

TO PROCLAIM AN UNKNOWN GOD

Acts 17:1-34

Key Verse: 17:23

Paul was in Europe. After establishing a small group of believers in Philippi, he continued along the Egyptian Way through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. There was a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica, so Paul decided to stop there and preach. On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He continued teaching the Bible there for three Sabbaths.

First, Paul preached that the Christ must suffer

In the synagogue of Thessalonica Paul sought to teach a Biblical view of the Messiah. He taught them from the Scriptures that the Messiah, the Christ, must suffer and die and rise from the dead. Perhaps he read Isaiah 53 to them: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering....he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter..." and Psalm 16:10: "because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see corruption... Then he proclaimed to them Jesus, who is the Christ. Some Jews believed; others did not. A large number of God-fearing Greeks and a good many prominent women accepted Jesus as the Christ. Perhaps because of the prominent women the Jews were jealous. They could not get their own hands dirty, so they rounded up some thugs, formed a mob and started a riot. They invaded the house of Jason, one of the new converts. Paul and Silas were not there, so they dragged Jason and some other brothers out. They accused Jason of harboring "the men who turned the world upside-down" (17:6-RSV). They couldn't find Paul, so they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

Under cover of darkness, Paul and Silas made their escape and went to near-by Berea. The Berean Jews were more noble than those of Thessalonica. They received the word eagerly and searched the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul preached were true. Many Greeks believed, including some prominent women. Then, the Jews of Thessalonica arrived. They again stirred up trouble. Those who reject the gospel can't seem to just walk away. They must attack the work of God and try to stop it. But God can't be stopped. So the brothers sent Paul to the coast and brought him to Athens. Silas and Timothy remained behind to teach the Bible and establish Berean and Thessalonian believers.

Second, Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection (16-21)

In Athens Paul was distressed at the blatant idolatry. The Jews of Athens had become hardened to it. Athens was the seat of intellectual thought. How could they be so

ignorant of truth and God. First, Paul went to the synagogue and talked with Jews and the God-fearing Greeks who came to the synagogue seeking God. He also went “fishing” in the marketplace and talked with whoever he could find there. He encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and debated them. (Epicureans taught that happiness is the supreme good. At first, they sought truth and real and lasting inner peace and happiness. But these noble aspirations soon degenerated. Instant gratification and physical pleasure became their preoccupation. Stoics, on the other hand, tried to live disciplined, independent lives. They practiced self-control. But their philosophy degenerated into pride and legalism. Paul preached the good news of Jesus and the resurrection. The Athenians were curious and invited him to the meeting of the Areopagus. The Athenians and foreigners who lived in Athens spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. The meeting in the Areopagus was primarily concerned about religion and morals. Paul stood up in the meeting and spoke.

Third, Paul proclaims the Creator God (22-34)

Paul noticed that among all of the idols there was one altar inscribed, “To an Unknown God.” Paul sought to make this unknown Creator God known. The Creator God made the world and everything in it. He does not need us, but we need him, for he is the one who gives life to all of us. The Creator God made all people—every nation of people who inhabit the earth—from one man. We are all belong to one race—the human race. God determines the times and places of our lives. He wants all people to seek him and worship him. When we worship the Creator God, creation order is restored and we can live in peace with all people. Since God made us, we are his children. God is not happy when people worship idols made by men’s hands. How can men worship idols of gold and silver that their own hands have made? This reveals their ignorance and the darkness in which they live. Paul continued. Men lived in ignorance in the past. But now, God calls all men to repent. He has appointed one who would judge the world with justice and has set the day of judgement. He raised from the dead the man who will be the judge. God the Creator is God who gives life and God who raises the dead. When they heard about the resurrection there was a sharp reaction. Some sneered. Others wanted to hear more. A man named Dionysius (a member of the Areopagus) and a woman named Damaris and a few others believed. It is hard for proud intellectuals to believe the gospel because it is not easy for proud people to admit that they need to repent. But when we stand before the judgement seat of God we can only stand with our heads bowed as we humbly seek God’s mercy and forgiveness. On the day of God’s wrath It is the Risen Jesus who is our judge; he is also our advocate; and he is our substitute—the one who takes our punishment on himself. Paul’s preaching in Athens seems to be a failure, but it was not. When Peter preached in Jerusalem, three thousand, then five thousand were converted. Only a handful in each place seemed to respond to Paul’s preaching. But the seed Paul planted through preaching of the gospel in Europe changed the world. As the Thessalonians said, “the men who turned the world upside down have come here.” The Creator God gives life. He raised Jesus from

the dead. He is working among us today.