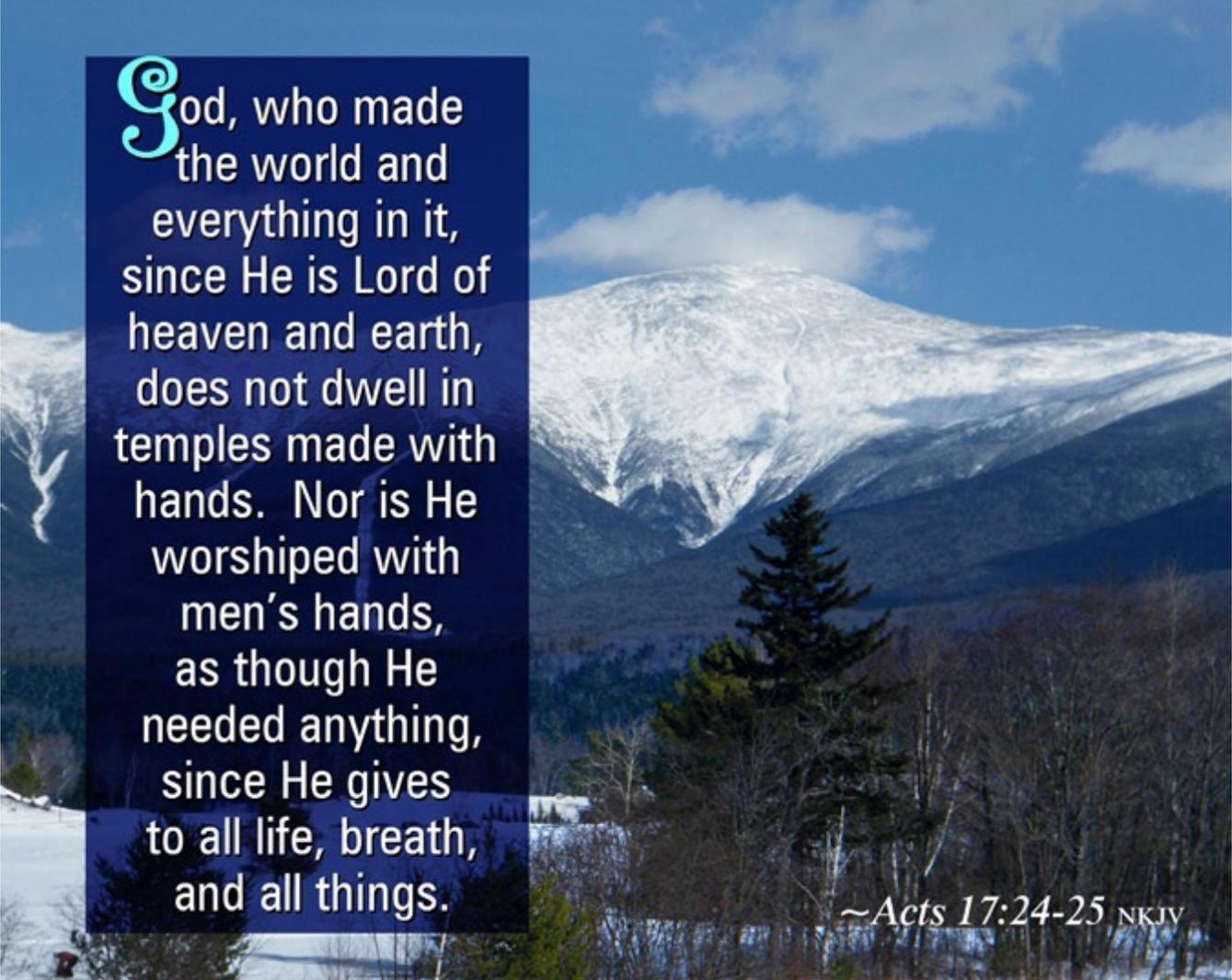


# The Second Missionary Journey

The Gospel Goes to Thessalonica, Berea and Athens

## A Study in Acts Chapter 17



God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

~Acts 17:24-25 NKJV

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# Acts Chapter 17

## The Second Missionary Journey Thessalonica, Berea and Athens

In this fascinating chapter the gospel continued to reach into Europe, namely into the Greek peninsula. Paul and Silas and Timothy went to Thessalonica where they met fierce opposition from the unbelieving Jews. Next, they traveled to Berea, where the Word of God was eagerly received. Jews from Thessalonica pursued Paul and forced him to leave Berea and travel to Athens where he delivered an unforgettable message to the philosophers on Mars' Hill (the Areopagus). Paul's ministry in these three cities could be summed up by his words in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24:

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness. But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

### Acts 17:1



Amphipolis was about thirty-three miles from Philippi. It was surrounded by the Strymon River. Apollonia was named after the Greek sun god, Apollo. It was thirty miles west of Amphipolis.

Thessalonica was thirty-seven miles from Apollonia. We assume that they covered each of these distances in a day's time which may indicate that they travelled on horseback.<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible approximately 1,400 cities are named. God is very interested in cities because of the souls that live therein. God wanted His missionaries to focus on the great population centers of the world and then train people to take the gospel message out to villages and smaller towns in the countryside. Thessalonica was a major population center.

Thessalonica was a hundred miles west of Philippi and had an estimated population of 200,000 people who were in desperate need of the good news of Christ. This city had been founded three hundred years earlier by Cassander, king of Macedonia, and it was named after his wife who was Alexander the Great's half-sister. There was a Jewish synagogue in this city. Thessalonica was a key seaport on the Adriatic Sea, a center of commerce, and was located on important trade routes.

The great Roman road from the Adriatic Sea to the Middle East was called the Egnatian Way; and the main street of Thessalonica was actually part of that road. If Christianity was firmly founded in Thessalonica, it could spread both east and west along that road until it became a very highway of the progress of the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

Thessalonica was the chief city and capital of Macedonia. While in this city, Paul labored with his hands, supporting himself, so that he might not be a burden to the believers (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-12). He was a skilled tentmaker (Acts 18:3).

## **Acts 17:2**

It was Paul's custom to go into a city and visit the synagogue on the Sabbath day in order to reach the Jewish people (Rom. 1:16, "to the Jew first"). For three sabbaths Paul "reasoned with them out of the Scriptures." This needs to be understood correctly because we do not reason people into the kingdom by way of intellectual arguments. We do not use human finite logic to get people out of the realm of Satan into the grace of our Lord Jesus. It is important to notice where the reasoning came from: "out of the Scriptures." In Isaiah 1:18 we read, "Let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." In other words, let us reason together and talk about it from God's perspective out of God's Word. The well-taught believer is on solid ground with his reasonings because he has the mind of Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures (1 Cor. 2:15).

The word "reasoned" is the Greek word *dialogomai* from which we get the English word *dialogue*. Often it involved a "going back and forth," that is, a two-way discussion which could sometimes include some arguing or disputing if there were differences of opinion. The same word is used in Acts 17:17 ("disputed"—KJV) of discussions Paul had with people in the Jewish synagogue at Athens.

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<sup>1</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., *From Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 127.

His mode of approaching the Jews here as well as elsewhere was not in a regular discourse in the form of a sermon or a lecture. It was just a converse, a discussion permitting questions and giving answers. It was teaching in a conversational way and the Scriptures [Old Testament] were the foundation of it.<sup>3</sup>

Paul went to the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths. Some have used this verse to argue that Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica was very brief, only for about three weeks. However, he probably stayed quite a bit longer. He visited the synagogue on three consecutive Saturdays and then may have stopped due to opposition from unbelieving Jews. There are reasons why Paul's stay in Thessalonica was most probably more than three weeks: 1) Paul supported himself by manual labor while there (1 Thess. 2:9); 2) While he was in Thessalonica, the believers in Philippi sent him two offerings (Phil. 4:16). Since Philippi was a hundred miles away, it is very unlikely that two trips could be made to Thessalonica in three short weeks. 3) A large number of those saved in this city were Gentile converts who turned away from their idols (1 Thess. 1:9). Thus, Paul's evangelistic efforts went far beyond visits to the synagogue. Some Bible scholars believe that Paul stayed in this city anywhere from two to six months.<sup>4</sup>

### **Acts 17:3**

They opened the Scriptures. This means that they opened up the sense of the Scriptures and explained the meaning. The verb means "to open completely, to open thoroughly what had been closed." It is used of a deaf man's ears being miraculously opened or healed (Mark 7:34-35). It is used of a male who "opens the womb," that is, a male who is born (Luke 2:23). In Luke 24:31 it is used of two disciples whose eyes were opened so that they recognized the risen Lord. Of Lydia it is said "whose heart the Lord opened" (Acts 16:14), resulting in her understanding of the gospel. In Acts 7:56 the heavens were opened so that Stephen could see the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. In this passage it means "to open the sense of the Scriptures, explain them" (Thayer). As we use the Scriptures and depend on the Lord, God can wonderfully open our eyes to the truth.

"Alleging" (KJV) means that they explained and demonstrated the essential facts of the gospel, and they proved these facts by appealing to the Old Testament Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> Notice that the death and resurrection of Christ were central to Paul's teaching (compare 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). We can assume that these same gospel facts were presented in other cities where Paul preached to the Jews in their synagogues, even though Luke did not record everything Paul said. Even in this chapter, Paul's sermon to the Athenians takes up the space of only ten verses. Luke probably gave a summary of that message and not an exact transcription.

The Old Testament predicted that the Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One) would some day come as Israel's Savior and King. He would first die (suffer) and then rise again from the dead. This is the very heart of the gospel. The price of redemption was paid in full, and this was later

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<sup>3</sup> Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion by D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Moody Press, 1977] Volume 2, pages 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> The verb "alleging" literally means "to set before," such as food being set before guests (1 Cor. 10:27). Here it means "setting subjects before one's hearers by way of argument and proof, of Paul, in 'opening and alleging' facts concerning Christ" (Vine).

confirmed by His resurrection from the dead showing that God was completely satisfied by the finished work of the Son.

Paul emphasized the necessity of Christ's death and resurrection. This implies, especially in discoursing with the Jews, that the Christ must suffer and rise from the dead **before** He reigns in His glorious earthly kingdom over Israel and the nations. Christ **must** first suffer and rise again. It was absolutely necessary for Him to do so. Consider the following passages which teach the same thing:

From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto His disciples, how that **He must** go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day (Matt. 16:21; compare Mark 8:31 and Luke 9:22).

But first **He must** suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation (Luke 17:25).

**Was it not necessary** for the [a]Christ to suffer these things and to come into His glory? (Luke 24:26, NASB).

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so **must** the Son of man be lifted up (John 3:14).

In view of the necessity of Christ's death and resurrection, we should also remember the necessity of the new birth: "Ye **must** be born again" (John 3:7).

#### **Acts 17:4**

Some of these Jews believed (were persuaded) and consorted with (associated themselves with, joined in with) Paul and Silas. Apparently, there were a number of Greeks or Gentiles who worshipped at the synagogue and "a great multitude" of them believed. Also, many prominent women embraced Paul's message. Luke had a special interest with how women responded to the gospel which Paul preached (compare also verses 12 and 34). The Gentile proselytes who were connected to the synagogue probably would not have been idolaters. Many other Gentiles not connected to the synagogue were also saved. Paul later wrote that they turned to God from their idols (1 Thess. 1:9).

Paul later commented on how the Thessalonian believers had received God's Word: "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" (1 Thess. 2:13). How we need to always recognize the Bible for what it really is, namely the Word of God!

## Acts 17:5

We are not surprised to learn that opposition came by way of unbelieving Jews. Everywhere God's truth is exalted, Satan is there to snuff out the light, confuse the message and attack and malign the messengers. Why does God put up with Satan? Why did God put up with Satan in Job chapters one and two? "What do you think of My servant Job?" Satan's response: "If You just take away that hedge that You have put around him, he will curse You. You are pampering him. No wonder he loves You. If You just take away those blessings and material things that You have given him, he will curse You to Your face. His religion is merely a sham. He's getting out of You what he wants, but he does not really want You." Why does God put up with Satan? Why not just destroy him on the spot! He does so to bring ultimate glory to Himself and for the spiritual good of those who are His own. God gave Satan permission to take away everything that Job possessed, including his children and his health. "You will then see what kind of relationship we have together." We might wish that Satan had said, "Lord, I've seen that You were right and I was wrong and I'm terribly sorry that I misjudged Job." Yet, Satan is never sorry. He keeps on hating God and God's people! He is incorrigible.

The unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica "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." "Lewd fellows" (KJV) refers to wicked or evil men. These men frequented the marketplace (*agoraiōn*), and sauntered about idly (Vine). We might refer to them today as loiterers who are up to no good.

Jason was Paul's host and Paul stayed in his home. Jason became Paul's proxy and representative. He was a convert to the gospel. Jason may have been the same man whom Paul mentioned in Romans 16:21, and if so, he could have been a relative of Paul. The Greek name "Jason" means "healer."

Envy or jealousy was a prime motivation of the unbelieving Jews who were hostile to the gospel. They were envious that many people were embracing the message of the gospel, a message which they considered to be contrary to the Jewish faith (Acts 13:45; compare Matthew 27:18). They were also jealous that so many Gentile proselytes were responding in a positive way to Paul's gospel. These were Gentiles who came to the Jewish synagogue and embraced the Jewish faith to some measure. Now the Jewish leaders were afraid they would lose them to those who were preaching Christ. Other non-proselyte, idol-loving Gentiles were also saved (1Thess. 1:9). Due to envy, they were forbidding Paul to speak to the Gentiles (1 Thess. 2:16).

The Amplified Bible translation of this verse is helpful: "But the [unbelieving] Jews became jealous, and taking along some thugs from [the lowlifes in] the marketplace, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and then attacking Jason's house tried to bring Paul and Silas out to the people."

This verse helps us to understand Paul's severe words against the unbelieving Jews found in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. Add to this Romans 11:28: "As to the gospel, they [the Jews] are enemies on your [Gentile] account, but as to the [national] election they are beloved on account of the fathers."

## Acts 17:6

These Jews failed to find Paul and Silas, but they took Jason and other brethren to the rulers of the city. The term “ruler” (*politarches*) was a unique name at that particular time and in that part of the world. In 1835, Archaeologists found this word inscribed on a triumphal arch near Thessalonica, thus confirming once again the accuracy of Luke as a historian. The inscription was taken to the British Museum. “The magistrates of Thessalonica are here called ‘politarchs’—a title which we know from inscriptions to have been used for the chief magistrates of several Macedonian towns, although it does not appear elsewhere in Greek literature...Five of the inscriptions refer to Thessalonica.”<sup>6</sup>

“These have turned the world upside down and have come hither also.” Ironside sees some truth in this accusation: “The apostle and his companion were indeed engaged in the business of turning the world upside down, but the reason for this was that through sin the world had been turned wrongside up.”<sup>7</sup> Paul and Silas were being accused of being revolutionaries and insurrectionists, men who were seeking to overthrow the present order of things. The Jews pleaded in this way: “Do you want your stability as a political entity destroyed? If not, then do what you can to wipe out these messengers who have come here to disrupt our city.”

The term “turned the world upside down” is sometimes rendered “These men who have upset the world have come here also” (NASB). Another rendering: “These people who have stirred up trouble throughout the world have come here too” (NET Bible). John Darby: “have set the world in tumult.” The verb means “to stir up, excite, unsettle” (Thayer). This verb is used in two other places: 1) It is used of an Egyptian who stirred up a revolt (Acts 21:38); 2) It is used of the Judaizers who were troubling the Galatians and throwing them into confusion (Gal. 5:12). By the use of this term, Paul and Silas were labeled as troublemakers because they were upsetting the present order of things. The term does indicate the tremendous influence that the gospel was having. Some hated the message and others embraced the message, but it certainly made a lasting impression.

Some have taken the phrase “turned the world upside down” and applied it to the impact that believers can have on the world. While it is true that believers are “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13) and should have an influence on our ungodly society, yet believers are not going to change the world, nor are they going to turn it right side up. As salt, the best we can do is slow down the inevitable process of corruption, and to stay “salty” and effective for the Lord.

The organization, Campus Crusade for Christ, once had a slogan, “Come help change the world!” Bill Bright, the Campus Crusade for Christ founder, wrote a book entitled, *Come Help Change the World*. The foreword says, “This is the story of the inception, the work and the vision of Campus Crusade for Christ to help change the world. They know the world can be changed... There are twentieth century Christian disciples who are committed to changing the world and fulfilling the Great Commission in this generation.” Yet, God’s program today is not to change the world, but to “take out...a people for His name” (Acts 15:14). God is calling sinners out of this present evil world as He is building His Church (Matt. 16:18). God has

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<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, p. 344.

<sup>7</sup> Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, pages 390-391.

condemned this world system (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17). He has delivered the true believer out of this evil world and out of the power of darkness and has translated him into the kingdom of His beloved Son (Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13). We should be careful to choose terminology that accurately portrays Biblical truth. The world is like the Titanic; it is headed for destruction. We are not going to save the Titanic or change its destiny. In God's grace we can seek to get as many people into lifeboats as possible so that they may be saved. Our mission is not to change the world, which is doomed, but to help rescue the perishing.

Another present-day group seeking to change the world would be professing believers known as postmillennial reconstructionists. They believe that they can bring in the kingdom and change the world by putting all societies under an Old Testament legal system (reinstating the Mosaic laws and their penalties). If individual sinners cannot even keep God's holy law (John 7:19; Gal. 3:10), how then can we expect an entire society to conform to such standards? It would not work in a thousand years!

The only One who can change the world is God Himself, and this will be done only when Christ returns to this earth to establish His kingdom. The Church will never bring in a new world. This work will be done by Christ and by Christ alone.

### **Acts 17:7**

Jason's great crime was that he received these missionaries and welcomed them into his house. The term "received" is used of receiving a guest into one's home (2 John 10; 3 John 8). The argument of these unbelieving Jews was that Paul and Silas were revolutionaries who were acting in opposition to Caesar and the Roman government. It was similar to the argument that the Jews of Jerusalem made when they accused Christ of being in opposition to Caesar (John 19:12). Once again they were condemning themselves by essentially claiming that they had no king but Caesar. These Jews who were under Roman bondage revealed the true state of their hearts in inadvertently contradicting their profession which ostensibly owned Jehovah as their Divine King.

Caesar Augustus and his successors in the Roman Empire were very frightened by the possibility of an insurrection to overthrow their power. They had armies everywhere, seeking to prevent any and all uprisings. They were threatened by Jesus who was called "the King of the Jews."

There is a sense in which their concerns were valid. The Lord Jesus will come back to this world, and He will confront all the governments of this world. He will destroy them by the Word of His mouth, as a two-edged sword. In Psalm 2:7 and 2:9 the Son of God said this, "I will declare the decree; the Lord has said unto Me, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee...Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." All the nations of the world will be destroyed by God's Messiah, Christ Himself.

We don't know how many of these truths Paul had announced in the synagogue for those three Sabbath days, but it was easy for the authorities to consider the followers of Jesus a real threat to the Roman Empire as they declared their allegiance to their King, even the Lord Jesus!

## Acts 17:8

These unbelieving Jews troubled the people of Thessalonica and their rulers as they portrayed the believers as being a threat to Roman rule. These were false charges. Paul and Silas had no desire to lead a political revolt. They simply wanted to proclaim a gospel which could free men from sin and rescue people from Satan's dominion (Col. 1:13). The charges were also somewhat hypocritical because the Jews in general were not big fans of Roman rule.

The word "troubled" means that they stirred up the people. Literally the word is used of agitating or troubling something by the movement of its parts to and fro. Figuratively, as here, it is used of causing a person inward commotion, taking away his calmness of mind, disturbing him, and stirring him up against someone. The same verb is used in Acts 17:13 where the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica stirred up the people at Berea, seeking to get them riled up against Paul.

## Acts 17:9

Jason and his friends had to make a financial pledge that nothing would ever happen to endanger the city of Thessalonica and its government. Jason may have had to deposit a certain amount of money with these city officials or have sponsors who could provide money pending the settlement of the case. The pledge may have included an assurance that Paul would leave the city. Not only did Paul often get in trouble for his preaching, but those associated with him, such as Jason, did as well. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and for the sake of the gospel (Matt. 5:10).

We do not know exactly how long Paul was in the city of Thessalonica, but in two letters to the saints in this city, Paul tells of some amazing experiences he had. Paul packed an enormous amount of discipleship and training into a short stretch of time. The truths he taught them even included intimate details concerning the second coming of Christ. Of the times and the seasons, he did not need to write to them because he had fully instructed them about these things when he was with them (1 Thess. 5:1-2). He also instructed them about the trouble and tribulation they would face because of their faith in Christ (1 Thess. 3:4). The two epistles to the Thessalonians are masterful examples of how to teach and train those who are new in the faith.<sup>8</sup> A local church must take seriously the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ by making disciples and teaching them to observe *all things* whatsoever the Savior has commanded us (Matt. 28:19-20). The "all things" covers all 66 books of the Bible. "But we don't have time to do that. In fact, it's impossible." To which Jesus added a footnote and said, "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (age)" (Matt. 28:20). It is a divine/human operation, and when God is involved, the impossible becomes possible. The enormous intensity of Paul's teaching ministry in this city is hard to miss. This was a thriving church which was well taught in the whole counsel of God in just a short period of time. Also, the faith of the Thessalonians, in turning to God from idols, was a powerful witness to others living in Macedonia and Achaia and beyond (1 Thess. 1:7-9).

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<sup>8</sup> See a concise overview of the letters to the Thessalonians by George Zeller entitled *Prescription for New Believers*, accessible at <https://middletownbiblechurch.org/newtesta/ntesta8.htm>.

## **Acts 17:10**

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica came to a sudden halt. The opposition by the unbelieving Jews had become so severe that Paul and Silas needed to depart from the city by night. This same opposition also prevented future visits (1 Thess. 2:18). We are reminded of the words of our Lord: "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another" (Matt. 10:23). Timothy's name is not mentioned here but he is mentioned in verse 14 as being in Berea. Paul's missionary team headed fifty miles to the west and arrived in the city of Berea, an inland city. The journey to this city may have taken a couple of days. As was their custom, they went into the synagogue of the Jews on the Sabbath day. The big surprise in this city was that they were not met with fierce opposition but instead they encountered people who had open and seeking hearts. Oh, that Jewish people today might have the same openness to the Scriptures; yet so many are blind (2 Cor. 3:14-16).

## **Acts 17:11**

The Jews in Berea were more noble (noble-minded, possessing outstanding qualities) than the Jews of Thessalonica. Why were they more noble? It was because they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, to see whether the things they were being taught were really true. "Searched" indicates that they investigated fully and examined the Scriptures very carefully in order to verify Paul's assertions. These Jews had access to the Hebrew Scriptures and they took advantage of the Scriptures which they possessed.

Luke is telling us something of supreme significance here. Would you like to know the truth about God? Would you like to be sure that your relationship with Him is established? Would you like to know God's plan for the ages from creation to the end of the world? Would you like to know how to function effectively for God in order to reach people for the Lord? The answer is found right here: 1) Receive the Word with all readiness of mind. That is, be open to the Spirit of God's instruction. The Holy Spirit can speak to us and teach us everything we need to know about God through His self-authenticating light and truth, even His infallible Word. 2) Search the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so. Paul was telling them amazing things. For thousands of years God had predicted the coming of the Messiah, and that he would die and rise again. They searched their sacred writings and they were convinced that Paul was not deceiving them.

This was a healthy form of skepticism: "Thank you Paul for what you have been telling us, but we are not sure what you are saying is true, and we are going to find out for ourselves." How might this apply to today? "Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon, but I'm going to need to study my Bible to be sure that what you have said is correct." A good Pastor would not be threatened by this at all. This is a healthy attitude of inquisitiveness and a desire to have Biblical confirmation of what your Pastor is teaching. The last thing a faithful Pastor would want is for people to say, "Pastor, you said it, so it must be true." Such is a potential disaster.

The preaching of ministers should be examined by the Scriptures. Their doctrines are of no value unless they accord with the Bible. Every preacher should expect his doctrines to be examined in this way, and to be rejected if they are not in accordance with the Word

of God.<sup>9</sup>

When the apostle preached the truth at Berea, the Jews, his hearers, “searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so”; that is to say, they made use of the scriptures as an authority by which they judged the teaching even of an apostle; and they are commended for so doing. The inspiration then of the Old Testament is demonstrated, its authority is recognized by the Lord, and the whole — as we possess it — is declared to be authentic and to be clothed with an authority which nothing can invalidate.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, vast numbers of pastors today who claim to be Christians are not teaching the Bible accurately. False teachings abound on every side. Thus, God’s people need to search the Scriptures daily, to be sure that what they are being taught is truly what the Bible teaches.

We do not read of any other city wherein [Paul] was given so fair a hearing, wherein people were so honest in seeking to know whether the Word was really in accordance with Scripture or not. How blessed it would be to find more people today characterized by the same nobility as that which marked out these Bereans—a nobility of mind that led them to put away all prejudice and preconceived notions and to examine fairly the matters to which their attention was called, testing everything by Scripture!<sup>11</sup>

### **Acts 17:12**

Therefore, many of these Jews believed, along with a sizeable number of Gentile men and women. “Honorable” means that these women were prominent and influential, and probably wealthy.

Often, we hear people refer to these Jews as the noble “Berean Christians.” This is not totally accurate. It is true that they became Christians when they believed, but initially they were not saved. They were unsaved Jews who were seeking to know the Lord and who searched their Old Testament Scriptures diligently to see if they were being told the truth. They were noble Bereans even before they were saved. In this verse we learn that many of these Jews believed and did become Christians.

Sometimes we hear theologians saying, “Unsaved people are dead and cannot respond to God in any way. They are like a corpse and cannot do anything.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, in this case these unsaved, spiritually dead Bereans searched the Scriptures diligently. It is true that God must do a supernatural work in the heart of the unsaved if they are to come to Christ and believe on Him (John 6:44, 65; Acts 16:14, Matt. 16:17, etc.). It is wrong, however to say that a spiritually dead person is like a corpse and can do nothing. Here are just a few things that an unsaved person can do:

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on Acts/Romans*, p. 254.

<sup>10</sup> John Darby, *Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*.

<sup>11</sup> Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, p. 394.

<sup>12</sup> The correct way of stating this is not that the lost cannot do anything, but that, as dead in trespasses and sins, sinners are incapable, apart from divine enabling, of any spiritual movement toward God (1 Cor. 2:14; Rom. 8:7-8).

A dead person can knowingly and willfully reject Jesus Christ.

A dead person can deny the deity of Christ and can deny the miracles of the Bible.

A dead person can use God's name in vain and can blaspheme the living God.

A dead person can go to church every Sunday, contribute money, and even be a member of the church.

A dead person can pray to God.

God invites dead people to reason together with Him (Isaiah 1:18).

A dead person can try, albeit unsuccessfully, to earn his way to heaven by good works.

A dead person can read the Bible, and this is vital because faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).

A dead person can listen to the gospel being preached, and he can decide to listen to another gospel message if he chooses.

A dead person can hear the wonderful truth of what Jesus Christ did for him at Calvary.

A dead person can reject the gospel message that he has heard or embrace it by faith (John 3:18,36). And when he believes, he passes out of death into life (John 5:24).

Countless more items could be added to this list. The corpse analogy falls far short of accurately describing the state of an unsaved person. It is better to embrace the descriptions of the unsaved man that are found in Scripture, such as Romans chapters 1-3; Romans 8:7-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:14; Ephesians 2:11-12; 4:17-19, etc.

The following comments were written by Douglas K. Kutilek and are used with his permission:

While the unsaved man is described by Paul as "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), I believe that this is a metaphor that is vastly over stressed by some of the Calvinistic writers of my acquaintance. Their typical justification for their "regeneration before faith" view (albeit, immediately before, which results inevitably and immediately in saving faith) is that "a dead man cannot respond to anything--he cannot hear, see, feel, think, touch, taste, act, OR BELIEVE. and therefore, God MUST regenerate him/make him alive before he can believe."

I see what to me is an insuperable problem with this view. These very Calvinists have no problem with a man being convicted of sin before regeneration, in some cases conviction enduring for many days, months, even years--yet how can a "dead" man (as they understand the term) anymore come under conviction, feel guilt, sense a drawing to Christ, than he can believe? To be consistent, they would have to also teach regeneration before conviction--but then there would be no need for conviction!

Paul uses a metaphor when he says that the sinner is "dead"--man is separated from God by his sin, guilt, etc., and is corrupted and tainted in all parts of his being by sin--his body, emotions, intellect, will, etc. are all corrupted. This is not to say that he is as evil in all his thoughts and acts as he might in practice be, nor that unregenerate man is incapable of acts of love, self-sacrifice, kindness, morality, etc. But like Adam, he is separated from God by sin, and is not capable, in himself, of reconciling himself or restoring himself to God's favor.

If regeneration precedes faith, then what must a sinner do to be regenerated? Those who teach this have never given a satisfactory answer. Shedd's answer is typical. Because the sinner cannot believe, he is instructed to perform the following duties: (1) Read and hear the divine Word. (2) Give serious application of the mind to the truth. (3) Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration.<sup>13</sup>

Roy Aldrich's response to this is penetrating: "A doctrine of total depravity that excludes the possibility of faith must also exclude the possibilities of hearing the Word, giving serious application to divine truth, and praying for the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration. **The extreme Calvinist deals with a rather lively spiritual corpse after all.**"<sup>14</sup>

### Acts 17:13

The Thessalonian Jews were not content to stay in their own city, but they went all the way to Berea, a fifty-mile trip, to stir up trouble there.<sup>15</sup> No wonder Paul wrote such strong words to the Thessalonians about these God-rejecting Jews: "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, 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: forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thess. 2:14-16). Yet, even in the persecution God was at work: "The activity of these enemies of Christ drove the missionaries from city to city. But in God's wisdom the opposition proved to be a heavenly breeze fanning the gospel flames and spreading them more widely."<sup>16</sup>

### Acts 17:14

Paul was forced out of the city to the Aegean Sea, heading south.<sup>17</sup> Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. According to 1 Thessalonians 3:1-3, Paul sent Timothy to establish the Thessalonian believers in the faith. Paul also reminded the Thessalonians that he labored night and day so as not to be a financial burden to anyone. He did not want to give anyone occasion to accuse him of avarice (1 Thess. 2:9). Paul was not after their money; he was after their souls (1 Thess. 3:8). The reputation of the gospel was at stake in these newly evangelized cities. Those who proclaimed the gospel needed to have blameless conduct.

Paul was shipped off to the east and to the south for his own security and safety. His life would have been in danger if he had stayed. There is a time to stay and there is a time to flee. The Lord

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<sup>13</sup> W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. II, pages 472, 512, 513.

<sup>14</sup> Roy L. Aldrich, "The Gift of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July 1965, pages 248-253. When Aldrich speaks of "the possibility of faith" we must recognize that it is only possible as God convicts, enlightens, draws and enables. Left to ourselves, none of us would believe the gospel.

<sup>15</sup> See discussion of this same verb ("stirred") under Acts 17:8 where the same verb is used ("troubled").

<sup>16</sup> Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Textual variants occur in this verse. If the Byzantine text reflects the original, then they took Paul to the coast pretending to go by ship in order to throw pursuers off the track, and then they traveled south by land to Athens. See Homer A. Kent, Jr., *From Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 138.

guides His servants. We are not told why it was deemed safe for Silas and Timothy to remain at Berea. The Lord places His servants in the right place at the right time, as they follow His leading. Later Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5).

### **Acts 17:15**

Athens was straight south of Thessalonica and Berea. It was one of the greatest cities of the Roman Empire. Athens was not as large in population as it had been, yet, this city was famous for other reasons:

Athens, although she had long since lost her political eminence of an earlier day, continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity. The sculpture, literature and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have, indeed, never been surpassed. In philosophy, too, she occupied the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. In all these fields Athens retained unchallenged prestige, and her political glory as the cradle of democracy was not completely dimmed. In consideration of her splendid past, the Romans left Athens free to carry on her own institutions as a free and allied city within the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup>

Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then returned with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

### **Acts 17:16**

Paul was alone in Athens, hoping to be joined soon by his companions. Luke had been left in Philippi. What an opportunity God gave to His servant Paul! In this city, Paul's spirit was stirred, and he was greatly troubled because the city was entirely given over to idolatry. Paul viewed the city, not from the perspective of a tourist, but from the perspective of an evangelist. He was greatly burdened for the host of lost men and women in Athens who were ignorant of the one true God.

The verb "stirred" (KJV) means "to irritate, provoke, rouse to anger" (1 Cor. 13:5 being the only other occurrence of this verb).<sup>19</sup> "Wholly given to idolatry" (KJV) means "utterly idolatrous, full of images of idols, grossly idolatrous." Paul was a trained Jew who knew the folly and wickedness of idolatry, of robbing God of His true glory as the only true and living God (Rom. 1:21-25; 1 Cor. 10:20). Many in Thessalonica had turned to God from idols (1 Thess. 1:10), and the people of Athens needed to do the same.

Some ancient writers have suggested that there were more idols in Athens than there were people. Paul, as a Jew, had been trained from childhood to honor the one true and living God, and to hate idolatry. Paul and every well-taught Jew knew that idolatry was the root cause of the Assyrian captivity (Northern Kingdom) and the Babylonian Captivity (Southern Kingdom). In

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<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, pages 348-349.

<sup>19</sup> The word "stirred" in Acts 17:13 is a different verb.

Israel's history, Judah and Jerusalem also had once been "wholly given to idolatry" (see Jer. 2:28; 11:13), but the Babylonian Captivity cured them of this sin. Paul was provoked within himself and overwhelmed with anger and amazement at what Satan had accomplished in this city. Paul no doubt had heard about Athens even as a child, but now he witnessed it with his own eyes.

### **Acts 17:17**

Paul continued his custom of attending synagogue services so that he could demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus Christ is indeed the Messiah. He had a great love for the Jewish people and a strong desire for their salvation (Rom. 9:1-4;10:1). The verb "disputed" (KJV) means to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss. Paul would draw his arguments from the Scriptures. See Acts 17:2 where this same verb is used.

The "devout persons" were God-fearing Gentiles who attended the Jewish synagogue. Paul also spent time in the market (*agora*, a public space where people would gather), seeking to deal with souls. Paul was dedicated to meeting with Jews and Gentiles alike so that he could interact with them and share with them the message of a crucified and risen Christ. "[Paul] was an outstanding personal worker who did not feel that he must have a pulpit in order to disseminate the truth God had sent him to proclaim."<sup>20</sup>

### **Acts 17:18**

Epicureans followed a philosopher who lived 300 years earlier by the name of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). "Epicureans sought contentment by a serene detachment from the world and believed there would be no divine intervention in life nor punishment after death."<sup>21</sup> They did not believe in an afterlife. Later followers of Epicurus carried this teaching a step further and believed that the whole purpose of life is to seek pleasure. Their motto could be stated in this way: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).

In contrast to the Epicureans, the Stoics believed in rigid self-discipline, being courageous and not letting circumstances affect them. It was a pantheistic and fatalistic point of view. From this philosophy we get our word "stoical," meaning to be unmoved by joy or grief, pleasure or pain. The man behind this philosophy was Zeno, who also lived about 300 years earlier (340-265 B.C.).

These philosophers encountered Paul and said, "What will this babblers say?" The literal meaning of "babbler" is "seed picker," used of birds picking up seed or grain. It was used of men lounging about the market-place and picking up bits of food from whatever might happen to fall from the loads of food being carted in. Here it is descriptive of a babbler, an empty talker, one who picks up foolish ideas and idle tales wherever they may be found. The expression is one of contempt.

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<sup>20</sup> Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, pages 396-397.

<sup>21</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., *From Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 139.

Others said he preached strange gods.<sup>22</sup> They had never heard of Jesus, and they did not believe in resurrection. It is possible that they thought these were two gods Paul was announcing: 1) Jesus; 2) Anastasis (Greek word for resurrection). These were two gods with whom they were unfamiliar: Jesus and resurrection!

### **Acts 17:19**

Mars Hill is the Roman name for a hill in Athens. This hill is called the Hill of Ares or the Areopagus (Acts 17:19, 22). Ares was the Greek god of war. According to Greek mythology this hill was the place where Ares stood trial before the other gods for the murder of Poseidon's son. Rising some 377 feet above the land below and not far from the Acropolis<sup>23</sup> and Agora (marketplace), Mars Hill served as the meeting place for the Areopagus Court, the highest court in Greece for civil, criminal, and religious matters. Even under Roman rule in the time of the New Testament, Mars Hill remained an important meeting place where philosophy, religion, and law were discussed.

The Athenians wanted to understand what Paul's new doctrine was all about. What an opportunity Paul had to point to the one true God, the Creator and final Judge of all men!

### **Acts 17:20**

Paul brought to them a strange (novel, surprising, different) form of teaching which they had not heard before and they were curious as to what Paul had to say. They took delight in learning about new things (Acts 17:21).

### **Acts 17:21**

These men of Athens, along with foreigners who were staying in that city, delighted in discussing new things and different ideas. They loved to learn about new concepts which they had never heard of or thought about before. "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7).

Unfortunately, there is a "new thing" which is less and less recognizable and understood in America and in the Western world. It is called the gospel: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Why would anyone consider this old-time gospel message something "new"? It is new because the darkness is deepening, the lights are going out and people do not even seem to remember that there was such a message of good news and such a Person as God's only begotten Son. It seems we are starting all over again. The lights are going out in America and in Europe and more and more people are ignorant of spiritual truth. "Who is

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<sup>22</sup> The word "gods" is *daimonion*, most often translated "demons."

<sup>23</sup> The Acropolis of Athens is an ancient citadel located on a rocky outcrop above the city of Athens and contains the remains of several ancient buildings of great architectural and historical significance, the most famous being the Parthenon.

Jesus? What is this message you are talking about? You sound like some kind of a strange babbler!” Unsaved people used to have a basic familiarity with Biblical truth. Sadly, this is no longer the case in our present secular society. The great gospel truths are unknown to so many, and when they hear the truth they think, “What is this strange teaching we are hearing?”

## **Acts 17:22**

Mars’ Hill was "the Hill of Ares," or “Areopagus” (see verse 19 where the same Greek words are used). On this hill in Athens was an open space where the supreme court would meet. This was the same court that condemned Socrates at an earlier time. Paul took full advantage of the opportunity to speak to these idolatrous people. They wanted to hear some new thing, and Paul was ready always to speak of His dear Savior. Today on Mars’ hill you can find Paul’s complete sermon (ten verses) carved right into a rock in the Greek language.

The Areopagus has been already described. He [Paul] is now on the heights, behind him is a crowd of citizens who have followed him from the Agora; in that crowd there are philosophers and artists, poets, warriors, and judges. Before him lies Athens in all her beauty, natural and artistic; the Acropolis lies on the east of where he stands, abrupt and vast, covered with the noblest monuments of Grecian art: temples, and theatres, and statues, and sculptured groups, rising up in majestic beauty to the sublime Parthenon, the masterpiece in the glory of ancient architecture. On the other side, hard by the Agora, rises the Pnyx, the place of the assemblies of the people, where stands the famous stone on which the orators addressed the assembled multitudes, and from which Demosthenes had often rolled his thunders. What a position for a poor foreigner—an obscure Jew like Paul—to take! Yet he takes it, and thus begins his sermon.<sup>24</sup>

The term “superstitious” was not meant to insult the hearers. Paul was simply saying, “I’m amazed by your fascination and your obsession with these religious objects you have everywhere in this place.” The word is translated “religious” in most translations. It literally means “fearing the deity or deities, reverencing god or gods, pious, religious” (Thayer). These people were not atheists; they had all kinds of idols representing the various gods to whom they gave respect and honor.

Paul engaged in open-air preaching, a method of gospel preaching which is rarely practiced today. The speaker stands in an open space and then projects his voice so the crowd can hear. The greatest open-air preacher was our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 13:1-3, etc.). Countless thousands were reached by way of the open-air preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield. It is hard to imagine how these bold preachers could project their voices so that they could be heard by many thousands of people at once. When Whitefield was in America, newspaper accounts reported that he spoke to 25,000 people in the fields. Benjamin Franklin confirmed this when he attended one of Whitefield’s open-air meetings. He did a little experiment by walking backwards until he could no longer hear Whitefield’s voice distinctly. He then made mathematical calculations and determined that if the crowd were in a semicircle, Whitefield’s voice could be heard by more than 30,000 people!<sup>25</sup> Oh that God might help each

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<sup>24</sup> David Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles—A Homiletic Commentary* [Baker Book House, 1955], p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Franklin’s calculations were interesting but it would have been far more profitable for his soul if he had given his

one of us to boldly proclaim Christ to those whom God puts in our path! “Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16).

Another excellent observation was made by William MacDonald:

Most of the preaching in Acts was spontaneous and extemporaneous. Usually there wasn't time to prepare a message. It was not the performance of an hour but the preparation of a lifetime. It was the preachers who were prepared, not the sermons.<sup>26</sup>

### **Acts 17:23**

Notice how Paul took advantage of an altar to use as a springboard to proclaim the gospel of Christ. “Devotions” (KJV) refers to the objects of their worship. Paul was observing and examining the various altars and idols and objects of worship. He then came upon an altar with this inscription, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” There were hundreds of gods, but these Greeks were concerned in case they had missed one, so they had an altar just for him, whoever he might be.

In Arlington Cemetery we have a tomb for the unknown soldier. We do not know who this soldier is, but his tomb is meant to honor all those who died for their country and who ended up in an unrecognizable condition. The Athenians covered all their bases. “We may have forgotten you or omitted you, but whatever god you are, we want to recognize you even though you are unknown to us.”

Another possible explanation of this altar is as follows:

In the sixth century B.C. it was said that a poet from Crete named Epimenides turned aside a horrible plague from the people of Athens by appealing to a god of whom the people had never heard. An altar was built to honor this god, whom the Athenians now called the Unknown God. Paul obviously knew of Epimenides; he quoted the poet in Titus 1:12.<sup>27</sup>

Paul's message to the Athenians provides a prime example of Paul's preaching to those who were pagan Gentiles. We saw another example of this when Paul preached to a group of pagans in Acts chapter 14 as they tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods from heaven. This is a fascinating study in Christian apologetics. How do you make the gospel known to people who are ignorant of the gospel and know nothing of the Scriptures? How can they be reached? What will you tell them? Are you going to argue with them from rationalistic, humanistic presuppositions or will you announce to them truths about who God is and what God has done? What approach should you take? Some have said that Paul really did not do a very good job in Athens because no church was established as the result of his ministry. Some suppose that when he got to Corinth he said something like, “Lord, I failed to minister your Word properly in

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full attention to the salvation message that was proclaimed on that day.

<sup>26</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, p. 1640.

<sup>27</sup> *The Nelson Study Bible*, note under Acts 17:22-3, p. 1853. See also Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary--The Book of Acts*, p. 370.

Athens and from henceforth I determine not to know anything among these Corinthians except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (compare 1 Cor. 2:2).

However, Luke did not record Paul’s ministry in Athens as a failure. There was something special about what happened at the Areopagus. We must not judge a person’s effectiveness as a faithful preacher by the number of apparent converts resulting from his ministry. If we were to do this, then Jeremiah and many of the prophets would be abject failures!

“Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.” Paul was going to help them understand the God of whom they themselves claimed to be ignorant. There was no compromise here. Notice how Paul began his sermon (paraphrase): “You ignorantly worship Him!” “I declare Him unto you.” This is straightforward preaching of the living God. Paul wanted them to know the God of whom they were ignorant, and to know Him is to have eternal life (John 17:3).

### **Acts 17:24**

Paul started his message with creationism, but he did not end there. There are people today who feel that all they need to do is to tell people about creation, as opposed to evolution, and then they have succeeded in making people aware of the one true God. Creation truth is important, and Paul used it as a starting point to eventually bring his audience to Christ. In Romans chapter one Paul sets forth the gospel of God and in a similar way he begins with creation truth (Rom. 1:20, etc.).

Keep in mind that Paul’s audience had never heard of the book of Genesis and had never read the Bible. Paul declared three facts in this verse: 1) The God I am proclaiming is the One who made the world and everything in it; 2) This God is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth; 3) He does not live in temples made with human hands as if He were limited or contained thereby (1 Kings 8:27; Isaiah 66:1). “Years before, when Paul was not a Christian, he had heard Stephen speak, just before he was stoned to death. Paul apparently never forgot the words that Stephen said, for he repeated some of them here” (Acts 7:48-50).<sup>28</sup> God is not a finite deity that must have a temple to dwell in.

### **Acts 17:25**

The verb “worshipped” (KJV) means “serve, render service to someone.” The true God is not served with human hands as though He needs anything. He is totally self-sufficient and infinite. God does not need us, but we need God. Rather than “needing anything,” the true God is a Giver, “giving to all life and breath and all things.” Apart from Him we would not have physical life and breath and all things that are needed to live on this earth.

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<sup>28</sup> From a note in the *Pilgrim edition of the Holy Bible*, edited by E. Schuyler English; see under Acts 17:24.

## Acts 17:26

All the nations of the earth have come from one source.<sup>29</sup> They are blood-related. The one blood from which all men are derived comes of course from Adam and Eve.<sup>30</sup> All men who dwell on the face of the earth, regardless of race or background, have originated from one person, namely Adam. We all trace our origin back to him. We did not come from animals or lower forms of life, but we came from God-created human beings, namely Adam and his wife Eve. Paul does not quote Scripture references. He does not refer his audience to Genesis chapters 1 and 2 because they were ignorant of the book of Genesis. Paul simply makes a pronouncement of truth, trusting the Holy Spirit to get their attention and work in their hearts. This passage provides an illustration of what it truly means to carry out the principles of 1 Cor 9:19-23, being all things to all men, whether to Jews, Gentiles or pagans.

The Greeks did not believe that all men came from one source, namely Adam. They believed that they were specially created by their gods right in the Greek peninsula where they lived. They thought of themselves as a superior race. They believed that other people, such as barbarians, were created by some other gods wherever they lived. They did not know about one unified human race created by the one true and living God. In their pride, the Greeks saw themselves as superior to other people and to other races.<sup>31</sup> Paul's teaching that we all descended from the same man should have been helpful in countering any ideas of racial superiority. We are all children of fallen Adam, in great need of God's mercy and grace.

“And hath determined the times (seasons) before appointed and the bounds of their habitation.” This is a remarkable statement. God, in His wonderful sovereignty, has determined every nation's limit both chronologically and geographically. He has determined who is going to live where and when, and for how long and under what conditions they will live there. To Abraham God said, “Your descendants will be 400 years in Egypt” (Gen. 15:13). God determined the place where they would be and for how long they would stay there. God also determined how long the Amorites would survive (Gen. 15:16). God sets the limits. He set the limits on the great empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, and He sets the limits on Great Britain, the United States, Russia, Iran and China. God gives people only so much time to come to know Him and to respond to Him, and then they are finished! It is a remarkable statement about God's absolute sovereign rule over the nations. He's in complete charge of every nation on earth!

## Acts 17:27

The verb “feel after” (KJV) means “to touch (Luke 24:49; Heb. 12:18), feel, handle (1 John 1:1), palpate [examine by touch], grope.” “Grove” means to feel about blindly, as a blind person would seek to navigate from place to place, or as a person would seek to find something in the dark. The unsaved are spiritually blind, and yet they are encouraged to seek after God and make

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<sup>29</sup> From this fact flows the truth that neither the Athenians nor any other race was inherently superior to others.

And the one source from which all men spring accords with the essential truth of the unity of the Godhead, one God rather than myriads of gods.

<sup>30</sup> In verse 26 the word “blood” is not found in many of the Greek manuscripts. For this reason, many of the translations read, “He made from one,” or “He made from one man (Adam).”

<sup>31</sup> The Germans under Hitler believed that they were a superior race, resulting in a massive genocide.

an effort to find Him. The good news is that He is not far from any sinner on earth. God can be found because He is not far away.

When it comes to seeking the Lord, there is an obvious antinomy. An antinomy is a contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles. On the one hand we are told that “no man seeks after God” (Psalm 14:2; 53:2; Rom. 3:11). On the other hand, lost men are told to seek the Lord (Acts 17:27; Isa. 55:6-7). How these two realities harmonize is difficult to understand, but we need to believe both. It may help to understand that God is the great initiator, and that we seek Him because He first sought us: “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost” (Luke 19:10). We need to respond in the right way to that which God initiates. God made the first move.

*Before I loved Him, He loved me.  
Before I found Him, He found me.  
Before I sought Him, He sought for me.  
Yes, Jesus cares for me.  
--Ron Hamilton*

## **Acts 17:28**

Paul in his presentation to the Athenians quoted from two pagan poets. Paul was raised in Tarsus, a university city in Cilicia (modern-day Turkey), and he would have been well-versed in Greek culture. He first quoted from Epimenides of Crete who lived 600 years earlier. Epimenides had written, “For in thee we live and move and have our being.”<sup>32</sup> The quote Paul shared with the Athenians was this: “In Him [in God] we live and move and have our being.” Paul also quoted from Aratus of Cilicia. Cilicia was Paul’s own home country where the city of Tarsus was located. Three hundred years earlier, Aratus said, “For we are also His offspring.” Another Athenian poet, Cleanthes (263 to 232 B.C.) also wrote, “For we are your offspring.”

This was a very wise maneuver on the part of Paul. He was catching the attention of his audience. Our Lord Himself recommended this type of approach when He told His disciples to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Paul was exercising wisdom. He was considering what would catch and hold the interest of these people. In dealing with unsaved men, may we be very gracious, patient and wise. God will guide us as we seek to present to them ultimate and life-changing truths.

In this verse we find a hint of Paul’s vast education and understanding of Greek culture and literature. His audience was ignorant of Biblical references, but they knew about the writings of these poets. When these writers said something that reflected Biblical truth, Paul was comfortable with using their words.

In Him we live and move and have our being. “In Him” here means “In virtue of Him.” It is because of Him that we live and move and have our being. Consider the three elements of that statement: **1) We owe Him our physical life.** God keeps our heart beating and enables us to

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<sup>32</sup> In the same poem Epimenides wrote, “The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!” which was cited by Paul in Titus 1:12.

take the next breath. Our times are in His hands, and our living and dying are totally dependent upon His will; **2) We owe Him our movement**, even our ability to function in this world and engage in numerous activities which all involve motion. We are able to walk, run, swim, climb, and due to the intellect God has given us, we are able to ride bicycles, drive cars, cruise the oceans (on or below sea level), fly in airplanes and even put a man into space. We can also move our mouth and tongue to speak, and move our fingers to write, and move our eyes to observe every aspect of our world. When was the last time we stopped to thank God for the ability to move? **3) We owe Him our existence**. Literally the Greek text says, “In Him we are!” Did you ever consider the miracle of your very existence? In order for you to even be on this earth, you had to win a race! The odds against you winning that race were so astronomical that it would have been easier to win a lottery (not that we endorse gambling). Consider the following:

### **Against All Odds, You Won the Race!**

Every person has been brought into this world by the living God, according to His sovereign purposes. You are exactly the person God wanted you to be. He put you in the right location, in just the right period of history. God was in charge of all your inherited genes, your appearance, your hair and eye color, your parents, your gender and your birthplace. You had no choice in any of these things; praise God, He made no mistakes! Here is an amazing biology lesson which involves our reproductive system, showing how fearfully and wonderfully we are made by our Creator. It is common knowledge that the wife provides the egg, usually just one egg, and the husband provides the sperm (seed) which are innumerable. On average there are 100 million sperm competing for one egg; but it can even be as high as one billion or more. It is a great race to the egg and when the first sperm gets there and enters the egg, the “gate” instantly closes, and no others are allowed in. That is, the surface of the egg changes so that no other sperm can enter. Consider your genetic makeup. If another sperm had entered that egg, you would have been a totally different person genetically, perhaps even a different gender. You would not be the person you now are. (It could be likened to running in a race against 100 million or more other runners.) If you had not won this sperm race, then you would not be the person you now are. The odds of ending up as the person you are could be compared to winning a lottery, that is, winning this “race” against insurmountable odds. Yet God is sovereign in it all, and you are exactly the person God intended you to be. It was not LUCK; it was the LORD! He does all things perfectly well! In Him, you live and move and have your being!

### **Acts 17:29**

Paul now brings home the application. God’s offspring is mankind.<sup>33</sup> We all sprang from our parents, and they from their parents, all the way back to Adam and Eve who originated by the direct creation of God. In this sense we are all the offspring of God. A god of gold or silver or stone could not create anything. Such gods or idols were made or engraved by the hands of men, and how foolish to think that we owe our existence to something which we ourselves have made. Men are the offspring of God, created by Him. Idols are the offspring of men, created by men, and thus inferior to man. How foolish to take that which is inferior and make it a god! This

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<sup>33</sup> This text does not support the religiously liberal idea of the spiritual Fatherhood of all men, that we are all His spiritual children. This text is pointing to what man is by virtue of creation, even in his fallen, lost state. The new birth and redemption of fallen men is not in view here.

truth should have been obvious even to pagans, if they were to have given it serious thought.

The term “godhead” means “divinity, deity.” The word was used by the Greeks to denote the divine nature and divine power and providence, in general, without reference to any individual deity (Thayer). This word (**theios**) was used by Paul purposely in speaking to these Greeks, instead of using the common word for God (**theos**). We should never lower deity down to something like gold or silver or stone. To do this is to be worshipping the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

### **Acts 17:30**

The times of this ignorance God winked at or overlooked. This speaks of God’s forbearance. Paul had said something similar to a pagan audience in Acts chapter 14. God did not wipe out the pagan nations immediately. Instead, He allowed all nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16).<sup>34</sup> God was longsuffering towards them, not willing that any should perish. God deals with men based on the light which they have received. “The ‘times of ignorance’ are the times before the full knowledge of God came in the person of Yeshua the Messiah.”<sup>35</sup> Now, in view of God’s new revelation about His Son, God was commanding all men everywhere to repent. This means they were to have a profound change of perspective on who God really is and who we are in our infinite need, and how God has provided for that need in the Person of Jesus Christ, God’s only Savior.

No matter where men are on the face of the earth, they need to repent. Repentance is essential for salvation.<sup>36</sup> There are some today who teach that faith alone is necessary for salvation and not repentance.<sup>37</sup> The Lord Jesus Christ taught the necessity for repentance: “Except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish” (Luke 13:3,5). Paul and Peter did the same (Acts 20:21; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 2 Peter 3:9). True faith includes repentance and true repentance involves saving faith.

### **Acts 17:31**

The world [οἰκουμένην--inhabited earth], namely, the entire human race will one day be judged by a Man, even Jesus Christ. The world will be judged with righteousness (Psalm 9:8; 96:13; 98:9). Our Lord spoke of a judgment affecting all men in John 5:22,27. The Father has committed all judgment to the Son. The entire human race will face a human being at the final judgment and His Name will be Jesus. God has ordained this Man and given assurance unto all men, in that He raised Him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s guarantee

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<sup>34</sup> Pagan men have always been accountable before God for their deeds and accountable to live according to the light they have been given. The first chapters in Romans clearly set forth the full guilt of Gentiles before God.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel’s Bible Commentary—The Book of Acts*, p. 373.

<sup>36</sup> Here “repentance” is set forth as the sole condition of salvation, while elsewhere it is “faith,” as in verse 34. It is always only one condition of salvation, whether it be faith or repentance, as they are two sides of the same single coin.

<sup>37</sup> “Free grace” teachers deny the necessity of repentance. Such men as Zane Hodges and Robert Wilkin argue that the Gospel of John was written so that men might believe on Christ and have eternal life, and the word repent is not found in John’s Gospel. A study which shows the meaning and necessity of repentance, and which answers this objection is found at <https://middletownbiblechurch.org/salvatio/termsrep.htm>.

of the final judgment.

When will this judgment take place? Literally, God **is about to** [mellō] judge the world. From God's point of view, this judgment will take place very soon. From the standpoint of Biblical chronology, we know that the judgment of the ungodly will take place after the millennium (Rev. 20:11-15; 2 Pet. 3:7). Men living on earth prior to the millennium will also be judged to determine who will enter the Kingdom (Matt. 25:31-46). Believers, thank the Lord, are exempted from condemnatory judgment (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1), but we must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account for how we have lived as saved individuals (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10) and to determine our reward or lack thereof (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

God has ordained or determined that Jesus Christ will be the judge of all men, and He has appointed Him for that task. This same word ("determined") is found in Acts 17:26. It is far better to stand before Christ at His judgment seat as believers (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10), than to stand before Him at the Great White Throne judgment as lost sinners (Rev. 20:11-15). These two judgments are separated by a thousand years.

How could these Athenians recognize who this Person is? Remember that for days Paul was preaching "Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18). You cannot preach Jesus and the resurrection without preaching about Jesus dying. You cannot be resurrected unless you have first died. Paul had preached the gospel to those in Athens (1 Cor. 15:3-4), even though Luke does not record everything that Paul included in his evangelistic appeals.

Paul declared that "this Man," the One you have heard me preach about, is going to judge the world. This is the very One that God raised from the dead. Paul's gospel preaching to those in Athens was not defective, as some might claim. Paul's Biblical presentation resulted in some people coming to faith in Christ (Acts 17:34).

Paul's message to the Athenians began with *God as the Creator of all* (Acts 17:24) and it concludes with *God as the Judge of all* (Acts 17:31). God will judge the world in righteousness. Those who do not measure up to God's perfect, righteous standard will be in trouble. God, the righteous Judge, demands perfect righteousness. His wrath will come down upon all those who are unrighteous (Rom. 1:18). The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-11). How thankful we are that God has provided a way for ungodly, unrighteous men to be declared perfectly righteous: "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24; compare Rom. 4:5; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Keep in mind that Greek thought was dualistic. They believed that man is made up of flesh (body, physical, material, that which is carnal) and soul (mind, spirit, invisible, eternal, that which is holy or godly). To the Greek, the heart is good, and the body is evil. Therefore, the Greek mind was predisposed to reject the truth of a bodily resurrection. Hence, we are not surprised by the negative reaction of the Athenians to Paul's declaration that God raised Jesus from the dead.

## Acts 17:32

It appears at this point that Paul's message was interrupted and cut short, due to his mention of the resurrection, a teaching which was in opposition to Greek thought. The response from the audience was mixed and somewhat disappointing. Some mocked the message and the messenger. "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. 1:18).<sup>38</sup> Others saw no urgency to respond and said that they would hear more of these things later. Those who refuse salvation today may not get another opportunity. We are reminded of the words of Felix in Acts 24:25—"Felix trembled and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." This is the last time mention is made of Felix in the Bible. As far as we know he died waiting for a convenient season; thousands of others have and will do likewise, including many of these Athenians. Spiritual procrastination has eternal consequences.

Paul gave Athens great light, and with it, great responsibility. "To whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48).

Responsibility is measured by privileges. Athens had been highly favoured for ages. Great men had lived and laboured there—men with many a divine thought within them—Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, but Paul was greater than all. He gave more of the divine in thought to them than was found in the combined wisdom of all their philosophers. O Athens, better a thousand times that Paul had never entered thee, than that thou shouldst fail in the new-imposed responsibility! Paul changed the position of Athens in the moral world. Geographically and materially, it remained the same, but in the moral empire of God it was a changed place. The men there would never feel again exactly as they had felt, would never think again exactly as they had thought.<sup>39</sup>

The particular doctrine which the Athenians rejected was Paul's teaching that all men would be raised from the dead (Acts 17:31). If he had merely spoken of the immortality of the soul, this would not have been a problem to most of these Greeks. But they rejected the concept of bodily resurrection. Their belief was this: "Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is *no resurrection*."<sup>40</sup>

One of the great poets of Athens, named Aeschylus, five hundred years earlier had said that when we die we return to dust forever, and there will be no resurrection from the dead. Such was one of the basic understandings of Greek philosophy: "There is no such thing as resurrection; it's impossible!" The people of Athens were programmed and brainwashed against the doctrine of bodily resurrection from the dead.

Erroneous ideas of the resurrection were held by the Corinthians who lived not too far away from Athens, and Paul had to write an entire chapter to correct them on this subject (1 Corinthians chapter 15). The Christians in Corinth needed to understand that we are not going to be what we are now, but we will receive a glorified resurrection body with all kinds of attributes and

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<sup>38</sup> In verses 32 and 34 we have 3 categories of men as a result of the gospel preached by the apostle Paul: mockers (v.32a), procrastinators (v.32b), and believers (v.34).

<sup>39</sup> David Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles—A Homiletic Commentary* [Baker Book House, 1955], p. 288.

<sup>40</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647 f.

capacities that we cannot even imagine. It is not just more of the same old thing (not just a mere resuscitation). Paul explained to the Corinthians the significance and the glory of bodily resurrection, based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ who was the firstfruits of them that slept.

### **Acts 17:33**

Paul was not arrested for his preaching. He simply departed to another location, to the city of Corinth (Acts 18:1). In the New Testament we never read about “the church which was in Athens.” Apparently, no local church was founded there. They were without excuse because the gospel was clearly presented to them. “The Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:22-23).

### **Acts 17:34**

Thank God, there were some who believed Paul’s message. A man and a woman are named: Dionysius and Damaris. Others also believed who were among them. Keep in mind that it is impossible to believe unto salvation unless you have heard the true gospel. “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Paul faithfully preached the Word of God. Luke gives us only a summary of what he preached (ten verses). Paul may have preached for much longer. We are only given the highlights of his message, not an exact transcription of it.

Dionysius was a prominent man in Athens. He was an Areopagite, meaning he was a member of the court of Areopagus (Mars Hill). He was one of the judges in Athens, sitting on what might be described as the Athenian Supreme Court. A woman Damaris also believed and others with them. We should not be highly critical of the Apostle Paul because a local church in Athens did not suddenly appear. To preach one sermon and have people converted as a result is not something to make light of. God was working in souls, even if only a few were being saved. Though there were not many converts, we can rejoice with the angels over even one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7,10), and we can thank God that in the city of Athens there were some who came to know the unknown God! We have no record that Paul ever returned to the city of Athens.

What marvelous insight the Lord has given to us as to how the great Apostle of the Gentiles reached out to wider and wider circles in Europe. It is of interest that we have no record of any of Paul’s sermons to the Christians in Corinth where he spent many months. The same is true of the years he spent in Ephesus. Not one of Paul’s sermons given to the Ephesians has been recorded. Yet God has recorded this sermon which Paul delivered to pagans in Athens, serving as a model sermon for how to reach unsaved people who live around us today.

May the Lord help us to totally reject what I (Dr. Whitcomb) or any other preacher or Bible teacher has said until we have searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so. Not until then are we to believe! Praise the Lord!

As we move into Acts chapter 18, we will see the conclusion of Paul’s Second Missionary Journey and the commencement of his Third.