

~ACTS~

Lesson 53- Stirred in Athens

Acts 17:16-23

We are continuing our study of Paul's second missionary journey, and we left off last week in Acts 17:15 as Paul was fleeing the persecution from the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica, traveling from Berea to Athens. Now in verse 16 Paul arrives in Athens, but he is alone waiting for Silas and Timothy to meet him having left both Silas and Timothy in Berea to edify and help the new Berean church amongst the persecution.

Who did their homework and tracked the travels of Paul, Silas, and Timothy from Berea to Athens?

- Paul, Silas and Timothy in Berea, Acts 17:10
- Paul leaves Berea and travels to Athens alone, Acts 17:14
 - Silas and Timothy remain in Berea, Acts 17:14
- Silas and Timothy receive word to meet Paul in Athens, Acts 17:15
- Paul is in Athens alone while he waits for Silas and Timothy to join him. Acts 17:16
- Silas and Timothy both arrive in Athens
 - Timothy is sent to Thessalonica to care the Thessalonian church, 1 Thess 3:1-2
 - The “we” is Paul and Silas, 1 Thess 1:1; and they sent Timothy to Thessalonica
- Paul and Silas being left in Athens alone together, travel to Corinth without Timothy, Acts 18:1
- Timothy rejoins Paul and Silas in Corinth and brings good news from Thessalonica, 1 Thess 3:6
- Paul, Silas and Timothy finally back together in Corinth and Paul is compelled to preach the Gospel, Acts 18:5

So as Paul is waiting in Athens for them, his spirit is provoked to speak the Truth and preach the Gospel and the remainder of chapter 17 focuses on Paul's time in Athens, specifically his message to the pagan Gentiles of this city.

16) Now while Paul waited (ἐκδέχομαι- to wait for in expectation) **for them** (Silas and Timothy) **at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.**

So Paul is waiting in expectation for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens. Probably with a certain amount of angst, knowing the state of affairs in Berea and Thessalonica being hostile and treacherous to these new Christians. But Paul, having this tenacious, driven character, never sat still. And as Paul is waiting for his companions, he begins looking around at this city of Athens. At first glance to the traveler, Athens is a glorious city, filled with wonder and amazement at its beauty. Athens was known as the “Eye of Greece and the mother of arts and eloquence.” It was, and had been, the center of learning and philosophy for hundreds of years. Famous men such as Socrates (469-399BC), Plato (428-348BC), and Aristotle (384-322BC) had lived and taught in this city. It was full of Greek sculptures, architecture, theater, and schools of philosophy, but everything was steeped in paganism and the worshipping of their Greek gods.

In the Agora, every god of Greek mythology was displayed and worshipped. Every building was a sanctuary to the gods. And not only did they worship their Greek gods, but they also honored and had alters for things like Fame, Energy, Persuasion, Pity and demons. Their reverence to demons and supernatural things was just as prominent as their Greek gods. Maximum Tyrius (2nd century AD) said, “The gods and the demons have this in common- they are both immortal.” What they didn't realize and what Paul points out in his letter to the Corinthians is that every idol and false god is a demon. A Roman satirist named Petronius (27-66AD) said “In Athens, it's easier to find a god than a man.” Historian

Pausanias said, “Athens had more images of gods than all of Greece put together.” Xenophon said, “Athens was one great altar, one great offering to the gods.”

So Paul is seeing these idols representing false gods and he is looking at them in amazement, but not as a traveler, but in fiery indignation toward the corruption and pollution of that city. Luke says that Paul’s **spirit was provoked** (παροξύνω- irritated) **within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.** This word “given over to idols” is one Greek word, κατείδωλος. Only used here in the entire Bible but is simply the word idol, εἰδωλον, with an emphatic intensifying kata in front. Meaning this city of Athens was intensely and excessively into idols. Therefore, the Spirit moved him to do something about it... he starts preaching the Gospel...

17) Therefore, he reasoned (διαλέγομαι- thoroughly explain in a logical manner, 17:2) **in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.**

Paul’s response to this extreme idol worship is to preach the Truth and he starts in the synagogue of the Jews: to the Jew first then to the Greek. And, as always in the Hellenistic synagogues, there were Gentile proselytes- σεβομένοις worshipping as well. Then when he wasn’t in the synagogue, he was in the Agora, preaching to the pagan Gentiles in the marketplace. This word “marketplace” is the Agora, Ἀγορά. This wasn’t just any marketplace. This was the Agora next to the Acropolis in Athens. And it wasn’t just a place of commerce either, but it was the center of public life: orators, statesmen, poets, and artists would collect here, as well as being a meeting place for philosophical conversations and business. It was here in the Agora that Greek life and culture thrived. And within this Agora were two meeting places of philosophy, the Porch (Stoa) of Zeno (Stoics) and the Garden of Epicurus (Epicureans), both of which confront Paul...

18) Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babblers want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul is preaching in the Agora, this center of Greek life, to **those who happened to be there**, and he is preaching Jesus. There are no coincidences. God is providentially arranging certain people to come hear the Gospel. What an amazing thing to just happen to meet the Apostle Paul in the marketplace.

As a result, Luke says **certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** begin speaking with him. Some mocked him and others were curious of this strange doctrine he is teaching. Those who mocked Paul said, **“What does this babblers want to say?”** Calling Paul a senseless babblers. Paul was preaching Christ and Him crucified and Him raised from the dead. He was preaching the offense of the cross. The controversial Truth that there is only one way to God... through the Man Jesus Christ. This is something Greek philosophers and anyone who would seek after the wisdom of man would have a hard time accepting. Paul writes about this in his letter to the church at Corinth, the capital of Greece, **1 Cor 1:17-31.**

Many of these Greek philosophers rejected this message and mocked him calling him a “babbler.” This word “babble” is σπερμολόγος- literally “seed-sayer,” or “one who sows the Word, λόγος. This was meant to be derogatory, but it’s actually a compliment to a Christian. We preach the Word, we sow, σπειρω, the Word, λόγος, into people’s hearts. To the world we are viewed as babblers, but to God we are His ambassadors preaching His message of Hope and Life. And Paul is specifically preaching on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ knowing that these philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics do not believe in the resurrection from the dead.

Epicureans came from the teachings of Epicurus (341-270BC) He taught his disciples that the enjoyment of pleasure was the highest form of human existence, hedonists. They were basically Atheists, although

they still believed in the Greek gods, but more that they were expressions of the human mind. Not actually gods, but were merely phantoms that had no bearing or influence on human life. And therefore, they didn't believe in a resurrection from the dead.

Stoicism began with Zeno, contemporary with Epicurus, although he taught almost the exact opposite. He believed that god was the spirit of the universe in which the creation itself was god and that god is resuming creation to itself. They didn't believe in an actual event of creation since god is creation, but they believed that god is an organizer impressing law and order on the substance of creation. The Stoics as a result were very strict, because they felt they needed to pursue law and order for god. Subsequently they didn't believe in the resurrection because they believed that when a part of creation dies, it is just absorbed back to god since god is the creation. This thinking resulted in elevating man to be self sufficient and god himself, being able to rule as his own king and god. Stoicism is the education of pride and self exaltation, but focused on reason and order because they believed the creation was trying to organize itself back to god.

Even though both these schools of thought are virtually opposites, the two things they have in common is neither one of them believe in the resurrection, and they both focus on ego and the pride of man. Both of which are completely contrary to Christian teaching. To be a Christian one must believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and one must humble himself to the Lordship of Jesus, **Romans 10:9**.

So here in Athens we see the same two responses to the Gospel that we always see... Humble or Harden. Some of these philosophers mocked Paul calling him a babbler, but others desired to hear more saying, **"He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods**, let's see what this new doctrine is that he preaches." This phrase "foreign gods," *Ξένων δαιμονίων*, is literally "strange demons." As I mentioned earlier, they revered demons and gods alike because they are both immortal. So since Paul is proclaiming Jesus who is immortal, they assumed he was speaking about a demon since Jesus wasn't one of the Greek gods.

So those who wanted to know more took them to the council of the Areopagus for a more formal discussion. This was common practice for the Greeks. On top of the Areopagus there was a council of Areopagites that would listen to new ideas of philosophy. Think about the intelligence and the versatility that the Apostle Paul had. One day he is preaching Jesus in the synagogue with the Jews and other days he is in the Agora debating trained philosophers in Greece. A truly amazing man...

19-20) 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."**

The Areopagus, *Ἄρειον πᾶγον*, Ares Hill or Mars Hill. It was an outcropping slightly lower and just beside the Acropolis, and up the road from the Agora. And at the top of the hill would sit the council of Areopagites, of which we will see, Dionysius the Areopagite, at the end of chapter 17 become a Christian, v. 34. These Greek philosophers lead Paul to the top of this hill to know more about this new doctrine he is speaking of.

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.

These Greek philosophers spent their time looking for the next new thing. It reminds me of those who have itching ears, and they are constantly trying to find someone or something to scratch them. In every person there is a need that only Jesus can fulfill. An innate desire that all people have, but when they don't have Jesus, they try and fill it with other things of the world and philosophy focused on man's pride and self-exaltation is one of the ways people try to fill this void.

With itching ears, the philosophers bring Paul to the top of this hill wanting to know some “new” thing. John speaks about these “new” things in his rebuttal to the Gnostics in **1 John 2:7-8**. The Apostle John wrote his first letter in response to the Gnostics infiltrating into the church. And the Gnostic heresies were constantly professing new knowledge and new philosophy and always seeking some new thing. John says, this is not a new branch of philosophy, this has been around, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, from the beginning. Because the Salvation of mankind through Jesus Christ has been prophesied from the beginning, but it is new in the sense that this Fellowship and reconciliation with God is now only found in Christ. This was the revelation that God gave Paul to preach. It’s not new, this has been the plan since before the foundation of the world, but it is new in Christ because now the Light is shining, death has been defeated, and darkness is passing away.

The Gnostics, Stoics, Epicureans... they were all seeking something new, because they didn’t have Jesus. And this progressive way of thinking is still going on today. Unfortunately, we are even seeing Christians today trying to re-invent the Gospel to attract the world. Trying to be on the cutting edge, trying to do something new to attract the world. The problem is, this way of thinking will always lead to compromising the Truth. Jesus told us how to attract the world... we lift Him up and exalt Him. *“If I am lifted up, I will draw all peoples to Myself,”* John 12:32. Preach Christ and Him crucified and Him risen from the dead, that’s it.

So here on top of the Areopagus, Paul does just that... he preaches the Gospel to these Greek philosophers. A masterpiece of Truth put together by the Holy Spirit to lead these pagans away from the darkness. Paul’s sermon exalts God rather than man, but places man in a position to be exalted, but only by his maker. When the philosophers would speak, they would focus on man leading to God. As man being the center, but Paul reverses the order and focuses on God leading to man.

22) Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;

Notice how Paul begins. He doesn’t attack them for being ignorant of the Truth but commends them for their desire to know spiritual things. This word “very religious” is δεισιδαιμόνων literally means to reverence demons. They had a desire for the supernatural, so Paul begins with that, directing them to the Truth.

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:

The Unknown God is the theme of Paul’s sermon. The Greeks were very superstitious, and didn’t want to offend the gods, so in the chance that they missed giving reverence to a god, they made this alter to the Unknown God. Paul uses this as a starting point to draw them to Jesus. He says that the God they worship but not knowing Him, this is the God they must know, for this God is the One True Living God, the Maker of all things.