

## Thoughts on Acts Seventeen

As the gospel spread through Macedonia from Philippi to Thessalonica and Berea, we read of the Gentile God-fearers and Jews who met to read scripture and study Moses and the prophets. We also learn of the continued efforts of the Jews to suppress or remove Paul and those who would teach the resurrected Christ. The danger becomes great enough for Paul to leave the area. Paul's escort from Berea took him to Athens, Greece, and left him there. (Acts 17:1-15).

In Paul's day, the city of Athens existed in its past glory as "the birthplace of Western civilization," as though the Hellenistic lifestyle could stand up to the morals of the Bible and God's people. Athens was the home of the great philosophers of the golden age of Greece—Pericles, Socrates, Demosthenes, and Plato. It remained a center of philosophy, literature, science, and art in Roman times. It boasted the best university in the ancient world and was the meeting place of the world's intellectuals. It was also a multicultural city where many gods were worshiped side by side. This many-faceted culture presented Paul with a great challenge and, as many believe, his harshest reception. Paul's speech was not a failure but a brilliant translation of his message into Hellenic thought and language. The sermon revealed Paul's knowledge of Greek thought and resulted in the conversion of an Athenian judge at the Court that met on the Areopagus (Ares Hill to the Greek and Mars Hill to the Roman).

Luke does not tell us for certain if Paul spoke before the judges of the court, former Archons (rulers of the court), or was just on the hill at the time. Luke does indicate that Paul was on trial but was satisfying the curiosity of the Athenians. It is most likely that Paul spoke to at least some of the assembled judges because ruling on the acceptance of foreign gods was one of their duties. Their belief that they should acknowledge all people's deities and that there might be some they did not know about is seen in the monument to "*The Unknown God*" (Acts 17:22-23). It is this monument that provides the opening for Paul's lecture. They had an "unknown" that Paul could make known. It is easier to explain the gospel to those with questions, where their attention can be centered, than to arouse interest in Jesus and His message. This is but one application for Peter's admonition, "*Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence*" (1 Peter 3:15).

Luke writes that Paul confronted the "*Epicureans and Stoics*" (Acts 17:18) at Athens. The disciples of Epicurus looked for true pleasure and not truth in their lives and thoughts. It was the old version of "if it feels good, do it." The result of that philosophy in Paul's day, as it is today, is a deterioration into pure materialism. The Sadducees were the Jewish equivalent of the Epicureans.

On the other hand, the Stoics saw life's goal as personal happiness, but they embraced providence, the ordering of all things for the best. To the Stoic, happiness was living virtuously according to nature, which involves a two-part process: First, conform our lives to the logical order guiding the universe, and second, surrender completely and without complaint to whatever providence may send us. At Athens, philosophy was virtually reduced to the teaching of these two opposing schools. Epicurus' teaching criticized polytheism, while the Stoics embraced it.

Paul's outline directs attention to the primary thoughts of both philosophies. Creation is the work of God; "*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not*

*dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24-25).*

God planned and ordered mankind: *"He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26).* He expects people to seek Him, not their own will and happiness, *"they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).* God is the reason for our existence and not the pleasures and happiness we might find on our own; *"for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children'" (Acts 17:28).* God will judge our responses to Him by the one He raised from the dead. *"He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).*

As we see in his letters, Paul continued to deal with these Greek philosophies (Romans 1:21-22); (1 Corinthians 1:18-23, 26-29). To the Colossians, Paul clearly asserts the danger in listening to the vain thoughts of the so-called wise teachers (Colossians 2:8), and (Colossians 1:15-20) describes the righteous judge.

Where do you go for knowledge?