

Acts 17:22-18:17 Chapter Study

III. Launching Out

Chs. 13-28

A. Paul's First Missionary Journey Chs. 13-14

B. Controversy ! 15:1-35

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

Lystra & Derbe, Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea [Maps]

7. Athens 17:15-34

Paul was rushed out of the city of Philippi before the fledgling church had been properly set up.

So Silas & Timothy stayed behind to help them become established, while Paul was taken by ship south to Athens.

As he waited for the rest of his team to rejoin him, he toured around the City which was the birthplace of Greek philosophy⁷ & the culture that dominated the Roman Empire.

He knew that for the Gospel to take root & grow in the Gentile world, it would eventually have to take on Greek philosophy & pagan religion.

So he walked around Athens, the center of it all, & looked for ways to speak the Gospel into the hearts & minds of the Athenians.

He taught in the little synagogue that was there.

He preached in the *Agora*, the marketplace.

Some of the Athenian philosophers heard him, & realizing he had a new spin on things, invited him to their forum where he could share his message at length.

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:

The Areopagus was on the same hill as the Parthenon which dominated the Athenian skyline.

It was the place where the philosophers debated & city council ruled.

They were all there now to consider how Paul's new message would effect Athens.

He began by observing how ultra religious the Athenians were.

As we saw last week, the city was *filled* with hundreds of altars & temples.

One visitor to Athens said it was easier to find a god than a man on the streets of Athens.

Inscribed on each altar was the name of the deity it was devoted to.

But one altar was dedicated to "The Unknown God." [Last week]

This altar became Paul's *launching point*.

In His grace & mercy, God had prepared the way for his message *6 centuries before*.

While the Athenians had forgotten the *details* of the altar's *origin*, they knew

the Unknown God was a great & good God.

They lamented the fact they could not honor him more accurately.

Paul tells the city leaders he's come to make the Unknown God **known**.

God **loved the Athenians** long before Paul was born, & 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 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 someone will share the Good News of Christ 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. **Theos** was their **generic** name for deity, for the divine.

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

The problem is – this One True God was unknowable.

He was so completely **Other** from His creation, Theos could not be known **by** that creation.

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

Theos, they said, 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.

Now, listen—it's difficult to explain just how brilliant Paul's strategy is here.

You see, the ultimate goal of most Greek philosophy was to catch a glimmer of Theos.

Though Aristotle had said He was unknowable, it was still the aim of both religion & philosophy to pierce through the veil of unknowing and press

into the enlightenment that would lay hold of Theos.
Paul now says that Theos hasn't been hiding from humanity, and He isn't so totally Other than He can't be known.
On the contrary, just as it's been the Greeks chief passion to find God, it's His chief passion to be found.
But humanity has made a major mistake in HOW it's gone about seeking God – idolatry.

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 that astute philosophers had made comment on for generations.

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

What is an idol but a block of stone or piece of gilded lumber?

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 to God as His representative.

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 & draw *anything* they wanted till the end of class time. They immediately set to work; all but one. Suzy pulled a piece of paper over & took a crayon, then just sat there looking at her blank page.
The teacher asked if she was okay. She said she was; she was just thinking about what to draw.

A few minutes later, the teacher noticed Suzy had her head down & was drawing furiously.

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

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

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

Suzy replied, "They will when I'm done."

Yeah – right. A 7 year old with a crayon is NOT going to draw a picture of God any more than an artisan is going to sculpt an image of Him out of marble.
Paul said that while God *overlooked* such foolishness before, now that the Gospel had come to them, 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 Athenian city council whose task was to judge & administer justice.

The **final judgment** would be a powerful image for these people.
But as Paul spoke of the final judgment, there was **urgency** in his voice.
He'd brought them a message that **required a decision**.

What they decided determined 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.

They reacted so strongly because the resurrection was so totally unexpected, so wildly surprising.

The Greek mind was dominated by the idea of fate.

And the ultimate fate of all men & women was death, from which there was **no recall**.

Paul's announcement of Jesus' resurrection opened a theological & philosophical can of worms that some of them were not willing to deal with.

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 an utter **impossibility**. So they rejected the Gospel out of hand, considering Paul's message absurd.

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'd listened politely to Paul, hoping to hear some **new way** to keep the masses under control.

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

The Gospel gets the same reaction from many today. They're 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 its 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.

This is spelled out in razor sharp logic in Romans 1.

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

They meant to *end* Paul’s speech, *politely*.

They were no less distressed by what he had to say than the materialists who mocked.

They were only *more kind* about how they expressed their desire to get rid of him.

So they say, “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*.

This is like so many today.

They recognize there’s a higher power, a supreme being who created & sustains all things.

But they grow uneasy thinking of Him as *Lord & Judge* before whom they will one day stand.

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

So they backpedal, saying 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 their need of Christ.

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

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

Dionysius was one of those who sat on the City Council.

Some Bible teachers point out the largely negative response Paul got here then point out all the errors in his method.

They say he ought never have tried to preached to them by repackaging the Gospel in philosophical terms as he does here.

I don’t find much merit in that view.

What we see in Athens on Mars Hill, is pretty much the same response to the Gospel Paul got in most places. Some believed, others didn’t.

Paul didn’t follow the exact same message plan he did when preaching in the synagogue because his audience on Mars Hill wouldn’t have been able to relate to it.

He astutely drew out those things in their culture that were a set up for the Gospel.

To criticize Paul’s message here is 2000 year late armchair quarterbacking.

8. Corinth 18:1-17

¹ After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth.

When Paul first arrived in Athens, he’d sent a message to Silas & Timothy in Philippi to meet him in Athens ASAP.

It took longer than expected for them to build a solid leadership team in the Philippian church, so Paul moved on to Corinth.

You see, as important as Athens was *historically*, by the first century, it had become a rather small city.

It was no longer *strategically* important to Rome, so while it retained its honor & prestige as the birthplace of Greek culture, it lost its political & economic position.

Corinth was a different story.

Located on the 3½ mile wide isthmus that connect northern & southern Greece, it was an important commercial center.

The sea voyage around the southern cape of Greece is treacherous.

So much so, most merchants & sailors preferred to offload their cargo at either Cenchrea on the east or Lenchaeum on the west., then carry it overland to the opposite port.

Even the ships were hauled out of the water & rolled across land via huge logs.

Corinth was the main city that lay along this route, protecting the passage between the ports, east to west, and guarding the isthmus leading north to south.

It was situated on a tall cliff that made for an impregnable fortress which had served the city well.

Being at such an important crossroads, Corinth had grown very wealthy.

The wealth attracted all kinds of people, including not a few sailors, who because of their travels all over the Mediterranean had picked up all kinds of ideas & vices.

These were all eventually carried and deposited in Corinth, which became incredibly corrupt.

So immoral was the city, it earned a reputation as the Sin-City of its day.

Polite society used the label “Corinthian” to describe someone who was sexually profligate, ultra-promiscuous, without the ability to blush.

What contributed to this reputation for gross sexual immorality was the massive temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of sensuality and love.

She was served by a thousand priests & priestesses, who every night, dressed in seductive costumes, then went out into the streets of the city to seduce people to worship Aphrodite by engaging in sex for a fee.

They were ritual prostitutes.

What made matters worse is that being a priestess to Aphrodite was something all the women of Corinth were expected to serve as for a term. It was seen as good citizenship.

And of course, the men were expected to show their loyalty by worshipping often.

Historians estimate the population of Corinth at this time was over 200,000 – a major city; the Roman governmental capital of this region.

So of course Paul wanted to see a church planted there.

If the challenge in Athens had been facing the opposition of *monumental intellectualism*, the challenge in Corinth would be in dealing with *mammoth immorality*.

² And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had

commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them.

³ So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.

Aquila & Priscilla were a married couple who became an important part of the Early Church.

Not just for their partnership with Paul but because of their influence on so many others.

The Spirit seems to have moved them from place to place so they could perform an important work of encouragement & support to many who went on to become leaders in the Church.

The word used for their trade means they *worked in leather*.

Actually, in Paul's home town of Tarsus, a certain kind of goat was raised whose fleece was used to make a special leather perfect for small portable tents.

It was a Jewish law that every young man had to learn a viable trade.

Even students who were headed for theological training were required to learn a trade.

The Jews didn't divide the world into totally separate categories of the spiritual & material like the Greeks did.

For the Jews, God was Creator & Sustainer of the universe, & you could worship Him as readily through honest labor as by the acts of formal worship.

The only question was which was the best way to worship at a given moment. So the rabbis taught that everyone needed a trade, through which they could learn more about God.

Because they didn't place a divide between the spiritual & material, they said that the physical world was a huge stage upon which God revealed Himself.

As Creator & Sustainer of the universe, they could expect to see His fingerprints everywhere.

This is why they used parables & illustrations from nature so readily.

Creation was truth's portrait - & physical labor was a way for a man to personally enter in to the lessons creation had to teach.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, his financial resources had dried up, so he asked around for work.

Being a Jewish tent-maker, he was directed to Aquila & Priscilla, who'd recently arrived from Rome.

In the 9th year of the reign of Emperor *Claudius*, he published an edict demanding the expulsion of all Jews from Rome.

There'd been several riots among the Jews, the historian Suetonius tells us, over a character named "*Chrestus*."

The opponents of this Chrestus kept attacking his supporters, beating them in the streets, holding hostile rallies against them, & burning down their homes & businesses.

Fearful the violence & flames would spread, Claudius ordered the Jews to leave.

From what we learn later about Aquila & Priscilla, their tent-making business was quite large with main outlets in Rome, Corinth, & Ephesus – all 3 being major cities.

There was ready employ with them in making tents so Paul found a way to replenish his dwindling purse.

What had to really excite him was to find that Aquila & Priscilla were also right-on believers; solid followers of Christ.

4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ.

As Paul worked with for Aquila & Priscilla, he would go regularly to the synagogue and preach the Gospel.

He had the typical reaction, some came to faith from both the Jews & the God-fearing Gentiles.

But things changed once the rest of his team met back up with him.

When Silas & Timothy arrived in Athens, they found Paul had moved on to Corinth.

Then they met up with him, they brought something unlooked for but much appreciated.

As Paul describes it in his letter to the Philippians, they'd sent to him a large financial gift to support his work in preaching the Gospel.

This freed Paul from having to make tents so he could devote his time whole to preaching & teaching.

He was so appreciative of the gift and what it meant as a demonstration of the Philippians love & support of him, that he recommitted himself to declaring Jesus as Messiah & Savior.

6 But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue.

The same thing happened in Corinth that happen nearly everywhere else; while some of the Jews came to faith and a lot of Gentiles did, the majority of Jews moved from resistance to rejection, then hostility.

Using an image from the prophet Ezekiel, Paul showed he was done trying to convince those who blasphemed Christ.

In Ezekiel 33, God said that his messengers were like the watchman on a city wall.

If they see danger coming and do not warn the city, then their innocent blood will be on his hands.

But if he warns them & they do not heed the warning, then their blood is on their own heads.

Paul says he's done all he can. If they refuse to receive Christ after he'd proven so clearly He was the Christ, then they have no excuse.

Since the Gentiles have shown that they are so ready & eager to receive Christ,

Paul will go to them.

But he doesn't go far.

He moves right next door to the synagogue where a new believer named Justus has opened his home as a meeting place for the fledgling church.

⁸Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.

It took a while for the Gospel to work on Crispus' conscience.

Even *after* Paul had left the synagogue, his words kept hammering away at his hard heart.

Like a jack-hammer they broke through & worked deep conviction within him. His conversion led to his entire family coming to faith.

He was such an important & influential person when he finally came out as a follower of Christ, many others were moved to re-evaluate their response to the Gospel.

They realized their resistance was prejudiced & ill-founded.

So they laid down their unbelief and embraced Christ.

⁹ Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."

God is the *Supreme Conservationist*.

He never *wastes* a word or vision. He only & always gives *exactly* what's needed.

That He came to Paul in this vision at this moment means it's something he needed.

The past had taught Paul there came a point in preaching the Gospel where the hostile Jews would eventually move to work him physical harm.

The conversion of their leader, along with the large number of Gentiles who were being converted, combined to arouse his suspicions that an attack was imminent.

Fear began to grow in him, and with the fear, the thought it might be a good time to ease off a bit, or maybe to head to a new city.

So God came to steel him & fire his resolve to press on right there in Corinth.

¹¹And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. ¹² When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, [the region/state Corinth was the capital of] the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, ¹³saying, "This *fellow* persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." ¹⁴And when Paul was about to open *his* mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. ¹⁵But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look *to it* yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such *matters*." ¹⁶And he drove them from the judgment seat.

After a year & a half, building the church both numerically & spiritually, the Jews

who still opposed had grown so frantic & desperate they grabbed Paul & hauled him before the judgment seat of the Roman governor, who was headquartered right there in Corinth.

Their charge against Paul was purely theological; it wasn't anything over which Gallio had any authority.

So he made that clear to them and sent them away.

Actually, Gallio's decision set an important legal precedent.

He was saying that the difference between Paul & his Jewish opponent wasn't something Rome was interested in.

It was a religious matter that would have to be decided within the realm of the Jewish religious leaders.

The only time Rome would step in was when their dispute spilled over into the streets & began to effect society at large.

17 Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things.

Historians have found in numerous writings from this period that there was an all too common problem the Roman legal system was trying to correct.

People could accuse someone of a crime, and based simply on that, the accused would be arrested & thrown in jail until trial.

It was a simple way for enemies to hurt each other – just *accuse* them & they'd be incarcerated.

This had become so prevalent as a dirty trick, many people had grown irate and worked for reform even as they held those who still did it in the greatest scorn.

The Greeks saw the Jews as trying to have Paul thrown into prison just because they didn't like him.

It was just this kind of thing they were so upset about – using the legal system to their own petty ends without any concern for true justice.

So they grabbed Sosthenes, the ruler of the Synagogue who'd replaced Crispus, & had been the spokesman against Paul, and they beat him right there in front of Gallio.

They did to him what he'd hoped Gallio would do to Paul.

Gallio was obviously one of those who wanted to reform the legal system to end its abuse through false accusations.

He thought this public beating of Sosthenes would send a loud message that such future attempts to use him as a pawn were not going to fly.

What's of greater interest though is that in writing to the Corinthians later, Paul mentions that Sosthenes was there with him & was included in the opening greeting.

Sosthenes ended up becoming a Christian & leader of the church who went to Paul with some issues that were troubling the Corinthians.

Church history is filled with stories of critics & opponents who ended up becoming, not only believers, but leaders. *Paul* is the premier example.