

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Three cities in which the Gospel is next preached are before us in this chapter. But there is a marked difference between these three places. In Thessalonica there was much hostility, the result of the success of the Gospel. In Berea a more noble class of Jews were found. Their nobility consisted in submission to the Scriptures, the oracles of God, and in a ready mind. There was a still greater blessing among the Jews and the Gentiles. In Athens the Apostle Paul met idolatry, indifference and ridicule.

I. The Gospel in Thessalonica (Verses 1-9).

II. The Gospel in Berea (Verses 10-14).

III. Paul in Athens (Verses 15-34).

I. The Gospel in Thessalonica.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul, as his manner was, went into the room, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, 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. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These things have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the others, they let them go” (Verses 1-9).

No record is given of work done on the way to Thessalonica.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the blessed messengers of the cross made for the influential capital of the province, knowing that they would find a goodly number of Jews there and a synagogue where they could preach.

Thessalonica was one of the most influential cities in those days. Even to-day it is a city of almost 100,000 inhabitants and its ancient name is still to be traced in its present one, that is, Saloniki, the second largest city in European Turkey. It has an excellent location on the Aegean Sea and by a direct road, the Egnatian way, had communication with the capital of the Roman Empire.

It was one of the free cities of the Empire and had its own constitution. This was democratic, its authority resting with the *Demos*, the people. The chief magistrates were called *Politarchs*, as we would call them now, *city fathers* or *rulers*. This word is used by Luke in verses 6 and 8.

As it is not found at all in classical literature, certain Bible critics accused the writer of the Book of Acts of inaccuracy and impeached in this way the inspiration of the book. But like all other criticism, this charge has come back upon the critics.

There is in the British Museum to-day a stone block in which the word “*Politarch*” is chiseled. The stone was taken from a triumphal arch, which stood in Thessalonica in the first century and which was preserved till 1867, when it was destroyed. The one stone block containing an inscription was transferred to the famous British Museum. The inscription is translated as follows:

“The *Politarchs* being Sopater, son of Cleopatra, and Lucius Pontius Secundus, Aulus Arius Sabinus, Demetrius son of Faustus, Demetrius son of Nicopolis, Foilus son of Parmenio also called Meniscus, Caius Agilleius Potitus.”

It is intensely interesting to find that some of these names are mentioned in Acts 20:4.

In this city the missionaries entered, and Paul at once sought out the synagogue. This was his custom. For three Sabbath days, or, as the margin has it, weeks, he ministered the Word to the Jews. And now we have before us a very interesting record. **“He reasoned with them out of (from) the Scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must have needs suffered and risen again from the dead: and that this Jesus (he said) whom I preach unto you is Christ.”**

From this we may learn important lessons.

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 were the foundation of it.

Of course, the Old Testament is meant by the name Scriptures, for the New Testament Scriptures were not yet in existence.

Such reasonings suited the Jewish mind well. It is still the best way in which to approach the Jew with the Gospel. The method which Paul followed is by far the best. He opened the Scriptures. The Law, the Prophets and the Writings * were opened by him in reference to the Messiah, whom God had promised to them.

* The Old Testament in Hebrew is divided into three parts. *Thora*, the Law; *Nevijm*, the Prophets; *Kethuvim*, the Writings - such as Proverbs, Psalms, Job, etc.

He quoted the great Messianic prophecies.

He must have turned to the Psalms and opened that blessed book in its many predictions. No doubt the different types as given in the tabernacle and its worship, the sacrifices and offerings, the Passover and deliverance out of Egypt, the brazen serpent and other events were rehearsed by him. But the argument and reasoning was altogether on the Person of the Messiah.

He showed that the Scriptures teach that the promised Christ had to suffer and to die and rise again from the dead. Then after he had established this fact, independent of who that promised Messiah is, he pressed home another fact, namely, that Jesus whom he preached is that Christ.

How powerful this reasoning must have been and under the Holy Spirit; it brought conviction to their hearts. Some believed. But the greater success was among the devout Greeks, such as had abandoned idolatry, who were attendants at the synagogue. A great multitude with many of the chief women believed. But many of these Greeks, as we learn from the Epistle to the Thessalonians, were converted directly from idolatry, “**they turned to God from idols**” (I Thessalonians 1:9).

As servants the Apostle and his companions had perfect liberty to enter these synagogues to deliver the message. This liberty still belongs to all who are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. The servants at Christ have perfect freedom to go wherever the Lord opens a door to preach the Gospel. *

* We emphasize this because there are some ultra separationists who form little sects, claiming to be the church. They forbid their preachers and teachers to enter church buildings of the different denominations and have even put some out of their fellowship because they preach the Gospel in a church.

Another interesting fact is learned concerning the activity of the apostle in Thessalonica from the two Epistles, which he addressed some time after to the Thessalonians.

These were the first Epistles Paul wrote. From these we learn that the Apostle not only preached the Gospel, but also taught the Thessalonian believers prophetic Truths and emphasized the Second Coming of Christ and the events connected with it. In the Second Epistle he reminds them of his oral teaching. “**Remember ye not that when I was yet with you I told you these things**” (II Thessalonians 2:5).

He told them that they were to wait for His Son from heaven (I Thessalonians 1:10); that there would be the falling away first and the man of sin be revealed before the day of the Lord could come (II Thessalonians 2:3-7) as well as other truths. He did therefore not think, as it is said so often in our days, that dispensational truths were too deep for these new converts and babes in Christ.

Nothing in God's Word is too deep for those who are born again and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This apostolic method is absolutely necessary to open up the Truth of God and lead newborn saints into it. One of the reasons of present day conditions among those who are no doubt saved, is the lack of dispensational teachings, which the Apostle Paul had so closely linked with the preaching of the Gospel in Thessalonica.

But the enemy was soon aroused in the city.

Once more the acts of the enemy through the unbelieving Jews are recorded. He resorts to the same tactics as at Philippi to stir up the mob of the city. The rabble stormed the house of Jason, where the Apostle and Silas lodged. Their intention was to drag the two before the people.

Failing to find these, they drew Jason and some other brethren before the Politarchs. Then the usual tumult ensued and the accusation was shouted out - **“These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason has received, and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another King, one Jesus.”**

The enemy gave a testimony in this accusation to the power and influence of Christianity.

The accusation that they opposed Caesar's decrees and claiming that another is King, namely Jesus, must have sprung from the fact that the dispensational teaching Paul gave had reached the people in a distorted way. Persecution set in, and from the Epistles to the Thessalonians we learn that the church there had much tribulation.

So severe became the troubles that the Thessalonians were greatly disturbed when false teachers spread the report that they were facing the great tribulation. To set their minds at rest on this question the apostle wrote his second Epistle. The rulers here took security of Jason and the others and then let them go.

II. The Gospel in Berea.

“And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people. And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still” (Verses 10-14).

Paul and Silas were immediately sent away by night.

What had become of Timothy? He is not at all mentioned in connection with this visit to Thessalonica nor do we hear anything from him since he joined Paul and Silas at Lystra. However from this we must not conclude that he had left them. There is sufficient evidence that he was with them in Thessalonica. Both Epistles to the Thessalonians are from Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus (I Thessalonians 1:1; II Thessalonians 2:1). This is conclusive evidence that he was with Paul and Silas. (Silas is the same as Silvanus).

From these Epistles is also gained the information that Paul and most likely also his companions worked with their own hands (I Thessalonians 2:9; II Thessalonians 3:8).

And now we find them in the City of Berea, some 40 miles from Thessalonica. This city had a magnificent situation at the foot of a mountain range. It is still a good sized city, known by the name of Verna.

As soon as they arrived in the city, they went to the synagogue and here they found evidently prepared ground. The Jews they found are described as **“more noble than those in Thessalonica.”**

The word noble does not mean, as some have said, a kind of aristocracy, but it consisted in a ready mind to receive and test by the Scriptures what the messengers of the Lord had to say.

They searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. They were anxious to know the truth and in searching the Word they compared Scripture with Scripture. Alas! How little of this readiness of mind and searching the Scriptures one finds among the modern Jews. Many have rejected their own Scriptures and the orthodox Jews are sadly ignorant of the oracles of God, while the Talmudical sayings, the oral traditions of the elders and the paraphrases have worked untold mischief. Only when the judicial blindness which rests upon them will be removed, the veil which is upon their hearts (II Corinthians 3:13-15) will they see Him of whom Moses and the Prophets spake.

But the neglect of the Bible is as marked, if not greater, in nominal Christendom. May we search the Scriptures daily.

Therefore, because they had a ready mind and searched the Scriptures, many believed.

And to the Berean assembly there were also added Gentiles - **“of honorable Women which were Greeks, and of men not a few.”**

Satan, however, knows no rest. When an effectual door is opened, then the adversaries begin.

News of Paul and Silas preaching in Berea reached Thessalonica and Satan brought his willing instruments, the unbelieving Jews, to Berea to stir up the people. It was thought best by the brethren, no doubt after prayer and direction from the Lord, to send Paul away. Silas and Timothy remained there.

III. Paul in Athens.

“And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed. Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is. For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians, and strangers which were there, spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing)” (Verses 15-21).

The exact route which Paul took is uncertain. Some of the noble brethren of Berea conducted him, showing thereby their courtesy as well as love for the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. When they parted the Apostle sent through them a message to Silas and Timotheus to come to him with all speed.

And now we behold our great Apostle in the wonderful city of Athens, the capital of Greece.

Well has one said:

“Paul at Athens, Paul the Jew of Tarsus in the city of Pericles and Demosthenes, of Sophocles and Euripides, of Socrates and Plato - that is a situation to which our pen cannot attempt to do justice: Nor is it less difficult adequately to estimate the place of Athens in the Roman Empire. For at this date Athens was still the intellectual and artistic capital of the world. It was also a religious capital, for it was the stronghold of the Greek mythology, which was generally accepted as the most authentic account of the gods and their history.”

What a great city it must have been! What splendor in art and architecture the eyes of the apostle must have beheld! Here the great masterpieces of the greatest masters in architecture and sculpture were to be seen. And then the memories of the past and the great philosophical leaders and their different schools.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had moved and taught in this city and the proud Athenians had erected upon their philosophies different schools. It was furthermore a great religious city, full of idols. Xenophon said of Athens:

“The whole of it is one great altar, one sacrifice and votive offering to the gods.”

One artist tried to outdo the other with filling streets and temples with idol statues. But at the same time this great city was on the road to degeneracy. The Athenians lived on the glories of the past, both in art and philosophy. Of this verse 21 bears a striking witness.

Paul in walking through the streets of the city and seeing it wholly given to idolatry was very much stirred in him; he was provoked. He did not halt to examine the temples and great masterworks. Behind the much praised masterpieces he beheld the corruption and wickedness of the human heart.

Not alone was his own spirit provoked in him, but the Holy Spirit stirred him to witness against it. In the synagogues, first of all, he disputed with the Jews and the devout persons, Greeks who had turned away from idols, and in the market daily, he spoke with those that met him.

The market was the Agora, an open square in the heart of the city. On its sides stood the public buildings what we would call City Hall, courthouses and the temples of different gods. Here also numerous shops were found, and, like in our country towns it was the place of buying and selling, for the people from the country came in with their wares. When business hours were over then the gossipers began. It was the place where new opinions were expounded, where philosophers and traveling orators found a ready audience.

From classical literature we learn, that Socrates 450 years before moved in this very place and spoke to individuals and by severe questionings tried to destroy their self confidence and explain his philosophy. But in Paul a greater than Socrates was moving around the Agora, questioning and reasoning with all who would listen.

Soon he came across some Epicureans and Stoics.

The Epicureans were Materialists. They believed in a certain sense in gods, but held in their belief something like the atomic theory of present day science. They denied a life after death.

The Stoics held a belief in a supreme being. They believed that in the Universe there existed an omnipresent spirit and of this spirit the human spirit was a part. The modern Pantheism was their creed. Yet they were religious. But they were extremely self-righteous and proud.

The Stoics were much like the Pharisees, while the Epicureans represent the Sadducees of Judaism. With some of these philosophers the Apostle met. As they listened to him they termed him a babbler. *

* The Greek word is *Spermalogos*, translated, a seed picker. It was a slang word used to describe the people who frequented the Agora and picked up, like birds, a little here and there.

Others were more serious and charged him with being a setter forth of strange gods. For this very thing Socrates had been put to death. But we are not left in ignorance of what Paul preached. He knew but one theme, Jesus and the resurrection.

So one day they took hold on him and brought him unto Areopagus.

The Areopagus was a court corresponding to the Roman Senate. Here he had a representative audience of philosophers, leading citizens and a large number of the gossipers, the folks who spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Here was their opportunity. Standing before the Athenian Court Areopagus he is told in a polite way to defend himself of the accusation made against him. “May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears; we would know therefore what those things mean.”

“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from everyone of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (vss. 22-34).

The address of the great apostle is one of unusual tact and wisdom.

If he became to the Jews as a Jew, here he becomes to the Grecian philosophers as a philosopher. He makes use of both the Epicureal and Stoic philosophy as far as he can and avoids as much as possible what might stumble them. He starts with the belief in God as the omnipresent and immanent Creator, the Ruler and Keeper of the Universe. This he could back up by quotations from their own poets. After this ground work he speaks of judgment to come, and introduced Him who is the Judge, and the fact of His resurrection.

Let us examine this discourse in its different parts. It has three parts.

1. *The Introduction* (Verses 22-23).
2. *Who the Unknown God Is* (Verses 24-29).
3. *The Message From God* (Verses 30-31).

1. *The Introduction.*

He addressed them by the usual phrase, “**Ye men of Athens.**”

The charge he brings against them is not superstition. What he said was that the Athenians were a very religious people, given to the worship of many deities. It was a wise statement. It would be well if some Gospel preachers would profit by it.

In preaching the Gospel to Romanists or to the Jews one does well not to antagonize their customs, but to avoid such controversies. Paul had found in Athens an altar with a strange inscription, "**TO THE UNKNOWN God.**" *

* Other ancient authorities speak of the existence of such altars in Athena. For instance, Philostratus and Lucian.

How this altar came to be in Athens is not known. It certainly bore witness to the fact that the true God was an unknown God to the Athenians. In this fact the Apostle found the true starting point. The human heart can set up gods and altars, beginning with the likeness of man, then of birds, quadrupeds and reptiles (Romans 1:22), but the true God the human heart with its vain reasonings cannot discover. He can only be known from revelation. And Paul is now in the presence of this illustrious audience to make known the unknown God.

"**Him,**" he said, "**I declare unto you.**"

2. Who the Unknown God Is.

He unfolds the truth of God as a Person. He is a personal God and as such He made the world and all things therein. This truth was not owned by the Epicureans or the Stoics. The Epicureans with their atomic theory, that the universe came together by itself, and the Stoics with their cold Pantheism denied this fundamental truth. This bold announcement effectually set aside the philosophical babblings of these wise men, and these few words completely answer the modern Materialists and Pantheists.

With the next sentence Paul lays bare the follies of paganism. As Lord of heaven and earth, because He is the Creator, He does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor can He be worshipped with men's hands as though he needed anything. In this statement he leaned towards the expressions used by the Epicureans, who declared that the divine nature is self sufficiency and needs nothing from us. But at the same time he rebukes the Stoics by showing that God giveth to all life, and breath and all things. He is the Preserver as well as the Creator.

Next Paul shows that God created man and that all nations of men are made by Him of one blood. This was not believed in paganism. Polytheism was closely connected with the conception that the different races came into existence in different ways. The various races therefore had different racial gods. The Greeks had divided the world into two classes, Greeks and Barbarians. That they, the proud Greeks, had sprung from the same stock as the Barbarians must have humbled them greatly. It rebuked their national pride. All the Apostle said to the cultured Greeks, the great philosophers was elementary.

The most simple truth about God and the origin of man could not be discovered by the keenest intellect. How all this bears out the divine statement in Romans:

“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations [reasonings] and their foolish [senseless] heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise (philosophers) they became fools” (Romans 1:21-22).

And furthermore Paul states that God is the governor over the nations. He has set the bounds of their habitations. The creature is to seek after the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, though He be not far from everyone of us. All this, and that in Him we live and move and have our being, is in connection with God as Creator, that He is the giver of life and breath and all things. The creature is sustained by Him.

Then in connection with this he quotes from their own poets. **“As certain also of your poets have said, for we are also His offspring.”**

Two Greek poets had spoken thus, Cleanthus and Aratus. Aratus was a Stoic. Thus he used the expressions of their own poets against themselves. These poets had more wisdom than the philosophers. In quoting this sentence from the poets Paul presses home the truth that man in his nature is the creation of God, created in the image of God. But where has man drifted to? Idolatry in its wicked foolishness is exposed.

The Godhead has been made like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device. It uncovered the miserable folly into which their reasonings had led them. How significant that in cultured Athens the great Apostle had to come down to the most elementary things of the truth.

3. The Message From God.

Their sin of idolatry had been uncovered and now the apostle brings a message to their hearts. He calls the times of their boasted philosophies and progress **“the times of this ignorance,”** and assures them that God has overlooked it, passed it by. But now He calls to repentance.

He aims at their conscience to awaken them to the sense of need to turn away from idols to the true God.

God sends to all one message, be they Jew or Gentiles, Greeks or Barbarians, to repent. And then he states the reason. A day is appointed in which He will judge the world in righteousness. The one through whom God will judge is a Man ordained by Him; then follows the declaration of the resurrection of this Man.

The day of judgment here does not mean a universal judgment (a term not known in Scripture) nor the great white throne judgment. The judgment here does not concern the dead at all, but it is the judgment of the habitable world. It is the judgment which will take place when the Man whom God raised from the dead, our Lord Jesus Christ comes the second time. His resurrection is the assurance of it.

But why did the apostle not press home the Gospel and speak of the forgiveness of sins? They were not ready for this. He talked to them as philosophers to stir up their consciences.

As soon as they heard of the resurrection of the dead, it was enough for most of them. Some began to mock. They plainly proved that they were far from the condition to hear more of salvation. Others said, as Felix said later, We will hear thee again of this matter. But even this testimony was not in vain. Some clave unto him and believed. No doubt he took these apart and instructed them in God's way of salvation.

Among them is mentioned a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius, the Areopagite. Tradition says that he became the leader of the Athenian Assembly.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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