

Acts of the Apostles

Week 20-Acts 17:1-34

In Thessalonica (17:1-9)

- Paul and Silas move on from Philippi to the city of Thessalonica (v 1).
 - o Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and was a “free city” ruled by its own local politarchs.
 - o Paul would later write two letters to the church he founded in this city. The first letter noted the strong opposition he faced in the city (1 Thess 2:2), but also the faith of those who converted “in the midst of severe suffering” (1 Thess 1:6).
- Thessalonica had a large Jewish population, and Paul began his ministry there.
 - o He spent three Sabbath’s engaging other Jewish men in the synagogue about how the Scriptures pointed to Jesus’s death and resurrection as confirmation that he was the Messiah (v 2-3).
 - o As happened in other places, “some were persuaded.” This group of converts included Jews, a large number of Greeks, and a number of prominent women (v 17:4).
- The acceptance of the gospel was not universal. Jealous Jews rounded up some “bad characters” and started a riot.
 - o When they couldn’t find Paul and Silas, they drug Jason, the missionaries’ host, and other believers before the city officials and accused them of causing trouble all over the world (literally, “turning the world upside down”) (v 6).
 - o They accused the Christians of sedition because they claimed Jesus, and not Caesar was king (v 7).
 - o They forced Jason to pay a bond, which would be forfeited if any more trouble occurred.

In Berea (17:10-15)

- That night, the believers sent Paul and Silas down the road to Berea (v 10).
- Luke notes that the Jews in Berea were more noble than those in Thessalonica (v 11).
 - o For Luke, that mean these Jews eagerly examined the scriptures to see if what Paul said was true (v 12).
 - o They were also more open to faith than those in Thessalonica with many Jews and Greeks believing in the gospel.
- The angry Jews from Thessalonica followed Paul and Silas to Berea and begin stirring up trouble for them there (v 13).
- Paul was immediately sent on to Athens, but Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea presumably to help further the church’s establishment (v 14-15).

In Athens (17:16-34)

- In Athens, Paul becomes deeply distressed by the number of idols in the city and began engaging Jews and Greeks in both the synagogue and the marketplace (v 17).
- A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate Paul.
 - o They accuse him of being a babbler – “a pseudointellectual with no substance.”
 - o They also accuse him of promoting foreign gods – a serious charge that could merit the death penalty. Socrates was put to death for rejecting the gods who were considered protectors of the state (v 18).
- Paul is taken to a meeting of the Areopagus which possibly functioned as a court of law and not just a philosophers’ club.
- They ask Paul about his new teaching (v 19). While our culture values the new, the ancients did not. What was new was considered threatening.
- Though Paul is distressed by their idolatry, he uses it as a bridge to talk about Jesus.
 - o He notes that the Athenians are very religious (v 22). The comment likely was heard as a compliment but was ambiguous. It could also mean that they were superstitious.
 - o He draws attention to their statue “to an unknown god” (v 23), an alter that testifies to their ignorance.
- Paul argues that the one, true creator God does not live in temples made by human hands (v 24)
 - o This God does not need anything that we could give him.
 - o Instead, this God gives everyone life and breath (v 25).
 - o This God providential rules the nations.
- This God is not unknown or impassive since God stirs us to seek after him (v 27).
 - o Most Greeks thought the highest gods were unreachable and did not bother themselves with mankind. This is why they worshiped lesser deities.
 - o Paul argues that the one true God has drawn near.
 - o Paul quotes the poet Aratus but interprets his words through a biblical lens (v 28).
- Paul challenges them to give up their idols, which do nothing to teach us about God (v 29).
 - o He notes that God once overlooked such ignorance but will do so no longer.
 - o By sending “the man he appointed” to die and rise again, God has given us all the proof we need to know who God is (v 31).
 - o We should therefore repent and believe (v 30).
- The response is once more mixed.
 - o Some sneer at the idea of the resurrection. Some scholars think the Greeks may have thought Paul was introducing two new gods, the male “Jesus” and the female “Anastasis” which means resurrection.
 - o Others asked to hear Paul again on the subject (v 32).
 - o A few believed including a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris (v 34).

Sources

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