

## 24. Paul Goes to Achaia and Preaches to the Areopagus: Acts 17

In the last lesson, Paul and Silas came out of the prison, went to Lydia's house for a while, and then left the city of Philippi. The church at Philippi followed Paul with monetary support according Phil 4:15-16:

15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.

Acts 17 records Paul's efforts as he spread the gospel from Macedonia into Achaia, beginning in Thessalonica. Achaia was the Roman province including ancient and modern Greece.

### **Paul in Thessalonica**

Acts 17:1-4

1 When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

When Paul arrived at Thessalonica, he went to the Jewish synagogue and reasoned with them from the scriptures. He was able to explain and prove that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. The apostles and evangelists preached this very same gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ from the day of Pentecost onward. The end of the logic is that Jesus is the Christ. Since the Gospel is the power of God (Rom 1:16), it is no wonder that Paul persuaded some of the Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and prominent women.

Acts 17:5-9

5 But the 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. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers 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.

The pattern for Paul's life has become one where he goes into a city preaching the death, burial, and resurrection, and proving that Jesus is Christ. Many people, Jews and Gentiles, respond to the gospel; and suddenly the established religious leaders and secular people that have a political or monetary interest rise up against the word and Paul. These people at Thessalonica are not different; in fact, they actually form a mob and start a riot. They catch



Jason, a local believer, and drag him before the city official. In their eyes, Jason's crime was that he welcomed Paul and Silas into his house.

The three-fold charge against Paul and Silas will be the one that, once planted, becomes the rallying cry that the Romans use against the Christians as the kingdom (the church) spreads throughout the Roman Empire. First, they charge that Paul and Silas cause trouble all over the world. Second, they accuse Paul and Silas of defying Caesar's decrees. Third, they say that Paul and Silas teach that there is another king, one called Jesus. These charges, if proven before a Roman court, are treasonous. Such charges will plague the apostles and Christians wherever they go.

### ***The Bereans Were More Noble Than Those at Thessalonica***

Acts 17:10-12

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

Because of the mob, the brothers sent Paul and Silas to Berea, where, as usual, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Acts 17:11 is one of the most powerful and instructive scriptures ever written:

11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

The eagerness of Christians to examine the scriptures to see if the one speaking is telling the truth is both protective and instructive. The scriptures and not man's word are complete and perfect according to Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Tim 3:16-17:

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul also teaches that when we read the scriptures we may understand them in Eph 3:2-5:

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

The entire effort of false religions from the second century onward is to remove the right of interpretation of the scriptures from individual Christians and to place that right into the hands of a select hierarchy of ecclesiastics or clergy. From the beginning, it was not so. Peter taught in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus taught emphatically in John 10:35: ". . . the Scripture cannot be broken. . ." Our charge today is that we eagerly examine the scriptures daily and to see if what is taught is true. In this way, we will be noble and those early Christians at Thessalonica were noble. The

power of the gospel, as preached by Paul and tested and proved by the study of the Bereans, prevailed and many believed.

Acts 17:13-15

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

The Jews who were after Paul in Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea. Then the brothers escorted to Paul to Athens. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea with instructions to join Paul as soon as possible.

### ***Paul Greatly Distressed by Idolatry in Athens***

Acts 17:16-18

*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 the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*

By education and inspiration, Paul would find a city *full of idols* distressing. He would have known the dangers of idolatry from his study of the Scriptures where God forbade the worship of idols in Ex 20:4-5:

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God . . ."

He was also carrying the letter from the church of Jerusalem to the Gentiles forbidding idolatry in Acts 15:28-29:

28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are **to abstain from food sacrificed to idols**, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

In spite of Athens being a city full of idols, Paul was successful in reasoning in the synagogue and the marketplace.

Acts 17:18

*18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling 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.*

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers disputed with Paul, saying that he seemed to advocate foreign gods because he taught about Jesus and the resurrection. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers represented the main philosophies taught in Athens at this time.

**The Epicureans.** The Epicureans followed the philosophy of Epicurus who was born on the island of Samos in 341 BC, and who taught first in Asia Minor and afterward in Athens until his death in 270 BC. The philosophy spread widely in Asia Minor. Some notes here are from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.

Epicurus taught:

"The aim and end of life for every man is his own happiness, and happiness is primarily defined as pleasure. 'Wherefore we call pleasure the **Alpha and Omega of a**

**blessed life** [Emphasis added]. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing” (Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.).

Epicurus used the phrases *alpha and omega* and *blessed life* to describe his pleasure-dominated philosophy. These same words become the thesis-setting words of *Revelation* by John. In Rev 1:3, John uses the word *blessed* of those who are very different from Epicurus’ pleasure seekers: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” The comparison in language is so stunningly the same that there can be no coincidence. A similarly stunning comparison occurs in the thesis-setting words of Rev 1:8, which follow immediately: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’” That is to say neither Epicurus nor the central element of the Epicurean philosophy—pleasure—are the alpha and omega. Only the Almighty God and his son Jesus take these words and the preeminence and power that such words convey. Paul’s preaching would be in direct conflict with the Epicurean core teaching.

Blessedness is not in pleasure; it is in the Lord God, the almighty. Then Paul sets the inheritance of the faithful—a resurrection from the dead as Christ was raised-- against the tragic second death of pleasure-seekers of every kind. Modern churches—those that turn the worship service to God, performed as he directs in the scriptures, into a hedonistic self-pleasing and entertaining spectacle of singing, arm-waving, hand-clapping, and dancing—should beware.

**The Stoics.** The people of Asia Minor knew very well the other philosophy addressed by Paul in Athens. This group, the Stoics, derived their name, *Stoic*, from the Stoa Poikile, the painted porch at Athens, where the founders of the school first lectured. This school of Greek philosophy was founded at Athens circa 294 BC by Zeno (circa 336 BC - 264 BC), a native of Citium, a Greek colony in Cyprus. But the Semitic race predominated in Cyprus, and it has been conjectured that Zeno was of Semitic, rather than of Hellenic origin. This would have given him close ties to the religions of the Samaritans and Hebrews, both of which looked to the almighty God of the five books of Moses. It is from this background that Paul refers to an unknown god in Acts 16:23. Zeno’s Greek critics taunted him with being a Phoenician. It suggests, therefore, that the distinctive moral tone of the Stoic system was Semitic and not Hellenic. The centers, among others, were Tarsus and Sidon. Paul, who was formerly Saul of Tarsus, would have known with certainty the Stoic precepts. In the 2nd century B.C., the doctrine came to Rome where it spread widely among the upper classes of Roman society.

The system acquired its most lasting influence by its adoption as the formative factor in the jurisprudence of imperial Rome and Roman law. As the Roman church assimilated aspects of the Romans and Roman law, the philosophy also contributed to the formation of Roman Catholic doctrine and ethics. The main principles of Stoicism may be summarized in three points: 1. Adherents follow nature. 2. The law of Nature is reason (logos)--the principle of intelligence in man, and the divine reason imminent in the world. 3. Their metaphysics inclined to be a materialistic pantheism. On the one side, Nature is the organization of material atoms by the operation of its own uniform and necessary laws. On the other side, it is a living, rational being, subduing all its parts to work out a rational purpose inherent in the whole. As such, it may be called Providence or God. [These notes on the Stoics are in part from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.]

Modern religions reflect the influence of Stoicism, when they seek rational answers from within themselves, their councils, clergy, and conventions, denying the infallibility of the inspired word of God as the only rule of faith and practice. Again, the apostle Paul summarized the case against these reason-dominated philosophies in Col 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

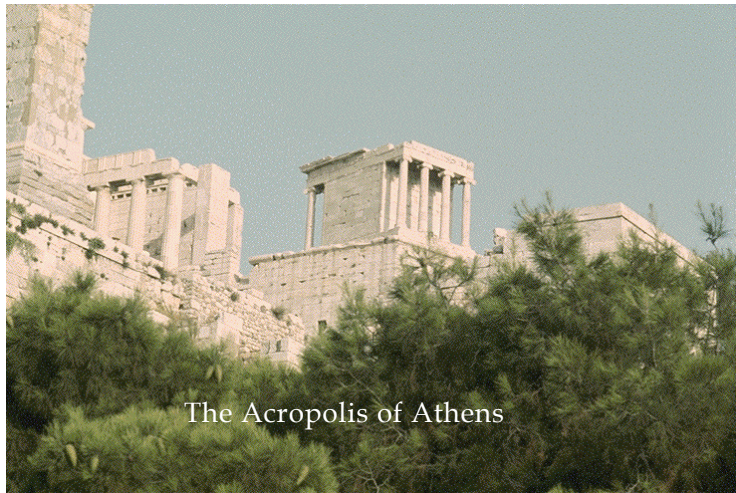
Acts 17:19-21

*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 want 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 Areopagus was as much a meeting as a place. The meeting was of those in Athens who met to discuss new and strange ideas that might affect their systems of philosophies. The place was a part of the Acropolis, which was the upper fortified most of Athens:

AREOPAGUS (ar-e-op'-a-gus)

(Areios pagos; Acts 17:19, 22. Mars' Hill, 17:22 the King James Version): A sort of spur jutting out from the western end of the Acropolis and separated from it by a very short saddle. Traces of old steps cut in the rock are still to be seen. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database



The Acropolis of Athens

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### ***Paul Preaches to the Meeting of the Areopagus***

Acts 17:22-23

*22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men 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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

Paul seized on the inscription: "To an Unknown God" as a beginning place to proclaim the true God and the savior Jesus Christ. The notes above on the Stoics indicate that there was in their history and background an awareness of a God who is above all and over all.

Acts 17:24-28

*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 hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each 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.'*

Paul begins with a simple but profound statement of who God is. God made everything; he does not live in temples made with hands; he is not served with human hands; he gives life, breath, and everything; he made man and determines where he shall live. He did all this so men would seek and reach out for him. Paul uses the poet's line to connect them to the conclusions one must draw if, indeed, everything is from God, even life and breath, and we are his offspring.

Acts 17:29-31

*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 man's design and skill. 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 all men by raising him from the dead."*

Why would God's offspring ever think that God—the divine being—be an image of man's design and skill. Rom 1:18-25 elaborates on how foolish it is to think that the all-powerful God came from the imagination of man whom he created:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

This all-powerful God now commands all people everywhere to repent. He will judge the world by Christ, and he proved this by raising Christ from the dead. Paul would later write in 2 Cor 5:10, "10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

Acts 17:32-34

*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 A few men 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 Athenians had a divided response: some sneered and some wanted to hear more. A few men believed in Athens, not the many in Berea. Apparently, only one of the Areopagus believed. Once Paul leaves for Corinth in Acts 18:1, he will not refer to Athens except to tell how he first came there alone from Thessalonica in 1 Thess 3:1. Other New Testament writers do not refer to Athens.