

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 17-18

17:1-9

- vv. 1-3 – As part of what is called the Second Missionary Journey, Paul and Silas continued traveling westward in northern Greece to the city of Thessalonica. As always, they went to the synagogue first and their message focused on Yeshua being the Messiah. In particular he specifically addressed the suffering and death of Yeshua, so that meant using Isaiah 53, Psalm 22 and other related passages.
- v. 4 – As a result some Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, including women, believed. The women are described as being “leading,” which in that culture probably meant being wives of officials of the city. But other Jews from the synagogue, likely the leaders, responded aggressively.
- v. 5 – The text shows that one of the new believers named Jason was hosting Paul and Silas. A mob from the synagogue went to his home in order to capture them, but they were not there at the time. So, not being satisfied, they took Jason and other believers before the city authorities.
- v. 7 – They made an accusation that had serious implications: “they act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus.” Claiming any kind of authority that rivals Caesar was a capital offense in the Roman Empire.

What could Paul and Silas have said that would provoke the accusers to make such a charge? They had been witnessing in the synagogue using the Scriptures, which have many references to the Messiah as king ruling over the earth (i.e. Isa 11:1-10). So even though it was part of their own theological heritage, they used it as a weapon against these men who proclaimed Yeshua as Messiah, a belief that they rejected. We also know that Paul later wrote in his first letter to the church of Thessalonica about the return of Messiah (1 Thes 4:14-18), and earlier in this chapter when describes his initial testimony in the city, he likely told them that Yeshua would come again to complete His messianic kingdom. And that would be a real threat to earthly leaders like Caesar.

The accusers wanted Paul and Silas to be punished (potentially as a death sentence). But since they couldn't lay their hands on either of them, they settled for lesser consequences for their hosts, Jason and others who are unnamed. It came in the form of a pledge (KJV – security), which is the modern-day equivalent of bail. And they were released. That essentially guaranteed that Paul and Silas would leave and not return to Thessalonica because their presence put the local believers at risk.

17:10-14

- v. 10 – Their next stop was 45 miles away in Berea.
- v. 11 – At this synagogue the Jews considered carefully what Paul had to say. That indicates you never know how people will respond to your testimony so you have to be prepared for those who desire detailed information from Scripture.
- v. 12 – Once again many Jews and Gentiles believed, including women and men of high social standing.
- v. 13 – And then the opponents in Thessalonica heard about it and they made the trip to Berea and

forced Paul out of town there as well.

- v. 14 – Silas and Timothy stayed behind, undoubtedly to continue quietly ministering to the believers in the region.

17:15-21

- v. 16 – Then Paul made his way to Athens, which is described as a city full of idols. The presence of these objects alone demonstrates that the people believed in many Gods, and used idols to visualize and connect with them.

- v. 17 – He spent time witnessing in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. That meant his message once again was based on Messianic prophecy and how Yeshua fulfilled them. But the Greek Gentiles in the marketplace required a completely different approach.

- v. 18 – Paul encountered two different groups:

- **Epicureans** believed in the pursuit of life free from pain, but not like Hedonists who indulged in pleasure. Epicureans merely avoided disturbances in life and simply sought a happy life. They believed in the gods but they were detached from humanity. And they believed the soul was material in nature, so when you die, your soul perished, and thus could not inherit afterlife.
- **Stoics** were pantheists who believed that the gods governed the universe and were very much involved in the lives of humans, even caring for their needs. They practiced reasoning through logic and reflection, and thus they esteemed people of great wisdom. They also did not believe in the immortality of the soul.

So Paul came to them preaching a very different message. They called him a term translated as “babbling,” but literally means a “seed picker.” It is derived from the image of a bird pecking away at seeds then was applied to worthless people picking up scraps at the marketplace. So when it was applied to someone like Paul, it meant that he wasn’t an original thinker, but merely someone who had picked up scraps of information from others and tried to pass it on like he was the originator and expert on the subject. It was a term that was meant to ridicule him.

- vv 19-21 – Paul’s audience tested him to see what he has to say that is new in nature. It was a way of confirming if he was a babbling (seed picker). He was given an opportunity to speak publicly at the Areopagus, which was a short distance away from the Acropolis in Athens, the hill with the Parthenon temple for worship of Athena. The Areopagus was a court or a council that originally dealt with criminal matters, and it was the place where Socrates was martyred, in part, for promoting belief in deities that were not part of the Greek pantheon. But after Greece was overtaken by Rome, and thus lost the ability to try capital cases, it only dealt with matters related to the local municipality or things of a religious or moral nature, and had the ability to approve teachers or cults or even specific doctrines. So it was very prestigious and had great influence over the way people thought in Greece.

17:22-34

- v. 22 – Paul’s skill in crafting his message is exemplary. He began by being complimentary, rather than condemning the people.

- v. 23 – He identified a point of commonality (an altar erected to an unknown god). This is important

to recognize—if Paul had preached a new deity, it would have brought condemnation, not to the point of death like in the case of Socrates, for that was not longer an option under Rome. But he could have been banished from Athens and thus curtailed his ability to witness and make disciples there. So he pointed to the existence of a deity already acknowledged by the Greeks but not specifically identified.

vv 24-26 – He then described the nature of that Unknown God using biblical principles without citing Scripture itself because it was unfamiliar and lacked authority among Greeks. According to Paul, these are the characteristics of the Unknown God:

- He is the creator of the universe (from the Greek perspective, the supreme deity and from the biblical perspective, the only deity).
- He is not restricted to man-made temples (cf. Isa 66:1; Acts 7:49).
- He is independent from humanity (especially relevant to the Epicureans).
- He is the source and sustainer of all life.
- He made humanity from one man (an allusion to Adam).
- He controls history (appointed times) and where people live.

v. 27 – Here Paul connected directly with the Stoic perspective upholding the involvement of the gods in the lives of humans. He stated that God intends for people to seek Him. That is why theologians call Paul’s argument in verses 24-26 general revelation—God reveals His existence in nature and our ability to sense that a power greater than us created and sustains the universe. So having that understanding will lead us to seek Him. But, as Paul pointed out, the problem is that we can only grope about. It is a picture of a blind person randomly feeling for something. And there might be many objects that you can grasp, but if you don’t even know exactly what you are supposed to grasp, you could have the right one in your hand and not be certain you are right. So general revelation, in this word picture, is that it is possible to find the true God, it is not likely, even if He is near or present all the time. That was the problem the Athenians faced on that day, just as people of every generation and place encounter. And that is why all people need the special revelation of Yeshua, that gives tremendous specificity to whom the people can find in their seeking.

v. 28 – Paul quoted from a Greek poem by Epimenides entitled *Cretica*, written some 600 earlier. That kind of recall demonstrates that Paul was familiar with the culture of his audience. He also quoted from this poem in his letter to Titus (1:12).

v. 29 – Paul’s conclusion is based on reasoning, which would appeal to the Greek Stoics: if humans are living beings made in the image of God, then God is a living being, not a man-made object of some kind.

v. 30 – How are we to understand this phrase, “having overlooked the times of ignorance?” The word translated as “overlook” (Gr. *hypereidon*) means that there should be a consequence but it is not enacted. As verse 31 shows, this particular consequence cannot be humanity’s future final judgment because that is never overlooked. Here, it refers to God’s right and power to pass judgment while sinful people are still alive, just as He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. But when people like the Greeks of that day are ignorant of that possibility, God overlooks it in His mercy. And, again, it does not refer to our judgment after death, just in our lifetime. So the times of ignorance are not just a lack of awareness of the true God of the universe, it is an ignorance of the grave consequences of sin.

But when people are no longer ignorant, but informed like Paul had just done for the Greeks, they have an opportunity to receive a favorable outcome in that final judgment if they repent (v. 30) and receive the righteousness that comes through a Man who rose from the dead (v. 31). Paul did not refer to Yeshua by name, but the people had now been told who the true God was and their times of ignorance had ended.

- v. 32 – Paul’s reference to the resurrection stirred a mixed result. Neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics believed in the resurrection of the dead. But some of them wanted to hear more about it. There may have been a simple curiosity in hearing new things (v. 21). But v. 34 shows that some men became believers, so their interest would reflect a genuine desire to learn more about their faith.

Overall, Paul’s message paralleled biblical principles perfectly. But the content was expressed in such a way that it was understandable to the Greeks, and it did not require quoting Scripture. He did the same thing by making his message understandable to Jews, only in that case it was based primarily on the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the act of contextualization—communicating the gospel in the context of your audience.

18:1-11

- vv 1-3 – Paul moved on another 50 miles to Corinth. We are told that this was after Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49: A.D., so it was probably around 51 A.D. at this point. He met a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla, who shared common traits with Paul of heritage (Jews) and trade (tent-makers), and he ended up staying with them. It does not say that they were believers, but it is likely that they were because later in Romans 16:3 Paul identifies them as believers and says that they risked their lives for him, most likely during this time in Corinth.

- v. 4 – As before, Paul began his ministry “to the Jew first” by witnessing on the Sabbath in the synagogue.

- v. 5 – Then Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, where they had stayed behind. They would have reported on the state of the congregations that had been planted in the region. And it seems likely that Paul wrote his First Epistle (Letter) to the Thessalonians at this time from Corinth because, according to 1 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul writes:

“But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you.”

- v. 6 – He also encountered resistance from the Jews of the city and he ends his attempt to witness in the synagogue. The phrase, “Your blood be upon your heads” is a picture of someone not heeding a warning and then facing the consequences that could have been avoided. Its intended meaning is evident in a passage in the book of Ezekiel:

“If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman; and he sees the sword coming upon the land, and he blows on the trumpet and warns the people, then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head” (Ezek 33:2-4).

- v. 7 – So perhaps in a symbolic gesture, Paul moved into the home of a believing Gentile, Titius Justus. At this point, Paul could have easily left Corinth and concluded his ministry there.

v. 8 – But some fruit began to appear, including an influential Jew, Crispus, who was the head of the synagogue.

v. 9 – And then Paul had a vision from the Lord telling him to stay.

v. 11 – Paul ended up staying and ministering in Corinth for a year and a half. His commitment to discipleship was paralleled at the same time by Silas and Timothy working with the first believing communities in northern Greece. This was important because the Gentile believers had little awareness of the totality of the biblical message. They had no Scriptures to read, no familiarity with Bible stories passed down on an oral basis, no worship songs to sing, no pastors to guide them from their own knowledge of the Scriptures and life experiences. They truly needed much help in getting started. And that included the letters to these congregations that Paul had begun writing.

18:12-17

v. 12 – Nevertheless, the Jewish leaders were not finished in their opposition. Just as had been done in other cities, they took Paul before the local authorities, in this case the Roman proconsul (governor), Gallio.

v. 13 – Their charge was that Paul “persuades people to worship God contrary to the law.” The law in question had to be the law of Moses, not Roman law, because in v. 15 Gallio acknowledges it as a reference to their “own law,” not something of a criminal nature (v. 14). So he refused to hear the case. If this was about a new cult, Gallio would likely had to investigate further and make a ruling. But he, like other Roman leaders, considered the Messianic faith to be a subset of Judaism. They saw it as a continuation of Hebraic worship, not something new.

v. 17 – Unnamed people took out their frustration on Sosthenes who had become the leader of the synagogue. We do not know if he was a believer and it was Jews who beat him up, or if they beat up their own leader because he failed to bring down Paul and the Messianic faith. Or maybe “they” refers to Greeks who harmed the Jewish leader for making a scene in the city by bringing charges. But obviously Gallio didn’t care one way or another because the historical record shows that he hated Jews in general.

18:18-28

v. 18 – Paul left Corinth along with Priscilla and Aquila. But before they boarded the ship in the port city of Cenchrea that served Corinth on eastward journeys, Paul cut his hair because he was taking a vow. The evidence shows that it was likely a Nazirite vow. That act shows that Paul was still faithful to the commandments of the Torah.

Nazirite vows are described in detail in Numbers 6. A person would take such a vow in order to demonstrate complete dedication to God. It required from cutting your hair during the period of the vow (so Paul cut it immediately before taking the vow). The person also had to abstain from wine or strong drink or even grapes of any kind. Normally the vow was taken in Jerusalem, but as part of the oral tradition of that day and later recorded in the *Mishnah (Nazir 1:1-9:5)*, a person outside of Israel could take the vow if he then went to Jerusalem, which Paul was doing here. According to Num 6:18, the one taking the vow would offer his hair at the altar and burn it by fire along with some other prescribed offerings. By following this practice, Paul was demonstrating his total commitment to God’s calling, as well as continuing to identify with his Jewish heritage. That would be important to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem who had not seen him for some time and could only

wonder what he was doing.

v. 19 – But first he stopped in Ephesus (on the western side of Asia Minor) for a short time. This time he only witnessed to Jews in the synagogue, not Gentiles. It doesn't say it in the text, but as we will see in v. 26, Priscilla and Aquila stayed in Ephesus.

v. 21 – And then he departed again.

v. 22 – This verse packs a great amount of detail into just a few words. When he arrived in Caesarea, the port city serving Judea, “he went up and greeted the church.” This is clearly a reference to the believers in Jerusalem because in terms of orientation, you always went up to Jerusalem (compared to our modern way of thinking related to maps in which “up” implies a northerly direction). While there, in addition to visiting with the believers of Jerusalem, he would have had the opportunity to stop at the temple to make his offering in completing the Nazirite vow process. Then he “went down” and returned to Antioch.

v. 23 – It doesn't say how long Paul stayed in Antioch this time, but it may have been as long as a year. And then he left on his third missionary journey, this time overland to Galatia and Phrygia where he had planted churches on his previous journey.

v. 24-26 – Meanwhile, back in Ephesus, a Jewish man named Apollos was “teaching accurately the things concerning Yeshua.” So apparently he had learned somewhere that the Messiah had come and how he fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. This indicates he was a believer in Yeshua, but he was not aware of the rest of God's plan that had been revealed at Shavuot/Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the people.

The reason for Priscilla and Aquila staying behind in Ephesus becomes evident because they were able to give Apollos the knowledge that he lacked. The effective manner in which they handled the situation shows that it is often best to talk to someone discreetly rather than confronting them publicly, which can stir up defensive pride.

vv. 27-28 – Apollos then began his own ministry by traveling to Achaia in western Greece.