Opposition and Opportunity on the 2nd Missionary Journey
Preparing to Teach Acts 17-18

Just to remind you of where we left off last session, Paul and company left Troas after receiving the Macedonian vision. They landed at Neapolis, modern-day Kavala. This was the port for the prosperous city up the mountain called Philippi. After founding a church with the help of a seller of dyed-purple cloth named Lydia (formerly of Thyatira in what is now Turkiye), Paul, Silas, and Timothy were preaching in the forum and open spaces of Philippi. Interrupted by a slave girl described as a Pythoness because her oracles seemed similar to those given at Delphi, Paul lost patience and commanded the demonic spirit to leave her.

For those who wonder why God granted this miracle without a lot of prayer and effort, in fact, without any show of piety other than the name of Jesus, please note that miracles occur when natural or supernatural effects are getting in the way of the advancement of God’s Kingdom—NOT for our personal benefit. We noted last session that it is when people get hit in the pocketbook that they resent God the most. We also saw how Paul and Silas were not treated as Roman citizens but given the antisemitic treatment of trouble-making Jews (the Philippian prejudice, not mine). When the magistrates realized their mistake, their first instinct was to get rid of the cause of the conflict so they were going to let Paul and Silas go quietly. But Paul felt that if the accusations were made publicly, the apologies should, as well. They received the apology (probably not as public as Paul wanted) and were asked to leave before there might be any more trouble. The missionaries gave encouragement (and maybe some last minute instructions) to Lydia and took off down the Via Egnatia—The Roman road that went from Dyrrachium on the Adriatic Sea to the west to Byzantium (later Constantinople/Istanbul).

Interestingly, for people like me who believe that the “we” sections in Acts refer to times when Luke was traveling with Paul, Silas, and company, the use of “they” in Acts 17 suggests that Luke was NOT traveling with them in Thessaloniki. That may not be so. The style MIGHT have changed for the sake of variety (ancient writers sometimes did that, not worrying about consistency in the modern sense) or Luke might have simply wanted to focus the “camera’ on Paul in particular. After all, before our session tonight is over, Paul will have to strike out on his own. Interestingly enough, even seminary professors can make errors. Notice how the following quotation counters what we see here in Acts 17: “Up until 16:8, the entire narrative is portrayed with ‘they.’ But in 16:9 it switches to “we” and remains that way until the end of the book. This means that Luke became Paul’s traveling companion in Troas (the location of 16:8-10). It also means that from 16:9-28:31 Luke is a personal eyewitness of the events he narrates.” [Campbell Constantine R. and Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 167.]

Although I could not find a reference to the medical school at Philippi in my sources (not in the *Encyclopedia Britannica, Holman Biblic Dictionary, Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Light from the Ancient Past, Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, nor any of the dozen commentaries I examined), I did find three references on the web (though none of them showed where they found *their* information) and Dr. Wong shared his reference in the *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary Vol. 2*, p. 470 . His source suggested that Luke may have stayed in Philippi due to his affinity to the medical school. With or without the medical school, there is a consensus among many commentators. “Towards the conclusion of the previous chapter, Luke disappears from the scene. The first person plural by which he makes his presence known disappears when Paul and Silas are thrown into prison. Probably, he remained at Philippi to reappear at the same place some years later (Acts xx.5).” [Foakes-Jackson, p. 159; see also Arrington, p. 173 and MacGregor, G. H. C., “The Acts of the Apostles: Exegesis” in Buttrick, G. A. et al. (eds.) *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume IX: Acts-Romans* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 221.]

Their first stop was Amphipolis. It was right on the Via Egnatia. It’s off the beaten track today and we visited the museum there and had lunch there, after finding out that the archaeological site was closed (due to heat) in the afternoons. It’s about 33 miles from Philippi and was the capitol of the first administrative district of Macedonia. According to Herodotus (Book VII, Paragraph 114): “Its former name was ἐννέα ὁδοί, or the “ Nine ways,” on account of the number of roads which met at this point.” [Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 133.] During the war with the Persians, the Persians crossed the Strymon here and buried alive nine boys and nine maidens to guarantee their safe crossing. Before Paul’s time, “The Athenians under Cimon colonized it, and called it Amphipolis, because it was completely surrounded by the Strymon.” [Gloag, p. 133.]

Another 30 miles and you get to Apollonia. Don’t get confused with the Apollonia in Albania (formerly in Illyria)—most of the pictures on the web are from there, not the one Paul passed through. From there, it’s 38 miles on to Thessaloniki . We don’t have any record of an extended stay in Amphipolis. As one 18th century commentator deduced, the reference to the synagogue in Thessaloniki suggests that there wasn’t one in Amphipolis or Apollonia (later named Ceres) [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 367.]. However, we have significant evidence of the missionary tour’s impact on Thessaloniki. [mileage courtesy of Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 134, n1.]

In the slides, I have a picture of the modern harbor of Thessaloniki, taken from the citadel—a medieval building at the highest point of the city. The citadel wasn’t there during Paul’s day, but you can bet there was some kind of fortification up there. Thessaloniki was, appropriately enough to those of us around Chicago, the “Second City” of Macedonia. Actually, it was the capitol of the second administrative district of Macedonia [Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), p. 164.]. It was also a trade city, suggesting a deliberate strategy on Paul’s part: “Since it was a center of trade, people came and went. Again Paul’s strategy for spreading the gospel becomes clear. Visitors would take the gospel away with them. No doubt this was a reason for Paul to pass through two large cities, Amphipolis and Apollonia, on his way…” [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 174.]

The interesting thing about Thessaloniki is that it already had a synagogue. We read in verse 2 that Paul followed through on his established strategy of visiting the synagogue on the Sabbath. Some translations like the Revised Standard Version take three sabbaths to be three weeks, implying that the missionaries’ sojourn there was only three weeks. However, the fact that the Philippian church seems to have sent offerings to Paul in Thessaloniki on two occasions seems unlikely for such a short stay (Munck, pp. 164-165; Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 101.]. Paul apparently worked through the week (1 Thessalonians 2:9) so that he wouldn’t have to take funds from those he was trying to convert and disciple [Culpepper, R. Alan, “Paul’s Mission to the Gentile World: Acts 13-19” in *Review & Expositor* (Louisville, KY: The Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 494.]. This would also suggest a lengthier stay.

I would suggest that Paul debated and preached for three sabbaths before he realized that the opposition was growing stronger and that the bulk of the group wasn’t listening to him any longer [Gloag, p. 135 agrees.]. A more recent commentary takes a similar approach: “Paul’s missionary activity focuses on the synagogue for three weeks. He is then forced to reduce or abandon meeting there because of growing opposition from members of the Jewish community. At that time he relocates the base of his activities probably to the house of Jason, one of the new converts (vv. 5, 7). [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), p. 1237.] In fact, if you look at verse 4, it appears that he had a small bit of success with the Jews, significant success with the Greek-speaking Jews, and significant success with prominent women [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 343.]. Luke goes to great length to emphasize the contribution of women to the gospel mission [Culpepper, p. 464.] Of course, some want to know why, if the women were so prominent, they were unable to stave off the persecution [Conzelmann, p. 135.]. I find it hard to criticize women functioning in such a misogynistic world, myself.

Most significant to me is the way Paul taught about Jesus as the Christ. The wording in the Greek is interesting. The word translated as “expounding” means “opening,” something of a multilevel meaning in terms of “opening” the scriptures to read them and “opening” one’s mind to what the scriptures said. The cool word to me is: παρατιθέμενος. The first two syllables are pronounced “pah-rah” and that means “alongside” as in our English words “paramedic” and “paralegal.” They aren’t quite doctors or lawyers, but we’d be hurting without them. The main root of the verb is pronounced “tih-THEH-meh-nohs” and means “setting something down” or “placing” something [Bruce, p. 343, n.3; Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 268.].

It seems to suggest that he was providing a comparison test between the scripture and what he was saying. That seems like a good model even though 1 Thessalonians 2:2 and subsequent events would suggest that the arguments were not well received. They probably weren’t well-received because the Jews expected the Messiah to be a conquering king, not a suffering Savior. Indeed, Paul probably used the Suffering Servant songs from Isaiah, especially Isaiah 53, to place alongside Jesus’ suffering and death. Even the testimony of Jesus’ resurrection couldn’t convince the bulk of them of Jesus as the Conqueror of Sin and Death. They fixated on this idea of King and when Paul said that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised King, that did it. It was this idea of the King as reported in verse 7 that really created the problem [Culpepper, p. 465.].

Luke doesn’t tell us which texts they used. It might have been Zechariah 12:10 (10 "Then I will pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the house of David and the residents of Jerusalem, and they will look at Me whom they pierced. They will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child and weep bitterly for Him as one weeps for a firstborn.” Holman CSB).

Let’s look closely at their methodology. Their methodology is to begin where the Jews were—interested in the Old Testament prophecies about God’s promised Messiah. Then, they added in something that the Jews hadn’t really considered—the need for the Messiah to suffer, die, and rise again. And then, they were ready to make their position totally clear—they proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

Notice that they still preach that Jesus is the Messiah, the ONE promised by God. They still proclaim Jesus to be the only way to salvation, but they do it AFTER they have prepared the fields for the seed. That’s something that a lot of modern witnesses (what theologians often call apologists) don’t sufficiently do. Too many apologists start with their own agenda rather than starting with people’s needs or interests.

So, look what our methodology in witnessing needs to be. We need to start with what people are interested in. What are people interested in today? A lot of people are interested in finding fulfillment in life, meaning for life. Others are interested in being accepted as persons of worth and finding both a group where they can fit in as well as that soul mate for whom most people long (I know that I did before God gave me Wailam.) Some people are interested in world problems. Others are interested in ideas or culture. What does that mean? It means that believers who want to share about Jesus can’t be ignorant of current events, modern philosophy, scientific advances, social and political movements, and the like. It’s like I once tried to say in a sermon and botched it, to have credibility as witnesses, we have to be secularly competent. We can’t be lazy, uninformed, and lack curiosity if we want to impact people’s lives.

Next, instead of pounding unbelievers with our Bibles and trying to get them to accept everything about the gospel right off the bat, we have to give them something to think about. I can’t help but think of Hamlet brooding about death in the graveyard scene with his, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Our world is working on the false model of empiricism. The world and the scientific community ASSUMES the universe is a closed system where laws are repeatable and demonstrable. But that’s not necessarily so. If there are miracles, they might by definition lack a repetitive nature. If an entity beyond the dimensionality that we know ever injects new energy or creativity into our dimensionality, how would we prove it? Our measurements are tied to our limitations. So, I believe we have a responsibility to shake up this complacent world-view of unbelievers, this self-satisfied idea of empiricism. But that’s not the end of our task.

We must, like Paul and Silas, move beyond conjecture and speculation and share about our genuine experience, our genuine assurance that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is the only way we know that people can get free of sin and guilt, find meaning in today’s life and live eternally in God’s dimensionality instead of our limitation. As we’ve said earlier, people aren’t going to like that much. They might even hate us for it, but just as a doctor wouldn’t hold back a medicine known to cure a disease, it is cruel for us not to seek appropriate times to share Jesus.

For a while, they seemed to be building a healthy church full of God-fearers and women, but that didn’t satisfy the Jews. They felt like the missionaries were stealing sheep. “The Jews (as in xiii:50), furious at the defection of many possible proselytes and great ladies, on whose influence and liberality they relied, raised a serious tumult by inducing the idlers who were loafing in the marketplace (A. V. ‘lewd fellows of the baser sort’) to mob the house of Jason, the host of the missionaries.” [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 159.]

The idea was to create an incident. I think it interesting that, to create plausible deniability, they found some disreputable characters to do their dirty work. Luke uses the same word used by Plato to describe those people who hang out in the marketplace, the agora, because they have nothing better to do. It isn’t a word used elsewhere in the New Testament, but it very well conveys the idea of those just hanging out and looking for trouble, “…these market-loungers or loafers or wharf rats.” [Robertson, p. 270.]

And you know how it is with mobs, once the blood-lust is raised, they aren’t particular about targets. When they didn’t find Paul and Silas at Jason’s house where the missionaries were staying, they targeted Jason. They might have had an ulterior motive. Not only was Jason a classical Greek name, as in *The Odyssey*, but Jason was the chosen substitute for the Jewish name “Joshua” when Jews were trying to assimilate into Greek culture. So, the Jews probably saw Jason as a traitor to his Jewish heritage, as well as an enabler of these heretics. In fact, “This Jason is likely identical with the Jason of Romans 16:21, where Paul describes him as a fellow Jew, mentioned next to Sopater, who was from Berea (Acts 20:4).” [Schnabel, p. 1242.] So, they had Jason and some of the brethren seized as a proxy for Paul and Silas to be brought before the politarchs.

By the way, a lot of historians questioned Luke’s use of this strange noun, *politarchs*, until the inscription pictured on the slides was found. I blew it up so it could be seen during the session. Here, is the same word that Luke used. Whenever people question the Bible, they usually find themselves exposed.

Still, the accusers didn’t care whether they actually had their facts straight or not. In fact, the passage offers three different accusations against the missionary team. Verse 6 accuses them of being trouble-makers. As I would translate the verse, “these men have disturbed the whole civilized world [i.e. Roman Empire] and they’re here now.”). The Greek verb literally has that idea of being “against standing.” So, one letter from the year 41, somewhat contemporary with Paul, has a person write about a naughty boy that “He upsets me,” [Bruce, 344, n.7; Robertson, p. 272.], with that idea of throwing things off-balance. What that accusation really amounts to is the idea that Paul and Silas were shaking their world, removing their comfort zone, and forcing them to change—and there are lots of people who are totally change-resistant. They don’t like change. The irony, of course, is that the accusers (as is often the case) were the ones creating the discomfort and unsettled balance in the city.

 The second accusation was that the team was acting in defiance of Caesar’s authority. Because they were winning people to the Jesus lifestyle, they felt like the Roman law against converting Romans to Judaism or Christianity was being broken. Essentially, they were saying that Paul and Silas were not acting as good citizens of the Roman Empire and that they were a threat to the well-being of the Empire.

Finally, they accused Paul and Silas of recruiting people to a new loyalty, obedience to a new authority. That would have been sedition, disloyalty to the entire Empire. Paul is being accused of being a traitor—even as Christians are accused of being bad citizens today—for a variety of reasons.

You see, these accusations come back at us in almost precisely the same way. Disturbing the whole civilized world? Today, we are accused as being the cause of much of the world’s hostility and violence. As Christopher Hitchens entitled one of his chapters in God is Not Great, “Religion kills.”

Gee, I wonder how the world gets that idea. You see, when we share our concerns with people that certain habits, attitudes, or aspects of their lifestyle aren’t healthy, they are likely to feel like we’re disrupting their lives. They’re likely to resent it before they respond. They’ll think the pleasure they get from sexual promiscuity is worth the risk and the personal hurt. They’ll accuse you of thinking you’re better than them. They’ll think the release they get from substances (whether cannabis, alcohol, carbohydrates, or something stronger) is worth the damage they are doing to themselves and will accuse you of being too uptight to experience what they’re experiencing.

The accusation comes back to us as the cause because, to them, our sharing and questioning makes them feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied with themselves. They become defensive and want to strike back at us and things can, in fact, escalate. So, in order to feel better about themselves, they want to paint us as the evil ones with a broad brush.

Sir William Ramsay observed: “The description of this riot is more detailed than any of the preceding. The lower classes, the least educated, and the most enslaved to paganism on its vulgarest and most superstitious side, were the most fanatical opponents of the new teaching; while the politarchs were by no means inclined to take active measures against ti, and the better educated people seem to have supplied most of the converts.” [Ramsay, Sir William M*., St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962—original, 1925), p. 229.] They become defensive and want to strike back at us and things can, in fact, escalate. So, in order to feel better about themselves, they want to paint us as the evil ones with a broad brush.

So, it’s back to the road for Paul. Some people wonder why Paul didn’t stick around to answer the charges, but I want to point out something to you in verses 8-9: “Thus, they stirred up the crowd and the politarchs also when they heard it. 9) When they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they released them.” [Munck, p. 164.] If Paul and Silas had remained, there would have been a high economic cost, as well as a risk of the bulk of the new church ending up in prison. That wasn’t going to do anyone any good. “Thus, Paul and Silas leave Thessalonica, acknowledging the danger that the activities of their Jewish and Gentile opponents constitute both for themselves and for the new community of believers, who might find life in the city easier once the two visitors have left. Note the circumstances of their departure: they leave immediately, during the night.” [Schnabel, p. 1248.] So, the missionaries moved on, but their work was established.

From Thessaloniki, they went off the beaten path, the established road. I can’t help believe that was discretion as the better part of valor—even if it didn’t work in terms of keeping the hostile Jews away. These Jews appear less concerned with tradition and more concerned with the scripture itself. They already had a positive discipline of reading and considering the Bible each day, but now, they took the time to compare what Paul was saying with the Scripture to see if what Paul was saying was true [Arrington, p. 175.]. It seems interesting to me that Paul put things side-by-side in Thessaloniki and the Bereans themselves were doing the homework in Berea.

I like the three words Luke uses to describe this group: “They were more “open-minded” (εὐγενέστεροι) and thus more ready to listen; they “received” (ἐδέξαντο) the word of God with much goodwill, i.e., without prejudice; they were “examining” (ἀνακρίνοντες) the Scriptures to establish the plausibility, or truth, of Paul’s message. [Schnabel, pp. 1248-1249.] But it seems like for every spiritual movement foreward, there is a forceful and undeniable counter-reaction from our enemy, the Satan. The translation on the slide says that they “stirred up a riot.” The Greek word, ταράσσοντες, has the idea of shaking something up. It’s ironic, isn’t it, that the very accusers who in Thessaloniki said that the missionaries were creating a disturbance do exactly what they were projecting onto Paul and company, both there and now, in Berea. Things are so severe that verse 14 says that they had Paul go right to the sea and take a journey while Silas and Timothy stayed.

I should probably consider the fact that the Greek wording is somewhat strange here. Verse 14 tells us that the brothers sent Paul on his way to the sea [for his own safety] while Silas and Timothy—not being the “face” or “poster child” of the enterprise—stayed behind to continue ministering. Yet, in verse 15, it indicates that the brethren accompany Paul all the way to Athens. A later (but not always reliable) text suggests that they traveled by land when it indicated that Paul didn’t get to preach along the way [Foakes-Jackson, p. 162.]. Things become more complicated when we look at 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2 and read that Timothy accompanied Paul to Athens [Conzelmann, p. 136.]. My suggestion is that they probably did go by sea and Timothy was one of the brothers [Arrington, p. 175.]. Then, Timothy and the brothers would have returned immediately to help Silas. Yet, because Luke was wrapping up the story in Berea and didn’t intend to expand on it, he wrote that Silas and Timothy stayed. That would have been true over the longer term. Indeed, 1 Thessalonians 3 suggests that both Silas and Timothy probably went back to Thessaloniki to continue forming the young church.

I incorporated in my slide show a slide that Wailam used with her Sunday School class. It shows this action and reaction factor in the missionary journey. I inserted it at this point because the sequence is slightly changed when Paul gets to Athens. Usually, Paul goes to the synagogue first and, after rejection and/or violence, he goes to the Gentiles. What’s the difference?

Verse 16 gives us a hint in that the city was full of idols, an unusual compound word that could mean “all about the idols” and would fit Xenophon’s snide remark about Athens as “all altars, all sacrifices and offerings to the gods.” [Gloag, p. 146; Robertson, p. 278.]. The Greek verb often translated as Paul being irritated can also mean to be sharpened or stimulated. Hence, I would suggest that Paul’s awareness of this total idolatry through Athens inspired him to accelerate his efforts among the Gentiles [I’m following an idea suggested in an article by Hans Conzelmann, “The Address of Paul on the Areopagus” in Keck, Leander E. and Martyn, J. Louis (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966) pp. 217-230.].

So, we have a case of what Wailam calls “working in parallel,” a favorite methodology of hers for getting things done. We see Paul engaging in dialogue with those who would listen at the synagogue (probably on the Sabbath and in the early mornings) as well as engaging in dialogue at the Agora. The Agora in Athens was where Socrates would have engaged in some of his famous dialogues as immortalized by Plato. So, it was a fertile place for those who wished to interact with others in intellectual gymnastics and stimulating conversations. “Athens in Paul’s time was no longer the Athens of Socrates; but the Socratic method had its roots in the soil of Attica and the nature of the Athenian people. …Among the people in the agora, then, Paul reasons in the Socratic fashion; but when the Professors came upon the scene, they soon demanded of him a display in the style of the rhetorician.” [Ramsay, pp. 238-239.] Paul wasted no opportunities because the Greek word is one that literally means “those that come alongside” or, in other words, chance passers-by [Robertson, p. 279.]. Paul would strike up a conversation with anyone and, because what he was saying was distinct from what they’d heard before, he aroused the interest of what I call the debating society of the Areopagus.

There was also a “court” associated with the Areopagus, but Luke always lets us know when legal or semi-legal proceedings are taking place and there isn’t any idea of that here. Rather, it seems that some of the “Professors” (as Ramsay called them) wanted to hear Paul make a fool out of himself. The word often translated as “babbler” in verse 18 is a piece of Athenian slang that means “seed picker.” It refers to a gutter sparrow who picks seeds out of drainage systems—very unenticing [Bruce, p. 351, n. 20.]. Schnabel agrees: “This Greek term, which denotes birds picking up seeds, is used metaphorically for someone ‘who wanders about the market and collects the scraps and debris scattered here and there.’” [Schnabel, pp. 1275-1276.]. F. F. Bruce suggests that with the use of “foreign” and “strange” (same root as “foreign”), they considered him an itinerant peddler of bits and pieces of assorted philosophies [Bruce, p. 351.].

You will find in the slides a brief discussion of the two schools of philosophy that Luke calls out specifically in this chapter: Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans tend to be materialists and Stoics believe that their conclusions are based on reason [Arrington, p. 177; Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), pp. 283-284.].

Paul’s message begins with a backhanded compliment. In Latin rhetoric, a speech usually began with a compliment. The King James Version that says “superstitious” isn’t helpful here. Paul is saying that they are very religious, very devout. He’s actually “setting them up” and it takes a Christian perspective to realize that it is ironic [Conzelmann, “Address,” p. 220.].

Although there are some inscriptions, such as the one on my slide, referring to an unknown god in singular form, the most common form of this was to unknown gods found in travel shrines. Of course, what’s even more surprising is that Paul grabs this bit of popular enthusiasm to shift from the compliment to the challenge that instead of debating, he will proclaim/announce the identity of this one God that they candidly admit they do not know to the group [Conzelmann, “Address,” pp. 220-221.].

Verses 24-25 appeals to both the biblical and Hellenic tradition which understands the existence of a Creator, but where Greek philosophy saw the creator as a panentheistic life force or watered-down deity (called a “demiurge”), Paul preached an active, personal God reminiscent of Isaiah 42:5 (creating heavens, earth, and giving breath to the people) [Munck, p. 171.]. “Appealing to their knowledge of creation (for he could not simply recite Scripture to pagans who were ignorant of Scripture) and to our common humanity, Paul asserts that his God ‘made the world and everything in it’ (v.24).” [Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* [Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 143.] Indeed, the assertion that God cannot be contained in a human-crafted shrine or temple would echo Isaiah 66:1 where the Lord asks where there could be a resting place or a house for one who is more than the heavens and the earth or King Solomon’s temple prayer (1 Kings 8:27) where he admits that if the heavens can’t contain God, the Temple won’t be able to do so [Bruce, p. 357, n. 40.].

Then, verses 26-28 feature Stoic coloring to show, as in both Stoic thought and Hellenistic Judaism, that God needs nothing [Conzelmann, “Address,” p. 221.]. Important to those trying to reason their way to God through reason, verse 27 emphasizes the search for God along with the limiting factor that one is “feeling” one’s way to God, essentially groping in the dark or in blindness [Arrington, p. 180; Robertson, p. 288.]. In verse 27: “The present active participle (ὑπάρχοντα) expresses the continued presence of God in his creation, indeed among the human race.” [Schnabel, p. 1292.]. This is similar to where: “Seneca formulated that ‘god is near you, with you, in you.’” Schnabel, p. 1293.]. Of course, the Greek philosophers took this God in an impersonal, intellectual sense as opposed to the Living God which Paul intends to reveal [Marshall, p. 288.] Paul builds another bridge by quoting from one of their poets, Aratus and states that we live and move and have our being in God (v. 28).

But Paul doesn’t stop there. He shifts from what the philosophers could have agreed with and made the claim for Jesus as both God and resurrected being. That’s where things got tough. It appears “…the Athenian philosophers, who mistakenly understood Paul to be ‘the proclaimer of [two] foreign deities’—Jesus and Anastasis, with *anastasis* being the Greek word for ‘resurrection’ (17:18). Since anastasis is a feminine word, these Athenians might even have imagined a partnership of a female deity (Anastasis) and a male deity (Jesus)—rather like Isis and Osiris.” [Longenecker, Bruce W., *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Romand World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 116.].

To demonstrate connections with the idea of Jesus as God who is both within and far beyond the natural order, I’ve provided a full list of scripture references on a slide that may be helpful to use as a discussion starter. At least, I find it to be full of significant concepts.

“Paul’s address was hardly a failure. Some mocked and others wanted to hear more, but several believed, even a member of the Areopagus. Gentiles were being reached apart from the synagogue and through a form of preaching which did not make explicit references to Israel and its scriptures.” [Culpepper, p. 495.] In a very succinct summary, we read:

“The Athens episode emphasizes that preachers of the gospel approach people wherever they can be found and whatever their social identity, that the proclamation of the gospel involves seeking points of agreement and stating points of disagreement, and that Christian beliefs involve truths about God, about human beings, about the world, and about Jesus.” [Schnabel, p. 1260.]

Acts 18

Although Athens was in decline in Paul’s era, it was still an important intellectual center. Corinth, on the other hand, was on the upswing (perhaps, with a 1960’s sense of swing, considering the immorality). Of course, in hindsight, we know that it was important in the early history of Christianity because we know that the Corinthian church took root there—warts and all. Corinth was a wealthy place, largely due to the isthmus that afforded a short-cut (albeit a difficult one of rolling ships across the land) between two seas. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan sophisticated city. In fact, though it isn’t used in the Bible, there is a verb in classical Greek that sounds like κορινθιαζω and means, “to act as a Corinthian.” It actually meant “to get laid” a lot. I’m actually using the crude phrase because I’m not sure that the polite phrase “to fornicate” really communicates just how out of control people were in Corinthian society. So, there was both need and, as you’ll find out in a moment, opportunity.

So, Corinth was a great place to meet and influence people from around the world. Indeed, there was a significant Jewish population there because they had been banished from Rome. The Emperor, Caesar Claudius, had decided that an entire race, the Jews, was made up of trouble-makers and had expelled them from the environs of Rome in AD 49 [Culpepper, pp. 495-496.].

So, Paul meets Aquila (originally of Pontus) and his wife, Priscilla. Since that name is used interchangeably with Prisca (Romans 16:3, I Corinthians 16:10, and II Timothy 4:19) and Prisca was a very well-off family in the Rome of the 1st century, many believe that Priscilla might have been upper class before her exile. She might have been the patroness of the Cemetery of Priscilla, one of the earliest Christian burial grounds in Rome, but that’s not necessarily so. In fact, since the verse here is one of only two times in the New Testament that Aquila’s name comes before that of his wife, it may well be that she was of higher station than he was. Others believe that when Luke puts her before Aquila that he is once again emphasizing the role of women [Arrington, p. 184.].

Yet, both of them were in the same business as Paul. Both were tentmakers, they opened their home and business to Paul, and they stayed with the church and in touch with Paul over the years. Their business had to do with using *cilicium*, a cloth made with goat hair, to create curtains and tents [Bruce, p. 367.]. If we applied the same rationale toward him that we do toward pastors today, he would be just a manual laborer and part-time, wannabe rabbi. But he’s such a wannabe rabbi that he can’t stay very long in one place. By our standards, he’s a total loser.

But wait, there are a couple of things most modern readers don’t know. Remember the famous rabbi, Gamaliel? Gamaliel said, “An excellent thing is the study of the Torah combined with some secular occupation, for the labor demanded of them both puts sin out of one’s mind. All study of the Torah which is not combined with work will ultimately be futile and lead to sin.” Isn’t that interesting? Some of us say that we would study the Bible more if we had time and some of us act like we expect the pastor to spoon-feed us because he or she is the professional. But the wisdom of the rabbis was that one needed the balance of secular work AND study in order to be relevant.

One modern commentary cites a reconstruction of the shop where Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul would have worked: “The shops gave on to a wide, covered gallery running round all four sides of the square. They had a uniform height and depth of 4 m. (13 feet). The width varied from 2.8 m. (8 feet) to 4 m. (13 feet). There was no running water or toilet facilities. In one of the back corners, a series of steps in stone or brick was continued by a wooden ladder to a loft lit by an unglazed window centred above the shop entrance, which at night was closed by wooden shutters. Prisca and Aquila had their home in the loft, while Paul slept below amid the tool-strewn work-benches and the rolls of leather and canvas.” [cited in Schnabel, p. 1333.].

Now, Paul had a vision. He wanted to see all of Israel saved and through Israel, to see the entire world saved. So, whenever he went to a new town or city, he started with the Jews first. He debated with them concerning Jesus as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies (vv. 4-5). Even today, in the ruins of Corinth, one can see an engraving that sometime after the 1st century identified the “bema” or high place in the northern portion of Corinth’s agora as Paul’s favorite spot to preach—right across from the Temple of Apollo. Paul wasn’t afraid to mix it up, but something happens in Corinth that signals a change in Paul’s ministry plan.

Paul took his outer cloak and shook it off, symbolically removing every bit of dust from the synagogue (Remind anyone of Jesus’ instructions to the original 12 in Matthew 10:14, Mark 6:11, and Luke 9:5?), states that the eternal condition of the Jews who refuse to believe is on their own heads, and clarifies his intention to focus on the non-Jews from that point forward. Paul knew when to cut his losses. Admittedly, he’d been beating his head against the stone walls of hostile Jewish audiences for the entire trip and we get the feeling from verse 4 that he was very diligent in this effort. He was going to get out of his comfort zone and share the gospel with those less knowledgeable. He sets up shop right next to the synagogue. In fact, the wording in the Greek is something like “hard against” the synagogue. It’s like Paul is simultaneously in the face of the Jews of rejected him AND drawing a hard line between believers and non-believers alike so that everyone can see.

Now, what I like about this is that Paul didn’t go back to Timothy and Silas and say, “Hey! We’ve got to come up with another plan; this one isn’t working.” He didn’t try to come up with some new form of ministry that would sneak the gospel into the synagogue. He didn’t come up with a whole lot of activities that might entice people into the fellowship. He cut his losses and then, did what God wanted him to do.

And what are the results when Paul changes his game plan? A house church is formed in the home of Titus or Titius Justus (v. 7). Some have suggested that his praenomen was probably Gaius so that Gaius Titius Justus would have been the individual Paul personally baptized (I Corinthians 1:14) along with Crispus. Speaking of Crispus, the former leader of the synagogue which had opposed Paul so vehemently was saved and baptized by Paul. Talk about sweet! Baptizing your former opponents? What could be better.

Note Luke’s continued emphasis on God’s direction. Again, the Lord speaks to Paul and assures him that he will be protected. As a result, Paul stays a year and a half in Corinth. Indeed, though Luke doesn’t mention it, it appears that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from here [Culpepper, p. 496.].

So, the Jews are jealous (again? Haven’t we heard this story before?) and they haul Paul before Gallio, the adopted brother of Seneca the Younger (the famous philosopher) [Smith, p. 107.]. “Apparently, Gallio became impatient with the Jews. This is suggested by the word ‘drove’ (ἀπελαύνω) which is much stronger than just ‘to send away.’ [Arrington, p. 185.]. Talk about a pretrial motion? Paul doesn’t even get a chance to offer a defense before Gallio is dismissing the case. He says that everything is all words to him and he feels like this is just an argument within the Jews. His ruling seems to set a precedent because, for the next 12 years (until Nero), Christianity gets the same begrudging tolerance as the Jews.

The bad news regarding Gallio’s decision was that the mob took it as an indicator that Gallio simply didn’t care. So, they almost immediately seized and beat Sosthenes, Crispus’ successor as leader of the synagogue. If Sosthenes had stood against Paul at this time, the mob of Gentiles may have take Gallio’s decision as an excuse for antisemitic violence. Once again, there would be consequences for going against God’s work.

But, there is another possibility. This is predicated on the fact that Crispus, the former head of the synagogue has already been converted and that a “Sosthenes” is mentioned as Paul’s co-author of 1 Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:1 [Marshall, p. 299.]. Is it possible that Jews and Greek proselytes saw Sosthenes going soft on the Christian message and tried to stiffen his spine of loyalty to Judaism by giving him the traditional 39 lashes with a whip? We don’t know. I somewhat like that idea, but it isn’t presented definitively in that manner by Luke.

So, did these things happen in Athens and Corinth as a result of Paul’s brilliance, Paul’s planning, or Paul’s persuasive speech? No! To apply what we see in these chapters, we need to learn to pray, “Lord, I have done nothing, but You have done everything.” Thank God that Paul was nothing and Jesus was everything.

I did not cover the trip to Syria and Ephesus at the last part of this chapter because it makes a better transition into Acts 19 and I wish to spend a lot of time on Paul’s ministry in Ephesus and it’s impact. I’m intrigued by the fact that Priscilla and Aquila go with him and that they are the ones who tutor Apollos who is mentioned in 1 Corinthians.