

Second Missionary Journey: Thessalonica, Berea, Athens
Read Acts 17.1-34

INTRODUCTION / CONNECTIONS / CONTEXT

1/ This lesson is a continuation of the [last lesson](#), and the narrative of this second missionary journey will continue on through **ch 18.21**. As we stated in our last lesson, **ch 18.22-23** describes a brief stay again in their home/sending church in Antioch before embarking again on their third missionary journey.

2/ What these three chapters **16-18** contain is a summarized itinerary/travelogue of this second missionary campaign. Just as **ch 16** tells of their ministry in Derbe, Lystra, the ‘Macedonian call’ to come to help them in Macedonia/Greece, and then on to Philippi. So, in our last lesson, after accounts of Lydia’s conversion, Paul and Silas being beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi, the conversion of the Philippian jailer, and then their leaving Philippi, the next place of ministry in in Thessalonica.

I / vv 1-9 | Thessalonica

1/ **vv 1-3** / Amphipolis and Apollonia are cities between Philippi and Thessalonica. Thessalonica was less than 100 miles SW from Philippi and was the capital city of the province of Macedonia. Upon arriving in Thessalonica, Paul followed his usual custom of seeing if there were **synagogues of the Jews** in that city. There was one in Thessalonica. **“And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”**

NOTE that Paul’s method of preaching among the Jews was to take the OT Scriptures which they had, knew, and read from every Sabbath day—much like he did in Pisidian Antioch [**ch 13.13-41**]. Paul showed the hearers from their own Scriptures that the Messiah whom they professed to be looking and longing for had come in the Person and ministry of **this Jesus!** ALL of the OT Scriptures portrayed, pictured, promised, and pointed to the coming of Christ. Christ had come and had fulfilled them all! **THIS** is the message of the Gospel! [NOTE: although Paul’s *public* ministry in the Jewish synagogues was only **three Sabbath days**, we can be sure that his *daily* interactions among those same hearers offered him much more opportunity for teaching and witnessing ministry. ALSO we know that during this brief time, which may have also extended more *privately* after his expulsion from the synagogues, established close, affectionate, and loving relationships with the Thessalonians as he repeatedly expressed in **1 & 2 Thessalonians** in often-repeated testimonies...

2/ **v 4** / Some of the Jewish hearers **were persuaded**; along with **a great many of the devout Greeks** [these would have been Gentile peoples who were ‘God-fearers’—they were persuaded of the True One God the Jews believed in, but had not become proselytes, or converted to Judaism by circumcision and observance of the Jewish customs]; and also **not a few of the leading women**. These would have been women, maybe like entrepreneurs like Lydia in Philippi, who had risen to positions of status and influence in their city. Once again, we are reminded that God has His chosen people everywhere, and **“as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” [ch 13.48]**. Preach the Gospel, and God will call and save!

3/ **vv 5-9** / But again, as always, Satan and the kingdom of darkness will oppose and raise his followers to attack the spread of the Gospel. This time it will come from the **jealous Jews** who view Christ, His Gospel, and His followers as enemies of their religion. Just look at the contradictory irony of this: these unbelieving Jews, who claim to be the Kingdom of God, are **jealous** of the impact and influence of the Gospel message that their True King, Jesus Christ, had come to announce and establish! So they spread the word around among **some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring out to the crowd**, obviously with the intention of ‘lynching’ them and killing them on the spot. [BTW, this Jason seems to be the same one Paul names in **Romans 16.21**. Jason appears to have joined with Paul after having believed and ‘joins the team’ as one of Paul’s faithful helpers.] But since Paul wasn’t ‘at home’ in Jason’s house, **“they dragged Jason and some of the**

brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’” Oh, that we were so zealous in our own cities to ‘turn the world upside down’ with the life-changing and transforming message of the Gospel! We don’t know what all they meant by their charges **‘they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus,’** other than we do know the Caesars had deified themselves, not just as civil kings, but also as ‘gods’ themselves—requiring everyone in the Roman empire to swear ultimate fealty and allegiance to Caesar. NOTE that Christians are not insurrections against their ruling authorities. We are not out to overthrow our governments by force or fight as underground liberators or freedom fighters. But we do proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and our first and ultimate allegiance is to Him and His Kingdom. The apostles have stood this ground before and staked the flag of supreme obedience to Jesus Christ in **ch 4.13-20 & 5.27-29**. Apparently, they were unwilling to follow through with their intentions to punish Jason beyond hefty fines, so **“when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”**

II / vv 10-15 | Berea

1/ **vv 10-12** / The believers in Thessalonica spirited Paul out of the city by night. They went to neighboring Berea, just a few miles due west of Thessalonica. Again, **“when they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue,”** preaching Christ from the OT Scriptures just as they had done in Thessalonica. They enjoyed a much warmer reception in Berea: **“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”** Ever since then, we have called those who are eager and interested in studying the Word of God ‘Bereans.’ We should all desire and strive to be Bereans. And we can also be sure that the reason these Bereans were so willing to hear the Gospel message from the Scriptures is because **‘the Lord opened their hearts to pay attention to what was said by Paul’ [16.14]. “Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek [Gentile] women of high standing as well as men.”**

2/ **v 13** / But Satan never rests! And we must never expect him to rest in opposing our witness and ministry either! The Devil never takes a vacation. **“But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the Word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.”** The unbelieving Jews, still holding on to their religious traditions—all of which Christ had fulfilled in the Gospel—are bound and determined to stop the spread of Christ’s Gospel to anyone else... and especially to reaching the Gentiles.

3/ **vv 14-15** / At this point, the missionary team splits up—not from conflict or disagreement this time, but—for the sake of Paul’s safety and the continuing spread of the Gospel. **“Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there [in Berea].** Paul was the targeted ‘lightning rod’ and ‘hot potato’ of the missionary team. So they sent him off in the direction of the Aegean Sea—he will arrive in Athens to the south. Silas and Timothy remained behind to continue teaching and strengthening the church there in Berea—to establish them in the faith and disciple them to remain faithful to their new-found faith in Christ. **“Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed to return to Berea.”**

III / vv 16-21 | Athens: witnessing in the marketplace

1/ **vv 16-17** / NOW when we come to Athens, we’re going to find a somewhat different cultural context, environment, and Gospel approach than Paul has encountered in visits to previous cities—although it will be similar to his approach he implemented in Lystra in **ch 14.8-18**. Except that the Athenian idolaters will not extend the same cordial hospitality. But Athens was the cultural, religious, and philosophical epicenter of Greek life in the Roman empire. **“Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy—see vv 14-15], his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”** Idols were

everywhere! Some historians and commentators have made the observation that Athens had more idolatrous images to their numerous gods than they had inhabitants in the city. This visceral reaction was the response of Paul's conscience and his jealousy for the glory of God. *"He experiences something like a gut reaction, a physical sensation stemming from seeing or hearing something deeply upsetting. Athens is full of some of the best art and architecture in the known world, and a vast part of it consists of depictions (mainly statues and reliefs) of the gods and temples dedicated to them. It is not the multiple idols in and of themselves ('an idol has no real existence'; 1 Corinthians 8:4) but the pervasive hold that idolatry has over the people that upsets Paul."* Brian J. Vickers | *ESV Expository Commentary*. Paul immediately gets to work: **"So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons [again, Jewish worshipers and 'God-fearer' Gentiles], and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there."** NOTE: *this is also how we should respond to the unbelieving and perverted culture in which we live and see all around us. All too often, we react, not with grieved consciences and souls for the lostness of our neighbors, but rather with disdain, rejection, animosity, and even bitterness toward them because they are 'different' than we are...or because they are rejecting our moral traditions and seeking to dismantle and destroy our cherished values. Yes! We must 'earnestly contend for the faith delivered once for all to the saints,' but we must do so from our love for those who are lost in their sins and perversions...and from a sense of jealousy for the glory of God.*

2/ vv 18-19 / Two of the most prominent schools of philosophy in Athens were the **Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** who **also conversed with him**. *"Epicurean sought what we would call the 'good life,' searching out how to live peacefully and to be content and satisfied in the world. For them the gods were, at best remote. Stoics, on the other hand, believed basically in what we might call fate and that the best way to live was for each individual to take responsibility for self-discipline and to avoid extremes in all directions. In the face of an impersonal force moving the universe along, only strict ethical codes and virtuous living could bring order to life. Neither group believed that the gods were involved in the day-to-day world."* [Vickers, *ibid.*]. Both the Epicureans and Stoics scoffed at Paul: **"What does this babbler have to say?"** That word 'babblers' literally means 'seed-picker,' like a bird that just randomly scavenges around on the ground looking for any seed or crumb of food it might find. It's a derogatory term and expression: this man is just pecking around to see if he can find some kind of idea to believe in—whereas they were sure they had found their 'truth.' It was a condescending, insulting, and dismissive 'blowing off' of Paul's message. And what was Paul's message? It was the Gospel of Jesus Christ! **"Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."** Paul's message of Jesus and the resurrection was not only the historical account of Jesus' identity and ministry, but also the Gospel of repentance and faith in Him as the only God and Savior of sinners—as we shall see from his preaching when they give him the opportunity to speak...

3/ vv 19-21 / **"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."** So now Paul is given a forum, platform, and 'free space' to preach the Gospel—and his 'pulpit' is NOT in a venue where the True God is known or worshiped, BUT within view of the Athenian acropolis, Parthenon, and the agora [marketplace] where their numerous false gods are on proud and prominent display. How does Paul proceed to preach the Gospel to these pagan unbelievers who know nothing about the content of the Old Testament Scriptures? Paul will present the objective truth of the Scriptures without quoting specific references. He will tell the 'story' of the True God, relating every truth about God to the 'real world' in which they and all of us live. Paul gives us a sterling model here how we can and should introduce God into the lives of people who are totally ignorant of who we know God to be or of anything the Bible says about Him...and us. *"Paul's address, almost certainly shortened and edited by Luke (it is hard to imagine that Paul spoke only a few minutes), is the most brilliant presentation of the message of Christ to Gentiles in the NT. Using Scripture as his fundamental, unapologetic foundation, Paul weaves in physical and*

cultural surroundings, religious and philosophical backgrounds, and his knowledge of Greek literature to build a seamless presentation of the one true and living God as both judge and redeemer of all people. It is astonishing in its profound simplicity.” [Vickers, ibid.]

IV / vv 22-34 | Athens: addressing the philosophers in the Areopagus

1/ What we will do here is break down the ‘points’ Paul made as he introduces the truths about God, about Christ, and about the Gospel they must know and believe to be saved from their sins and their perverted, pervasive idolatries [which all of us have in our unbelief—in all of our various expressions and practices]...

2/ **So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said...**

- **“I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the object of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”** This is a masterful acknowledgment that they were, in fact, seeking to know God—though they did not know the one True God they were seeking to know and worship. NOTE that Paul is not just offering God as another to complete or add to their existing pantheon of false gods [we call this ‘syncretism’—mixing elements of various beliefs until you find what you think you can live with or want to believe]. Paul will take them from where they are and what they know to the *only* True God there is...
- **God made the world and everything that is in it, being Lord of heaven and earth...** Everything you see, know, and experience in the world in which you live was created by this God...
- **God does not live in temples made with hands...** of which there were many in Athens alone.
- **God is self-sufficient in, of, and from Himself...** He is the uncreated God in contrast to all these gods and temples you yourself have created to worship. He needs NOTHING from any of us!
- **God is the One who gives life and breath and everything...** He is the ultimate Supplier of everything created and the Source of all existence—including your very physical human life and breath.
- **God created all the nations and peoples of the earth from the one man He made...** Paul simply uses the word ‘from one,’ meaning that ALL the ethnicities of the one human race have come from ‘one’ common ancestor—in this case, Adam.
- **God has also sovereignly determined and allotted where all these peoples and nations would live over the course of human history...** all of our chronicles and annals—is truly ‘HIS-story.’
- **God created the world with all its inhabitants for one purpose: that we may know Him and worship Him—and Him only...** [see Revelation 4.11; 14.6-7]. As Romans 1.18-32 expounds, it is WE who have sought and felt around to reject this one True God, choosing rather to idolize, follow, and worship ourselves and the other created objects rather than the God who created them.
- **Your own poets have expressed this created, innate knowledge within us all—that there is a God who is greater than we are** [quoting Epimenides and Aratus].
- **God has been merciful, forbearing, and longsuffering to the perversions of the idolatrous nations until now—not destroying them immediately with His judgments—but now He commands everyone to repent and turn in faith to the ‘Man whom He has appointed’ to be our ultimate Judge and Savior, Jesus Christ, whom He sent to die for our sins and raised Him from the dead to forgive us of our sins.**

3/ Again, this is only the ‘bullet points’ of Paul’s fuller message he delivered to them. And again, God made the message effective: **“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”**

“...but now He commands all people everywhere to repent!”