of Rome). They brought them before the magistrates of the city. There had been trouble in the Jewish community in Rome not long before this that led to the expulsion of all Jews around 49 A.D. The accusation is that they are the same kind of people or may be the very same group. Jesus did not come only to be our teacher, but to turn our world upside-down. The powerful and the eminent of this world are at the top of the power pyramid and look down on the weak and insignificant; but Jesus comes and turns that pyramid around and says, "If you want to come to Me, you have to come like a little child." As Paul says, God has chosen the foolish and weak things of the world to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27), and so God turns the world's power-pyramid upside down. The truth is not that they were turning the world upside-down, but rather turning it right side up. They were placing Jesus in His proper place, but when you have placed yourself or a society above God, you have become accustomed to being upside-down.

When we encounter the gospel it should absolutely fundamentally change the way we view the world. We do not simply add Jesus to our life as if He is there to govern a small unfulfilled part of our life. We are completely changed and who we were is no longer. We are made new creatures to be conformed to the image of the Son of God. The truth in light of the gospel is that we are unbelievably broken with a proclivity towards sin. We believe the lie that we make better gods than God. The cross makes us realize this upside down thinking and causes us to surrender to the atoning sacrifice of our Savior.

Jesus gives us an example of this upside down thinking when He spoke of a rich man who amassed great wealth, and all he could think about was building bigger barns to store all his wealth. From all outward appearance this man would seem to have been someone to admire and emulate, but Jesus calls him a fool. He is a fool because God wasn't the ruler of his life. (Luke 12:16-21)

The evil men from the marketplace made an even more serious accusation: "these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king; Jesus." This troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things, because this raised the fear that their city might become a boiling point of political rebellion against Caesar.

Their fears were unfounded. Even though the gospel has definite political implications, it makes Christians better citizens than before and their prayers for officials of government are more helpful than most imagine.

Even though the accusation of political revolution was not true, it unwittingly acknowledges Jesus as king. Even the evil men from the marketplace understood that Christians taught that Jesus was a king, that He had the right to rule over His people.

Jason and the others were released once they left a security deposit to guarantee against any future riots. Some think that they also had to give their word that Paul and Silas would leave and not come back, at least while these leaders were in office. Basically, the Roman magistrates did not care what you believed. But when the public order was disrupted by riots they came down with an iron hand. If things got out of hand, it wouldn't be long until the Emperor dispatched his legions to restore order and no one wanted that.

### **Acts 17:10-12**

And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. 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. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

Paul and Silas flee Thessalonica and head towards Berea (modern day name Verria) which is about 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica.

After they had left suddenly after spending only a few weeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), Paul felt he had so much more to say to these Christians, so he wrote the letter of 1 Thessalonians. Many feel 1 Thessalonians was Paul's first letter.

In Berea, they follow their familiar strategy and found that their audience was more honorable than those in Thessalonica. Two things earned this compliment for the Bereans: first, they received the word with all readiness. Second, they searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. They searched the Scriptures when Paul taught to see if his teaching was truly Biblical. They would not accept Paul's word at face value, but wanted to know if these things were so. When they heard Paul teach, they were not concerned with how eloquent or how passionately he argued his point, Instead, the Bereans wanted to know, "Are these things ... so? Is this man teaching us the truth? Let's search the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things are so."

Their research was not casual. They searched the Scriptures and the word used for searched indicates it was a deep search, like an investigator trying to discover the truth of a case. It was worth it to them to work hard at it and investigate what the Word of God said and how Paul's teaching matched up with it. It wasn't a one time, quick look. They made it a point of diligent, extended study.

They believed they could understand and find out truth from the Bible. For them, the scriptures were not just a book of poetry or mystery or nice spiritual inspiration for thoughts-for-the-day. It was truth, and that truth of the Messiah was there to find out. But with all their diligent searching and concern for the truth, the Bereans did not become skeptics. They received the word with all readiness. When Paul preached, they had open hearts and clear heads. Many people have clear heads but closed hearts and never receive the word with all readiness. It was both of these things that made the Bereans more honorable than those in Thessalonica

We should be more like the Bereans. We should receive the word with all readiness, with open hearts. This means we don't reject out of hand something

that is contrary to what we know and believe. Just because we think we know something doesn't mean that we truly do. What if those who heard the gospel rejected it because they thought they knew everything there was to know about the Messiah? They could have thought and believed with all certainty that they were taught and studied everything they needed to. Are we going to follow their example to first listen and then study and search out a matter? That being said, no matter how eloquent or powerful a speaker is, how respected or credentialed they are, we must search out the scriptures to be sure they are telling us the truth.

### **Acts 17:13-15**

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. And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timothy abode there still. And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timothy for to come to him with all speed, they departed.

The Jews from Thessalonica were not satisfied to force Paul out of their own city. They even followed Paul to Berea to disrupt his work there also. This is now the fifth city Paul has been run out of by an angry mob stirred up by envious Jewish leaders. The Christians in Berea sent Paul away to Athens, fearing for his life and a total disruption of the work going on there. But both Silas and Timothy remained there because Paul wanted to leave them behind to take care of new Christians in Berea. Later they will rejoin Paul in Athens, but we don't know specifically when. Then Timothy will go back to Thessalonica to check on the church there. (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2)

### **Acts 17:16-17**

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

Are we stirred up looking at the state of the world around us? We should look around at every thing that is distract us from searching out the riches of the gospel and be compelled to speak the truth.

The sense given here is that Paul would have preferred to wait until Timothy and Silas came from Berea before he began ministry in earnest in Athens. But when he saw that the city was given over to idols he was compelled to preach the gospel immediately. Athens has 1,000 years of history when Paul is visiting. It is famous for birthing democracy and is a literary, artistic and philosophical center. The mythology of the Greek gods are still known today, but to them these were truths, not stories.

Rome conquered Athens in 146 B.C., but allowed it to function as a free city. The city is not the same however. While it was still a great learning city at the time, it was living off its old reputation and its population had dwindled to around 10,000. The idea behind given over to idols (kateidolos) is really under idols, or swamped by idols. So Paul saw the beauty of Athens, having the best that Greek sculptors and architects could offer. But all that beauty did not honor God, so it stirred his soul to preach the truth of Jesus. It has been said that there were more statues and monuments to the Greek gods in Athens then the rest of Greece combined.

Paul continues his pattern of going to the synagogue first, but also spends the weekdays in the market places to interact with the gentiles. 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 in England. Paul spoke to a city perhaps different than any other city he had preached in.

"Although Athens had long since lost the political eminence which was hers in an earlier day, she continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity." (Bruce)

"By now the greatest days of Athens were behind it, but it could still be fairly described as the intellectual capital of the Greco-Roman world and, at the same time, the religious capital of Greece." (Williams)

### **Acts 17:18-21**

Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (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 Epicureans pursued pleasure as the chief purpose in life, and valued most of all the pleasure of a peaceful life, free from pain, disturbing passions and superstitious fears (including the fear of death). They did not deny the existence of gods, but believed that they had nothing to do with man.

Epicurus in 341-270 B.C founded this philosophy. It taught that the ultimate goal was pleasure. This pleasure was measured by freedom from pain, distressing emotions, superstitions, fears and anxiety about death. It was an intellectual detachment from this world. They believed that physical desires could lead to addiction and unhappiness. This should not be confused with hedonism.

The Stoics were pantheists who put great emphasis on moral sincerity and a high sense of duty. They cultivated a spirit of proud dignity and believed that suicide was better than a life lived with less dignity. It was founded by Zeno (340-265 B.C.) The Stoics believed that everything was god, and god was in everything. So they believed that all things, good or evil, were from god and so nothing should be resisted, and they believed there was no particular direction or destiny for mankind. They stressed reason and logic as principles that should govern a persons life. Some derided Paul because he did not communicate with the philosophical niceties popular in Athens (What does this babblers want to say?). Others thought Paul was an exotic proclaimer of foreign gods.



The word for babblers is spermologos. The word originally described the action of a bird picking up grain and then was applied to scrap collectors picking up junk. It finally came to mean to refer to someone who sell or proclaim the ideas of others without understanding them.

The Stoics and Epicureans seem to dismiss him, probably thinking that he wanted to add Jesus as another Greek god and possibly thinking that the resurrection was some sort of goddess. In any case, they did not accept the good news of Jesus. It was the novelty of Paul's message that earned him the invitation to the Areopagus. These ancient Greeks lusted after the latest, just like we do today.

They took him to Areopagus which is the city council of Athens and the chief judicial body of the city. Areopagus is the name of the Supreme court of Greece to this day. Then, the council was responsible for culture, education and religion. It also dealt with cases of homicide and societal morals. The Areopagus evaluated the competence of visiting lecturers to speak in their city.

### **Acts 17:22-31**

Paul does not begin with an exposition of Scripture, which was his custom when dealing with Jews or Gentiles who would be familiar with the Old Testament. Instead, Paul begins with general references to religion.

**Superstitious:** Greek word deisidaimon meaning reverencing gods, pious, religious. Also used negatively in the word superstitious.

The religious character of Athens was noticed by many ancient observers, some of whom thought that Athenians were the most religious of all human beings. Because the word is ambiguous he could be appealing to their piety or using to point out they were flawed in their thinking. I believe he used an ambiguous word so that the hearer would hear what they wanted to hear.

**TO THE UNKNOWN GOD:** Paul understood that in their extensive pantheon, the Greeks had an unknown god who covered any god that may have been neglected. We don't have any direct evidence of this altar, only writings that indicate it did in fact exist.

Six hundred years before Paul, a terrible plague came on the city and a man named Epimenides had an idea. He let loose a flock of sheep through the town and wherever they laid down they would sacrifice that sheep to the god that had the nearest shrine or temple. If a sheep did not lay down near a shrine or temple they would sacrifice the sheep TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Paul proclaims to them the God who created everything, yet distinct from His creation. Paul proclaimed that God was bigger than any temple men's hands could build (does not dwell in temples made with hands), and could not be represented by anything men could make with their hands (Nor is He worshipped with men's hands). It is said that there are two books about God; the Bible and nature itself.

There is something in us all that yearns to worship and we will place a God on the throne of our life, the only question is, will it be the one true God or an idol. In bringing an understanding of who God is to these people, Paul started at the beginning: God is the Creator, and we are His creatures.

"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 recognized that these philosophers had to change their ideas about God. They had to move from their own personal opinions to an understanding who God is according to what He tells us about Himself in the bible. Paul contends that we are all descended from Adam through Noah, and that there is one God who created us all and we are all obligated to.

**For in Him we live and move and have our being ... For we are also His offspring:** These two quotations Paul uses from Greek poets are attributed to Epimenides the Cretan [600 BC] (who Paul quotes again in Titus 1:12) and Aratus [310 BC]. Paul did not quote these men because they were prophets or because all their teaching was of God. He quoted them because these specific words reflected a Biblical truth, and by using them he could build a bridge to his pagan audience. Since we are His offspring we are responsible to have right ideas about God and therefore must reject the wrong idea that gold or silver or stone could represent God. The phrase, "We are his offspring," is found in more than one

poet (Paul's use of the plural "poets" may refer to this fact). It is in a work by the Cilician poet (Paul is from Tarsus in Cilicia) Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.). The poem praises Zeus and opens with these words:

Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus,

The phrase is also part of a poem by Cleanthes (331-233 B.C.), in a slightly different form. The first few lines are:

O God most glorious, called by many a name, Nature's great King, through endless years the same; Omnipotence, who by thy just decree Controllest all, hail, Zeus, for unto thee Behooves thy creatures in all lands to call. We are thy children, we alone of all...

Paul has no problem in quoting material or ideas that were produced by pagans in honor of gods such as Zeus. He takes the principle — in this case, thoughts about the nature of God and humanity's relationship to him — and applies it to the one true God.

Paul progresses from knowing who God is (our Creator), to who we are (His offspring), to our responsibility before Him (to understand Him and worship Him in truth), to our accountability if we dishonor Him (judgment). The emphasis on the resurrection is important. Paul sees the resurrection of Jesus as the assurance of this; it demonstrates that the teaching and work of Jesus were all perfectly approved by God. Paul seemed unable to preach a sermon without bringing in the resurrection of Jesus

Paul does not use Old Testament references in his speech. Unless someone accepts that there is a true God and that He has given us His word, it would be of little use to quote the scriptures. It is thoroughly and completely biblical though and points squarely to the God of Israel. He is using what they know to guide them to a place where they can hear the truth of who God really is.

Verse 31 clearly speaks of Jesus and that we will all be judged by the work of Jesus and that because Jesus has risen from the dead, that we have a hope and will be raised at the appointed time.

### **Acts 17:32-34**

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. 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 resurrection was not a popular concept among Greek philosophers. Some thought Paul foolish for even believing such a thing, and other wanted to hear more about this new teaching (others said, "We will heart you again on this matter").

The Greeks were fond of the idea of the immortality of the soul, but not of the idea of the resurrection of the body. They felt that anything material was inherently evil, so there really could be no such thing as a "glorified" body. They thought the ultimate form of glory would be "pure spirit."

It would seem that this experience influenced Paul in his future endeavors. He wonders if the educated of the "pagan" world could hear any argument in favor of Jesus. (1 Corinthians 1:21)