

## Acts 17 – Be a Berean!

THEME: The second missionary journey of Paul continued (Paul in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens).

### REMARKS

In this chapter we continue with Paul on his second missionary journey. In chapter 16 we were with him when he crossed over into Europe, a memorable, significant, revolutionary crossing. It brought the gospel to the ancestors of many of us, who were by no means a superior people. Actually, God chooses the weak things of this world just to let the world know that it is all because of His sovereign grace and not because of merit. We thank Him for sending the gospel over into Europe.

We went with Paul first to Philippi where he received some rough treatment. Yet, a little church came into existence in that town. When we study the epistle to that church, we will find that it was closer to the apostle Paul than any other church or any other group of believers.

Now he continues on his journey. I hope you will follow this on the map. You will notice that he goes to Thessalonica and Berea, still traveling westward into Macedonia, then south to Athens. Thessalonica will be his next significant stop for missionary activity.

### *Paul and Silas in Thessalonica*

***Act 17:1 And traveling through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.***

As we have noted before, Paul used the synagogue as a springboard to get into a city or a community. This would lead him to the devout Jews of the city, and some of those Jews would believe. Never did all of them believe, but some of them did. In fact, most of them would reject him, and this would push him right out to the Gentiles. Then some of the Gentiles believed. This is how a church would come into existence, a local church composed of Jews and Gentiles.

Amphipolis was also called “Nine Ways,” which suggests its importance both strategically and commercially. Most cities are built on the pattern of a square, but this was like a roundhouse, and the wall around it was round. It was an important station on the Via Egnatia, a Roman road which was the prominent thoroughfare through that area. It was five hundred miles from the Hellespont to Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic by this road. This would be the highway which the Roman army would use. This was the route the traders would travel. And now here come some missionaries on this road going to Thessalonica. Apollonia was another town on this same Egnatian Road.

Thessalonica was thirty–eight miles west of Apollonia on the Egnatian Road. It was inland but it was a seaport because three rivers flowed into the sea from there. It was a prominent city of that day, another Roman colony. Cassander rebuilt it in about 315 A.D., and it is thought that he named it after Thessalonica, the stepsister of Alexander the Great. There are some warm springs there and the earlier name of the town was Therma or Therme. Cassander was one of the generals of Alexander the Great, and he took over the rule of that area after the death of Alexander. At the time of Paul, however, the city was a Roman colony.

***Act 17:2-3 And according to Paul's custom, he went in to them and reasoned with them out of the Scriptures on three sabbaths, opening and setting forth that Christ must have suffered, and to have risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus whom I preach to you is Christ.***

Paul followed his usual custom of first preaching in the synagogue. He was there only three Sabbaths, which means that he could not have been there longer than a month. In that limited period of time, he did his missionary work. Believers came to Christ, a local church was organized, and Paul taught them. In that brief time, he taught them all the great

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doctrines of Scripture, including the doctrine of the Rapture of the church—we know this from his First Epistle to the Thessalonians which was the first Epistle that Paul wrote. Paul had quite a ministry there in one month's time!

Now note his message. He was “opening and alleging”—that is, from the Old Testament Scriptures— “that Christ must needs have suffered.” He preached the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, showing that this was necessary, as set forth in the Old Testament. Friend, you will not find a message given in the Book of Acts either by Peter or by Paul in which the Resurrection is not the heart of the message.

Today we find so often that the Resurrection just doesn't seem to be the heart of the message. What we talk about today is the Cross—even in fundamental circles. But, my friend, we have a living Christ today. Someone has put it this way: “There is a Man in the glory, but the church has lost sight of Him.” The Lord Jesus Christ is yonder at God's right hand at this very moment. That is very important. It is one thing to talk about the historical death of Christ nineteen hundred years ago and His resurrection on the third day, but the question is: How are you related to it? That was Paul's great theme in the Galatian epistle. Is it meaningful to you that Christ died and that He rose again? Are you related today to that living Christ? How has this been meshed and geared into your life?

Today we have conservatism in the church, and we have liberalism in the church and, very candidly, neither group seems to be getting through to Him. Why not? Well, because every Sunday should be Easter—on the first day of the week He came back from the dead! It is important to mention the resurrection of Christ because we are talking about the Man in the glory.

Unfortunately, that just doesn't seem to be the emphasis. Pastors don't emphasize it because seminaries don't emphasize it. Take down any theology book and study it—Strong's, Shedd's, Thornwall's, Hodge's, and you will find that all of them have a long section on the death of Christ. That's very important; thank God they have a long section on that. But they have a short section, just a few pages, on the Resurrection. I think they missed the boat there. I think they should have put in a long section about the resurrection of Christ. That was the basis of New Testament preaching. I'm emphasizing this because it is very important. Paul was in Thessalonica only three Sabbath days, and the resurrection of Christ was his message.

Notice their reception of Him.

***Act 17:4-7 And some of them believed and joined themselves to Paul and Silas, both a great multitude of the worshiping Greeks, and not a few of the chief women. But the disobeying Jews becoming jealous and having taken aside some wicked men of the market-loafers, and gathering a crowd, they set all the city in an uproar. And coming on the house of Jason, they sought to bring them out to the mob. And not finding them, they drew Jason and certain brothers before the city judges, crying, these who have turned the world upside down have come here too, whom Jason has received. And these all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.***

Some of them believed. That always happens when you give out the Word of God. Some of them believe. Also, some of them won't believe. The minority believe; the majority will not. - McGee

When Dr. Luke says, “of the chief women not a few,” he is using his usual understatement and means that a large number of prominent women came to the Lord. How wonderful!

Some of the Jews were persuaded and took their place with Paul and Silas as Christian believers. Also, many of the Greek proselytes and not a few of the leading women of the city were converted. This provoked the unbelieving Jews to decisive action. They rounded up some of the hoodlums from the marketplace, incited a riot, and besieged the house of Jason where Paul and Silas had been guests. When they did not find Paul and Silas in the house, they dragged Jason and some of his fellow believers before the rulers of the city (politarchs). Without meaning to, they paid a genuine tribute to

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Paul and Silas when they described them as men who had turned the world upside down. Then they charged them with plotting to overthrow the government of Caesar by preaching about another king—Jesus. It was, to say the least, a strange thing for Jews to be so zealous in safeguarding the government of Caesar, because they had little or no love for the Roman Empire.

But was their charge true? Doubtless they had heard Paul proclaim the Second Coming of Jesus to reign as king over all the earth. But this did not pose an immediate threat to Caesar, since Christ would not return to reign until Israel had repented nationally. - Believers Bible Commentary

**Do we have a Christian nation or a pagan nation? What is the implication of the answer to this question?**

***Act 17:8-9 And hearing these things, they troubled the crowd and the city judge. And taking security from Jason and from the rest, they let them go.***

The politarchs were troubled by these reports. They required Jason and those with him to post bail, probably adding instructions for his guests to leave the city. Then they let them go. – Believers' Bible Commentary

**This was no different to our current Bond system. They held Jason as Bond until the apostles left.**

Paul and Silas in Berea

***Act 17:10-11 And the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. They, when they arrived, went into the synagogue of the Jews. And these were more noble than those of Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to see if those things were so.***

You would think that all this would dampen the enthusiasm of Paul, that it would slow him down. It didn't slow him down one bit; he is still going. He goes to Berea, which is a town down closer to the coast. These people were reasonable. They searched the Scriptures, and there came into existence a church in Berea. We don't hear much about that church. It is interesting that the strongest churches arose where the persecution was the greatest. One of the troubles today is that the church is not being persecuted. In fact, the church is just taken for granted. The average Christian is just a person to be taken for granted. It wasn't that way in the first century. – McGee

**“Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. And weak men create hard times.”**

**— G. Michael Hopf, Those Who Remain**

***Act 17:12-14 Therefore many of them believed, and quite a few of honorable Greek women and men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica knew that the Word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the people. And then immediately the brothers sent Paul away to go towards the sea, but both Silas and Timothy stayed there.***

Here goes Dr. Luke again with his diminutive “not a few.” Why doesn't he say a great crowd of men and honorable women believed? When he says, “Not a few,” he means it was a multitude. - McGee

When word trickled back to Thessalonica that Paul and Silas were carrying on their ministry in Berea, the Thessalonian Jews made a special trip to Berea and stirred up the crowds against the apostle. The brethren thereupon sent Paul toward the seacoast, accompanied by an escort of believers. They probably went as far as DIUM and sailed from there to PIRAEUS, the port city of ATHENS. Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. – Believers Bible Commentary

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**Act 17:15-16** *And those conducting Paul brought him to Athens. And receiving a command to Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. But awaiting them in Athens, Paul's spirit was pained within him, seeing the city full of idols.*

It was a long journey from Berea to Athens. It showed the true devotion of the Christians there that some of the brethren were willing to accompany Paul all the way. When it came time for them to leave Paul in Athens, he sent word by them for Silas and Timothy to join him with all speed.

While waiting for them at Athens, Paul was deeply burdened by the idolatry of the city. Although Athens was the center of culture, education, and fine arts, Paul was interested in none of these things. He did not occupy his time with sightseeing trips. Arnot comments:

It was not that he valued marble statues less but living men more. ... He is not the weak but the strong man who regards immortal souls as transcendently more important than fine arts. ... Paul did not consider idolatry picturesque and harmless, but grievous.

**Act 17:17-18** *Then indeed he addressed the Jews in the synagogue, and those worshiping, and daily in the market, to those happening to be there. And certain philosophers from the Epicureans and from the Stoics met him. And some said, what will this babbling say? And others said, He seems to be an announcer of foreign demons (because he preached Jesus and the resurrection to them).*

When I was in Athens, I went down to that market. It is right at the foot of the Acropolis. I can imagine Paul walking up and down there. He was a tentmaker, you know, and I think he sold a few tents while he was there. While he was selling the tents, he was talking about the Lord Jesus Christ. The people began to get interested.

The philosophy of the Epicureans was more or less hedonistic. The Stoics, a group who believed in restraint, were what we today call stoical. The Epicureans believed that you go the limit, and in that way, you could overcome the flesh. They thought that you should give the flesh all that it wants. If it wants liquor, drink all you can hold. Concerning sex, believe me, the Epicureans could really join in the “new morality,” which was nothing new for them. By contrast, the Stoics believed that the body should be held under control.

Philosophers of both groups come to Paul to hear what he has to say. Paul has been doing a lot of talking and they call him a babbling. His subject is something new to them. Jesus and the idea of resurrection are to them “strange gods.”

I hear people say today that Paul got his idea from Platonism. They say he didn't really believe in bodily resurrection but in a platonic idea of a spiritual resurrection. It was more or less the influence of an individual permeating through society. This is the life after death. One still hears that type of thing today. It is found in liberalism, and it is nothing in the world but old Greek philosophy. But these Greeks, philosophers as they were, didn't quite understand Paul. I think Paul was a little too deep for them. Philosophy had gone to seed in Athens at this particular time. However, they wanted to hear him. - McGee

**Act 17:19** *And taking hold of him, they led him to the Areopagus, saying, are we able to know what is this new doctrine of which you speak?*

The Areopagus is a very peculiar formation of rock on top of which the Parthenon and the buildings connected with it stand. Frankly, it is a very lovely setting, beautiful buildings and beautiful statues, but a city wholly given over to idolatry. It is up from the marketplace of the city and Paul is brought there to speak. Probably every preacher who visits there reads Paul's sermon from the top of Mars' Hill. When I was there another preacher began to read it, and since I didn't

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like the way, he was reading it, I went way over to the other side of the rock. I sat with my Bible and read it silently. It was a thrilling experience.

Now these Greek philosophers say to him, “May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest is?” They want to know more about it. They are completely in the dark. They are worse off than the Galatians or the people in Philippi and Thessalonica. Why? Because they think they know something. The very hardest people in the world to reach with the Word of God and the gospel are church members because they think they don't need it. They think the gospel is for the man on skid row and for some of their friends. Some church members can be mean and sinful and yet not recognize they really need a Savior, not only to save them from sin, but also to make their lives count for God. – McGee

**Let me say if you think Celebrate Recovery is for someone else because you don't have an addiction, now it is time to check yourself because we all have hurts, hangups, and issues. Don't let pride be your downfall.**

***Act 17:20 For you bring certain strange things to our ears, therefore we are minded knowing what these things mean.***

***Act 17:21 (For all the Athenians and strangers who were there spent their time in nothing else except to tell or to hear something newer.)***

They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, a judicial body like a supreme court that met on the hill of Mars. In this particular case, it was not exactly a trial, but simply a hearing in which Paul would be given an opportunity to set forth his teaching before the members of the court and the multitude. This is somewhat explained in verse 21. The Athenians loved to stand around and talk, and to listen to others. They seemed to have an unlimited amount of time for this. – Believers Bible Commentary

In this same way America is going to seed today. Have you ever listened to talk shows? They are boring to tears. Everyone is trying to come up with something new. Each one is trying to say something novel. They try so hard to say something smart, something sophisticated; yet it is the same old story. Athens tried the same thing.

There must have been quite a bunch of loafers back in Athens. They didn't work—they didn't do anything. They just talked, propounding new theories and new ideas. The human family seems to reach that place of sophistication. They think they know something when they don't. They don't know the most important fact in the whole universe.

There are those who say that Paul failed on Mars' Hill, that he fell flat on his face in Athens. I totally disagree with that. I believe this was one of the greatest messages that Paul ever preached. - McGee

### ***Paul Addresses the Areopagus***

***Act 17:22 And standing in the middle of the Areopagus, Paul said, Men, Athenians, I see that you are fearful of gods in everything.***

He begins his message quite formally, “Ye men of Athens.” Then he says, “I perceive ... ye are too superstitious.” The word superstitious is wholly inadequate to say what Paul really means. He is saying that he perceives they are in all things too religious. The Athenians were very religious. Athens was filled with idols. There was no end to the pantheon of the Athenians and the Greeks. There were gods small and gods great; they had a god for practically everything. That is what Paul is saying. They were too religious.

I sometimes hear people ask, “Why should we send missionaries to foreign countries? Those people have their religion.” I suppose that when Paul went down to Athens, somebody said, “Why are you going down there? They have religion.” I am sure Paul would have answered, “That's their problem; they have too much religion.” A preacher friend of mine said many years ago, “When I came to Christ, I lost my religion.” There are a great many folks in our churches today who need

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to lose their religion so they can find Christ. That is the great problem. Some folks say, “People are too bad to be saved.” The real problem is that people are too good to be saved. They think they are religious and worthy and good. My friend, we are to take the gospel to all because all men are lost with Christ, which is the reason Paul went to Athens. The Athenians needed to hear the message of the gospel.

Notice that in Athens Paul did not go to a synagogue. He had no springboard in Athens. He begins his masterly address to “Ye men of Athens.” After he makes the observation that they are too religious, he continues: - McGee.

**Have you ever noticed that the most religious are the hardest people group to reach?**

***Act 17:23 For as I passed by and saw the things you worship; I also found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Not knowing then whom you worship, I make Him known to you.***

“I ... beheld your devotions.” He saw their objects of worship. He noted their altars and their idols and their temples. In fact, that very beautiful temple called the Parthenon was a temple built to Athena, the virgin goddess of the Athenians. There were idols all around. Paul said, “I observed all of this, and amidst the idols I found an altar inscribed to the unknown god.”

Now an altar to an unknown god could mean that the Athenians were broad minded. They didn't want to leave anyone out. If someone had come to Athens and said, “How is it you don't have an altar to my god?” they would have answered, “Well, this altar is really to your god.” That way any stranger could come to worship at the altar to the unknown god, believing it was built for his god.

Or it could mean that they recognized there was a God whom they did not know. Many pagan folks recognize that behind their idolatry is a living and true God. They know nothing about Him, and they do not know how to approach Him. They have traditions that back in the dim and distant past their ancestors did worship Him. This could have been the case with the Athenians.

Paul uses this as the springboard for his message. He says he wants to talk to them about this unknown God. He says he wants to tell them about the God whom they don't know. Perhaps that is not as diplomatic as his first approach. After all, the Athenians thought they knew everything. This crowd of philosophers met in Athens and talked back and forth, as philosophers do on college campuses today. And now Paul begins to talk to them about the God they do not know. Who is He? Well, first of all, He is the God of creation. - McGee

***Act 17:24-25 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of Heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is served with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives life and breath and all things to all.***

Missionaries tell us that the best place to begin in teaching pagans about God is the account of creation. This is exactly where Paul began with the people of Athens. He introduced God as the One who made the world and everything in it. As he looked around on the numerous idol temples nearby, the apostle reminded his hearers that the true God does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He dependent on the service of men's hands. In idol temples, the priests often bring food and other “necessities” to their gods. But the true God does not need anything from man, because He is the source of life, breath, and all things. – Believers Bible Commentary

***Act 17:26-28 And He has made all nations of men of one blood to dwell on all the face of the earth, ordaining fore-appointed seasons and boundaries of their dwelling, to seek the Lord, if perhaps they might feel after Him and find Him, though indeed He is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also certain of your own poets have said, for we are also His offspring.***

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Paul next discussed the origin of the human race. All nations came from the common ancestor, Adam. Not only were the nations brought forth by God, but He also arranged the years, and determined the countries in which the various peoples would dwell. He showered innumerable mercies on them in order that they might seek Him. He wanted them to grope for Him and find Him, even though in actuality He is not far from each one. It is in the true God that we live and move and have our being. He is not only our Creator but our environment as well. To further emphasize the relationship of the creature to the Creator, Paul quoted from **some of** their Greek **poets**, who **said**, “**For we are also His offspring.**” This is not to be interpreted as teaching the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. We are the **offspring** of God in the sense that He created us, but we only become *sons* of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. – Believers Bible Commentary

This phrase “feel after him” has the idea of groping after Him. Man is not really searching for the living and true God, but he is searching for a god. He is willing to put up an idol and worship it. Man is not necessarily looking for the living and true God, but he is on a search. - McGee

***Act 17:29-31 Then being offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold or silver or stone, engraved by art and man's imagination. Truly, then, God overlooking the times of ignorance, now He strictly commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day in which He is going to judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He appointed, having given proof to all by raising Him from the dead.***

In other words, he says we ought not to be idolaters. He has shown God to be the Creator. Now he will present Him as the Redeemer.

There was a time when God shut His eyes to paganism. Now light has come into the world. God asks men everywhere to turn to Him. Light creates responsibility. Now God is commanding all men everywhere to repent.

He has presented God as the Creator in His past work. He shows God as the Redeemer in His present work. Now he shows God as the Judge in His future work.

When God judges, it will be right. Judgment will be through a Judge who has nail-pierced hands, the One who has been raised from the dead. Paul always presents the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is a declaration to all men. It is by this that God assures all men there will be a judgment. - McGee

***Act 17:32-34 And hearing of a resurrection of the dead, some indeed mocked; and others said, we will hear you again concerning this. And so, Paul departed from among them. But certain men joined themselves to him and believed; among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.***

Do you know why they mocked? Because Platonism denied the resurrection of the dead. That was one of the marks of Platonism. It denied physical resurrection. When you hear people today talking about a spiritual resurrection but denying the physical resurrection, you are hearing Platonic philosophy rather than scriptural teaching. Paul taught physical resurrection from the dead. So, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

Some critics have said that Paul failed at Athens. He didn't fail, friend. There will always be those who mock at the gospel. But there will also be those who believe.

There was quite an aggregation of converts in the city of Athens. When Paul went to a place and preached the gospel, he had converts. He didn't fail. He succeeded. Wherever the Word of God is preached, there will be those who will listen and believe. - McGee