

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN / Sunday, November 22, 2015

Unifying Topic: **THESSALONICA, BEROEA, AND ATHENS**

I. Paul Uses An Open Door In Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4)

II. Paul Uses A Group's Interest In Berea (Acts 17:10-12)

III. Paul Uses An Existing Belief In Athens (Acts 17:22-25, 28)

The Main Thought: 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. (Acts 17:23, KJV).

Unifying Principle: Some people accept verbal convictions while others reject them. How do Christians respond when those they hope will accept their messages reject them? Luke shows that Paul was undeterred and continued telling the Good News story and preaching with strong passion and conviction.

Lesson Aim: To highlight the various ways Paul and his team used his listeners' own beliefs as the launch pad from which to present the Gospel.

Life Aim: To understand that the existing beliefs of our hearers often provide powerful starting points for presenting the claims of Christianity.

HISTORY:

Acts 16:16-40 Paul and his company were going to the place of prayer and was soon ¹followed by a slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination that made money for her owners through fortune telling. For days she cried out, *"These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation."* While true, it annoyed Paul (probably because it was not of her own free will) and he cast the spirit out in the name of Jesus. This greatly angered the girl's masters, who had Paul and Silas beaten and imprisoned. At midnight while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns, a great earthquake shook the prison and broke free their chains. Assuming all had fled, the jailer was about to kill himself when Paul stopped him. When the jailor asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas told him to believe on the Lord Jesus, and then proceeded to teach him and his family the word of the Lord. That same night, the entire family was baptized. In the morning, the magistrates sent word to release Paul and Silas, but Paul demanded a personal release as they were Roman citizens who were beaten and imprisoned without trial. Scared, the magistrates came and pleaded with Paul and Silas to leave the city, which they did after a short visit to Lydia's house to encourage the brethren. Note that the author's return to the use of *"they"* indicates that Luke stayed behind in Philippi (vv.16-40).

LESSON:

Acts 17:1-4 Paul Uses An Open Door In Thessalonica

17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a **synagogue of the Jews**:— Paul and Silas, and Timothy journeyed westward along the great military road, *Via Egnatia*. They had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia (these were not small towns), for Amphipolis was itself a major community. Why they passed by these cities we are not told. However, it should be observed that Paul followed definite missionary strategy in establishing churches in key centers which could form evangelistic outreach centers around their location. Thus, he moved on to Thessalonica the chief city and capital of the province of Macedonia. In Thessalonica, Paul discovered a synagogue of the Jews there, for this city had been made free because of its loyalty to Rome. As a free city it was allowed its own government and local laws. A synagogue, a group of Jews who gathered for teaching and prayer could be established wherever there were ten Jewish males.

17:2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,— Paul's regular practice in each town was to preach in a synagogue as long as the Jews allowed it, and he went there three consecutive Sabbath days, which is three weeks, opening up the scriptures to them; reasoning; explaining the scriptures to them. He went straight to the scriptures which could not be denied.

¹ http://executableoutlines.com/acts/acts_16.htm

<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sunday-school.html>

17:3 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. The common Jewish view of the Messiah was pictured as a conquering political ruler who would restore their fortunes, defeat their enemies, and usher in the kingdom. The Jews resisted the idea that the Messiah had to suffer, even though this is found in the Old Testament (Ps.22; Is.53; Zech.12:10; 13:7). That's why Paul had to reason so. They had their own perception of Him. That's why Paul so wisely began by talking about the Old Testament writings and explained that the Messiah had to suffer; He fulfilled them. He then made it known that the Messiah died and had risen from the dead, and that Jesus, whom he preaches about unto them, is Christ—Jesus is the Christ! This is a good strategy for us when we witness for Christ. Begin where people are; affirm the truth they do know, and then present Christ, the One who is Truth.

17:4 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. The Jews were the most prejudicial people imaginable, yet the result of the message was that some Jews believed and joined with Paul and Silas in following Christ. And there were many devout (God-fearing) Greeks, and chief influential women that believed.

I don't know why vv.5-9 were skipped because the subject of the lesson is found in verse 6.

Acts 17:10-12 Paul Uses A Group's Interest In Berea

17:10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. Yes, those who didn't believe the message were moved with jealousy and envy and incited others to set the city in an uproar. They went to Jason's house thinking Paul and Silas were there, but not so, so they assaulted the house of Jason (vv.5-6). Upon Paul and Silas' return back to Jason's house the Christian brethren related to them what had happened, and the decision was made that it would be best that they escape by night. Berea was about 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica. It was well off the path of the *Egnatian Way*, the major Roman road. Naturally he could preach more freely and reach more people if there was peace. When they arrived they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

17:11 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. The Jews in Berea were different; nobler than those in Thessalonica. The word "*noble*" applied to people who exhibited noble behavior, in that they were open-minded, fair, and thoughtful. They received Paul's message with all eagerness of mind, searching, studying, and investigating the scriptures daily to see whether those things were true. They did not just believe the message. They checked for themselves that the message had the same meaning as the scriptures.

17:12 Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. Many Bereans believed, including many honorable Greek women and men. The word "*honorable*" means both of good character, respectable and influential citizens. While the Thessalonians had to be persuaded, the Bereans were ready and believed.

NOT APART OF THE LESSON: VERSES 13-21

²Once again the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica heard that Paul and Silas were ministering in Berea, and they came to stir up the people (v.13). As before, Paul had to leave town quietly to avoid more trouble for the Christians. This time the believers in Berea out-smarted the enemy by taking Paul to the sea, and putting him on a ship headed for Athens, while Silas and Timothy stayed (v.14-15). While in Athens, Paul could not wait any longer on Silas and Timothy, for he could not swallow the scene there of idolatry anymore (v.16). He began to reason and discussed the gospel with men everywhere; in the synagogue; in the marketplace. And he proclaimed the gospel daily to the average citizens, to the Epicureans philosophers, and the Stoic

² <http://www.family-times.net/commentary/obstacles-that-hinder-the-work-of-the-lord/>
<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sunday-school.html>

philosophers (vv.17-21).

Acts 17:22-25, 28 Paul Uses An Existing Belief In Athens

17:22 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. Throughout ancient history Athens had been one of the most glorious cities of the world. But as history has always proven, when a people gain prosperity, most of them become complacent, selfish, and hoarding. At the time of Paul's visit, the city was at the center of the world, but its citizens lacked spiritual unity and common purpose and behavior. There were as many gods as there were men. Now, Paul stands in the midst of Mars' Hill addressing the men of Athens.

"Mars' Hill" is also known as "Areopagus" which is the Latin form. It was called "Mars' Hill" because Ares, the god of war was said to have been tried there for the murder of the son of Poseidon. It was situated on a high and rocky place in Athens, on a hill just west of the Acropolis. Later, the Romans referred to the rocky hill as "Mars Hill", after Mars, the Roman god of war. There was an ancient court which sat there. The Court of the Areopagus consisted of nine archons or chief magistrates who were then in office, and the ex-archons of blameless life who dealt with matters of religious morals and education of Athens. It subsequently formed the higher court of modern Greece.

This is where Paul stands ready to preach. He stood up in full view, taking a stand where so many of the world's great philosophers had stood, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was the highest court in Athens and Paul expounded, *"I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."* Meaning, *"in all things I notice; I observe; with my own eyes, I can tell you are very religious (revere your deities)."* The Greek word would mean *"fearing a demon"*, a supernatural spirit—given to demon worship. The most momentous moment of their lives was about to take place. And there they sat and some stood, completely void of any knowledge of the living and true God. Paul didn't begin by reciting Jewish history, as he usually did, for this would have been meaningless to the Greek audience. He began where they were.

17:23 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. Finally he moves to his message to the Person of Christ. When you witness to others, you can use Paul's approach; use examples, establish common ground, and then move people toward a decision about Jesus Christ. Paul had noticed as he walked throughout that great city of Athens, there was an inscription on an altar the Athenians had built: *"To The Unknown God."* This one caught his attention. Two points:

1. The word *"devotions"* means the objects of worship such as idols, altars, images.
2. The people acknowledged that there was an unknown god, and worshipped him. But they did not know him.

None of the gods satisfied the people. Their lives and their religions were still empty and missing something. They knew nothing about him, yet they worshipped him. ³A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god it was sacrificed to *"The Unknown God"* (Acts 17 - William Barclay's Daily Study Bible). Paul declared unto them that he knew the unknown God they ignorantly worshipped and he would personally declare Him unto them.

17:24 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;— He declared that *"The Unknown God"*, He is God who made the world and all things therein; He is Creator; Lord of heaven and earth, and He does not dwell in temples made by hands. This means there is only One Supreme God and there are no other gods. Not a god for this and a god for that like the 30,000 gods of the Athenians. All these gods are false. They are only the creation of man's mind and the object of man's desires.

³ http://preceptaustin.org/acts_17_commentary.htm
<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sunday-school.html>

- God is Creator—Creator.
- God is Lord of heaven and earth—Ruler.
- God is Creator, not the created.

Paul's assertion was a powerful and upsetting truth for some of the Athenians to hear. It ran contrary to the Epicureans, who believed matter was eternal and therefore had no creator, and to the Stoics, who as pantheists believed everything was part of God—who certainly couldn't have created Himself.

17:25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;—

- God is the Self-Sufficient One. He needs nothing.
- God is the giver of life and breath and all things—Giver.
- God guides the history of all men and nations (v.26)—Comptroller.
- God has a great purpose for creating men (v27-28)—Revealer.

17:28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being;— Paul says, here, God causes us to live. Our purpose is in Him. We live in Him. We move in Him. Our very being is in Him. God is not far off. He is near everyone of us and can be found in us. He and His works are all about us. Once we have found (have a relationship with) Him, we can call upon Him and He will make Himself known to us. He will not be unknown to us. Paul goes on to say, **as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.**

- If man is the offspring of God, then idols are less than man, for idols are made by the mind of man. Man is superior to idols, therefore, to worship idols is to degrade the exalted position God had given man.
- If man is the offspring of God, then something created by man is less than God. God is above everything man makes. Therefore, to exalt the works of man's hand above God is to degrade the exalted position of both God and man.

The Greeks certainly could not plead ignorance. Even their poets acknowledged the revelation of God in nature, though they wrongly saw it as a revelation of their false gods. The Cretan poet Epimenides noted that "*in him we live, and move, and exist*", while Aratus, from Paul's home region of Cilicia added "*For we are also his offspring.*" Those noted quotes illustrate the universal revelation of God as Creator, Ruler, and Sustainer. While Paul could easily have documented those truths from the Old Testament, he chose instead illustrations familiar to his pagan audience who were unfamiliar with Scriptures.

SUMMARY:

⁴Paul, Silas and Timothy continued on the second missionary journey. As they departed Philippi, they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, arriving at Thessalonica (v.1). Paul found the Jewish synagogue and for three Sabbaths "reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (v.2). He taught them that Jesus had suffered and died, and then was raised from the dead. He proclaimed to them that Jesus was the Christ. Some Jews and a great multitude of Greeks believed and joined them (vv.3-4).

The brethren sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea (about 50 miles away). They went to the Jewish synagogue there and found the people to be receptive to the gospel. They were willing to study the Scriptures to determine the Truth. Many believed (vv.10-12)

Paul spoke to the Athenians by finding common ground from which to launch into his gospel message. He keyed into the inscription: "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." This is the One he proclaimed to them. Paul also referenced a saying of their own poets, "For we are also His offspring." He pointed out that since we were the offspring of God, in God we live, and move, and have our being (vv.20-25, 28).

⁴ http://executableoutlines.com/acts/acts_17.htm
<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sunday-school.html>