

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Twenty-Two
Acts 17:19-18:11

Day One

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

v. 19 – They brought Paul to their hallowed hill where the supreme court of justice convened. In a sense, the message of the gospel was on trial there before the epitome and pinnacle of Greek philosophy, or love of wisdom. As we pointed out in an earlier study, the Greeks considered the resurrection foolishness:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

In modern times, the same can be said of the gospel message. Today the resurrection isn't offensive as much as the concept that there is only one way to God, namely Jesus. The prevailing wisdom of today is that there are many roads and paths to God.

vs. 20&21 – Greek men employed slaves so that they would not have to do any menial work. This freed them to debate philosophical issues all day in various configurations. What a boring existence! I went to a luncheon the other day sponsored by the university from which I graduated. The dean of the college spoke and he is considered a scholar. It was so boring! I thanked God for having delivered me from that world, where I had worked when I first got out of university. I also thanked Him that I had something to which I could give my life and feel fulfilled.

What are you giving your life to? What are you investing your time in? Does it have any eternal value? Do you have some sense that God is in your work with you? I am not implying that you must do church work if your life is to have purpose, but there should be some sense of the kingdom of God being established through what you are doing at least part of the time. Do you sense God's favor in your work, or are you just enduring your work for a paycheck or benefits?

vs. 22&23 – Luke seemed to have an exact account of what Paul said. I wonder if the court there kept a record, for shorthand was used in that time. Many believe that this was Paul's finest presentation of the gospel on record. He related his message to the audience

and made a compelling case for his life's work. The Athenians had many gods, but just in case they missed one, they had a monument to that god as well. Paul focused on that and tied his message to that monument to the unknown god. If we are going to reach the world, we must talk the world's language. I am concerned when I hear church people talk, for at times I hear us using a language that only we understand. But Paul used a language and examples that the unsaved could understand. **How is your language? Filled with church expressions? Or can you talk the talk of the world without being of the world?**

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17:15-19).

Day Two

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out 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 some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

v. 24 – This seems like a basic statement, but the Epicureans and to some extent the Stoics believed that the world was a random accident of creation, sort of like the Big Bang Theory that is popular today. Paul confronted their atheism head on by declaring that God is the Creator. Then Paul took a swipe at the Greek panoply of idols, which was a collection of petty, vain, conceited, erratic and vengeful beings. The Greeks fashioned their gods after the fallen nature of man. The stories of Greek mythology often portrayed humans as being more noble and righteous than their gods!

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Psalm 135:15-18).

The Greeks fashioned petty gods and, true to Psalm 135, they became just like them. Paul came to deliver the truth so they could be set free from their idolatrous bondage. What are you doing to deliver others from their individual idolatrous bondage?

v. 25 – Paul was undoubtedly familiar with Jeremiah's words:

For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with

hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good” (Jeremiah 10:3-5).

God gives breath to all living things because He is life and the source of life. We worship God not because He needs our worship (as was true with the Greek gods), but because He is worthy of worship. Do you see the difference? God needs nothing from man; He is self-sufficient.

v. 26 – We all come from Adam and Eve, so we share in a common humanity and nature. And furthermore God establishes when and where we will live, so our ethnicity and life isn't a random act, but the will of God! God chose your nationality, so you can exalt in your ethnic origin as a gift of God. But don't idolize your heritage, for there is no one people group who is superior to another. They are all the same in the sight of God.

v. 27 – The Gentiles had to grope after God, for up to this point, God had not chosen to reveal Himself to them. Yet He is not far from every man, and Paul was there to declare the way to God in Christ. While there was a season when the Gentiles had little access or knowledge of God, that season was now changing due to the work of Christ.

v. 28 – This is one of the most basic verses for me: “In Him we live, move and have our being.” God is all and all. We exist because of Him, whether one knows Him or not. We are His children by creation, but only salvation in Christ connects a person to the Fatherhood of God. Until then we are objects of God's wrath, cut off from God's grace by sin:

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:3-5).

Don't ever be lulled into thinking that everyone shares in God's grace, whether they are in Christ or not. They may share in the grace of life and physical existence, but they are cut off from eternal life without Christ. Period.

Day Three

29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

v. 29 – Paul said that since we are God’s offspring, God could not be fashioned with something that is inanimate, like rock or stone. Since we share in God’s life, God would have to be a living being like us—according to the apostle’s reasoning. But those who insist on making gods of stone or wood reduce their own life to something much less, and the Greeks consistently had ignoble behavior befitting their ignoble gods:

Why do the nations say, "Where is their God?" Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them” (Psalm 115:2-8).

The New Testament also warns against idolatry, but not so much of graven images but of heart matters:

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming (Colossians 3:5-7).

v. 30 – Since the Gentiles had not been given entrance to the things of God as Israel, it seems that God looked past or “winked at” their idolatry. Does this mean that God didn’t care about the idolatry? No. It means that God didn’t wipe out the Gentiles who engaged in such activity. But that was about to change, as Paul and others were to present the way of life, which would make the Gentiles accountable for what they heard.

What do you think are the idols of this generation? Materialism, success, comfort and wealth are a few that I can think of. Can you name any others? Do they have any hold on your life? How can you minister effectively to people who are caught in the grips of these idols and have become just like them, as the psalmist predicted?

v. 31 – Paul then turned the speech or sermon to a discussion of Jesus, and the fact that God affirmed Jesus’ work by raising Him from the dead. Jesus’ work will include judging the world on the appointed day:

Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:22-27).

Day Four

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

v. 32 – At the mention of the resurrection, Paul was interrupted and not permitted to finish. The Epicureans especially would have reacted to this, for they believed that the flesh was inconsequential, so that a bodily resurrection would have been useless. The Stoics probably were the ones who said they wanted to hear more, but they never had the chance to hear, at least from Paul. Paul's trial was hastily adjourned and he was free to go. I suppose we could say that the world's finest philosophers put Paul and his message on trial and found them both not guilty of any wrong doing, but inconsequential as far as their own deliberations were concerned. Philosophy, which literally means love of wisdom, rejected the wisdom of God in Christ for the empty wisdom of their own philosophers:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (1 Corinthians 1:25).

v. 33 – We could only wish that Paul would have had a chance to finish to hear how he would have addressed the issue of salvation before the council. As I stated earlier, many believe that this was Paul's finest message, but one void of many results. As a speaker, I have encountered a similar phenomenon. On the one hand, I was pleased with my message, preparation and delivery. But on the other hand, I got very little feedback or results. Then there were other times when I felt totally out of sync and got great results and feedback.

So I have tried to be content to see the word I preach and teach have an impact in people's lives, realizing that it's not about my eloquence but God's power. I think Paul learned this in Athens and wrote about it later:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

At the same time, you can't always judge the results or fruit of your labors on the spot. You must give God time and room to work. Again Paul wrote about this when he said:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

v. 34 – **While Paul did not get overwhelming results in Athens, he did get some. Are you discouraged over the seeming lack of results in your work, family or ministry? I urge you to be open to what God is trying to show you and become more effective in your work. At the same time, I urge you not to be overly concerned, for your results may lie in the future. So have faith, trust God and keep on working.**

Day Five

18:1 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

v. 1 – As is often the case, a down time is often followed in God by an up time. Paul went from Athens where he got few results to Corinth where he conducted successful, long-term ministry. Corinth was a rough city, however, and nothing like Athens. Corinth was a seaman’s town, where the immorality was legendary. The idolatry here wasn’t philosophy, but rather sex! Paul turned his apostolic attention to this depraved city and as one would expect, the grace of God was abundantly present.

Is there some perverted world to which God wants to send you? Will you go? Can you describe where it is or what problems the area is known for? I pray that the Spirit of the apostle Paul will go with you and give you grace to make a difference for Jesus.

v. 2 – Paul now met a couple who would become strategic allies in their work among the Gentiles. Priscilla and Aquila had recently come from Rome, from which they had been expelled by the emperor! We are not sure why the Jews were expelled and some surmise that the Jews were sent out because they were grouped with the Christians who were there. I doubt if Christianity had made much progress in Rome to this point and rather think that some Jews were causing trouble and the emperor took it out on all Jews. Undoubtedly there were believers among those expelled and this expulsion providentially brought this couple to Corinth so they could ally with Paul.

Can you see God’s hand in the difficult things that happen? I’m sure a relocation to Corinth from Rome was a major hassle, but God used it in their lives to bring about good. Maybe it’s time you were reminded of the famous, comforting truth that Paul later wrote to the church in Rome:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Is it time today to sing God’s praises and thank Him for something difficult, indicating that you trust the truth of Romans 8:28?

v. 3—I’ve always found it interesting that here we are told that Paul was a tentmaker. Paul wrote 13 letters and never mentioned what he did for a living; Luke had to tell us that. But in every letter, Paul told us what his purpose was, and that was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. **This holds an important lesson for you: Don’t draw your identity or purpose from what you do to make a living, but draw it from what you**

do that brings you pleasure and God glory. Do you understand the difference? What is your purpose? What is your occupation? Are they the same or different?

v. 4 – Paul resumed his pattern, which was to preach and reason in the synagogue among the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. He did not do this in Athens and perhaps that was another reason why he obtained few results. **What is your strategy to fulfill your purpose? Do you have one?**

Day Six

5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. 8 Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

v. 5 – When help arrived, Paul focused on what he was there to do: preach the gospel. It is interesting to me that Paul had such a burden and passion for his people, yet he never got the results that he had hoped for.

I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Romans 9:1-5).

Paul understood that they had entered a season in which the grace of God was for the Gentiles and not for the Jews. If you think of it, the only time that the gospel had an impact on Jews was in the first century, and even many of those Jews were disillusioned with what following Jesus really meant (read Hebrews if you doubt that statement).

My point here is that you can't choose your purpose or field of effectiveness; God chooses that for you.

v. 6 – Paul didn't linger any longer among the Jews than necessary. When the Jews became abusive and resistant, he shook out his clothes of anything that they tried to put on him—curses, criticism or correction—and went to the Gentiles from that point forward. Paul understood his duty as explained in Ezekiel, but he didn't stay around among a people where he wasn't wanted:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood'" (Ezekiel 33:1-6).

You can't want anything for someone more than they want it for themselves, including the gospel. Learn to recognize where God's blessing is for you and bear fruit in that sphere.

vs. 7&8 – Paul didn't go far when he refocused his ministry. He went next door to the synagogue and continued his ministry. There were some Jews who believed but the main source of converts came from the Gentiles in Corinth. Of course we know from Paul's letters to this church that the converts brought with them many immoral tendencies common to the residents there. This presented quite a challenge to Paul and the message of the gospel there, but Paul persevered and the church prospered there.

Do sinful people scare you? Are you afraid to work with them because they are unclean? Are you worried what others will think if you minister to addicts, people with blue hair or people involved in pagan lifestyles? The church must overcome its bias against sinners if the church is going to do what Jesus and Paul did.

Day Seven

9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." 11 So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

v. 9 – I heard a pastor say that when the Lord says, "Don't fear," it's usually too late! It's hard for me to see Paul as afraid of anything, but obviously he needed some encouragement at this point. And the Lord was only too glad to provide it for His faithful servant. Perhaps Paul's confidence was shaken after Athens; or maybe he was a bit overwhelmed by the pagan environment at Corinth. But the Lord directed Paul to keep speaking and not to be silent.

v. 10 – It seems that Paul was afraid that he would be physically attacked. But the Lord was with Paul and urged Paul to act according to the Lord's promise and not according to what Paul beheld. **Are you afraid? What are you afraid of? You don't have to hide your fears from God, but you do need to face your fears in God. Remember what Jesus said:**

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1).

Also remember what Paul wrote:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? **If God is for us, who can be against us?** He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom 8:31-39).

You may want to sit down and make a list of your fears at this point in your life. Then re-read the verses above from Romans and then burn the list!

Notice that the Lord referenced "many people" that He had in the city. Even though they had not come to Jesus yet, the Lord considered those people "His." That indicates God's confidence in His grace to save.

v. 11 – In response to the word, Paul stayed and taught for 18 months, which is the longest that he stayed in any one place up to this point in his ministry. So the word of the Lord was true for Paul and it is true for you! You can trust God to fulfill His word for you. Will you let Him do that today? Can you put your trust in Him? Can you do what Jesus commanded?

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1).