

THE ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 17:1 – 18:23

The reasonable gospel: Paul's second journey ends

*What is faith in the gospel based on?

*How did Paul get into a debate with Greek philosophers?

*What occupation did Paul have besides preaching?

Introduction

As we pick up the narrative in chapter 17, Paul and his companions are in the middle of their second trip around the Mediterranean to preach the gospel. Paul and Silas first traveled through the countryside of (what we now call) Turkey, and they picked up a young man named Timothy in Lystra (Acts 16:1-5). They finally ended up in Philippi, where they aided the conversions of Lydia (16:11-15), the jailer (16:19-34), and their households.

Have you noticed the pattern on these trips? In each new city the preachers would enter the synagogue and reason with the Jews. Then the message would spread throughout the city until opposition arose to drive them out. In this lesson, that pattern will become very clear. We will see how Paul presented the message, what faith in the gospel is based on, and why people so often reject it.

Acts 17:1-9 Paul in Thessalonica

After leaving Philippi, Paul and the others went to another major city of Macedonia: Thessalonica. There, “according to Paul’s custom,” he went to the synagogue of the Jews and presented the message to them first. Some of them accepted the gospel, as well as certain women and some Gentiles who also believed in the one, true God. When the Jews saw how many people were turning to Christ, however, they got jealous and started a riot. The crowd tried to find Paul and the others in the house of a man named Jason, where apparently they were staying. Since they couldn’t find them there, they dragged Jason and some other disciples instead in front of the city officials, and accused the preachers of causing confusion all over the world and proclaiming a new king, Jesus. The authorities made Jason promise that nothing else would happen, and then released them.

Note: The reasonable gospel, the unreasonable rejecters

Has anyone ever told you that they can’t believe in Christ because it doesn’t make sense? Today, the gospel is ridiculed because people think it is not logical, that it is not provable, that it is just a myth or legend, etc. Scientists and other educated people overwhelmingly reject it. Is it true that people can only place their faith in Christ based on a good feeling? Should Christianity’s job be to just give us an emotional high, or make us feel better when we are sad?

Paul did not think so. Notice his method of presenting the message: he reasoned (verse 2), he explained (verse 3), he gave evidence (verse 3), and he persuaded (verse 4). Paul did not expect his listeners to put away their logic and only use their emotions when deciding whether or not to convert. He expected them to use their logic! He was convinced that there was enough evidence to believe in Christ, whether he found it in the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures or in the eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ resurrection. Beware of people today who seek to draw us in to their sect with emotionally-charged concerts or meetings, promises of happiness or prosperity, elaborate staged “miracles,” or charismatic preaching. Paul later wrote to the Christians here in Thessalonica, “We never came with flattering speech” (1

Thessalonians 2:5). Such methods might be fit for the word of men, but not for the word of God. Our faith in Christ is based on evidence.

As previously stated, people today accuse Christians of being unreasonable and illogical. Ironically, time and time again we see the people who reject the gospel behaving irrationally. Why did the Jews here in Thessalonica begin the riot against the preachers? Because they were jealous. And even though they accused Paul and his companions of having “upset the world,” they were the ones who “set the city in an uproar.” People do not reject the gospel because it is not reasonable enough; they reject it because it doesn’t fit with their preferred lifestyle.

Acts 17:10-15 Paul in Berea

Paul and Silas quickly left Thessalonica, and continued traveling to the city of Berea. Just like always, they started off in the synagogue. But unlike the usual pattern, the Jews there gladly listened and investigated the message. But even though many of them believed, Paul had to leave again when Jews from Thessalonica chased after them and stirred up the crowds against them. Paul came by sea to Athens, where he planned to wait for the others.

Note: Why should we believe?

We saw in the last section why people reject the gospel: because they do not objectively weigh the evidence. But why do people believe? We see here that the Bereans had open minds; they “received the word with great eagerness” (verse 11). Then, they thoroughly investigated the message, “examining the Scriptures daily.” Verse 12 tells us that “many of them therefore” — because of their noble attitudes — “believed.” Do we want to gain faith in God? Do we want to strengthen the faith we already have? The Bereans show us how: devoted studying and seeking.

Acts 17:16-34 Paul in Athens

Paul was not idle while he waited in Athens. He reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue, as well as outside in the marketplace with whoever would talk with him. Athens was a unique city. It was a major port city, which means that cultures from all over the world mixed there, even bringing their false gods with them. Athens was also the philosophical center of the western world at that time. Verse 21 describes the attitude of the citizens; all they did was talk about new ideas. Soon, the ideas that Paul brought caught the attention of the philosophers, and they brought him to the Areopagus, a local court that governed religious matters and public lectures, to explain himself.

Paul knew that his message would go against the teachings of these philosophers. The Epicureans (mentioned in verse 18) believed that pleasure was the highest goal in life; the Stoics saw God as a materialistic “world-soul.” However, Paul began with a complement, saying that the Athenians were very religious. Indeed, the need to seek God was one theme in the speech he made (verse 30). Paul’s main message was that there is only one, universal God who made the world and everything in it (verses 24-28). He even quoted from Greek poets to make his point! (The Greek philosophers would have cared nothing for the Scriptures that Paul used when speaking with Jews). Paul condemned idolatry (verse 29) and called for repentance (verse 30). Finally, he spoke of the evidence behind his message: the proof of Christ’s resurrection (verse 31).

Paul probably would have gone on to speak about the eyewitnesses of Christ’s resurrection, including himself, but the crowd did not let him. They mocked him. Only a few were willing to listen, and fewer still became Christians. It is ironic that the most religious people yet were the most close-minded! They refused to investigate.

Acts 18:1-11 Paul in Corinth

After his experiences in Athens, a city known for its philosophy, Paul traveled to Corinth, a city known for its immorality. The Corinthians even had a temple dedicated

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| 2. Berea | b) Paul met Priscilla and Aquila and stayed for a year and a half |
| 3. Athens | c) The Jews received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily |
| 4. Corinth | d) The Jews became jealous and dragged Jason before the city authorities |
| 5. Ephesus | e) Paul reasoned in the synagogue but could not stay |

True or False:

- ___ 1. Paul was such a charismatic speaker that it didn't matter if his message made sense; people believed it anyway.
- ___ 2. The gospel preaching always received the same response: some believed and some didn't.
- ___ 3. Opponents to the gospel defeated Paul in a public debate.
- ___ 4. The Jews from Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea in order to stir up crowds.
- ___ 5. The Athenians were very religious.
- ___ 6. Paul thought it was fine to use images in worship, as long as they represented the true God.
- ___ 7. Paul made tents for a living.
- ___ 8. The leader of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth believed in Christ.
- ___ 9. The city of Corinth was so immoral that Paul decided not to stay more than a few weeks.
- ___ 10. Paul ended his journey in Antioch, the same place he started.

After you've filled out the answers, send this lesson back to the person who sent it to you with your name and address. They will correct your answers and discuss any questions or comments you have on the text.

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