

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 17

17:1-9

- v. 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? We know that they had been witnessing in the synagogue using Scripture, which has many references to the Messiah as king ruling over the earth (i.e. Isa 11:1-10). And that meant Yeshua had to return in order to establish His messianic kingdom. So even though it was part of their own theological heritage, these opponents used it as a weapon against these men who proclaimed Yeshua as Messiah. They exploited the way that the return of the messianic king would be perceived as a real threat to earthly leaders like Caesar.¹

The accusers wanted Paul and Silas to be punished (potentially as a death sentence). But since they could not 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.

¹ It is interesting to note that this theme of the return of Yeshua continued later on in Paul’s first letter to the congregation that would be founded in Thessalonica (1 Thes 4:14-18).

- 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 abundance of these objects demonstrates that the people believed in many gods, and they used idols to visualize and connect with them.
- v. 17 – He spent time witnessing in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, which means that his message would have been about Messianic prophecy and the way that 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 was initially derived from the image of a bird pecking away at seeds, and then it was used in reference to poor people picking up scraps at the marketplace. So when it was applied to someone like Paul, it meant that he was not an original thinker. Instead, he was perceived as being 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 clearly a term meant to ridicule him.

- v. 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 local municipal matters or things of a religious or moral nature, and it had the ability to approve teachers or cults or 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.
- v. 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, in this word picture, general revelation is sufficient for people to find the true God, but it is inefficient and 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. That is why all people need the special revelation of Yeshua, which provides people with a far more precise understanding of the existence and identity of God. But, as Paul is demonstrating, general revelation is a good starting point in witnessing.
- v. 28 – Paul quoted from a Greek poem by Epimenides entitled *Cretica*, written some 600 years 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 that humans are living beings made in the image of God; therefore God is a living being, not a man-made object of some kind. Because he used reasoning, his argument would have appealed to the Greek Stoics.
- 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. Paul shows that it requires repentance (v. 30) and receiving the righteousness that comes through a Man who rose from the dead (v. 31). He 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.