

Acts 17 Chapter Study

III. Launching Out

Chs. 13-28

C. Paul's Second Missionary Journey 15:36-18:22

1. Paul & Barnabas split-up 15:36-41
2. Lystra & Derbe: Timothy joins Paul 16:1-5
3. Galatia: The call to Greece 16:6-10
4. Philippi 16:11-40
5. Thessalonica 17:1-9

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

While both Amphipolis & Apollonia were good sized cities in their own right, Paul knew if they could plant a healthy church in Thessalonica, the entire surrounding region would eventually be reached.

So they made their way Southwest along the Via Egnatia, the main highway that connect Europe & Asia.

It was 33 miles from Philippi to Amphipolis, another 27 miles to Apollonia, then 40 more to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the capital of the province of Macedonia with a population of about 200,000.

Because it was a commercial center, it had a sizeable Jewish community with a synagogue, which is of course, where Paul went first.

² Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."

Luke gives us a great summary of Paul's method when he spoken in these synagogues on his missionary journeys.

He went to the synagogue because there was a built in interest in what he had to share.

The Jews were looking for their Messiah, while the God-fearing Gentiles who were there had already demonstrated a desire for truth.

By attending synagogue services, they'd heard of the Messiah & would be looking for His coming with nearly as great a sense of expectation as the Jews.

But as had been the case with the people of Israel when Jesus came, they were expecting the Messiah to come as a political & military leader.

Christ as Suffering Servant was no where on the horizon of their expectation.

So when Paul taught, he showed how the prophets had *foretold the sufferings & crucifixion* of the Messiah.

Once he made his case for the Messiah's suffering, death, & resurrection, then he announced that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled all the prophecies and proven Himself beyond a shadow of a doubt, to be the Messiah.

Not only does Luke give us a *summary* of Paul's *teaching*, he describes his *method*.

He says Paul *reasoned* with them *from the scriptures, explaining & demonstrating* the Gospel.

Paul didn't come into town with a big, flashy production – a massive stage show meant to entertain and wow the crowd with a slick, professional presentation. He wasn't some kind of rhetorical genius whose oratory skill mesmerized his hearers.

He didn't whip them into an emotional frenzy then press them for a commitment.

He simply made a logical, solid, reasonable case for faith in Jesus as Messiah & Redeemer.

His authority flowed directly from one thing – the Word of God! For it was *from the Scriptures* that he reasoned.

Two things I want to focus on here . . .

1) The Christian Faith is **reasonable!**

It isn't a blind leap into the unknowing dark, as many modernists would claim. The *Modern Age* has drawn a thick line between Faith & Reason & said that there's no correlation between the two; they line on opposite sides of an impassible wall.

On one side is *reason*, with the twin pursuits of *science & philosophy*.

On the other side is *faith*, with *religion & metaphysics*.

According to *Modernity*, **Reason** deals with the *knowable*, the *verifiable*.

It's the use of the mind interacting with the material universe.

It deals with facts & logic.

Reason is the means by which we can know what's real.

Faith, *Modernity* says, is the thoughts & desires of those who *want more than IS real*.

Faith has nothing to do with reason; it's mere wish-projection.

Faith, by definition, deals with unreality – because reality is the sole possession of reason, you see.

Reason relates to what's real, and if it's real, then it's known by reason.

Therefore faith is left with what's left – imagination, what isn't real – fiction.

Reason sees a cloud & knows it's condensed & suspended water vapor.

Faith sees a sailing ship, or a face, or an angel.

This is what *Modernity* has done to faith.

By a simple manipulation of the meaning of words, it's stripped faith of ANY claim to logic or reason.

It's arrogant & bogus, & we don't need to be fooled by it.

Just as Paul did, we can prove the reasonableness of the Gospel & Christian Faith.

It isn't a blind leap into the dark. It's a reasonable response, actually, it's THE reasonable response, to the evidence of history & logic.

In 1 Peter 3:15 the Apostle tells us we ought to prepare ourselves to give a rational, well-reasoned *defense* for our faith when we're challenged.

In fact, the Greek word he used for “defense” was a technical & legal terms for the case an attorney would put together when going to court. Court cases hang on 2 things: *evidence & logic*.

Where both Judaism & Christianity differ from other world religions is that the core beliefs we hold are just the metaphysical ramblings of some wise man.

What we believe flows from *verifiable & verified historical events*.

Certain intellectuals hold an arrogant condescension toward people of faith – saying that being a follower of Christ requires us to check our brains at the door .

Let me ask – did you check your brain at the door when you came in tonight, or do you find our study here on Wednesdays to be mentally stimulating & engaging?

The Christian Faith is reasonable, imminently so.

In Isaiah 1:18 God *invites* us thus; “Come now, *let us reason together* you & I.”

God *wants us* to use our minds as it relates to Him, not put them on a shelf.

The more I study Scripture, the writings of the world’s great thinkers, & the world at large, the more I see the *reasonableness* of the Christian faith as the best explanation for what is.

No other religion or philosophy *comes close* to the cogency of a Biblical Worldview.

What’s interesting is watching how as post-modernity *undercuts the skepticism* of the Modern Era, more & more scientists & philosophers are coming round to the realization that the Judeo-Christian worldview is indeed reasonable & persuasive.

2) Paul’s *authority came from the Scriptures*.

While *v. 2* says he *reasoned* from the Scriptures, *v. 3* says he *explained & demonstrated* the truth of the Gospel.

“*Explained*” is a Greek word meaning “*to open up what was sealed, closed.*”

In this context it means to *bring an understanding* of something where before there was no insight.

The word “*demonstrate*” means to set something before someone, as when a waiter places a plate of gourmet cuisine before a customer seated at a table.

Here’s what Paul did in the synagogue of Thessalonica for 3 straight weeks –

He showed how the Scriptures foretold the Messiah would come to suffer & die for sins, then rise again on the third day.

Having *proven* this as the mission of the Messiah, he then set Jesus before them as the *fulfillment* of those prophecies – as the Christ whose death & resurrection meant the possibility of a whole new relationship with God based on grace through faith, not works.

Paul didn’t come to them saying, “Look, I’m an apostle, so listen up!”

He didn’t make a claim to authority on the basis of a dynamic personality or special revelations from God.

Paul knew his authority came from his *right handling* of the Word of God. Really, it wasn’t *HIS* authority at all – *it was the authority inherent in the Scriptures*.

As long as he kept his teaching to what the Word said, both he & his hearers were safe.

This is what *every leader & teacher* in the Church ought to do – draw their authority from the Word of God.

If they can't base what they're doing & saying in the Word, then really, they *don't have any authority*.

If a teacher will simply read & explain the text, opening it to people so they can *see for themselves* what it means, then the Holy Spirit will have what's necessary to APPLY the truth to those who hear.

When the teacher moves from explaining to application, his/her words will then be an *echo* of what the Holy Spirit has already been saying, and people will know the teacher is simply being faithful to the text.

You know why you count me your pastor? Because you know what I'm teaching isn't stuff I've dreamed up out of my own imagination – it's the Word.

I explain the text – you look at it and say, “Yep, that's what it says.”

Then when I begin to share an application for how we can *live* the text, you're already there because the Holy Spirit has already spoken that thing to your heart.

My words are like an echo of what's already going on inside, confirming what you're thinking & sensing.

What pastors & teachers need to do is simply *open the Scriptures to people*.

Unfortunately, what we find on the speaker's circuit are celebrities claiming to be modern day prophets & Apostles who've been given special revelation from God & have a *new message* for the church.

They demand people's attention because of their authority as a special spiritual agent.

It's a constant parade of these guys on Christian TV.

Each one tries to *out do* the others with some new vision or dream or Word from the Lord that get more & more wild.

Paul's claim to authority flowed from one thing – the Word of God.

In fact, he never asked people to *believe in him* – he simply laid out the Scriptures & called on people to believe THEM.

He didn't base his teaching on new revelations or visions – though he had them, including a trip to heaven.

His authority flowed from the Word – as should ours.

There's one more thing I want to touch on before we read on.

Notice that Paul opened the Word to them, showing how the death & resurrection of the Messiah had been foretold, then he showed how Jesus was the *fulfillment* of all that had been prophesied.

The only other time the word “explained” appears in the Bible is in Luke 24:32 when the 2 from Emmaus said to each other about Jesus, “Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, & while He *opened* to us the scriptures?”

You'll remember that as they walked along the road, Jesus took them on an extended study through the entire OT, showing how it was prophesied that the Messiah would suffer & die for the sins of the world & would rise again

on the 3rd day.

Think of it – they were all bummed out because Jesus had been crucified.

Why didn't He just say to them, "LOOK – it's ME!"

No – instead, he opened the Scriptures to them – and it was when they saw what the Word said, & they sat down to eat with Him, that they finally realized who He was.

Don't miss the point – Jesus is revealed THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD!

This is how He comes to us today. He know & experience Him as the Spirit works through the Word.

Bible students : Pay close attention to this because it's of utmost importance.

Notice *when* the scriptures were *opened* to the 2 on the road to Emmaus.

Take careful note of when the Thessalonians understood the Word of God.

When Jesus was the object.

Revelation 19:10, says that Jesus is the center & subject of all prophecy.

In John 5:39 Jesus said to the Bible scholars of His day, "You search the

Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."

The key to understanding the Bible is to look for Jesus.

If you only study the Bible so you can do well in the Bible category on Jeopardy, you won't really *understand* scripture

But if your desire is to *know* Jesus, then the Scriptures will open to you.

4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

The response was pretty typical. A few of the Jews and a large number of god-fearing Gentiles came to faith.

Luke mentions the presence of a few prominent women among these early followers of Christ in Thessalonica.

He'll refer to a group of them in several other Greek cities too.

These were women from the elite levels of society who'd grown weary of the moral debauchery of Greco-Roman culture & found in Judaism something better & truer.

Being wealthy, they were exempt from the common labor of other women, & spent their time in philosophical pursuits.

They were a ripe & ready audience for the Gospel.

5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

Here was the inevitable backlash from the Jews who *rejected* the Gospel.

They saw the very same proof as those who'd come to faith, but drew a different conclusion.

They held on to their *own ideas* about what the Messiah would do when He came & found Paul's explanation of the Gospel to be an *abomination*. So they attacked.

But look who they *recruited* to do their dirty work – "evil men of the

marketplace.”

These were *street ruffians – toughs – thugs – common vagrant ne'er-do-wells* who just hung around in a pack looking for trouble to get into. *Hoodlums. Shenanagizers. Hooligans. Punks.*

The Jews knew they were no match for Paul in debating the truth, so they took the base route of opposition – bald-faced violence.

How can these people, who think they are defending a holy God, ally themselves with common criminals & urge them to violence?

Hooligans don't really have much need for a reason to get wild – any little match lights their fuse.

So the Jews provoked them and a riot ensued.

They ran to Jason's house where Paul & his team were known to be staying.

They began beating on his door, demanding that Paul be delivered up.

6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things.

Paul, Silas, Timothy & Luke weren't home when the mob attacked, so they dragged Jason & a few other new believers to the city magistrate, charging them with sedition against Rome.

This was the same charge made against Paul in Philippi – but it was totally bogus!

Paul advocated nothing contrary to the rule of Rome.

What's interesting is their words – “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”

Word of the Gospel had begun to spread around the Roman Empire.

The news of a reform movement inside Judaism had gone far & wide following the first Pentecost some 20 years before.

And the Gospel was gaining a reputation for reforming not just Judaism, *but all of society.*

Where ever the Church took root – a new culture began to blossom – a culture of love & grace that transcended the lines that had divided society into distinct & separate groups of the rich & poor, slave & free, men & women, Jew & Gentile.

Just a thought before we move on – In Thessalonica, the opponents of the Church called it a *dangerous revolution.*

Is that the way the Church is seen by it's opponents today? Not here – not in the US.

No – it's seen as *old fashioned, bound by empty traditions, & irrelevant.*

In the mind of critics, *Revolutionary* is about as *far from descriptive* as you can get for the average local church.

Yet, when you think about it – *revolutionary* is exactly what the Church ought to be!

We ought to be subverting the culture at *every point* where inequity, injustice,

& unrighteousness prevail.

Where ever hell has set up a fortress – the Church ought to be hammering away at its gate.

The movie Amazing Grace, the story of William Wilberforce’s long campaign against slavery is a great example of this very thing.

9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

6. Berea 17:10-14

10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

The city magistrates made Jason & his friends post bail & promise that Paul & his band would leave.

If Paul had been there, he *never* would have agreed to this!

He would have claimed his rights as a Roman citizen, as he did in Philippi, which prohibited a Roman citizen from being expelled from a Roman city, which Thessalonica was.

But he wasn’t there. And right or wrong, Jason agreed to the terms so Paul’s team was banished from the city.

In 1 Thess 2:18 he tells them there were several times he *wanted* to visit them but Satan *hindered* him.

He’s most likely referring to this *restraining order* that had been laid on him. Because Paul couldn’t visit the church at Thessalonica in person, he wrote them the letters we know as 1 & 2 Thessalonians, which scholars believe were the very first letters Paul wrote in the Bible.

So the devil may have thwarted Paul’s physical presence in Thessalonica, but he couldn’t halt his ministry there.

And ultimately, 1 & 2 Thessalonians have done far more *damage to Satan’s kingdom* than Paul’s physical presence could have done.

How many millions have been saved & delivered from the ravages of sin because of reading these letters?

What Satan meant as a setback to the advance of the Kingdom of God once again became his undoing.

The devil just keeps loading the shot gun God uses to blow him away!

Leaving at night to avoid another uproar, they traveled to Berea, about 50 miles southwest.

And once again, Paul heads to the synagogue to share the Gospel.

11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

Though Paul followed the very same pattern in Berea he had in Thessalonica, his message was received in a different manner.

Luke says the Bereans were more “*fair-minded*.” The Greek word is “*eugenes*” & means “well-born.”

This doesn't mean they were from *better families*.

He means the Bereans weren't bound by prejudice & jealousy; they had a genuine concern for truth & would go where ever the evidence led.

They understood that their views on the Messiah might be in error.

If Paul could point out IN THE WORD OF GOD where their assumptions were ill-founded, & prove from the Scriptures that what he was saying was so – then they would change their minds & come to faith.

They didn't cling to their traditions because they were comfortable.

They didn't hang on to ideas they realized were errant.

No - They searched the scriptures daily to find out if what Paul was saying as true or not.

As they looked to the Word, they discovered there was even more evidence for the Gospel than Paul had told them.

And seeing it for themselves, they came to faith.

There is a crying need for Bereans today - for people to check what they're hearing from all sources, against the Word of God.

That there are so few Bereans today is the only way to account for the endless parade of heretics we hear today.

13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there.

The unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica couldn't leave well enough alone.

They'd been successful in ousting Paul from *their town*, so they decided to trouble Berea with their false charges & took the 2 day trip there.

The church in Berea hadn't been properly shaped yet, so Paul left Silas & Timothy behind to take care of it while he set sail for Athens.

7. Athens 17:15-34

15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. 16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

Athens is about 200 miles south of Berea but traveling by ship, probably took a couple days.

When the people who were carrying him returned to Berea, they carried a message from Paul to Timothy & Silas to meet him in Athens as soon as they could wrap up their work in organizing the new church in Berea.

Though Paul was alone now, arriving in Athens had to be an exciting moment. Athens was the *intellectual* capital of the Roman Empire.

In fact, there are philosophers *today* who would say ancient Athens was the intellectual center of the universe and all history.

Athens was the home of Socrates, Plato, & Aristotle.

Many historians call Athens the *birthplace of western civilization*.

While Rome was the greatest *empire* of world history, the culture of the

Empire was primarily Greek.

From government, art, and philosophical roots have all been heavily influenced by Athens.

Modern mathematics was born in Athens.

It was the home of Pythagoras, Aristarchus, & Archimedes

Western ideas of liberty, law, democracy, & parliamentary rule – all originate in Athens.

Paul knew that if the Christian faith was ever to succeed on the world of great thoughts, it would eventually have to confront & conquer Greek philosophy & religion.

What better place for the showdown to take place than in *Athens*?

As he walked around the city to get a feel for how best to present the Gospel, he saw *idols everywhere*.

A man named Pausanias, who lived near this time, said after a visit to Athens that it was easier to meet a god on the streets of Athens than a man.

Athens wasn't only the intellectual capital of the world, it was also the *religious capital* of the world.

The entire pantheon of Greek gods had temples & idols there.

In fact, standing high above the city on a cliff-sided hill was the *Parthenon*; a majestic tribute to the architectural excellence of the ancient Greeks.

To this day, though it lies mostly in ruins, it's a breathtaking sight & a landmark most people can identify.

But as Paul toured the city, he was "provoked" v. 16 says.

The word means "to be stirred up/agitated." We get the word "*paroxysm*" from it.

It refers to an emotion so intense it creates *physical pain*.

While the artistry & genius of the Greeks was impressive, Paul saw it as a colossal waste of time & effort because it was all spent on *vanity*.

That magnificent Parthenon that rose above the city was dedicated to a *fiction*.

The idols & temples that filled the city & consumed so much of the people's attention were nothing but stone & wood.

Paul grew *angry* at the lies of Satan who'd held the multitudes of Athens in bondage for generations.

He was determined to do something about it.

Though the rest of his team wasn't there yet, he had to get started pushing back the darkness.

17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

He began his work as always, in the synagogue.

But as he taught, he included themes relevant to Athens & her culture.

It didn't take long before his message began to be repeated by others outside the synagogue.

Paul also used some of the public forums that were set up in the marketplace for people to make announcements.

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

As Paul preached in the *Agora*, the marketplace, some intellectuals overheard him. Then when they met together later, they talked about & debated what they'd heard.

Some wrote him off as nothing more than a babbling man.

The word is literally, “seed-picker.”

These were poor, pathetic beggars who didn't have all their wits.

They sat in the marketplace, waiting for someone to buy a loaf of sesame bread and when they walked by, they'd dive on the seeds that fell to the ground.

In modern terms, picture some homeless person who daily shuffles behind the mall stores to rummage through their dumpsters looking for something to eat, mumbling to themselves some incoherent nonsense.

Those who called Paul a babbling man had heard his message & considered both him & it absurd.

Others realized Paul was speaking about more than a new philosophy; he was announcing a new religion.

Because they were such a religious & superstitious people, *they* had more interest in what he had to say.

The Athenians prided themselves on the fact that *all* the gods were represented in Athens.

The thought there was one they'd neglected would trouble them.

History tells us, & Luke marks it, that philosophers were divided into 2 main schools at this time, Epicureans & Stoics.

Epicureans believed the gods were far off & disinterested in humanity.

They believed death meant annihilation so the highest good was to seek after pleasure while alive.

Anything painful was evil, while anything pleasurable was good.

The pursuit of luxury, fine food & drink, physical comforts & intellectual stimulation *defined* their lives.

While no one claims to be an Epicurean in the modern world,

Epicureanism lives on in the modern American *consumer mentality* – and the slogan: “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

The Stoics were on the *other end* of the spectrum from the Epicureans.

They believed the gods were near & *in everything* - that every person had a *spark of divinity* within.

They were *fatalists* - who believed *everything* that happened was the will of God & not to be resisted.

They thought the body *hindered* the spark of divinity in people.

So they adopted an *extreme asceticism* - a rigorous discipline of denying the flesh *any* satisfaction but what was necessary to survive.

Stoics ate only bland foods, wore uncomfortable clothing, & abstained from sex.

So it wasn't a very popular movement.

But those who joined were well respected for their disciplined lifestyle.

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." 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.

The central meeting place of the chief philosophers was the Areopagus – AKA, Mars Hill.

It was across from the Acropolis with its Parthenon.

It was there that the Athens City council met. Comprised of 30 men, they tried murder cases & governed issues of public morality.

Because religion has a direct impact on morality. whenever a new religion was proclaimed, the council would meet to & the one spreading it would have to address them.

So Paul was brought before them to give a full account of the Gospel.

Besides the 30 official members of the Areopagus, there would be a large audience of spectators.

Since Athens was the university town of the ancient world, all of those who fancied themselves intellectuals went there.

Luke tells us that philosophical debate and discussion was the chief past time of the Athenians.

The people loved nothing more than to hear some new slant on this or that.

This had to be a special moment for Paul as the *brain trust* of the world at that time sat waiting for him to speak

Now before we get into the next verses, I need to tell you a story.

A 3rd Century Greek author named *Diogenes Laertius* wrote a work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

He tells how there was a severe plague that struck Athens in the 6th century before Christ.

The city council turned to one of their oracles for help & they were told the plague was judgment for the treachery of one of their recent rulers by a god *unknown* to them.

They were instructed to send to the island of Crete for a man named Epimenides who would tell them what to do.

Epimenides arrived & told the people to release a flock of sheep at dawn onto a grassy hillside.

Any sheep that lay down, rather than feed, was a sign from this unknown God that it was the one He wanted sacrificed to Himself.

Several sheep did in fact lie down, & masons made altars at each location, then priests offered the sheep as sacrifices.

Each altar & idol in Athens had the name of the god it was dedicated to

engraved on it.

The masons asked *what name* was to be placed on this new collection of altars, but Epimenides replied they were simply to engrave - "To the unknown God."

As soon as the altars were built & the sacrifices made, the plague lifted.

A couple centuries passed & the people forgot about the plague & the altars.

Because they were dedicated to an unknown God, no one attended to their upkeep & they fell into disrepair.

Eventually, *only one altar* was left, & when the city council realized it,

they cleaned & repaired it, & set aside a budget for its maintenance. ^[1]

This gives us the background for what we read next .

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; 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:

This obscure altar to the unknown God became the launching point for Paul's message.

While the Athenians were religious in the extreme, their religion was vain because their worship was focused on empty idols & false gods.

God, in His grace & mercy, had prepared the way *centuries before* for the arrival of Paul & the proclamation of the truth.

Though nameless & unknown 5 centuries before, God had placed in Athens a memorial to Himself that He would later use as a powerful key to tap into their lives.

While the Athenians had forgotten the details of the altar's origin, they still knew that the Unknown God was a great & good God

And now Paul tells the city leaders this is the God he's come to make known.

God loved the Athenians long before Paul was born, and was patiently at work among them preparing the soil for the day when the Gospel would come.

2 Peter 3:9 says that God is not willing that *any* should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance.

So we can be confident in knowing that He's at work in the lives of the lost, breaking up the fallow ground of hard hearts, preparing them through the circumstances of their lives for the day when a believer will share the hope of the Gospel with them.

24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵ Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the

boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Paul's presentation of the one, true God is *masterful*. The name he gives the Unknown God is *Theos*.

While the Greeks worshipped *hundreds* of gods, each with its own name, *none* was named Theos, which was their *generic* name for deity.

Yet several of their *greatest philosophers*, including Aristotle, had stated that the gods they all knew & worshipped weren't really *God* in the true sense - they were merely *minor deities* who owed their existence to the one True God.

The problem is - this One True God was unknowable.

He was so completely Other from His creation, he could not be known by His creation.

The closest human beings could get to the divine was to honor & serve the lesser deities, like Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, & Hera.

Theos, was the Creator & Sustainer of all things.

Paul says he's come to remove the veil that's shrouded Theos & kept humanity ignorant.

History, Paul declares, is the *story* of Theos seeking to reveal Himself to man - a revelation that's been made crystal in the Person of Jesus Christ.

²⁹ Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Paul points out an *obvious point* about the *error of idolatry*, one astute philosophers had made comment on for generations.

If God is *greater* than man as everyone admits He is, then how can He be honored by an idol?

What is an idol but a block of stone or hunk of gold & silver covered wood?

An idol is man's attempt to represent God, but he makes something that is *even less than man himself*.

People ought to realize how *ridiculous & offensive* an idol would be as a representative of a God.

Any god would look at the idol that was made to him or her and grow furious at the foolish attempt of humanity to capture his/her essence.

Idols are an enduring monument to one thing - the spiritual insanity of fallen humanity.

A Sunday School teacher finished his lesson early & told the kids they could get out paper & crayons & drawn anything they wanted till the end of class time.

All the kids immediately set to work; all but one. Suzy pulled a piece of paper over and took a crayon, then just sat there looking at her blank page.

The teacher came by and asked her if she was okay, and Suzy said she was; she was just thinking about what to draw.

A few minutes later, the teacher noticed Suzy had her head down and was

drawing furiously.

So she walked over to see what she was doing. She couldn't make heads or tails of the drawing & asked, "Suzy, what you got there?"

Suzy said, "I'm drawing a picture of God."

The teacher said, "But no one knows what He looks like."

Suzy replied, "Well – they will when I'm done."

Yeah – right. A 7 year old with paper & crayon is NOT going to draw a picture of God any more than an artisan is going to carve an image out of marble.

God *overlooked* such foolishness before, but now that the Gospel has come to

Athens, that time is past & they must put away their idols & embrace the True God.

30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Paul presented God as Creator, Sustainer, Lord, & now as Judge of all mankind.

Remember, this was the Areopagus, the Athens city council whose task was to judge & administer justice.

The *final judgment* would be a powerful image for these people.

But as Paul speaks of the final judgment, there's a sense of urgency in his voice.

He's brought them a message that requires a decision.

What they decide determines their eternal destiny.

For Paul – the keystone, the proof that his message was true & compelling was that Jesus had risen from the dead.

This was an historical certainty that in Paul's mind could not be denied or gainsaid.

But as soon as he mentioned the resurrection, it threw his hearers into an uproar.

32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

There were 3 different responses to Paul's message.

1) The first group *mocked* when they heard of the resurrection.

They considered resurrection a complete impossibility. It simply wasn't in the realm of the possible. So they rejected the Gospel out of hand.

These were *naturalists, materialists*. There was *no room* in their worldview for the supernatural.

Miracles simply did not, *could* not happen.

For them, God was merely an invention to keep the illiterate & superstitious masses of commoners in line.

They listened politely to Paul, hoping they might hear of some new way to keep the people under control.

But as soon as they realized he was sincere in his faith they stopped their ears & dismissed him by making fun.

The Gospel gets the same reaction from many people today. They are hard-boiled *materialists*.

There's no reality other than what their senses perceive.

Science is their religion, the laboratory their church, & a white lab coat their priestly robe.

But the *materialist's* position is *self-contradicting*.

You see, as limited as Science is in it's inquiry of reality, it's been able to establish certain *laws*, which *require/demand* the existence of an Eternal Creator.

The Law of Cause & Effect, the Laws of Thermodynamics – all require the existence of God as the Bible describes Him.

2) The 2nd response was from those who said, "We will hear you again on this matter."

They meant to *end* Paul's speech. This was a polite way of shutting him up & getting rid of him.

"Very interesting. In fact, we'd like to hear more later but that 's enough for now."

These didn't *outright reject* the Gospel, but they were getting uncomfortable with the direction Paul was going.

All the talk of judgment made them uneasy.

When they heard the mockers snicker at the mention of the resurrection, they saw it as a convenient moment to halt Paul.

This is so like so many today.

They recognize there is a higher power, a supreme being who Created & Sustains all things.

But they get uncomfortable thinking about Him as Lord and Judge before whom they will one day give account.

When the Gospel is preached they see that a point of decision is approaching, and they don't want to decide.

So they backpedal & politely say they need to think about it.

All they're doing is asking for more time to resist the Holy Spirit Who's convicting them of sin & need of Christ.

3) The 3rd response is seen in Dionysius & Damaris, and the others who came to faith in Christ.

These heard in Paul's message the truth & followed it to the logical end.

[1] [Don Richardson - *Eternity In Their Hearts*]