

Acts 17 New King James Version

Preaching Christ at Thessalonica

17 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." ⁴ And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

Assault on Jason's House

⁵ But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." ⁷ Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." ⁸ And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. ⁹ So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Ministering at Berea

¹⁰ Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. ¹² Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ So

those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

The Philosophers at Athens

¹⁶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?" ²⁰ For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore, we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Addressing the Areopagus

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of the ^[1]Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

*****TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.*****

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one

of us;²⁸ for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’²⁹ Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.³⁰ Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.”³³ So Paul departed from among them.³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Sermon on Faith and Knowledge

I believe there are a fair number of people in this congregation who have traveled a bit for their occupations. Certainly, it was a large part of both Leah and my own experience. When you are still young, the life can seem almost romantic; you travel to new places, meet people from vastly different backgrounds, sometimes you get to stay in pretty high-end hotels, and you are on a corporate card.

Eventually though you find that you are spending a lot of time alone, you miss your family, you realize that if you are married, you are putting stress on your spouse and your relationship. You miss some important events in your child’s life.

The layers of complexities eventually become overwhelming, and you just want to be able to stay at home.

Paul’s “professional life” had him on the road for most of the 35 years he preached the word of Christ, and the importance of the faith in a forgiving

God. His road life was a bit more austere than ours.

There were no hotels available for his “sort”. He mostly slept on the ground or at some fellow believer’s house. He and his companions traveled either by foot, or by triremes. A trireme was a galley; a long, narrow, highly maneuverable ship powered by oarsmen, sometimes stacked in multiple levels.

Sailing the Mediterranean Sea was a dangerous endeavor; not only were there pirates and dangerous storms, but navigation was also far from being an accurate technology.

It would take 2 weeks for a ship to sail from Israel to Athens; 643 nautical miles. A modern ship sails that in a day and a quarter or less.

Paul’s problems didn’t end with these logistical details.

Many groups didn’t want Paul and his associates to preach to people at all, and especially in “their city”. The leaders of many Jewish communities saw them as heretics of a “false Messiah”.

When members of their synagogue began accepting the message of Christ, these leaders sought out the Roman guards to remove the “dangerous rabblers”.

They wanted severe punishment doled out; stoning or even crucifixion.

The Romans were atune to the Jewish leaders’ request, as rebellion in Roman cities was a fairly common thing; and was a sure passage to a much worse assignment for local Roman rulers.

In Greek cities, pilgrimage to Greek and Roman temples was a source of income, and certainly the sordid stalls around them sold all sorts of evil as well.

Strangers preaching different Gods, especially the Christian one, weren’t good for business, or their idol worship.

This chapter of Acts begins with Paul forced to leave Thessalonica, then Berea, and then finally arriving in Athens to preach. Paul is met at the **Areopagus** by Greek philosophers, who Paul notes, are

at the **Areopagus** for the sole purpose of debate. Luke mentions that they are Epicureans, who believe that pleasure is the sole intrinsic goal of life, and Stoics who are more interested in Epistemology than religion. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that examines the origins and limitations of knowledge. Think of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in regard to this.

At this point harken back to Paul's comments on the Greeks in 1st Corinthians, and their problems with religious faith:

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

These Greeks believed that they would **call Paul out for his preaching of Christ's resurrection, and his faith in an invisible God.**

Here however Paul calls them out for their hypocrisy:

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

This is in truth a devastating rebuke of both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Paul is pointing out that the Christian god does not simply reside in temples, nor does he need something from people. Nothing in man's imagination or design is of God's nature.

Christ's New Covenant

Paul dealing with the issue of belief in the resurrection of Christ, especially with the Greeks, in this Chapter of Acts come up at an interesting time for me.

It reflects an issue I have encountered recently, with numerous non-Christians; understanding the primary message of Christianity. In several cases this involved erstwhile well-educated individuals.

Many non-Christians believe that Christianity requires faultless persons in order in order to receive forgiveness and salvation.

This is entirely false. As you know Christ's message is that we as HUMANS can never do anything that can provision us with Christ's forgiveness and grace.

Christ requires from us that we have **FAITH in him, and that alone is what gives us his grace.**

In Romans Paul talks about the dichotomy of salvation by faith alone and the change that faith brings in our lives.

Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life, has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

For those that are not believers and did not grow-up in a household where Christian faith was

taught as a foundation; ideas about Christianity are often based on bad information.

Here is a list of Christian beliefs, non-Christians are sometimes confused about:

1. Salvation Through Faith. Salvation is an act of grace (kindness) on the part of God. Given to us through Christ's sacrifice, dependent only on faith in Christ. Salvation is NOT about human works.

Christ however hopes that we will lead a life that reflects our faith in him, and appreciation of his grace.

2. The Holy Trinity. The Triune nature of God is about our relationship with God, rather than how God perceives himself. We relate to God through our relationship with him as the Holy Spirit. We achieve Salvation through the sacrifice of his son here on Earth. We have life, and fulfillment of our needs through the blessings he bestows on us as God.

3. The Bible. Is the Bible the Word of God, a historical document, a moral guide, or a collection of metaphorical stories? We understand that it represents the basic tenets of our faith and explains, in simple form, the purpose of our faith. For centuries church leaders studied our Bible carefully to ensure its accuracy of that message. We believe that it is the "inspired word of God".

4. The Debate Of Faith Vs. Evidence. I have faith that Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity is true; but I can't prove it, because I don't know how. I just assume that space and time are interconnected, and they are perceived differently depending on the observer's motion. I also have faith in God, and I can't prove God's existence either.

Some assume that you can "only believe what you see". Yet when a living, breathing Christ was on Earth, and healed the sick, cured the blind, and broken, fed the multitude, and brought Lazarus back from the dead,

many many, who even witnessed these events, still refused to believe.

5. The Idea We Are All Sinners God didn't give us rules because he wanted to punish us. It is a logical fallacy to assume that this is the reason. The Ten Commandments serve us as a moral code for us to live by. God didn't assume we wouldn't sin, it was a given we would sin, but he knew we needed a framework of what is acceptable in a world in which we are to love and respect each other.

The Commandments serve as signposts that point us to a godly path, demonstrating our need for a Savior to restore us when we inevitably stray from that path.

6. Heaven And Hell. Christ defined who would be with him after death: (John 11:25)

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."

Heaven and hell are more than celestial locales; they're metaphors for moral choices.

7. The Role Of Women. Jesus elevated the status of women during His ministry on earth and the apostle Paul taught that men and women are equal in Christ. Jesus confronted this idea of inequality and showed that male and female are both precious in the sight of God.

8. The Resurrection: Historical Event Or Metaphor? For believers, it's the ultimate proof of God's power and love. The resurrection is not just about Jesus rising from the dead; it's about the promise of new life for all. It's a metaphor that speaks to renewal and transformation.

9. The Church Community. The church is a cornerstone of Christian life, offering community, support, and a sense of belonging. We are the church, it is not a building, it is the people inside, it is their faith and how that is reflected in the community.

10. Christian Love Is Unconditional. “Love thy neighbor” is perhaps one of the most quoted Christian tenets. It’s a divine mandate that calls for selfless giving and radical acceptance. Christians are called however to love the sinner, and not the sin. Here is what Paul says in Romans 12:9

⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

Our world is replete with our modern-day versions of Epicureans and Stoics. Doubt is often seen as an unmitigated virtue. However, logic alone informs us that this is not true. If I could only believe what I can prove, then there is very little I would believe. To live in such a world would make it impossible to relate to others, or to gain greater knowledge than what our own feeble experiences can dictate.

Conversely, if life had NO rules whatsoever, except for pleasure, then no one would ever sacrifice the smallest things for another person. No one would provide love to those who are need of solace and kindness; no one would determine whether the personal gain of an action might cause unbearable and undeserved pain to another.

God has provisioned us with his existence to not only give us faith in something greater than ourselves, but also to ensure that we have a compass by which to guide our lives.

Let us Pray:

Heavenly Father!

We live in a world which often challenges our faith, but we know and depend upon our conversations in prayer with you to restore us.

Help us to be a light for others; use us Lord as your tool, an instrument of your will, in their time of need.

Make our ears open, and our eyes to see, when we fail to be the people you wish us to become. Help us, so that we can hear your voice and see your will instead of our own.

Give us strength, even in the midst of adversity, to stand up for our faith, in times of turmoil.

Help us to see all those who are in need; let us witness the kindness and blessing you have given us by giving them also to others.

In your Holy Name we pray;

Amen