

Last week's lesson had Paul in Philippi. There he met Lydia, preached the good news that she accepted, and he, in turn, accepted her hospitality. He encountered the demon-possessed girl and, as a result of casting out the demon, was taken before the authorities by the girl's owner. Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten (or flogged) and thrown into prison. God displayed His power in an earthquake that caused the prison doors to fly open and the chains to fall off the prisoners. Fearful that they had escaped, the Philippian jailer was about to take his life, when Paul saved him literally . . . both from suicide and from eternal damnation by preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to he and his family. Each member of the jailer's household believed and was baptized – joyful at their salvation. After a public apology from the authorities who had jailed them, Paul and Silas returned to Lydia's (no doubt nursing their bruised and beaten bodies), encouraging the believers of the new church before they left town. Another new church had been established.

LECTURE 17

PROCLAIMING THE UNKNOWN GOD

Certainly if ever there was a Bible chapter that lends itself to a three point sermon or lecture, it would be Acts, chapter 17. They (1) resisted the Word in Thessalonica; (2) received the Word in Berea; and (3) ridiculed the Word in Athens: three different cities – three different receptions of the Gospel message.

In Acts 17:1 we read, "When they had passed through Amphipolis and Appolonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue." It sounds like a pleasant stroll; but in fact Amphipolis was 33 miles from Philippi, Appolonia another 30 miles, and Thessalonica 37 miles from there . . . a total of over 100 miles and about a three day journey covered in a single sentence. The road they traveled was one of the best in

the province, paved with marble blocks and called the Egnatian Way that crossed Macedonia and connected the Adriatic Sea with the Black Sea.

Thessalonica was a principal metropolis of Macedonia with a population of about 20,000 people. Rivalled only by Corinth, it was a center of business being located on several important trade routes and it had an excellent harbor. We don't know exactly how long Paul and Silas stayed there, but it was long enough to receive financial help at least twice from the church in Philippi according to Philippians 4:16; and long enough for Paul to get a weekday job at his trade of a tentmaking according to 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

Most major cities had colonies of Jewish citizens engaged in trade, banking, or manufacturing . . . and, of course, there was a Jewish synagogue. Very often some of the Gentile population was attracted to the synagogue. We've already heard the term "God-fearers" – the name given to those people – and even proselytes were in the congregation. This is where Paul began.

For three Sabbaths Paul used a three-prong approach. First, he "reasoned with them from Scripture." The root word means he dialogued with them – exchange, questions and answers. Second, he "explained" or opened the Scriptures. That has the

idea of giving enlightenment much as Jesus did with the men on the road to Emmaus. Isn't it refreshing to have something explained clearly and simply?

There's a story of about a wordy advertisement for soap that read: "The alkaline element and fats in this product are blended in such a way as to secure the highest quality of sa-pon-ification, along with the specific gravity that keeps it on top of the water, relieving the bather of the trouble and annoyance of fishing around for it at the bottom of the tub during his ablution." A good editor boiled it down to say, "it floats." Simplicity can be good!

Third, Paul proved that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. That means to give evidence or place beside. No doubt he used Isaiah 53 describing the suffering servant, and Psalm 22 paralleling Jesus' words on the cross and Psalm 16:10 "the Holy One will not undergo decay."

There is a dignity and respect that Paul gave his listeners. It takes time for the heart to respond. In sharing our faith we must give others room to move and think. The gospel dialogued, opened and placed before others will always stand on its own merit. And it did. "Some of the Jews were persuaded as were a large number of God-fearing Greeks and some prominent

women.” Among the men were Aristarchus and Secundus, who would later travel with Paul. But overall the Jews were not ready for a suffering, crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. They liked those passages of Scripture that dealt with the majesty of the Messiah, with the time when He would come in His royal power and establish His kingdom over all the world and rule over the nations, subdue all enemies, cause war and strife to cease, and reign in triumphant splendor and glory. That is what they were expecting. But the necessity of a resurrection? They rebelled at the Word of God at that point.

The unbelieving Jews envied Paul’s success. Do you remember the difference between envy and jealousy? 1) Envy – has empty hands and wants them full. 2) Jealousy – has full hands and never wants them empty. With their empty hands these Jews gathered a mob of bad characters from the market place (or as A. T. Robertson calls them “bums”) to start a riot and they rushed Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas . . . but apparently the Holy Spirit had invited them out for a cup of coffee and they were not to be found. So Jason and some of the other Christians were taken before the city officials with the accusations that “these men have turned the world upside down.” That’s the way versions other than NIV describe it.

Of course, the way the accusations were made it was a serious complaint that included them teaching about a new King. Certainly when we read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, especially chapter 4, we can see they had been taught about the coming kingdom. Basically the magistrates didn't care what you believed, but when public order was disrupted, then they came down with an iron hand. It was settled when Jason, who was probably a relative of Paul's, posted a bond guaranteeing that Paul and Silas would leave town.

When you think about the charge of turning the world upside down, we need to remember that the world was already upside down. When you turn something that is upside down – that is already upside down - you turn it right side up! The world was turned upside down at the Fall, and it has been operating in reverse ever since. But now the gospel comes and turns it right side up. Peace and tranquility and prosperity and progress and harmony and love and grace – all these wonderful things begin to flow out of a community that is operating in the fullness of life provided in Jesus Christ.

So, under cover of night, Paul and Silas left the city and headed for Berea about 50 miles away. Later Timothy would be sent to Thessalonica to encourage the church in its time of

persecution (1 Thessalonians 3:1). Since Timothy was a Gentile, and had not been present when the trouble erupted, he could minister in the city freely. The “peace bond” could keep Paul out, but it would not apply to Paul’s young assistant. If you have time one evening soon, you might read Paul’s two short letters to the Thessalonians while this is fresh in your mind and see if they don’t become more alive to you.

Point one to remember: The Thessalonian religious leaders rebelled at hearing the good news . . . but the gospel came to reside in Thessalonica in spite of them.

Berea is an interesting choice of destination for Paul and Silas as it was “off the beaten track” so to speak, a pleasant little city in the foothills of the Olympic Mountains but with a large population. Perhaps they felt they’d be safe there for a while. It’s here that Timothy (who had probably been left in Philippi) joins Paul and Silas and, as usual, Paul headed for the synagogue.

Throughout church history, the Bereans have been models of how to discern truthful teaching – they examined the Scriptures closely, checking everything Paul was telling them. What satisfying days these must have been for these missionaries! A mountain top experience in contrast to the valley

experiences of being run out of one town after another. Vs. 11 says the Bereans “examined the Scriptures every day.” They not only received the Word, they researched it and responded to it.

That is why we break down the lessons and present them to you into a daily format. I know that many of you do them all in one sitting. I do it myself sometimes for the sake of time. But each one of us needs to be in the Scriptures on a daily basis. Whether it is being guided through Isaiah or the book of Acts with questions to answer, or a daily devotional reading plan, or a read the Bible in a year program . . . the approach is not the important thing, it is building the storehouse knowledge of God’s Word so that you can draw on it for strength and encouragement and truth in your own valley times and use the Word of God to encourage others. We are growing in our Christian faith and as growing children we need the counsel of a loving parent – God, the Father who will listen to prayers, the Savior who will counteract the attacks of Satan, and the indwelling Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth as we study God’s Word and give us the understanding of that truth that will set us free.

Note that Scripture says they received the message with great eagerness. You know, there are many who come to church or Bible study without the expectation that God will be speaking

to them. Think of the preparation that has gone on for what you're experiencing right now. You studied the Scripture directly from your own Bible (hopefully with a prayer for the Holy Spirit's insight). You participated in a small group discussion that your leaders prepared themselves for and they guided you into sharing so that your brothers and sisters in Christ might benefit from the good things you have to share. Each lecturer spends hours in preparation to add to your knowledge with background information and application in hopes that the Scriptures will become even more alive and exciting to you.

According to a Barna Research Group survey, less than 35% of Americans open the Bible in a given week. 55% thinks "God helps those who help themselves" is directly from the Bible; 63% cannot name the four gospels; 59% cannot name half or more of the Ten Commandments; 58% do not know that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount; 52% do not know the book of Jonah is in the Bible; and 48% do not know the book of Thomas is NOT in the Bible. Your commitment to Bible study is noble. Like the Bereans you want to hear from God so you can live for God. The only way we know how to please God, is to read His instruction book. You are like the noble Bereans – that's a great compliment!

Whether it was a trail of bread crumbs or some well-meaning traveler, news got back to Thessalonica and the Jews, who had forced Paul from their city. So they came to Berea to disrupt his work there also by stirring up and agitating angry crowds. This is now the fifth city Paul has been run out of by an angry mob stirred up by envious Jewish leaders. Fearing for his life, the Christians in Berea sent Paul off to Athens while Silas and Timothy remained there to encourage this new Christian church.

Point two to remember: The Bereans received the good news . . . and the gospel reached others because of them.

Paul in Athens – a new city . . . definitely a new challenge. Last week was the 15th anniversary of my Dad's death and I still miss him very much. He was a great fisherman. Countless summers we spent fishing in streams or lakes with all the joys of camping along with it. One summer when I was about 8 we went to Kern River. My Dad set up the campsite and spent the weekend then had to go back to work for the week. I remember this particular trip because Monday morning I came down with mumps and had to stay in the hot tent the whole week to keep from infecting my sister and the other kids whose families were camping with us.

Well, Friday night came and about dusk Daddy returned and went down to the river and caught his limit in about a half hour and we had trout for dinner. Perhaps I neglected to say that no one anywhere around had caught fish the entire week . . . so the smell of that frying trout wafted over the whole area and one by one, the fishermen would drop around wanting to know what bait he used. He had some fun and told one guy cheese, another guy salmon eggs, another worms, and someone else that he used a certain kind of special fly. They all had a good laugh out of it. But the secret was really this – he said, “If you want to catch fish, you have to think like a fish.” Man, he was really good at that. (By the way, the mumps had healed enough by that weekend so I wasn’t contagious and I got to do some fishing too.)

We all know what an intelligent man Paul was and in Athens that’s the exact approach he used. He argued in the synagogue with the Jews and devout people using Scriptures they were familiar with, but he dug around in his “tackle box” and came up with different “bait” for the marketplace.

It had been about 400 years since the Golden Age of Greece and Pericles, but this was still the city of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, Epicurus, and Zeno. Still a thriving center of art, culture and knowledge; however, it had lost almost all of

its political influence. It had a population of about 10,000 people but there were 30,000 statues of gods: one on every corner and then some! It's easy to reason that the men and women of Athens had a great capacity for God.

Two major schools of thought were prevalent: 1) the Epicureans who believed everything happens by chance, death is the end, there are gods but they have nothing to do with the world, and that pleasure was the important thing in life. Their motto that still exists to this day is "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Or we might say, "Enjoy life – it's all there is!"

The second group was the Stoics (who followed Zeno). They believed the gods fated everything so whatever happened to them was their destiny, as pantheists everything was a god, and their motto in modern terms would be, "Grin and bear it." Apathy was regarded as the highest virtue. So we might say it translates into, "Endure life!" – Two schools: Enjoy life . . . endure life.

Paul knew the Athenians were religious, they had many gods, and they loved to talk about new ideas. So he cast out his "lure" of debate. The Epicureans and Stoics gathered to hear these new thoughts about Jesus and the resurrection, but the Epicureans (since they didn't believe in an afterlife) soon dismissed Paul as a "babbler" – a "seedpicker" (like a bird that

gathers up a seed here and a seed there to make a new thought). Others, however, were confused but interested.

The Council of the Aeropagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the "new doctrine" Paul was teaching. They courteously invited him to present his doctrine at an informal meeting. Paul was not on trial, they only wanted to hear what he'd been teaching in the marketplace.

Ray Stedman comments that if you visit Athens today you will be taken up a small rocky hill without buildings, west of the Acropolis, and told that this is Mars Hill where Paul addressed the Athenian philosophers. He writes, "I question that this is so, although the word Aeropagus does mean Mars Hill. But it is also the name given to a court of judges who had the final authority in the city of Athens at this time. They no longer met on Mars Hill but by this time were meeting in the marketplace on one of the porches surrounding the area. So it is before the court of Aeropagus that Paul appeared."

Regardless of physical location, we are drawn by the brilliant approach Paul chose to use. He gave a genuine compliment first. He met them where they were by acknowledging, "I see in every way you are very religious."

His message also made brilliant application, for he pointed directly to the problem. Athenians were supposed to know everything, but they had an UNKNOWN GOD. Having established this bridge, he gave them a dose of spiritual truth – first about God and then about themselves. Truth about God always helps us understand ourselves.

The fundamental truth about God is that He is the Creator. This may not sound so earth-shaking to us, but it challenged their whole theology. The Stoics were pantheists (everything is a god) and the Epicureans practical atheists. Paul's declaration denied the premise of both groups. He talked about the greatness of God: He is Creator; the government of God: He is ruler; the grace of God: He is Savior.

The true God is the God of history. He made man as one race, originating from one source. The interesting thing is that today this statement is as scientifically sound as when it was first uttered. Science today admits that there is only one race of men, one species: Homo Sapiens. Despite differences of pigment, stature, and features that exist around the world, there is only one race of men. Furthermore, God has intervened to direct their lives in the course of history. He has determined where they shall live, how long they will live there, how long a nation or

empire should take to rise or fall . . . all that involvement so that they might find God. That is why God has allowed history.

Vs. 27 is fantastic – “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.” The apostle’s point was that as creatures of intrinsic dignity, having been created by God, desired by God, men ought to refrain from false worship. Since we are made in His image, it is insulting to God and degrading to us to make an idol and call it god.

Then the plea vs. 30-31 “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. 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.”

Repent of what? Idolatry. If we set anything above God as the object of our time, thought, energy, or life, we are worshiping the work of our hands and degrading both God and ourselves.

Why? There is an inescapable day coming – a day when God will judge the world. There is an unchallengeable Judge – the One who will do the evaluating will not be a god remote upon Mount Olympus, but He will be a Man, someone who has lived right here with us, who knows what human life is like, who has

felt everything we feel. This is an irrefutable fact because God raised that Man from the dead. This is where Christianity ultimately rests – with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reaction was mixed. Mostly ridicule, some wanted to hear more, but a few believed. Paul thought like the fish he was trying to catch. Two specific people are named for us in the Scriptures who came to the Lord that day: Dionysius and Damarius. It's always specific people who come – we don't catch fish in general. Our goal may be to share our relationship with Jesus Christ with ALL seekers, but the goal will be accomplished when a specific person – a classmate, a parent, a child, a co-worker responds who has a name: Joe or Ruth or Carol.

Point three to remember – remember the others?

Point one: The Thessalonian religious leaders rebelled at hearing the good news . . . but the gospel came to reside in Thessalonica in spite of them.

Point two: The Bereans received the good news . . . and the gospel reached others because of them.

Point three: The people of Athens resisted the good news . . . but the gospel belongs in the marketplace – a good reminder to us from them.

George MacLeod wrote a poem titled "The Cross in the Marketplace." Listen:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again
at the center of the market place
as well as on the steeple of the church,
I am recovering the claim that
Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral
between two candles:

But on a cross between two thieves;
on a town garbage heap;
at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan
that they had to write His title
in Hebrew and Latin and Greek . . .

And at the kind of place where cynics talk smut,
and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.

Because that is where He died,
and that is what He died about.

And that is where Christ's men ought to be,
and what church people ought to be about.

Well, at least Paul stayed out of trouble in Athens. Nobody beat him up, nobody rioted, nobody demanded that he be thrown

in jail. And maybe, given Paul's past history, you could call this a very successful visit. Paul was not told to leave, so we assume he lingered in Athens and continued to minister to both believers and unbeliever. But he left believers and perhaps a church planted in Athens. We never hear anything about it again, but since Corinth and Athens weren't very far apart we might assume that the 1 Corinthians letter addressed to "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus" might have been circulated to the Athens church.

What we do know from this lesson is that the gospel message about the truth of Jesus Christ was preached consistently, in spite of persecution, and with great zeal. The challenge to us is not where or when we'll have opportunity to share our witness, but that we'll be equipped with a solid foundation of truth from God's Word to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you."