

# Study 26: Acts chapter 17

## ***Introduction***

The second missionary Journey continues in Europe (Macedonia). Paul establishes churches here in some significant regions, including the major city (even today) of Athens. Despite the successes, Paul has his set-backs. We saw some in Philippi, and there are some more in this chapter, as well Paul's masterly sermon in Athens.

**Timing:**            *When did these events occur?*

**Content:**           *What are the major events?*

**Cast:**              *Who are the major players?*

## ***Body of the Study***

**Who went with Paul?**

**How long was Paul in Thessalonica?**

**How did the Jews react to this?**

**What was the reception like at Berea?**

**Where does Paul go next?**

**What does Paul find at Athens?**

**Why did they want to listen to Paul?**

**How does Paul address them – what is his line of argument?**

**How did they react to Paul?**

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

- *How does Paul's sermon to the Greeks in Athens differ from his other sermons?*
- *What are the applications for us, as we reach out to teach a world that is caught up into mysticism and philosophy? How should we go about it?*

*Read chapter 18 in preparation for next week*

# Notes for study 26: Acts chapter 17

## *Introduction*

The second missionary Journey continues in Europe (Macedonia). Paul establishes churches here in some significant regions, including the major city (even today) of Athens. Despite the successes, Paul has his set-backs. We saw some in Philippi, and there are some more in this chapter, as well Paul's masterly sermon in Athens.

**Timing:** *When did these events occur?*

Paul has not spent very long – perhaps a few months in the places that he is visiting. This places the time as around 52 AD, and cannot be any later due to the dating of Paul in Corinth at the time of Gallio (18:12).

**Content:** *What are the major events?*

Middle part of the Second Journey, Amphipolis & Appolonia, Thessalonica, Christians (Jason) persecuted, - to Berea. Paul goes to Athens, address on Mars Hill.

**Cast:** *Who are the major players?*

Paul, (Silas), Timothy, Jason.

## *Body of the Study*

### **Who went with Paul?**

Luke begins in the third person “...when they had gone through Amphipolis and Appolonia...” (17:1) which indicates that he stayed in Philippi. This is not unreasonable, as the church having begun there needed to be strengthened since it was in its infancy in that location. It would not grow and prosper if the new converts were just left alone.

It is certain that Paul left, since we find “...Paul as his custom was, went in to (the synagogue)...” (17:1,2). We find that Silas went with Paul (17:4), but what happened to Timothy? Did he stay with Luke, or go with Paul and Silas?

Timothy is last mentioned as being in Philippi, (16:40) and is next mentioned in Berea (17:14). He may have stayed for some time (months) in Philippi with Luke, and then later came down and joined Paul and Silas in Berea. But since Paul later uses him as his envoy to the Thessalonica, and with the communication that was occurring between Philippi and Thessalonica, it is likely that he spent some time in Thessalonica with Paul and Silas.

Silas and Timothy then left Berea and came to join Paul in Athens (after the brethren from Berea had returned with Paul's message to send them). Timothy was then sent by Paul from Athens straight back to Thessalonica to find out how the brethren were doing (1 Thess 3:1-2). Timothy returned with good news from the brethren, and some questions about the resurrection (What happens if we die before Christ returns? Will we miss out on our place in heaven?). By this time Paul had moved on to Corinth. This prompted Paul to write the first letter (1 Thess 3:6), which he sent back to Thessalonica with Timothy again. Timothy returned with further questions and Paul then immediately wrote the second letter, and sent it back to Thessalonica with Timothy again.

As Paul, Silas and Timothy travelled, they followed the Egnatian Way towards Rome. Luke does not say how long they stayed in Amphipolis and Appollonia, whether they did any evangelism there or whether it was just an overnight stop. The distance between the towns would make for about one days walk. If they were just overnight resting stops, then it is

surprising that Luke thinks that they are worthy of mention. It is more likely that Paul had tried to teach in the market place, had no response, and so he moved on.

Thessalonica was different to the other places, in that it had a Jewish synagogue. This gave Paul the ideal base to begin to evangelise. The first century writer Strabo described Thessalonica as the most populous town in Macedonia. Other writers described it as the metropolis of Macedonia and a place of great magnitude. Prolific coinage suggests a high level of prosperity. The population included a large Roman element and a Jewish colony, with some estimates of a population of 200,000 at the time of Paul's visit.

### ***How long was Paul in Thessalonica?***

A cursory reading of Acts 17, would suggest that Paul only stayed in Thessalonica for three weeks “...for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures...” (17:2 NKJV). However the events of Paul's visit are also recorded for us in Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church.

When Paul came to Thessalonica (as we are about to see in our study) he was only there for a relatively short time, and was then forced to leave after having established the church. He had not been gone very long before he wrote the first letter as a letter of encouragement.

The response to the first letter came very quickly, and then Paul almost immediately wrote the second letter. These were the first letters (that we have) that Paul wrote.

During his time in the city, Paul had developed a reputation as an example to the church as well as to the Gentiles (1 Thess 1:5, 9). This could scarcely have happened in three weeks. Further, Paul praises the Philippians for “...time and again sending to support me whilst I was in Thessalonica...” (Phil 4:16). Given the communication processes of the day, and that it was not just *once* that they sent support, but rather (it would seem) many occasions, then it is more likely that Paul was in the city for several months. The time had to be long enough for the Philippian brethren to hear of Paul's need, for the support to have been collected and then sent to him. The *three weeks* then, was the time that he was teaching the Jews in the Synagogue. We also know that whilst he was in the city he worked to support himself (probably at his trade of tent making) (2 Thess 3:8). It is more likely that Paul spent perhaps three months in Thessalonica, for it would be difficult to have achieved the things he did in establishing the church there, in less a duration.

Notice how Paul dealt with the Jews - his approach was to “...reason with them from the scriptures...” and to “...show that the Messiah was to suffer...” and to “...rise again from the dead...” and that “...Jesus was the Christ...” (17:2-3). This provided a vastly different view of the Messiah than the Jews had expected. They were looking for the Kingly Messiah who was going to come and sit on David's throne, and re-establish the kingdom with the glory of King David and Solomon. The idea of a Messiah who would suffer and be put to death was just not in their comprehension. But Paul's approach to this was based on the *scripture*. He showed that *the scripture foretold* that these things would happen (Some scriptures might include Ps 16:10, and the type in Jonah that was fulfilled by the antitype of Christ (Mt12:40)).

Some of the Jews were persuaded, and became christians, as were a lot of the Greeks who were *Proselytes of the Gate*. Paul must have done a lot of work outside of the synagogue, since he writes how they had “...turned from dumb idols to serve the true and living God...” (1 Thess 1:9), which is not a description of Jews becoming christians, but rather of Gentiles.

### ***How did the Jews react to this?***

Paul had found some success at Thessalonica, and consequently the Jews became jealous, particularly since many of the *Proselytes of the Gate* had walked away from their conversion towards Judaism, and had now become christians, “...joining with Paul and Silas...” (17:4)

However, the Jews reacted by rounding up a vigilante rent-a-crowd to help them force Paul and Silas out of the city. They accused Paul of treason, by teaching that there is another King

apart from Caesar (ie treason) in the person of Jesus (17:5-7). They came to the house of Jason where Paul and Silas were staying, and dragged him out to the rulers of the city. Notice the accusations that are made against Paul & Silas:

- These men have turned the world upside down (true)
- They have come here too (true)
- Jason has lodged them (true as far as we know)
- They are acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar (not true)
- Saying that there is another King – Jesus (true, but not in the sense that the Romans would understand).

Luke describes the leaders of the city as *politarchs*, a term that is found nowhere else in scripture nor contemporary writings. Even Aristotle who extensively deals with all known official titles in his work *Politics*, does not mention the term *politarchs*. This has been used to discredit Luke, and hence the rest of his account. However, inscriptions have been found at the western edge of the city of Thessalonica, and at other places in Macedonia with the name *politarchs* and a list of men who occupied the position. This shows that Luke was exactly right in his description of the title of the political leaders of the city.

The leaders took a “security” or “bond” from Jason and the other brethren, and were let go. Perhaps the nature of the security was that Paul and Silas no longer preached in the city – or perhaps that they would be handed over to the *politarchs* when they came home again.

The rest of the brethren must have been aware of the threats, and they “...*immediately sent Paul and Silas away in the night to Berea...*” (17:10 NKJV).

### ***What was the reception like at Berea?***

Paul and Silas immediately went into the synagogue, and presumably (*as his custom was* – 17:2) Paul began the same pattern again of teaching that Jesus was the very Messiah who was promised and foretold in the Old Testament scriptures. Berea was about 80 km southwest of Thessalonica, and the Jews there respond in a far more positive way those in Thessalonica. The Berean Jews were “...*more noble minded than those in Thessalonica...*” (17:11). Luke outlines for us why they were regarded this way – “...*because they received the gospel readily...*” – and “...*because they searched the scriptures daily to see if the things that Paul was saying were really so...*” (17:11).

It would appear that Paul must have spent some time there for such a reaction and acceptance to develop. This was one of the more fruitful places amongst the Jews where Paul worked.

The result was that “...*many of the Jews believed...*” (17:12) and the work in Berea was prosperous (at least for the beginning).

However, the Jews from Thessalonica heard about Paul’s success in Berea, and so they came down there to stir up the Jews and cause more trouble. It was not just the Jews in Berea that they stirred up, but also “...*the crowds...*” (17:13). Consequently Paul was sent away by the brethren in such a way as to confuse his direction – so that the Jews would have some difficulty in following or finding him. It is likely that he had been in Berea for several months, since the church has been established there by this time.

### ***Where does Paul go next?***

Paul was sent out “...*to go to the sea...*” (17:14) which suggests that he made out that that was where he was going, but he actually went in the opposite direction towards Athens, about 400 km away. This is supported by some texts, and is translated in the KJV “...*to go as it were to the sea...*”

Brethren from Berea accompanied Paul, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea – apparently in much less danger than Paul who was recognised as the chief speaker and leader. The Berean brethren acted as companions and guides to Paul, and ensured that he came to a new area of work remote from where he had been so troubled in Macedonia. But we need to

remember amongst all of the problems in Macedonia, at least three churches had been established at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

When Paul reached Athens, the Berean brethren returned, and Paul sent a message with them for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible. They came and joined Paul whilst he was still in Athens, and Paul sent Timothy straight back again to Thessalonica to see how the church there was doing (1 Thess 3:1-2).

We know that Silas came to Athens as well, since Luke writes “...while Paul waited for **them** at Athens...” (17:15 NKJV). We also know that he and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth – after Paul had left Athens (18:5). Paul may have sent Silas back to Berea when he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica with the first letter, and he would then have come back to Corinth with Timothy on his return from Timothy’s visit to Thessalonica.

### **What does Paul find at Athens?**

As Paul waited for Silas and Timothy, he walked around the city, he found idolatry everywhere “...his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols...” (17:16 NKJV). This is also supported by many ancient writers, such as Petronius Arbiter who says: “it is easier to find a god than a man there”<sup>1</sup>.

We may see beauty in the carved statues, and to us they are just statues. But to those from ancient Greece, they were objects of worship to which people would bow down and offer sacrifices. Paul’s response was *shudder!* “...his spirit was provoked...”

In response, Paul “...reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there...” (17:17 NKJV)

Whilst he is in the marketplace, he drew the attention of some of the philosophers. Most likely others were also speaking there, and Paul had to compete with them. They heard Paul, and brought him into the Areopagus, where more of the philosophers could listen to what he had to say.

### **Why did they want to listen to Paul?**

The Areopagus was the meeting place of the Greek philosophers. They had no greater desire than to “...hear something new...” (17:21). They were obviously eager to learn, with the whole of the Greek society geared towards learning and philosophy. The fact that Paul had come into town talking about something new would have been *music to their ears*, and they would have relished the opportunity to listen to him.

But *learning* about new things was what they were about – *heeding* the things that they learned and *doing* something about it was quite a different matter!

Luke tells us about two groups at the Areopagus, the Stoics and the Epicureans. These groups were in many ways the opposite of each other, as well as being the opposite of Paul’s teaching. The Stoics taught that the true meaning and philosophy in life was achieved by a total indifference to both the sorrows and pleasures of the world. The Epicureans on the other hand taught sought relief from the sorrows of life through the pursuit of its pleasures. In contrast to the Stoics, Paul taught that we should weep with those who weep, and have joy with the joyful. Likewise in opposition to the Epicurians, he taught that we should deny ourselves ungodliness and worldly lusts!

Whilst they were eager to *listen* to Paul, it is not surprising that most of them rejected what he had to say.

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<sup>1</sup> Petronius Arbiter, *Petronii Arbitri Satyricon*, XVII, Quoted from Reese, p.621

## How does Paul address them – what is his line of argument?

Paul begins where they are – he firstly comments on their religious nature “...I perceive that in all things you are very religious...” (17:22 NKJV). However the nature of their worship was not towards the true and living God, but rather towards demons, and dumb idols.



The Egnation Way, on which Paul, Silas and Timothy would have travelled.

The Athenians were so mindful of worshipping the gods, that they had a god for the sun, one for the moon, one for the rain, one for the harvest, one for the sea... In fact, they had so many gods, that just in case they had forgotten one, they built an alter “...TO THE UNKNOWN GOD...” (17:23). The only god that they didn’t know is the true and living God. He is “...the One whom you worship without knowing...” (17:23 NKJV). This gave Paul the perfect opportunity to get their attention, and tell them about “...the God who made the world and everything in it...” (17:24 NKJV). This was the only god that they knew nothing about, and Paul says the reason that he is here is to tell about this God!

The Greeks had temples for their gods all around them. Perhaps the greatest of these was the Parthenon that stood on top of the Acropolis overlooking the city of Athens, and was the Temple of the goddess Athena. Also right there surrounding Paul as he spoke were the temples of Apollo, Vulcan, Theseus, and Ares. The true and living God did not need these man-made temples, as He “...does not dwell in temples made with hands...” (17:24 NKJV) because His dwelling place is in heaven itself.



Athena Parthenos – the goddess for whom the Parthenon temple was built.

The worship the true God received was nothing like the worship that offered to the idols around them. Rather than the physical gifts that were brought (uselessly) to the idols, and not consumed – by contrast the true God was the giver of gifts “...since He gives to all life, breath, and all things...” (17:25 NKJV).

God made all nations “...of one blood...” (17:26) – that is to say that all men are equal! The Athenians had the view that they had come from a different origin than other men, had better gods than anyone else, and consequently were a far superior race. Paul says

- Firstly that they were created by the true and living God,
- Secondly that He created all men – the Greeks as well as the others – and,
- Thirdly, that all men were created equal by God.

He is the one who determines their boundaries. Indeed the different languages and races have been established – and this was clearly evident between the Greek and Roman (Latin) languages.

Man’s purpose on the earth – and the reason that he has set their language, race, and geographic boundaries was “...so that man might worship God...” (17:27). This is exactly consistent with the Genesis record of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), where God caused the dispersion because they were *rebelling* against Him. The evidence for the existence of God comes from two sources – the natural record (Rom 1:20; Ps 19:1); and secondly, the revealed record (2 Tim 3:16; Ps 19:2-3).

Paul notes that “...perhaps it might be possible to find God...” (17:27) by the natural revelation, but then proceeds to point out that we can only really fully know God by His divine revelation (the revealed record) – which only comes through Jesus Christ His Son. Even their own Greek poets have said that “...we are the offspring of God...” (17:28) - which is a quote from a poem referring to Zeus, attributed to Epimenides of Crete. The point that Paul makes is that the Greeks attributed the gods as being more than just the dumb idols that they actually were. The implications are that we are indeed the offspring of the true and living God, and therefore we ought to recognise Him accordingly and listen to what He has to say.

The True and Living God “...now commands all men everywhere to repent...” (17:30 NKJV). Ignorance of God might have been an excuse in previous times, but it is no longer acceptable. **The only course of action is to take action!** This was somewhat of a crunch point for the audience, since they were interested to listen – and their interest was primarily *academic* – but to actually *do something* about it was not within their scope of interest. The time is coming when God will judge the whole world. Men need to repent because they are going to be judged. The consequence of not repenting is not to be pardoned, and to remain condemned. Neither the Stoic philosophy, nor the Epicurean philosophy had anything to offer when they were to face the righteous judgement of God!

We will be judged by Jesus Christ. God “...has shown His full assurance of this by raising Him from the dead...” (17:31). God’s Judgement *will come* and we can be assured that it will come *because of* Jesus’ resurrection. **And by the resurrection of Jesus, we not only have assurance of facing God in judgement, but we also have full assurance of salvation by His blood!**

### **How did they react to Paul?**

The reaction was mixed. Some said they wanted to hear more – “...some joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” (17:34 NKJV)

Describing Dionysius as “*the Areopagite*” is to describe him as one of the judges, who served in a high magisterial function. He must have been at least 60 years of age to qualify for the position as a judge.

We do not know how long Paul stayed in Athens, but it is of the order of a few months.

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