



## The Book of Acts - Chapter Seventeen

### VII Acts 15:36-18:22 - The Witness in Greece (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Seventeen

Having left Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy headed generally southwest through Macedonia, coming to the major city of Thessalonica by way of Amphipolis and Apollonia.

Thessalonica had a thriving Jewish community and Paul followed his standard pattern of taking the Gospel to the Jews first, speaking boldly and passionately in their synagogue on three Sabbath days, proving, from scripture, that Jesus was the Christ. His work was successful with some Jews and many God-fearing Greek men and women coming to faith. But, as we have seen in Jerusalem, Pisidian Antioch and elsewhere, many Jews, fearful of their own wealth and status in the community, opposed the ministry team and the Gospel.

The Jews raised a mob and started a riot in the city. They went to the house of Jason, where Paul was thought to be staying. Not finding him there, they dragged Jason out instead and took him to the authorities, making up charges that they were defying Cæsar and causing trouble everywhere they went. The authorities took a financial surety from Jason and the others against there being any further trouble caused by Paul's teaching. Therefore, Paul and his companions had to leave, as the Jews would continue to oppose him; thus Jason and others would lose a significant amount of money.

Paul's group travelled on to Berea, where the local Jews were much more willing to hear the message and to search the scriptures in response, in order to validate Paul's claims. This time many of the Jews, as well as Greek men and women, came to faith. When the Thessalonian Jews heard about this, they travelled to Berea, stirred up the crowds there, and forced Paul to leave. But Timothy and Silas remained to continue the work as the focus of the antagonism by the Jews was against Paul.

Some of the Berean brothers took Paul to the coast. From there, he travelled either by ship or by road to Athens, where he would work alone for a short period of time before travelling on to Corinth in nearby Achaia.

Paul's spirit was stirred and he became extremely concerned as he saw the level of idolatry in Athens. Initially, he spoke publically in the city, mostly in the market places, but then he had the opportunity to speak to the prominent and powerful Areopagus, a group who controlled many aspects of life in Athens. They were mainly philosophers.

Paul produced a remarkable message showing how futile idolatry is and that everything, including humans, are made by a single God. This God had also brought Jesus into the world to teach us how we should seek God and turn to him for the forgiveness of our sins.

He gave conclusive proof of his authenticity by raising Jesus from the dead, after the Jewish Religious leaders and Romans had killed him.

Some of his listeners dismissed the message outright, some wanted to hear Paul again, and some came to believe in Jesus, including one of the Areopagus' judges, Dionysius.

## VII.e Acts 17:1-9 - In Thessalonica

From Philippi, Paul travelled the 94 miles or 151km to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the proud capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and had a population of over 100,000 multi-national inhabitants. Its natural harbour and location on the busy east-to-west Egnatian Way, as well as key north-south trade routes, meant that it was a flourishing centre of trade and philosophy. It was a free city and was governed by local officials called politarchs.

Religiously, the city was committed to the Greco-Roman pantheon and the imperial cult; Egyptian cults were also prominent. There was a sizable population of Jews in Thessalonica.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul recounts: <<We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition>>. He also mentions in Philippians 4:16 that the Philippian church helped him with his material needs during this time.



This map of the Aegean Sea area shows the main cities that Paul visited in the region.

<sup>1</sup> When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.

### Acts 17:1

Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, and Thessalonica were all cities on the main east-west Roman commercial route called the Egnatian Way. These cities were separated from each other by about a day's journey on foot.

Luke gives no account of teaching in Amphipolis and Apollonia, he simply reports the group passing through these cities. However, Apollonia is a city in Illyricum and this area was preached in by Paul: <<by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ>> (Romans 15:19).

<sup>2</sup> As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

### Acts 17:2

The reference to Paul preaching on three Sabbath days gives the impression of a brief stay in Thessalonica, but this was only the period of his synagogue teaching. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and to the Philippians reflects a longer ministry: <<Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you>> (1 Thessalonians 2:9), <<Now we ask

you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you>> (1 Thessalonians 5:12), and: <<for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need>> (Philippians 4:16).

<sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said.

#### Acts 17:3

Christ had to suffer. The Jews resisted the idea that the Messiah had to suffer, even though this is found in the OT, e.g. Psalm 22, Isaiah Chapter 53, Zechariah 12:10 and 13:7, etc.

Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, not just out of respect for the Jews, or because he knew he would have a captive audience just as Jesus did for his teaching, but he also went to show his own great respect for Jesus, as he knew that he had come to fulfil the law, not replace it. Thus Paul remained faithful to those parts of the tradition and law the Gospel acknowledges. Anyway, there is no better place to be than in church: <<Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked>> (Psalm 84:10). For Paul, however, the synagogue must have seemed more like the <<Tents of the wicked>> at times! Again, he relied on scripture to show that Jesus is the Christ, why he had to suffer and die, and that God would raise him from the dead. The truth is even stronger than Paul’s personal testimony. He taught for three Sabbaths, indicating that these things take time and we must be patient and show perseverance.

Paul’s knowledge of scripture, and his understanding and absolute belief in the authenticity of the Gospel message, are key to his teaching. He consistently proved that Jesus had to suffer and die, something Jesus himself frequently commented on, e.g. Luke 24:26 <<Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?>>. The Cross, however, was a stumbling block and an offence for the Jews, as it did not sit well with their expectation of Messiah, or with their culpability in making it happen. Without dying, he could not purchase our redemption, and without resurrection, he could not apply that redemption.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

#### Acts 17:4

In the Greco-Roman world, women often held prominent positions, as we saw in Pisidian Antioch: <<But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region>> (Acts 13:50). This will be confirmed in v.12.

Some of them were among the God-fearing Greeks, i.e. devout believers, who attended the synagogue and worshipped the one true God.

Some people who heard the message turned to the Lord and followed Paul’s ministry team: <<And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will>> (2 Corinthians 8:5). It must always be that way round - Jesus is always to be the focus.

<sup>5</sup> But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.

#### Acts 17:5

The Jews were jealous because they were losing power and influence as we encountered elsewhere: <<Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy>> (Acts 5:17), and: <<When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying>> (Acts 13:45).

There were also incidents where the opponents to the Gospel were stirred up because of their loss of financial gain, such as in Philippi: <<When the owners of the slave girl realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities>> (Acts 16:19); and in Ephesus: <<About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!>> (Acts 19:23-28).

The Jews is an expression used in the Greek text, sometimes in a neutral or positive sense, but mostly to refer to hostile Jewish leaders and the ordinary people who followed them, who had opposed Jesus and the Gospel message he had introduced. The phrase does not usually mean all the Jews, for Jesus, Paul and the apostles were also Jews. Luke, like John in his Gospel, wanted Jewish readers in his own time to realise that opposition to Jesus by many Jewish leaders went back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, but that did not deter many other Jews from following him anyway. In many places in John's Gospel, and in Luke's records, 'the Jews' seems to be a shorthand expression for 'the Jews who opposed Jesus'. Jesus later instructed John to write: <<I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars — I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you>> (Revelation 3:9).

<sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here,

Acts 17:6

Men who have caused trouble all over the world. These hostile opponents spoke truer words than they realised, for the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire was the beginning of a movement that would change the course of history forever.

Jesus first came to his people: <<He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him>> (John 1:11), some of whom believed and he prayed for those who didn't; those who rejected him and his message then persecuted those Jews who did believe and had accepted him, and they paid a heavy price for doing so: <<For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judæa, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last>> (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

<sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Cæsar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

#### Acts 17:7-9

Another king, one called Jesus. Christianity was not contrary to Roman law at that time, but this factual claim would be seen as a challenge to Roman authority and was a crime against Cæsar personally, which could bring a death sentence. However, Jesus had never been a political or military threat to Rome, as his kingdom is spiritual and not territorial, as Jesus himself had explained to Pilate: <<Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” >> (John 18:36). He came to offer all people a route to salvation irrespective of their race and culture.

Jason and others had to post a bond, given as a guarantee that there would be no more disturbances of the peace as a result of Paul's preaching. As a practical matter, this probably meant that Paul would have to leave Thessalonica, since his Jewish opponents would continue to stir up trouble while he remained. This may be what Paul meant by: <<but Satan stopped us>> (1 Thessalonians 2:18b), which Paul said prevented his return to Thessalonica.

This time the mob was a rabble. In his Apologia, Tertullian pleads: ‘our persecutors are invariably unjust, impious, infamous, whom you yourselves have been accustomed to condemn’. The devil carries on his designs; he sets cities in uproar, sets souls in uproar, and fishes in the troubled waters.

#### VII.f Acts 17:10-15 - In Berea

Paul, Timothy and Silas travelled to Berea, 50 miles or 81 km by road, southwest of Thessalonica. It is not clear whether the Bereans were less bigoted, more open-minded, better educated or more conversant with scripture than those at Thessalonica, or whether the Holy Spirit had opened their hearts and minds before Paul arrived, but the result was they were willing to hear the Gospel, search the scriptures to confirm what was being said, probably enquire of God through prayer as to the authenticity of the message, and were subsequently convicted of its truth and necessity, before coming to faith.

<sup>10</sup> As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.



#### Acts 17:10

As soon as it was night shows the danger the group were in from this mob, who were clearly after Paul's blood.

The image is of the restored Berean synagogue but it may date to after Paul's time.

At least two inscriptions confirm a Jewish presence in Berea after the time of Paul.

All the Jews in Berea were murdered when they were shipped off to concentration camps by the Nazis during the German occupation of Greece in World War II.

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

#### Acts 17:11

Noble translates the Greek eugenēs, which originally meant ‘of noble birth’ or ‘well born’. The word was also applied to people who exhibited noble behaviour, in that they were open-minded, fair, and thoughtful. Thus Luke saw the Bereans as more noble in their receiving Paul’s message with great eagerness, and then in looking to the written words of the OT as their final authority, i.e. they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. By commending this activity, Luke encourages this searching of the scriptures as a pattern for all believers, and gives support also to the doctrine of the clarity of scripture, the idea that the Bible can be understood rightly, not only by scholars but also by ordinary people who read it eagerly and diligently, with conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit for help.

The doctrine of Christ does not fear scrutiny. Followers of Jesus desire no more from people than they will not dismiss the message but will, without preconception or prejudice, examine the Gospel, then test it through the OT scriptures: <<You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me>> (John 5:39), take time in their hearts to call upon God and receive the truth for themselves.

<sup>12</sup> Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

<sup>13</sup> When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

<sup>14</sup> The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.

#### Acts 17:12-14

Many of the Jews believed. In contrast to many other locations, these Jews did understand the scriptures. They could immediately see and know the truth of the Gospel message, and they embraced it willingly and fully.

Jews in Thessalonica. As with the Jews of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, who travelled to Lystra to oppose the Gospel and to kill its messenger: <<Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead>> (Acts 14:19), so too the Thessalonians travelled to Berea with the same intention. This is another instance of the enmity in the serpent’s seed against the seed of the woman, and we must not think it strange when persecutors at home extend their rage to stir up persecutors abroad. This is a common phenomenon of the atheist movement.

This would have come as no surprise to Paul, or to the church he had left behind in Thessalonica, as he had already taught them things like this would happen: <<In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know>> (1 Thessalonians 3:4).

Immediately sent Paul to the coast. Apparently most of the opposition was, once again, directed against Paul, who was the main spokesman, so the believers sent him away, while allowing Silas and Timothy to remain among them. The phrase to the coast indicates that they took Paul as far as the sea, but the text does not specify whether they then travelled with Paul to Athens by ship or by land, along the coastal road, a distance of 222 miles or 357 km.



The Road from Berea to Athens would not have been an easy route as the mountainous terrain shows in this image of the route.

In both Thessalonica and Berea, the disciples seemed to value the visitors' safety more than anything else and it was always they who persuaded the apostolic group to leave. The latter would no doubt have gladly risked their lives had they thought it the right thing to do.

<sup>15</sup> The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

#### Acts 17:15

Brought him to Athens. Jesus had started the fire: <<I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!>> (Luke 12:49), and the opposition were trying to extinguish it but only succeeded in spreading it further, as Paul moved on to Athens and then Corinth.

Instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. Luke does not, at this point, give many details about the travels of Silas and Timothy, but Paul gives more information in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 3, and Luke gives more details at Acts 18:1 and 18:5.

These passages reveal the following sequence:

1. Paul travelled to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea (vv.14-15).
2. Paul summoned Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens (v.15).
3. Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens (v.16, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).
4. Paul became concerned for the churches he had just founded in Macedonia, i.e. Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, so he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to find out how that church was doing, amid its persecution and opposition (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2). At the same time he must have sent Silas somewhere else in Macedonia (Acts 18:5), being willing to be left in Athens alone (1 Thessalonians 3:1). It is likely that Silas went at least to Philippi but possibly also to Berea.
5. <<After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth>> (Acts 18:1).
6. Silas and Timothy joined Paul again in Corinth, bringing good news from the churches of Macedonia (Acts 18:5, 1 Thessalonians 3:6).
7. From Corinth, Paul wrote his two letters to the church at Thessalonica. Both of these letters come from Paul, Silvanus i.e. Silas, and Timothy, (1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1).

#### VII.g Acts 17:16-34 - In Athens

Paul's ministry in Athens began in the marketplace, where he encountered some Athenian philosophers (vv.16-21). This led to a more formal presentation to the Areopagus (vv.22-34).

Paul, himself a scholar in Greek philosophy and poetry, found himself at the world centre of such ideals but would not be sidetracked by what this great city had to offer as he would later write to the Colossians: <<See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this

world rather than on Christ>> (Colossians 2:8). His heart and mind was set on doing the work the Lord had set him apart for and that he did, despite the attitudes of those learned people who thought his ideas strange. However, they would give him a platform to explain the Gospel and some of them came to believe, and others wished to hear more.

#### VII.g.i Acts 17:16-21 - Witness in the marketplace

Paul proclaimed the Gospel to the Athenians. Such was the great openness to learning in the city, and the idolatry that came with these ideas, that it was said of Athens at the time there were more gods in the city than humans! Their great wisdom had made them into fools: <<Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools>> (Romans 1:22), and: <<For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe>> (1 Corinthians 1:21).

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

#### Acts 17:16

Athens was filled with examples of artistic beauty, particularly its statues of the Greek gods and the architectural magnificence of its temples. Paul, however, was deeply troubled by the idolatry that the art represented.

He was greatly distressed or, in some translations, his spirit was provoked within him. Here, 'his spirit' does not mean the Holy Spirit, but Paul's own human spirit: <<The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children>> (Romans 8:16). He was deeply troubled to see the entire city devoted to false gods, represented by idols. Elsewhere, Paul would later write: <<the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God>> (1 Corinthians 10:20b). Large portions of central Athens have been excavated. Paul would probably have been speaking in the Roman Forum, used as a marketplace (v.17), and in the Greek Agora, largely filled with civic structures. These were surrounded by great stoas, or covered walkways, one of which, the Stoa of Attalos, has been reconstructed for modern viewers, see the image. In Paul's day Athens boasted a stadium, a large theatre, and an odeion known as the Agrippeion. Some of Athens' most prominent features were its numerous pagan temples. The great temple to Athena, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, dedicated to multiple deities, and the temple to the goddess Roma and the emperor Augustus stood high above the city on the acropolis. Many other pagan sacred sites have also been found, confirming Petronius' satirical assertion that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Multiple inscriptions also indicate a Jewish presence in Athens, and Herod the Great was honoured by the Athenians for his generosity to the city.



The Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis



The Stoa of Attalos

<sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

#### Acts 17:17

He reasoned. Witnessing for Christ was a matter of patient persuasion. Paul saw very few people come to faith here in Athens (v.34), he had no disciples to support the work, there is no record of any miracles being performed, and there is no record of a church being established or even formal gatherings to proclaim the Gospel to others than that recorded here to the Areopagus. But Paul would leave a legacy and one of his few converts would become the first Bishop of Athens.

God-fearing Greeks were probably not proselytes, i.e. they worshipped God and were attached in some way to a synagogue, but had not undergone Jewish rites, e.g. circumcision.

In the synagogue, in the marketplace. Paul again started at the synagogue, where at least the people were free from the draws of idolatry, even though there is no real reported response, positive or negative. But Paul did not limit himself to proclaiming the Gospel once a week only and took the message to the streets on a daily basis; debating with all who would listen. This is the best way to proclaim the Gospel and to get people to take notice, especially those that would not normally come near to a church building. Go out and meet the people where they are.

<sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

#### Acts 17:18

Paul conversed with representatives of two of the most popular philosophies of the day, Stoicism and Epicureanism.

Epicureans basically believed in the pursuit of knowledge of the working of the world and the limits of human desire with the ideal of finding inner peace and tranquillity, a freedom from fear and the elimination of superstitions.

The Stoics taught that destructive emotions resulted from errors in judgment, and that a person of moral and intellectual perfection, would not suffer such emotions. They believed that the individual was equal or even superior to God.

It was the new idea of the resurrection that attracted many to hear Paul rather than a desire to come to know God, for they were all interested in ‘new ideas and thoughts, and new gods’. Deuteronomy 32:17 states: <<They sacrificed to demons, which are not God – gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear>>; perhaps, like King Ahaz, they simply desired a new altar: <<Then King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He saw an altar in Damascus and sent to Uriah the priest a sketch of the altar, with detailed plans for its construction>> (2 Kings 16:10).

They called Paul a babblers, Greek spermologos, literally ‘one who picks up seeds’, derived from an older and less common meaning of legō, to pick up. The term thus suggested one who pecks at ideas like a chicken pecks at seeds and then spouts them off without fully understanding them. Some commentators write that babblers was perhaps a reference to a small bird that spent its time hopping around gathering seed. They likened Paul to this as they thought he was hopping around the markets, selling this new idea to pick up small amounts of money to earn his living. How wrong they were!

<sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”

#### Acts 17:19

The Areopagus is the ‘hill of Ares’, Ares being the Greek god of war. The Court of the Areopagus was a long-established body with extensive authority over the civil and religious life of Athens. In Paul’s day, it exercised jurisdiction, especially in matters of religion and morality. In speaking before the group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (v.18), Paul would have addressed them either on the hill of Ares, i.e. Mars Hill, located below the acropolis, which is favoured by most commentators, or southwest of the acropolis in the northwest corner of the Agora, where at the time of Paul the group held its ordinary meetings in the Royal Colonnade.



New teaching. Their interest was more in the concept of academic learning than a desire to know God for who he really is.

Mars Hill in Athens as it is today.

<sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.”

<sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

#### Acts 17:20-21

As they spent time listening they would at least be in a place to hear the message, which is better than those who simply dismiss it without listening to or pursuing the truth for themselves. When discussing faith with people today, it is not uncommon to hear them say, ‘I have my own beliefs’, which is basically idolatry through ignorance.

#### VII.g.ii Acts 17:22-34 - Witness before the Areopagus

At other locations, the apostles encountered Jews and God-fearers. Therefore, they could start by proclaiming and proving that Jesus was the expected Messiah, and to refer to the scriptures, so listeners could check it out for themselves.

Here, he was dealing with something completely different. Similar to that in Lystra, but to men whose thinking and analysis was at a much higher level than the average person, Paul had to proclaim that there was a creator God, who not only made everything but was ultimately in control of everything and every person too. God does not require images, in fact he abhors them, or buildings or anything else, other than the hearts of people who would worship him for who he is.

Paul’s Areopagus address is the prime example in Acts of preaching to the Gentiles. Although rooted in OT ideas, the address appealed to the Greek philosophers by interacting with their thought processes, even quoting their own writers in a well-informed, respectful way. Its main subject was the error of idolatry. Paul began with and returned to the theme of idolatry (v.23 and v.29), in a well-constructed manner, clearing the way for a full statement of the Gospel, but he was interrupted before he could achieve this.

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked

carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

#### Acts 17:22-23

Paul stood up. More than 400 years previously, Socrates had stood before this same court and had dismissed all their known gods. He then introduced new demons, for which he was condemned. Paul was careful to proclaim the former without introducing the latter. He was not introducing new gods but The Ancient of Days.

Religious, the Greek noun *deisidaimōn*, could be taken either positively as pious or negatively as superstitious.

To an unknown god. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, the Greek geographer Pausanias recorded 'altars of the gods named Unknown' in Athens (Description of Greece 1.1.4). He also mentioned such an altar at Olympia (Description of Greece 5.14.8), and an inscription found at Pergamum has been restored to read 'to unknown gods', see the image.



A biography of Apollonius, a traveller from Tyana, who came to Athens not long after Paul, contains a remark to the effect that it was wise to speak well of all the gods, especially at Athens, where altars are set up in honour, even of unknown gods.

Paul charges them that, through their very desire for religion and acceptance of even an unknown god, they have lost sight of the truth they so desperately searched for, by accepting new ideas about gods that were nothing more than the creation of men's minds and hands. When what they should be doing is accepting the one true God that made them, and give the glory to him for that, rather than glorifying themselves through what they had made.

There are many thoughts about the inscription to the unknown God:

1. A god who exists but which they are unhappy not yet to know.
2. A god of the foreign lands beyond their knowledge and therefore unknown to them.
3. Or the God of Israel, who had no name other than 'I AM', and is seen by some to hide himself from those who do not know him: <<Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Saviour of Israel>> (Isaiah 45:15).

<sup>24</sup> “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

#### Acts 17:24-25

Paul speaks of the God who made the world and everything in it, including mankind. He identifies this one true God as superior to all the lesser, competing deities that might be worshiped in Athens, with all their foibles and weaknesses.

When Paul says that God does not live in temples built by hands, nor is he served by human hands, which is similar to what Stephen had told the Sanhedrin nearly 20 years earlier: <<However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?>> (Acts 7:48-50), it is easy to imagine him gesturing toward the magnificent temple, the Parthenon, that stood just above him and his hearers on the acropolis. Paul was claiming that the true God of heaven and earth does not live in temples like the Parthenon, and is not served by the sacrifices, which the Athenians regularly brought to their temples.

God does not live in houses built by man, even by great kings like Solomon: <<But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!>> (1 Kings 8:27), and: <<This is what the Lord says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word">> (Isaiah 66:1-2). Yet he does dwell in the hearts and minds of those who will accept him.

One day God will dwell forever on earth, but not in a temple of human construction: <<Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God">> (Revelation 21:1-3).

Paul declared that God was not new to them for, as they had a dependence upon him, so they paid him homage, even if they were worshipping him in ignorance, which is of course not what God wants from any of us.

<sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

#### Acts 17:26

One man refers to Adam, in whom all the people find their ancestral unity, an idea that would appeal to the Stoics' strong sense of human brotherhood. Paul thus affirms the historicity of Adam and the descent of the entire human race from him. This also rules out any kind of racism, since the various ethnic groups come from one man. Natural analysis would also have led them to conclude we all have a common father: <<Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?>> (Malachi 2:10a).

This would be contrary to their normal debating, as Athenians believed they were a race set apart; sprung up out of their own earth, born of the gods and superior to all mankind. Here, Paul wiped away that myth and confirmed it was God who made us all, and made us all equal.

Having determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live indicates God's sovereignty over the histories of nations, as King Solomon lamented: <<There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace>> (Ecclesiastes 3:1-14).

<sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

#### Acts 17:27

Seek him is perhaps better translated as feel their way towards him and implies a kind of groping around in the darkness, without really knowing how to find God, although they hoped that they would. The verbs translated seek him or feel their way and find are in the optative mood in Greek, suggesting possibilities considered uncertain of realisation. The optative mood is a grammatical mood that indicates a wish or a hope.

Not far from each one of us implies God's omnipresence and also implies that God hears people's prayers and knows their hearts, including these philosophers in Athens! God's providence leads people to seek God, with the goal that they might perhaps find, i.e. worship him, but all people fall short of seeking God wholeheartedly and successfully, as Romans 1:18-Romans 3:20 teaches. Paul is being inviting here. There is a God to find, and he is not hard to find, having revealed himself to us through the story Paul now prepares to tell.

<sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

#### Acts 17:28

Some of your own poets. Instead of the OT, Paul quoted statements from pagan Greek writers, who would be familiar to his audience. Paul had studied Greek philosophy and poetry as a student in Tarsus before travelling to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel. Although he quoted them with approval, this does not imply that he approved of other things that these writers said or wrote. The first quotation, in him we live..., appears to be from a hymn to Zeus by Epimenides of Crete, circa 600 BC. The words are found just two lines later than the quotation Paul takes from the same poem in Titus 1:12 <<Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" >>. The second quotation here is from the poem Phainomena by the Stoic poet Aratus, circa 315-240 BC.

If we are offspring of God then we are spirits in flesh and he, as the Father of spirits, is himself Spirit. Therefore, he cannot be contained in idols of gold, silver, rock, wood or any other material that has been crafted by man's hand. Paul shows them what an absurdity their religion is in relation to the reality of a single Godhead, who is always near each of us, although he may be distant, and in whom: we live and move and have our being.

What Paul showed in his debate with such learned people was that you can argue at their level to show the weakness, and even the absurdity, of their own argument. The same is true today but for many of us to have such an intellectual argument with people like Richard Dawkins, for example, who is much more intelligent and better educated than most people, would prove to be very difficult. But we can at least study what they say and then see that their arguments against God actually point toward the very need for God to exist in the way it is claimed that he does. For without him everything is meaningless: <<"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" >> (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill.

#### Acts 17:29

God is not like gold or silver or stone, of which idols are made. God made us, i.e. we are God's offspring, and we are much more complex and wonderful, in fact we are: <<fearfully and wonderfully made>> (Psalm 139:14b), and therefore more wonderful than these lifeless

material substances. Therefore, God himself must also be much more wonderful than these things. With this observation, Paul returns to the critique of idolatry with which he began and sets up the basis for the need to repent.

He is the benefactor of mankind, giving man a soul and implanting a spirit within the material human form that is recreated within woman. He holds our souls, gives us each breath through the systems he sustains, provides a system of sustenance and renewal. Yet many reject him for other gods. It puts us in mind of Daniel 5:23 <<Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways>>, and: <<How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures>> (Psalm 104:24). The marvel is that he does it all on a personal level: <<He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store>> (Job 23:14).

God honoured man by making his soul after God's own image, but we then dishonour God by making his image after our own body and other physical forms, which is directly contrary to the Second Commandment: <<You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments>> (Exodus 20:4-6). The Godhead is spiritual, infinite, immaterial, incomprehensible, and therefore it is a very false and unjust conception that an image gives us of God, no matter how expensive the material used, or how artistically and skilfully it may have been crafted.

<sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

#### Acts 17:30

Paul moved to his distinctly Christian appeal, at this point distancing himself from the philosophers.

God overlooked. That is, God did not bring immediate judgment to the world in previous times but Paul warns of coming judgment in the next verse.

Heraclitus was asked 'What are men? He answered 'Mortal gods'. He was then asked, 'What are gods?', to which he said, 'Immortal men?' In other words, we all want to be the god of our own lives and have immortal lives. Everlasting life is a reality but there is only one that is desired, and only one way to attain it, and that is through Jesus the Son, to God the Father, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Until now, God had allowed the Gentile world to go its own way. He had focused on the Jews, probably in a way to show the rest of the world just what people will do even with the privileges of knowing God intimately and rejecting him, by giving them the covenants and all the blessings, and the law, a code of life, which they could neither keep nor had they really tried to do so, but sought other gods that the heathen Gentile world had. The Jews were then punished for their idolatry but the Gentiles were not: <<These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face>> (Psalm 50:21). Times had now changed, the Gospel was being brought to the Gentiles and all mankind is now without excuse. A choice has to be made and judgement will

come upon each and every person according to their choices, and the subsequent implementation of those choices.

He suffered the Gentiles for their hostility towards God, as it was done mainly in ignorance: <<Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief>> (1 Timothy 1:13).

He now invites all of us to repent. The only exclusions are those who have turned to Satan and are not willing to give up that relationship. All other men can choose to come to God through Jesus by repenting their sins and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, with all that entails for their lives, now and throughout eternity.

<sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

#### Acts 17:31

He will judge the world means that God will hold all people accountable, even these philosophers in Athens. In his explanation that it is this God who will judge all men for what they did and didn't do: <<For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad>> (2 Corinthians 5:10), he states that a day has been set for it to happen: <<This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares>> (Romans 2:16).

Raising him from the dead. Jesus was not just a religious teacher. The resurrection of Jesus is at the centre of God's plan for history and is the basis for hope in the future resurrection of the body, see 1 Corinthians 15:42-57 and Revelation 21:4. It is also key evidence to persuade people to believe in Christ: <<But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him>> (Acts 2:24), and: <<God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact>> (Acts 2:32). Most importantly, the resurrection placed Jesus at God's right hand, showing his authority to be the judge and the giver of salvation that Paul is describing, see Acts 2:30-36.

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

#### Acts 17:32-34

As a result of Paul's address to the Areopagus, Luke notes that a few men believed, Greek andres, referring to male human beings, as would have been the case for members of the Areopagus (v.22). In addition to these men who initially believed, some others also, Greek kai, meaning 'and also', believed, including Dionysius, and a woman named Damaris, as well as a number of others, i.e. in addition to Dionysius and Damaris.

Athens was one of the most fruitless places Paul worked. The philosophers and others, with their apparent great learning and desire for further knowledge and wisdom, could not reconcile their understanding to the Resurrection of Jesus, as it went against most of their understanding of death and the afterlife. In a way, their prideful attitude was as arrogant as the Pharisees and was a barrier to them coming to God. The difference in the two groups being that the Pharisees had the word of God to tell them this would happen and still they did not believe. The Athenians only had the word of Paul; however eloquent and

commanding he was, he would have not been as impressive to them as he would have been to many, as they were used to such debates and their hearts were hard to the message, which was the key difference.

But not all, some wanted to hear more, which is all a follower of Jesus can ask for, but better still some believed straight away, probably because their hearts were open to God and they were convicted by the Holy Spirit, either before or during Paul's oratory.

According to Eusebius, Dionysius was a judge and senator in the Areopagus on Mars Hill. He was a local Athenian, who had studied astrology in Egypt and was there at the time of the miraculous eclipse that occurred during the Saviour's passion, something he took particular note of. When he returned to Athens, he would at first dispute with Paul but then was converted to faith in Jesus from his error and idolatry. He went on to be the first Bishop of Athens. By this one convert alone, Paul's labours in Athens were not in vain.