

## LESSON FOUR

(17:1-34)

### **Passing Through the Cities of Amphipolis and Appollonia, 17:1a**

**17** *Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Appollonia, they came to Thessalonica.*

V. 1 - Paul apparently did not stop in Amphipolis or Appollonia - they were both important cities - but went to Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia, about 100 miles from Philippi. It ranked with Antioch of Syria and Caesarea in Palestine in political influence. Paul remarked in I Thess. 1:8 that the gospel had “sounded forth” (from Thessalonica) everywhere. I Thess. 2:20 has Paul saying that the converts in Thessalonica were his “glory and joy”. He boasted to churches of their “steadfastness and faith” in all their persecutions, II Thess. 1:4. Note the description of the Jews there in 2:14-16. Through the middle ages it was a stronghold of Christianity in the East.

### **At Thessalonica, 17:1b-10a**

*where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” 4 And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas; as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. 5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7 and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” 8 And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. 9 And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. 10. The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Beroea;*

V. 2 - Paul reasoned/discussed from the “writings” (i.e., Scriptures) with the Jews in the synagogue, where he went first, as was his custom. He remarked in I Thess. 1:9 that some there had turned from idols; so his ministry encompassed people like the Greeks, v. 4. I Thess. 2 and II Thess. 3 both bring up Paul’s manner of life there. These incidental remarks may indicate a stay of some time, which included the three Sabbath days.

V. 3 - Luke described Paul’s method as opening the Scripture (as in Luke 24:32, 45) and presenting his case: 1) that the Messiah must suffer and die (cf. Luke 24:25-27) and 2) that the Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. I Thess. 2:2 states that Paul faced great opposition. Doubtless the Jewish rabbis resisted the presentation.

V. 4 - Yet, some were open-minded and were persuaded (note the comments on 14:2) rather than being disobedient, and joined Paul.

**leading women** - This may mean wives of important men, or women in positions of importance, or both. 17:12 has a like reference. Luke's Gospel has more about women than the other Gospels have.

V. 5 - The jealousy of the Jews killed Jesus, and caused Christians no end of trouble. It is good to be jealous for the things of God, but not to the point of doing harm to others who disagree. The O.T. speaks of God being jealous, with an everlasting love (Deut. 4:24; Jer. 31:3). And Paul speaks of his jealousy for the Corinthians (II Cor. 11:2). Such must be tempered with restraint and wisdom, however.

The wicked fellows of the rabble were probably some who loafed around the market place; and "made a crowd" and raised a great tumult.

V. 6 - The description of the work of the apostles is somewhat revealing in regard to their accomplishments. Perhaps the description was overdrawn, but it certainly was accurate as to the intent of the Christians. The Greek word means "to stir up," "upset," and thus to create strife or revolt. Naturally, as in Ephesus, ch. 19, such could not be tolerated by Romans.

The word for the rulers of the city is an example of Luke's fine historical accuracy, as examples can be cited to show that the city was ruled by men described by the exact word in our text.

V. 7 - Some think the charges were perverted, but in essence, the Christian system was, in some points, opposed to the decrees of Caesar. Rightly understood, any culture, Christian in nature, may have government (as witness even in Romans 13). of the people. But to set up someone in opposition to Caesar was not acceptable. The Christian system, in some ways, did exactly that, and Christians would in subsequent years, but put to death for refusing to bow to Caesar's image, and offer a pinch of incense thereupon. You may already have noticed that Luke, in his first book, has this same charge made against Jesus to Pilate, 23:2.

V. 8 - The charges from the crowd agitated the city fathers and may have affected them somewhat as the cries of the mob influenced Pilate's decision.

V. 9 - Just what the security from Jason was to insure is not quite clear, but Paul mentions (I Thess. 2:18) that he was unable to return, so it may have meant his leaving the city. Note also in 2:14-16 how Paul viewed the Jews who opposed him.

V. 10 - However long or short the time spent in the city, much good came from it, and many were saved in spite of the defiant Jews. We have no notice of any subsequent church activity there, as at Athens with the church begun there, 17:34. However, Paul's letters (that we possess) were not necessarily written to every church begun by him, but

to churches with problems. He may have not written to other churches, or we may not have the letters.

### **At Beroea, 17:10b-14a**

*and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. 12 Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. 13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Beroea also, they came there too, stirring up and inciting the crowds. 14 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea.*

V. 11 - An oft-quoted verse, since it described the ideal attitude of anyone faced with a challenge to the position then held - i.e., check the charges being made as to their accord with truth. One has no need to fear truth, whoever has it. However, it is just as necessary to check how the various “truths” presented are fitted together. It may be in this area that most disagreements occur. This is where the problem invariably arose with Jesus’ preaching, and with the preaching of the apostles; there was little argument about the fact that the Old Testament Scriptures foretold of a Messiah to come. The argument was about the nature and identification of that Messiah. Paul asserted the Messiah was Jesus; the Jews who disbelieved denied it.

For us, the same thing is true. Many people will agree with the assertion that all the Bible is from God. The point of dispute is how one views or arranges the material in the Bible.

The phrase “more noble” comes from a word meaning “a better kind.” These Jews were eager to listen and learn, and did not allow pride and prejudice to detract them from pursuit of truth.

V. 12 - An impressive group both of men and women accepted the position advocated by Paul. Note that although the synagogue was the main place of work, others not necessarily connected with it were also evangelized and brought to faith in Jesus.

V. 13 - The jealous Jews wrought havoc in Beroea, stirring up (as an earthquake “shakes” things) and troubling (agitation again) the people to revolt against Paul. We note that the brethren in Beroea supplied a messenger to Jerusalem (20:4) and doubtless money for the collection which Paul’s group was taking there. Since they were a part of the Macedonian churches which gave so liberally, II Cor. 8,9.

V. 14 - We don’t know for sure when Timothy came to Athens, if separately or with Silas. He would act as a messenger at a later time (I Thess. 3:1 ff).

### **In Athens, 17:14b-34**

*but Silas and Timothy remained there.*

*15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.*

*16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. 18 Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, "What would this babbler say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" - because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you present? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except selling or hearing something new.*

*22 So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship. I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each of us, 28 for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, "for we are indeed his offspring." 29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead".*

*32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from among them. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

V. 15 - Why Paul was such a prominent person is hard to understand at times, since others also preached the good news. However, the whole Acts account describes Paul as a very intense individual, and against such a person people react, whoever they may be. Others, such as Luke, Silas or Timothy, could stay where Paul could not, even though all were of the same persuasion. Perhaps this fact should be kept in mind today as we labor among people. Some can do one work, others another work, though all believe and teach alike.

V. 16 - Athens, well known in secular history because of its university, and the various men who graced its campus, such as Pericles, Demosthenes, Socrates, Plato,

Aristotle, Sophocles and Euripides, now has a Jew turned Christian who is running from his own countrymen to enter its portals. Paul doubtless knew about its past, and its present, including such things as its renowned art centers, and the beautiful Parthenon crowning the Acropolis. He saw what others may also have seen; a city full of idols and people worshipping them. But he had a different response than others: a substitute of the true for the false, the real thing for that which was deceiving. (Can we only dimly perceive how he felt, or could his reaction be replayed in our lives?)

*Provoked* is the Greek word also in ch. 15:39; I Cor. 13:5; Heb. 10:24. It indicates a strong reaction. He saw a city with idol statues everywhere. Note here Romans 1:18-23 - when one refuses the knowledge of the true God, idolatry is the natural and inevitable result. He surely did not view the art and sculpture merely for its own sake, but saw beyond it to what it said about the people. Historians of this period who suggest that it was easier to find an idol in Athens than a man perhaps exaggerated the matter, but there were evidently plenty of idols.

V. 17 - Paul's procedure was again the same - reasoning ("argued" as in 17:2) with Jews in their synagogues, and also others who chanced to pass by the market place where all would appear, sooner, or later.

V. 18 - Most commentaries will give information on the philosophical schools mentioned. Both groups were prominent in Athens. and were rather at opposite poles of thought. Stoicism tended more toward intellectualism. Epicureanism tended to emphasize a pleasurable (hedonism) life, having everything under control. Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) was anything but a sensualist, but followers over the centuries allowed his philosophy to degenerate. He had taught that man had freedom to act, and life ought to be so lived that none of the stresses and strains in it would bother, but that came to be simply "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (and cease existing).

Zeno, (340-265 B.C.) founder of Stoicism (from *stoa*, a colonnade or porch where Zeno taught), was pantheistic in theology, fatalistic in thought. Some have characterized the stoics as the Pharisees of Greek philosophy, since they tended to apathy about life. Paul may have known more about Stoicism, since Tarsus was a center of learning, and Stoicism was prominent in the school there (at least six famous Stoic philosophers made their home in Tarsus). It was a mixed bunch addressed by Paul.

The one point both of these had in common: they tended to exalt self. Paul's remarks seem to take in these philosophies, even if somewhat indirectly at times.

**Babbler** - The Greek word describes someone who had picked up bits and pieces of wisdom but had nothing to offer of genuine interest. They described him as one who proclaimed a strange doctrine of deities (i.e., a god who came to earth, was crucified and resurrected). In Athens, if a new doctrine of a god was introduced that would upset the current doctrine held, it was considered a capital offense. (At its ultimate, Christianity would do just that!) Socrates was killed for just such activity.

V. 19 - There is considerable doubt as to just where Paul was taken. The Greek text quite possibly indicates that Paul appeared before the council of the Areopagus (which met often times close to the Agora (market place) rather than on the hill itself, from whence the council got its name).

Their question indicates that they wondered if it were possible to know whereof Paul spoke. The reason for such a question was that many mystery religions of the day would not share their doctrines outside of those in the group.

V. 20 - Some surprising things, they affirm, Paul has brought to their attention, and they desire to know more.

V. 21 - Luke inserts a note for his readers' benefit, describing the basic character of those in Athens. Historians of the day confirm Luke's description. With this sort of desire apparent, Paul set himself to declare the eternal truth, both new and old.

V. 22 - The opportunity presented itself, and Paul was ready for the offensive. He through the previous activity (v. 17) knew his audience, and addressed them correctly and well. Some have taken Paul to task for his presentation, and quote I Cor. 2 as his personal reaction to this sermon. Such does not appear to be the best position. He clearly addressed them on their philosophical basis, showing errors therein, and led them directly to God, with relevant information. The resurrection was the point at issue, and could not be avoided. Furthermore, some believed, including one of the distinguished people of the court itself, and a church was begun in Athens. Who could ask for more? In regard to the I Cor. 2 text, the contrast is that of the wisdom of God, elaborated in ch. 1 and proclaimed through the apostles, versus the wisdom of those in Corinth, which tended to puff up, 8:1.

**Very religious** - a much better rendering of the Greek term than "superstitious" of K.J. The Athenians were just that, and not superstitious. The Greek term means a "fearer of deities".

V. 23 - The reason for the previous observation in v. 22 is in this verse. Paul had observed the many objects of their worship. Whether these men shared the common views or not, some, through the expression of the statue in question, had expressed the desire to know more. His approach was to amplify what some presently claimed, thus avoiding the charge of presenting something contrary to what was then held.

V. 24 - Of course, monotheism was not unknown to these men, but their religion was not so. In fact, polytheism was found (and still is) everywhere except among the Jews, who had a revelation from the one God whom they worshipped.

V. 25 - The Epicureans held that the "gods" were quite indifferent to human needs, and dwelt afar, not being bothered by any of earth's problems. The Stoics held that the "gods" animated the earth (but couldn't exist apart from it). Paul declared that God is both transcendent and more than the sum total of the universe since he made it while remaining separate from it.

V. 26 - This verse cut across their cultural belief that the Athenians were self-generated, and so superior. Christian doctrine teaches the opposite (though it is more difficult to practice such doctrine than to preach it). It may be added that such a view hit at the prejudice of the Jews too. Contrariwise, all were created of one origin (from Adam) and no one was innately superior to another.

The major problem here is to what extent God determined man's boundaries without transgressing man's free will. To some extent, the O.T. prophets showed that God did determine the movements of some peoples, especially Israel, though that nation was treated on the basis of what God knew they would do.

V. 27 - As in ch. 14, Paul asserted that God's witness should have led men to him, had they thought correctly. Note that here Paul denied what the Epicureans taught about the gods being far off from man. The true God had rather planned all of life so that it would bring men to him.

V. 28 - The part quoted was of a Greek philosopher of the Stoic school whose language was adapted to assert that God was the only source of life, movement, existence. The assertion was made of Zeus (Jupiter), but Paul went beyond Zeus, pointing out that man didn't produce God but rather God created man, and that God wasn't Zeus.

V. 29 - Now, the essential nature of the divine is not to be expressed in idols, and subject to man's ideas rather, God is transcendent and separate from his creation (thus arguing against the position of the Stoics who had their gods being immanent and pantheistic).

V. 30 - God's past revelation was rather incomplete for most peoples (only Jews had a written revelation) and men were judged accordingly (God looked beyond those times to what was to come). But now, the final and greater revelation (in Christ) had come, and such actions as had been allowed were no longer allowed so repentance is in order in view of an impending judgment (thus arguing life after death in opposition to the Epicureans). Moreover, God had given assurance (Greek word for faith) that such was going to happen by evidence which all could know, and act accordingly. (See the importance of proclaiming a resurrected Jesus! Actually, faith in anything comes from evidence, which "persuades" that "whatever" is presented is trustworthy. it is always a process of persuasion through presentation of evidence, etc., as in 17:2-3.) As Paul wrote in Galatians 4, the fullness of time had come, and Jesus came that men might not be condemned but saved.

V. 32 - Paul had presented the essentials of Christianity: one eternal transcendent God who cared for man, who gave man a charge to repent in view of the day of reckoning to come. Some didn't believe in any life after death, while others thought the soul lived on. But none held to a bodily resurrection, the basic fact of Christianity.

V. 33 - With the possibility of another hearing, Paul departed, but not without results. Some of those listening were persuaded and formed part of the body of the church in Athens. Of interest is that one of the council was persuaded, and a woman, plus others. In consideration of the audience, hardly more results could have been expected. A university town is both open for promulgation and difficult to persuade.

As before mentioned, some think that I Cor. 2:1-5 is Paul's response to this sermon, in which the cross, per se, was not proclaimed. However, it seems that such a position discounts God's leading in what Paul did. If we believe that God directed Paul in what he preached and wrote, there is no good reason to think that this sermon was not so directed.

## QUESTIONS

57. What words describe Paul's presentations in Thessalonica? in Beroea? in Athens?

58. What two points did Paul make to the Jews of Thessalonica?

59. What was the actual charge in v. 7 leveled against Paul and Silas by the Jews?

60. What was the cultural effect of this charge, as stated in v. 6?

61. Have you treated other people like the Berean Jews treated Paul? (Weren't their actions like the "golden rule"?)

62. What sort of effect in Berea did the Jews from Thessalonica create?

63. Most cities of Paul's day were full of idols (cf. Thessalonica, I Thess. 1:9). Do you suppose that a center of learning such as Athens, with all its potential for evil, was somewhat more of a "provoker" to Paul than other cities?

64. What terms describe Paul in the Athenian eyes?



65. Summarize Paul's sermon.

66. In what way(s) did Paul differentiate between the Christian God and those of his hearers?

67. Is all the human race of one origin?

68. Do people yet today consider themselves better than others because of birth, wealth, etc.?

69. If you were in Paul's place, what would you preach?

70. Is there anything more powerful to preach than a resurrected Christ and universal judgment?

71. What were the results of Paul's sermon?

72. Do you suppose God directed Paul in remarks? (Read Matthew 10:17-20; I Thess. 2:13; Gal. 1:11,12).

#### **ABA REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4**

1. Briefly discuss Paul's ministry in Thessalonica.

2. Discuss the location and history of Thessalonica.
3. What does the Greek word for the term “turned the world upside down” mean?
4. What accusation was made by the mob against Paul and Silas?
5. What two things are recorded to show that the Jews in Berea were more noble than those in Thessalonica?
6. What does the phrase “more noble” mean?
7. Briefly summarize Paul’s visit to Athens and his discussion with the philosophers there.
8. Discuss the history and culture of Athens.
9. Summarize the philosophical thoughts of Stoicism and Epicureanism.
10. Who was Zeno?
11. Discuss the meaning of the Greek word for “Babbler”.
12. What does the Greek term “very religious” mean?
13. Complete the lesson writer’s statement: “Paul declared that God is both \_\_\_\_\_ and more that the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_ since He made it while \_\_\_\_\_ from it”.
14. True or False: “In Athens, if a new doctrine of a god was introduced that would upset the current doctrine held, it was considered a capital offense”.

15. Thought question: Would you consider Paul's ministry in Athens a success? Why or why not?

16. What does the Greek term "very religious" mean?

17. Complete the textbook author's comment: "Note here that Paul denied what the \_\_\_\_\_ taught about the \_\_\_\_\_ being \_\_\_\_\_. The true God had rather planned all of \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_. The true God had rather planned all of \_\_\_\_\_ so that it would \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_."

18. Complete the textbook writer's comment: "Actually, faith in anything comes from \_\_\_\_\_, which "\_\_\_\_\_ " that "\_\_\_\_\_ " is present is \_\_\_\_\_. It is always a process of \_\_\_\_\_ through \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_."

19. What two essential elements of Christianity did Paul present in Acts 17:32?