

Acts 17A

- We rejoin Paul's second missionary journey
 - He's left Philippi and he's headed west-southwest along the northern coast of the Aegean Sea
 - He still has Timothy, Silas but Luke stays behind in Philippi
 - Notice that Luke no longer writes in the first person plural ("we" has become "they")
 - Luke rejoins Paul in Acts 20 when Paul reaches Philippi on his third missionary journey, and first person plural returns

[Acts 17:1](#) ¶ Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

- We're stopping on verse 1 only briefly to note that Paul does not stop in the first two towns he visits
 - Given Paul's route, we know Paul is walking along a stretch of Roman highway known as the Egnatian Way
 - A major Roman road that crossed East-West from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea
 - A distance of about 600 miles
 - Like all major Roman roads, it was about 20 feet wide and lined with polygon stones covered with hard packed sand
 - It passed through modern day Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, and Albania
 - By the time Paul walked its length, it had already existed for nearly 300 years, and it was a major avenue for commerce
 - Connecting the Eastern parts of the Empire with Rome itself
 - As Paul walks from Philippi, he passes through two towns without even bothering to stop
 - The first two towns are not insignificant cities, yet Paul moves through them

- Then Luke pointedly says that Paul stops in Thessalonica where a synagogue of Jews existed
 - We know there is no record of a synagogue in either of the first two towns
 - So it seems that when Paul couldn't bring the Gospel to the Jew first, as God directed, he kept walking until he reached a town with an audience of Jews
- So Paul lands in Thessalonica
 - It was a large city, about 200,000 strong and the capitol of Macedonia
 - While Paul stayed here, he lived initially from support sent to him from the church in Philippi
 - Paul mentions the Philippian's support in his letter to that city in chapter 4
 - Before the support began to arrive, Paul supported himself through tent making, as he describes in both his letters to Thessalonica

[Acts 17:2](#) And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

[Acts 17:3](#) explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

[Acts 17:4](#) And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

- As as we've seen before, Paul first goes to the synagogue to give the Jews the opportunity to know that their Messiah had come
 - Luke says something noteworthy in describing Paul's technique in this town
 - Paul reasoned with the Jews in this synagogue
 - The Greek word for reasoned has a root word from which we get the word dialog
 - This is rational discourse on Paul's part
 - And then Luke says Paul explained and gave evidence that Jesus was the Christ

- What kind of “evidence” do you think Paul offered?
 - First, Paul would have offered his eye-witness testimony from having seen the resurrected Lord
 - Secondly, Paul used the Scriptures to make his arguments
 - Notice that Paul works to explain that Jesus HAD to suffer and die
 - This would have been the sticking point for the Jewish audience, which would have been confused to learn that the Messiah had come to die
- Paul is working from Scripture to preach the Gospel by reason to a Jewish audience
 - Paul never gives a miracle, raises someone from the dead
 - Paul never offers to heal someone to prove his story
 - Weren’t those miracles given to Apostles so that they could use them to validate their story?
 - And since Paul has used them for Gentiles, why doesn’t he use them now for the Jews?
 - For that matter, we haven’t seen Paul making efforts to reason with the Greeks from Scripture as he is doing here
 - He makes the presentation and often it’s accompanied by miracles to gain their confidence
 - It seems Paul uses two opposite approaches depending on his audience
 - But the one common denominator is that both hear the message of that Christ was crucified for our sins
 - This is in keeping with what Paul said in 1 Corinthians

[1Cor. 1:22](#) For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom;
[1Cor. 1:23](#) but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,
[1Cor. 1:24](#) but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

- Paul knew the Jews wanted to see miracles and Greek loved to debate ideas, but these fleshly pursuits only served to distract them from the truth

- So Paul resisted giving them what they wanted
- Instead, he offered them the message of the cross
- A message that was - and is - a message of foolishness to anyone other than those who are called
- In this case, the message finds a receptive audience with some of the Jews, a large number of the Greeks who attended the synagogue, and a few of the leading women of the city
 - Remember, a leading woman usually men the wife of a leading man, an official of some kind
- A period of time goes by, which Luke skips over
 - Though we can read about some of the intervening events in Paul's two letters to this city
 - By v.5, a large and committed church has been established in the city

[Acts 17:5](#) But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.

[Acts 17:6](#) When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also;

[Acts 17:7](#) and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

[Acts 17:8](#) They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things.

[Acts 17:9](#) And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

- As we've seen many times already, the preaching of the Gospel stirs the Jews to jealousy and they react with hatred
 - They organize a conspiracy and set the city in an uproar
 - Remember, we're talking about a city of nearly 200,000 people, so it's likely that they incited pockets of hostility in every areas of the city where the church was operating
 - Paul alludes to this period of persecution during his first letter to the city

[1Th. 2:13](#) ¶ For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

[1Th. 2:14](#) For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

[1Th. 2:15](#) who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,

[1Th. 2:16](#) hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

- The men hired by the Jews were actually a regular fixture in many Roman towns
 - They were unemployed or underemployed low class individuals who loitered in marketplaces and offered themselves for hire
 - One curious odd job common within Roman society was professional heckler or professional fan
 - These men could be hired to follow someone around and heckle them or applaud them, depending on whether you wanted to harass an individual or compliment them
 - The KJV translates their description as “men of the baser sort”
 - Some older Bible translations translate it “as wicked men of the lowest rabble”
 - This is where we get the term “rabble rouser”
 - Someone who rouses up the rabble is someone who hires the rabble to heckle or cause a disturbance
 - In this case, the Jews hired the rabble rousers, and the effect was to start an uproar
- Looking for Paul, the crowd starts at the home of the man who has been hosting Paul and his traveling companions
 - They search the home but cannot find Paul so they do the next best thing...they take his host, Jason
 - They announce charges before the city officials

- Jason is associating with men who upset the world
- The Greek word for “world” means the inhabited world, and it probably refers to all of the Roman empire
- In other words, they are accusing Paul and Jason by association with causing a disturbance of the peace in the Roman Empire
- Secondly, they are accused of treason for convincing people to worship someone other than the Caesar
 - Both of these charges are political in nature, so these Jewish leaders have learned from their forerunners in Jerusalem
 - The Jewish leaders in Jesus day also prompted the Roman authorities to act against Jesus on the basis of political charges, rather than religious charges
- By this point, you can be sure that Jason and the other believers caught up in this melee are pretty nervous over what’s happening
 - In a very real sense, Jason’s life is on the line
 - So they offer him the opportunity to escape punishment if he makes a pledge, or literally a payment of a bond
 - Jason posted bail, with the understanding that Paul and Silas would leave the city
 - If Jason failed at his word, he would forfeit his bond and be subject to prosecution

[Acts 17:10](#) The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

[Acts 17:11](#) Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

[Acts 17:12](#) Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

- Clearly, Jason didn’t want Paul to leave, but Jason had little choice under the circumstances except to post the bond and agree to the terms
 - Likewise, Paul himself wouldn’t have wanted to leave, but he must have seen the situation as God’s will and obeyed

- Not wanting to jeopardize Jason further, Paul and Silas leave quickly
- In fact, they leave at night, which was unusual and showed great urgency
- If we look at what Paul says in 2Thess, we find what may be a evidence that Paul never returned for Jason's sake

[1Th. 2:17](#) ¶ But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while — in person, not in spirit — were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

[1Th. 2:18](#) For we wanted to come to you — I, Paul, more than once — and yet Satan hindered us.

- Paul travels further down the Egnatian Road to Berea
 - Paul is willing to stop in Berea because this is a town with a synagogue
 - This town is mentioned only here in all Scripture, and its role is relatively minor in the story of Acts
 - In fact, Cicero referred to Berea as the “out of the way city”
 - And yet many Bible students have heard of the Bereans because of one comment Luke makes regarding the Bereans’ unique practice of fact-checking their teachers
 - Luke compares them to the Thessalonians calling them more noble-minded
 - It’s hard to tell if the comparison was intended as a criticism of the Thessalonians or a way of complimenting of the Bereans or both
 - Luke uses the term “noble” to describe the Bereans to mean they were at a higher level than the Thessalonians
 - In the sense that they were practicing their faith at a higher state of maturity
 - We need to look carefully at why they receive this famously unique commendation
 - First, they received the word with great eagerness

- The Greek word for eagerness actually has a more subtle meaning
- A better English rendering would be receiving the word with all readiness of mind
- The Bereans were ready to receive what Paul preached
 - They had prepared their minds for the truth of the Gospel
 - Obviously, the Bereans were good students of Scripture and knew the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah
 - So when Paul began to reason from Scripture, they were already familiar with the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah
 - This made it much easier for them to accept what they were hearing from Paul
- Imagine yourself a teacher lecturing to a room of students
 - Would you rather lecture to a group that has done its homework and is familiar with the material?
 - Or to a group that didn't do the reading and hasn't got the foggiest notion what you're talking about?
 - Which one makes your job easier?
- The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians because they had done their homework
 - So they were prepared to hear about the arrival of a Messiah
 - They had read the OT prophecies and knew what to look for in a Messiah
 - Once Paul explained Jesus, they would have recognized the fulfillment of prophecy instantly
- Today, we still have the need to be prepared students of the Word
 - But today the emphasis is in understanding how to live a life that hears the Spirit's call and responds to His direction
- Secondly, Luke says they are in the habit of checking the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true

- They aren't letting anyone get away with teaching error
 - This is an outgrowth of their devotion to study
 - They are always ready to learn, but they insist on checking for themselves
 - They don't take someone else's word blindly
 - They want to see it for themselves in God's word
- These two qualities made the Bereans noble
 - They pleased God by studying the word intently on a regular basis, while remaining always ready to learn more
 - And checking the facts of other teachers
- This brief mention of the Bereans has gained so much attention in the church over the years because it clarifies the importance of knowing God's word
 - In this case, their knowledge ensured they were ready to receive the Gospel when it appeared
 - And they were ready to contend with false teaching any time it appeared
 - This kind of noble-mindedness has fallen out of fashion in the church, and it probably explains why the church suffers so much at the hands of false teachers and bad doctrines
- But in a pattern that we've seen before, the Jews begin to harass Paul again

[Acts 17:13](#) But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

[Acts 17:14](#) Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there.

[Acts 17:15](#) Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

- In this case, these weren't even Berean Jews
 - They came from Thessalonica about 50 miles away

- And they begin using the same tactics again to stir up crowds
 - You can see how spiteful and hateful the Jews were when you consider the trouble they took to stop the spreading of the Gospel
- In response, the newly established church in Berea send Paul away from the city
 - They send him as far as the sea, meaning to a sea port on the Aegean Sea
 - But this time he leaves Timothy and Silas behind hoping they will go unnoticed
 - It's likely that the Jews came so quickly this time that Paul hadn't been in Berea long enough to fully establish the church in doctrine and practice
 - So Silas and Timothy have the job of continuing the discipleship in Berea for a little while
 - We see some evidence of Paul's hasty departure in his letters back to the city when he has to work hard to correct their poor understanding concerning the end times and other issues
- Paul leaves under Berean escort and eventually catches a ship bound for Athens
 - The reuniting of Paul with his three companions is a bit complicated, and the details aren't recorded in this chapter
 - But we can piece it together from other chapters in Acts and from many of Paul's letters
 - Paul reached Athens alone, but then later sends for Silas and Timothy to join him in the city, which they do
 - After they join him in Athens, Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica and Silas to Macedonia
 - Then Paul himself leaves Athens and goes to the next major city around the Aegean Sea: Corinth
 - Paul reaches Corinth alone but Timothy and Silas later return to join him there

- Finally, Luke rejoins Paul when he comes back through Philippi in Acts 20 on his third missionary journey

[Acts 17:16](#) ¶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.

[Acts 17:17](#) So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

- Athens was the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire
 - It had once been the most developed city in the world, but at this point it had fallen down
 - Still, it retained it's intellectual pride
- While in Athens, Paul can't help but notice that this city was a center for idol worship
 - And it provokes or stirs him to respond
 - It's unlikely that the idol worship Paul witnesses was common among the Jewish population
 - Nevertheless he begins his ministry in the city by witnessing in the synagogue as usual
 - I find it helpful to remember that even when Paul was in a waiting mode, he never stopped the work of ministry
 - He's waiting in Athens for his friends to join him, but he was never idle in ministry, even when he waited
 - Ministry is what happens while you're planning your next mission trip
 - Paul continues his preaching in the marketplace for a number of days
 - The marketplace was a large square in the heart of the city surrounded by prominent public buildings and shops
 - This is classic street evangelism, and Paul's task was challenging, because he wouldn't have been the only one offering new ideas
 - Greeks congregated in places like this precisely to hear the latest thinking or engage in debate on topics of the day
 - Paul became just another voice, albeit one bringing truth

- Eventually, Paul caught the ears of some important men of the city

[Acts 17:18](#) And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

[Acts 17:19](#) And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"

[Acts 17:20](#) "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."

[Acts 17:21](#) (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

- The Epicureans and Stoics represented two competing philosophical viewpoints within Greek society
 - The Epicureans were followers of the Greek philosopher Epicurus who lived at the end of the 4th century BC
 - They believed that it was impossible to find pure truth, so they maintained that the pursuit of truth was pointless
 - Therefore, the chief pursuit of life should be pleasure rather than knowledge
 - They also believed there was no afterlife, and the gods lived apart from men and had no contact with men
 - Thus Epicureans were effectively atheist
 - The end result was that life should be an attempt to maximize personal pleasure
 - The Stoics lived at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum
 - They followed Zeno who lived in the 3rd century BC
 - He taught in the Stoa Portico, or porch, so his followers became known as the stoics
 - The highest goal of life for a Stoic was detaching from all emotionalism and live in perfect agreement with nature and reason
 - The only good in the world was to live virtuously with perfect reason

- And the only evil was to lack reason
- Death, pain were not evil; pleasure and joy were not good
- Stoics made a goal of maintaining a brave and indifferent attitude in the face of pain, suffering or death
 - Likewise, they repressed emotions of joy or happiness so as to project complete contentment regardless of circumstances
 - Roman society was attracted to stoicism because it valued seriousness, endurance and bravery
- When they hear Paul, they take note of his odd message
 - They say he is a babbler (literally: seed-picker)
 - And they say he is preaching about strange gods because he mentions Jesus and the resurrection
 - This is a play on Greek words
 - They think he is preaching strange gods because they hear about Jesus and another God called “resurrection”
 - The Greek word for resurrection is anastasis
 - There was a Greek god named with the same word, Anastasis
- So they judge Paul worthy to join them in a special debate society that met on the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill
 - As Luke says, this was a place where men met to debate ideas back and forth with no really purpose except the entertainment value
 - And into this setting, Paul has a huge open door to present the Gospel