

15:36-18:23 - Paul's Second Missionary Journey (part 2)

Paul in Thessalonica – Acts 17:1-9

Acts 17 is a continuation of Paul's second missionary journey which began in Acts 15:36.

Paul, Silas and the others who had joined the missionary team had suffered and been insulted in Philippi; nevertheless, they continued to travel and preach the gospel eventually reaching Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia (1 Thess. 2:2; Marshall, 291), about 100 miles from Philippi (see map at the end of this document). Although they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the way, there is no mention of missionary activity in those cities. On occasion, Paul would spend time in cities of lesser importance. It appears that his pattern was to reach out to strategic centers and highly populated areas.

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

17:2 And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

17:3 explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

Even after Paul had decided to reach out to the Gentiles he continued his pattern of first going to the synagogue. This was a point of natural contact. By reading the letters to Thessalonica it's clear that the church was primarily composed of Gentiles; however, Luke focuses on the Jewish aspect of their journey and how the events that follow developed.

It should be observed that Paul ***reasoned with them from the Scriptures***, the common authority of both Jews and Gentiles. The standard message to Jews was that ***Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead***. This was the message Jesus had preached as well, as He had predicted that the Son of Man must suffer and die and be raised (Lk. 9:22). One of the first things that Jesus did after He had risen from the dead was to rebuke the disciples for being slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets had spoken, namely, that it was "necessary for the Christ to suffer" and "to enter into His glory" (Lk. 24:25-26; 44-46).

"Giving evidence" in verse 3 is a single word in Greek and literally means "to place beside" and may mean that Paul was setting the OT predictions alongside their fulfillments. In Paul's earlier sermons he had used Psalm 2:1-7; 16:8-11; 110:1; 118:22; Isaiah 52-53 and possibly Deuteronomy 21:22-23 to preach about Christ and could be using the same references here.

Secondly, Paul was proclaiming Jesus (17:3b). That is, he told of His birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, exaltation, the ministry of the Spirit, etc. (Stott, 271).

Thirdly, he identified Jesus as the Christ (17:3b).

17:4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

The response to Paul's message was divided. Paul had preached the message not simply with words but with power (I Thess. 1:5), and many believed. However, these were mostly Greeks and God-fearers, not Jews.

17:5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.

17:6 When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also;

17:7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

17:8 They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things.

17:9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

Paul's success with the Gentiles stirred the Jews to jealousy prompting them to do anything to stop the spread of the gospel (contrast Ro. 11:13-14 where the Jew's jealousy over Gentile salvation motivates them to believe). They resorted to aligning themselves with unsavory people who formed a mob and made their way to the house of Jason where they had hoped to find Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason out along with some other believers who had gathered there and accused him of being an accomplice to the "crimes" of Paul and Silas.

The accusations against Paul and Silas were serious. They were said to be people ***who have upset the world*** (wording that has revolutionary overtones and is used in Acts 21:38 of an Egyptian terrorist who "started a revolt" – Stott, 273), and who act ***contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus***. These are charges that could result in imprisonment or even death (Bruce).

The city authorities were alarmed and only released Jason and the others after some sort of bond was demanded as security, probably with a promise that Paul and Silas would leave town and not come back (Stott, 273; Marshall, 296). This may be what Paul is referring to in 1 Thessalonians 2:18 where he writes, "For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan hindered us."

Paul in Berea – Acts 17:10-15

17:10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

17:12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

17:13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

In order to prevent more mob violence, Paul and Silas were smuggled out of the city under the cover of darkness and traveled about 50 miles to Berea. Once again, they went to the synagogue first. Unlike the Thessalonian Jews, those in Berea were open to studying the Scriptures. They combined critical thinking with a willingness to examine and submit to God's Word in spite of what they had been taught previously. There was integrity and the lack of bias. There was true interest; they met with Paul and Silas daily, not just on the Sabbath. What is significant is that neither the speakers nor the hearers used the Scripture unintelligently. Although we can be certain that debate ensued, the Scriptures were used as the guide. Things weren't just accepted, nor were they flatly rejected; decisions were made after examination. From Luke's description in Acts we can be sure that this was welcomed by Paul.

Nevertheless, their integrity did not result in *all* believing in the message. There was a division just as there was in Thessalonica. The gap was widened when the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul and Silas were continuing their evangelistic work and went there to stir the people up.

17:14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there.

17:15 Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

This time the believers didn't wait for another public confrontation (cf. Act 17:5-9), but ***immediately . . . sent Paul out to go as far as the sea.*** Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to continue the work.

Those who escorted Paul didn't stop until they got to Athens – a sea voyage (presumably) of more than 300 miles. They returned to Berea with the message from Paul that he wanted Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible.

Something that stands out in Luke's description of Paul's travels to Thessalonica and Berea is the attitude of both the speakers and the hearers toward the Scriptures. In Thessalonica Paul "reasoned with," "explained," "proved," "proclaimed," and "persuaded" the people. In Berea "they received the word with great eagerness" and "examined the Scriptures daily."

Paul in Athens – Acts 17:16-34

17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.

Athens was and still is a glorious city. The architecture was magnificent. Most city-states in ancient Greece had at their center a rocky mound or hill where they built their important temples and where the people could retreat to if under attack. The acropolis in Athens was famous; it is the home of the Parthenon (a temple dedicated to the patron deity Athena) and could be seen from miles around. It was a place of great learning. The great philosophers of the past – Aristotle, Socrates, Plato – had all proclaimed their ideologies there. But even among all this human achievement, intellect, and glory, the city was filled with idolatry. The word used to describe the city might be translated as "smothered in

idols.” The Greek historian and student of Socrates, Xenophon, called Athens “one great altar, one great sacrifice.”

In consequence, ‘there were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country,’ and the Roman satirist hardly exaggerates when he says that it was easier to find a god there than a man. There were innumerable temples, shrines, statues and altars. In the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena (the goddess of wisdom, war and the crafts, and favorite daughter of Zeus) whose gleaming spear-point was visible 40 miles away. Elsewhere there were images of Apollo, the city's patron, of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana, and Aesculapius. The whole Greek pantheon was there, all the gods of Olympus. And they were beautiful. They were made not only of stone and brass, but of gold, silver, Ivory and marble, and they had been elegantly fashioned by the finest Greek sculptors (Stott, 277).

But all of this did not impress Paul. In the midst of these great human accomplishments, unrivaled in the rest of the civilized world, Paul saw a city submerged in the darkness of idolatry.

The NASB says ***his spirit was being provoked within him***. The verb is used regularly in the LXX [the Greek OT] to express God's reaction to idolatry (Isa. 65:2-3; Deut. 9:7; Psa. 106:28-29; Hos. 8:5). Both Paul and God were provoked for the same reason, namely for the honor and glory of God's name.

God is provoked because He is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14: “. . . the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”).

Now jealousy is the resentment of rivals, and whether it is good or evil depends on whether the rival has any business to be there. To be jealous of someone who threatens to outshine us in beauty, brains or sport is sinful, because we cannot claim a monopoly of talent in those areas. If, on the other hand, a third-party enters a marriage, the jealousy of the injured person, who is being displaced, is righteous, because the intruder has no right to be there. It is the same with God, who says, 'I am the Lord, that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols' (Isa. 42:8). Our Creator and Redeemer has a right to our exclusive allegiance, and is 'jealous' if we transfer it to anyone or anything else. Moreover, the people of God, who love God's name, should share in His 'jealousy' for it. For example, Elijah at a time of national apostasy said, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts' (I Ki. 19:10), so distressed was he that God's honor was being profaned. Similarly, Paul wrote to the backsliding Christians, 'I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy'; he longed for them to remain loyal to Jesus, to whom he had betrothed them (Stott, 278).

These are the feelings that Paul felt in Athens. He didn't feel a pity for the people's ignorance nor even fear for their eternal salvation, he was stirred with jealousy for the name of God as he saw human beings giving honor and glory to idols instead of the one true and living God.

Moreover, this inward pain and horror, which moved Paul to share the good news with the idolaters of Athens, should similarly move us. Incentives are important in every sphere. Being

rational human beings, we need to know not only what we should be doing, but why we should be doing it. And motivation for mission is specially important, not least in our day in which the comparative study of religions has led many to deny finality and uniqueness to Jesus Christ and to reject the very concept of evangelizing and converting people. How then, in the face of growing opposition to it, can Christians justify the continuance of world evangelization? The commonest answer is to point to the Great Commission, and indeed obedience to it provides a strong stimulus. Compassion is higher than obedience, however, namely love for people who do not know Jesus Christ, and who on that account are alienated, disoriented, and indeed lost. But the highest incentive of all is zeal or jealousy for the glory of Jesus Christ. God has promoted Him to the supreme place of honor, in order that every knee and tongue should acknowledge His Lordship. Whenever He is denied his rightful place in people's lives, therefore, we should feel inwardly wounded, and jealous for His name (Stott, 279).

17:17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

17:18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Although Paul was dismayed by the idolatry, he didn't just throw up his hands in despair, or curse and swear at the Athenians. Instead, he shared the good news of salvation with them. He desired that they turn from their vain idols to the living God and give Him glory.

Verses 17-18 tell us of three groups of people that Paul was reaching out to. As was his custom, he reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue. Secondly, he went to the marketplace (the *agora*), which was the center of public life, and witnessed to the people who were there. Thirdly, he spoke to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the two most well-known philosophical groups of the period.

These last two groups were contemporary but rival systems of belief:

The Epicureans, or 'philosophers of the garden,' founded by Epicurus (died 270 B.C.), considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs. The world was due to chance, a random concourse of atoms, and there would be no survival of death, and no judgment. So human beings should pursue pleasure, especially the serene enjoyment of a life detached from pain, passion and fear. (Marshall describes them as materialistic in their outlook, page 300; Bock calls them agnostic secularists, 561). The Stoics, however, or 'philosophers of the porch' (the *stoa* or painted colonnade next to the *agora* where they taught), founded by Zeno (died 265 B.C.), acknowledged the supreme god but in a pantheistic way, confusing him with the 'world-soul.' The world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency. To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure,

and of the Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain. In Paul's later speech to the Areopagus we hear echoes of the encounter between the gospel and these philosophies, as he refers to the carrying activity of a personal Creator, the dignity of human beings as His 'offspring,' the certainty of judgment and the call to repentance (Stott, 280-281).

Contemporary equivalences to these three arenas of social intercourse might be the church (similar to the synagogue), the market (*agora*), and the university setting (where the philosophical gather). In each of these places the gospel should be preached.

The response among the philosophers was mixed. Some called Paul a babbler. Literally, the word which they used is Athenian slang meaning "seed picker." It originally referred to various seed-eating birds that scavenged about from here to there gathering food. The term was then applied to people who were beggars that lived off the scraps of food they could scavenge. Then thirdly, it was used to describe teachers who didn't have any original ideas themselves, so they plagiarized from other teachers, picking up scraps of knowledge here and there passing it along as if they knew what they were talking about. This was how some saw Paul. Others said that Paul was advocating foreign gods, so they took him to the Areopagus, literally, "hill (*pagus*) of Ares." It was a hill that overlooked the *agora* (marketplace).

17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"

17:20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."

17:21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

At one time the Areopagus was a place where the court had met, but by Paul's day it was where a less authoritative council met that consisted of the guardians of the city's religion, morals and education.

It doesn't appear as if Paul was on trial. There is no mention of a legal charge, no prosecutor, no judge, no verdict, and no sentence. Rather, Paul appears to be at an informal inquiry by the city's commission determining if he was introducing foreign gods into the city. In other words, the reason Paul was standing before them was because he had been accused of "bringing some strange things" to their ears, and they wanted to know what these things meant. The outcome of the inquiry would result in either permission granted to Paul to continue teaching, or a demand that he be silent. Therefore, Paul told the court what he believed and presented the gospel.

