



January 21, 2022

### **Paul's challenges at Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens...anything New?**

Warm hellos friends, brethren, co-workers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God, from back here on the Gulf Coast. We had a blessed visit to Minnesota and South Dakota and after an almost 8 hour layover in the Dallas airport yesterday are home. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you all doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

The Roman calendrical year 2021 is now history. It was a significant year. This next year looks to be a significant one as well. Speaking of history, let's review parts of the book of Acts which records the history of the early church. Join me if you would as we review pieces of chapter 17 from the book of Acts.

The first part of the chapter records the challenges that Paul experienced at Thessalonica. Paul was able to speak at the synagogue and persuade several of those who attended there (including non-Jews or Greeks) to accept that Jesus was the Messiah. That must have been encouraging to him.

However, a number of the Jews there made trouble for Paul and Silas and they were forced to flee from Thessalonica and travel to Berea. Those who attended the synagogue in Berea were more receptive to the message that Paul preached. However some of the angry Jews from Thessalonica arrived and stirred up the crowds at Berea to the point that the believers in attendance persuaded Paul to depart from Berea as well and sail over to Athens.

Several believers went with him, while Silas and Timothy remained behind and were told "to join Paul later". Let's notice the interesting actions Paul takes while in Athens.

*"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was troubled, for he saw all the town full of images of the gods. So he had discussions in the Synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, and every day in the market-place with those who were there." (vv.16-17)*

Paul's persistence, courage, and zeal to reach others with the truth of the gospel is amazing and inspiring. He has just fled for safety when his distracters stirred up violent opposition to him and his message. Not only did he contact the Jews and Greek proselytes in the synagogue, he also interacted with the local populace in the market place.

I'd say Paul had the gift of gab and the ability to dialogue with a number of diverse individuals. He did not give up easily either. It would not surprise me if he was quite strong and even a little argumentative at times! The *Online Bible Greek Lexicon* comments on the Greek word *Agora* translated 'Market-place': "#58 agora from ageiro (to gather) or the place of assembly for public debating."

Interestingly enough the art of objective and critical thinking with debate seems to be a lost art now a days.

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

The *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary* on this verse states: "of the Epicureans--a well-known school of atheistic materialists, who taught that pleasure was the chief end of human existence; a principle which the more rational interpreted in a refined sense, while the sensual explained it in its coarser meaning, and of the Stoics--a celebrated school of severe and lofty pantheists, whose principle was that the universe was under the law of an iron necessity, the spirit of which was what is called the Deity: and that a passionless conformity of the human will to this law, unmoved by all external circumstances and changes, is the perfection of virtue."

The *JFB commentary* makes an interesting comment on the word translated "babbling": "The word, which means "a picker-up of seeds," bird-like, is applied to a gatherer and retailer of scraps of knowledge, a prater; a general term of contempt for any pretended teacher."

The prideful philosophers there expressed their disdain for Paul and his message, but they were still intrigued enough to hear of this Jesus (who was resurrected from the dead), to invite Paul to continue his discussion at the Areopagus. They most likely perceived that he was well educated and had knowledge of many subjects, but they still decided to try to discredit this man whom one might say was "a new member of their club".

"*And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?"*" (v.19)

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "The Areopagus was a hill not far from the Acropolis, already described, where the supreme court of justice was held; one of the most sacred and reputable courts that had ever existed in the Gentile world. It had its name, Areopagus, or the

Hill of Mars, or Ares, from the circumstance, according to poetic fiction, of Mars being tried there, by a court of twelve gods, for the murder of Halirrhothius, son of Neptune. . . The justice administered in this court was so strict and impartial, that, it was generally allowed, both the plaintiff and defendant departed satisfied with the decision. "Innocence, when summoned before it, appeared without apprehension; and the guilty, convicted and condemned, retired without daring to murmur.""

Of course Paul was not being tried for any misconduct, but his ideas were on trial. He didn't "fit in" if you will with the modern thinking and philosophy of their day.

One wonders how these philosophers supported themselves financially. "*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.*" (v.21)

Adam Clarke again comments: "As Athens was renovated for its wisdom and learning, it became a place of public resort for philosophers and students from different parts of the then civilized world. The flux of students was in consequence great; and these, having much leisure time, would necessarily be curious to know what was passing in the world, and would frequently assemble together, in places of public resort, to meet with strangers just come to the city; and either, as Luke says, to tell or hear some new thing."

We'll try to continue next time in observing how Paul communicates to this new audience, as it is fascinating and we can definitely learn from him! Much of what he experienced is similar to what God's children face today. Progressive thinking was alive and well then too.

I hope you'll find some time to study what is written in these Friday evening letters, and that it is helpful for you to remain strong in the Word of God and your relationship with Him.

Arms up friends! Our prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Please do pray for us as well.



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