

TUTORIAL

2.22

Paul continues visiting & teaching people in the Aegean area

Paul and his team travel to Thessalonica, then Paul and Silas move on to Berea. When opponents of the truth make further work impossible, Paul goes to Athens, where he gives his famous speech to the intellectuals of the city on Mars Hill. He then travels to Corinth where he stays for around two years teaching God's Word, before heading back to Antioch via Ephesus and Jerusalem.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 17:1-18:22.**

Last time

After visiting the existing fellowships in southern Galatia, Paul and his church planting team were keen to visit communities that didn't yet have access to the Gospel. With the Holy Spirit's guidance, they travelled to the city of Philippi in the province of Macedonia. There a woman, Lydia, was saved along with her family, and their home became the base for the Philippian church. Paul and Silas were beaten and jailed. Their jailer, waking in the night to find an earthquake had opened all the doors, was about to kill himself. Paul stopped him, explaining that everyone was still there. The relieved man accepted the Gospel message and he and his family were saved. After encouraging the new believers again, Paul's team left Philippi.

The team visits Thessalonica

Heading out again, Paul, Silas, young Timothy, and any others with them, would have been following the *Via Egnatia*...an epic Roman road that stretches way back to the east behind them to Byzantium on the Black Sea - today's Istanbul - and ahead all the way to the Adriatic coast in modern day Albania. They pass through a couple of towns, apparently without staying long, until they reach Thessalonica, about 160 kilometers west of Philippi (Acts 17:1-10). Thessalonica had an estimated population of 200,000 when Paul visited - at the time it was the largest city in Macedonia - and today is the second largest in all of Greece.

Typically, Paul visits the synagogue, knowing that he has an immediate point of contact with people who are familiar with the true God from the Jewish Scriptures. He draws out the truth for them, particularly from those sections

that clearly point forward to Jesus as the promised Messiah. Here as always, we see Paul carefully sharing truth by laying worldview, Narrative foundations or building on whatever he finds already in place. Having taken the time to do this, he's then able to present the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus as the logical climax of all that God has been working towards down through history. So then it's not some optional religious system he's offering; instead it can be seen as the only possible solution a Creator who's completely holy and completely loving would come to, as He seeks to rescue His lost race of image-bearers.

This clear message resonates with many...Luke says they are *persuaded*. A couple of years later, in one of the letters Paul will write to them as a local fellowship, he'll remind them that they were saved through God's Spirit and through their belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Their new birth comes as they willingly accept what the Spirit reveals to them miraculously in their hearts or *spirits*, while also convincing them logically through their minds, or *reason*. Some of those who are saved are Jews, but many more are men and women from the majority Greek or Roman culture who've been associated with the synagogue.

The now familiar pattern for Paul's visits to different places repeats itself...the orthodox Jews are upset at losing influence over these former adherents to their faith, some of whom are prominent people in the community. Accusations are made, a mob gathers, a riot starts..."It's those troublemakers from Judea. What are their names, Paul and Silas? We've heard about them. Going around teaching about this Jesus...saying he's the real king. Causing disturbances everywhere. Well not here. The Romans will call it treason! We'll lose our status as a free city. They're at the house of that Jew, Jason. Right, let's get them." Not finding Paul and Silas, they take Jason and others to the city council, but they are eventually released after posting a good behaviour bond.

The new believers feel that under the circumstances it's best for Paul and Silas to move on that same night. Luke mentions Paul speaking at the synagogue in Thessalonica on three consecutive weeks, but it's not entirely clear if that's the full extent of their stay in the city. However long it is, by the time Paul and the team leave, there is a group of believers in the city with a deep commitment to the Lord Jesus, a common sense of identity, a good grasp of the fundamental truths of the faith, and an understanding of their role in the community. As Paul will write in a letter to them soon, they have the strength to stand against the opposition, which inevitably came. That said, there are some important areas of truth that he did not have time to share with them before his hasty departure, and those are some of the topics he'll address soon in the two letters to the Thessalonian church that we have recorded in the New Testament.

In Berea they find people keen to engage

Continuing west on the *Via Egnatia* for 70 kilometers they reach Berea - today Veria - at the eastern foot of the Vermio Mountains (Acts 17:10-15). They find people in the synagogue here who are open to the truth they are proclaiming and who listen eagerly, as the text says, to Paul's message. But their enthusiasm for the teaching of the church planters is not mindless acceptance. Day after day, Luke says, they search the Scriptures - God's Narrative - to verify that what Paul and Silas are teaching aligns with what God Himself has revealed there. And, as a direct result of them truly grasping these things for themselves, many from both the Jewish minority and Greek majority believe in the Good News about Jesus.

As we've noted before, God created us *in His image* so that we can respond to His revelation of Himself fully: with our hearts, souls, emotions, wills and minds. When we tell God's Story to people, we need skill and insight so that they are hearing *Him* appealing to the deepest longings of their hearts, captivating their imaginations, challenging their worldview assumptions, and convincing them of the inherent logic and coherence in everything He has said and done.

Almost inevitably it seems, Jews from Thessalonica follow the church planters to Berea and stir up problems. The new believers act quickly and escort Paul to Athens...probably by sea, although Luke doesn't say specifically. Silas and Timothy stay behind for a while before rejoining Paul, no doubt to strengthen the young church.

Paul visits Athens and speaks on Mars Hill

Meanwhile Paul isn't relaxing while he's waiting for them in Athens. Home to an estimated 20,000 people, at the time of his visit, it's well past its prime of five centuries before when it dominated the other Greek city states and was renowned as a centre of Hellenist literature, art and philosophy. At the time of Paul's visit there is still plenty of outstanding architecture to see, and as he looks around, something else is impossible to miss (Acts 17:16-32). The first century Greek historian, Plutarch, recorded that there were 20,000 statues of gods in Athens, and the Roman writer Petronius from around that time famously joked that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. It's not surprising to hear that Paul is really bothered at this visible evidence of paganism everywhere he goes. How do you begin to create a hunger for the Gospel in a society that has turned so far from the true God?

His approach to the situation is worth noting...he tries to pursue meaningful engagement with people in two different contexts. The first is a religious setting - the *synagogue* - where there is already a foundation of understanding about the true God to build on. The second context is out in the *public arena* where almost no one he interacts with knows anything about God or His Narrative. The more educated of this group tend to have a worldview that syncretizes their extreme polytheism with the teachings of two respective schools of philosophy. The Epicureans pursue meaning through restraint,

tranquility, enjoying life, loving others and avoiding any fear of death. The other, the Stoics, are looking for fulfillment through conforming their wills to an impersonal god-force: 'reason', that they believe rules the universe.

At first Paul's teaching is seen by these intellectuals as bizarre and foreign, but the longer they debate with him, the more intrigued they become. They invite him to address the Council that gives oversight to religion and education for the city. Most believe this meeting takes place on Mars Hill, just below the famous fortified *acropolis*. Paul's speech provides us with an invaluable example of how to engage with people who have no prior knowledge of the true Creator-God. He looks for common ground, and begins with something familiar: their altar "to an Unknown God", but he reinterprets it in an unexpected way to get their attention. Then he introduces them to God, briefly describing His being, His character, His purpose for creation and stance towards sinful human beings... introducing the truth that this God is infinitely greater than any of their false deities. Embedded in his address are a number of significant challenges to their existing worldview. He concludes with a warning and an exhortation for them to seek understanding about what God has provided for humans to be able to be reunited with Him. Time doesn't permit us to analyze Paul's famous sermon in depth, but anyone will be rewarded by a careful study of it in order to glean underlying principles for sharing truth. Some of his audience responds with contempt, but others, including one member of the Council, become believers as a result.

Paul travels to Corinth for a lengthy stay

Without giving any particular reason, Luke records that Paul decides to leave Athens and head to Corinth (Acts 18:1-22)...maybe in the hope of finding more prepared soil for the Gospel message. Today just an hour and a half by train or road, Paul would probably have walked the 80 kilometers around the coast. It seems that as he approached the big bustling city of around 200,000 people, it probably wasn't with a spring in his step. He'd later write to the church he'd plant there that as he came, he was very conscious of his own weakness...in fact, he describes himself as timid and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3). We don't know for sure all the factors playing into his state of mind, but for one thing, he was on his own - Silas and Timothy hadn't caught up with him yet. We also learn later that he was in a tough spot financially. And Corinth itself was a daunting prospect. Much of its population was made up of sailors, merchants, refugees, and discharged soldiers. The cultic prostitution at the temple of Aphrodite had brought wealth but also corruption to Corinthian society, and its name was synonymous with immorality.

But the Lord Jesus is looking after the former Pharisee He'd called into His service so dramatically on the road to Damascus. Just as He'd promised nearly a quarter of a century before, wherever His disciples go out to share His Good News, He is with them, giving them strength and guidance. In Corinth, Paul meets a Jewish couple who've recently come there from Rome after the

Emperor banished all Jews from the capital city. He is able to live and work with them at their mutual trade of tent making. We don't know at what point this couple become believers - whether previously, or through Paul's witness - but later in the Narrative we'll hear that they play an important role as co-workers with him in his church planting and establishing work. So during the week he works at his trade and then on Saturdays - the Sabbath - he regularly goes to the local synagogue to look for opportunities to share the Gospel with Jews and people from other ethnicities who worship the One, True, God there.

Eventually, after Timothy and Silas arrive with a gift of money from the believers in Philippi, he's able to spend all his time sharing God's Word with people. It's worth noting that while there's nothing wrong with the categories of supporter, full-time worker, supported missionary, or tent maker that we use today, they don't seem to apply to Paul or his co-workers. For him there is no dichotomy, no distinction. Being a witness for his Master, being a church planter, these are not roles he takes on or puts off at certain times...it is just who he is. He's simply living out in any given situation what he understands he has been given to do, and what he's responsible for, as someone who's benefited so much from God's grace.

After most of the Jews in Corinth take a stance of opposition to Paul and the Gospel, he says that he is no longer responsible for them...he'll now focus on taking the truth to the other ethnic groups. He finds a great base to work from and some more co-workers in the city. Although Luke records that Paul's efforts result in a lot of people coming to faith, it seems that at some point Paul becomes disheartened or intimidated. The Lord encourages him not to be afraid, not to stop sharing...and reminds His servant that He is with him. Once again we're reminded of God's amazing intention to work alongside those who'll faithfully walk with Him. He has given Paul the role of being His Narrator, His Voice, but the final results are His responsibility. It's His church that is being built, His people that are being equipped. This strengthens Paul's resolve and he stays there in Corinth this time for a year and a half teaching God's Word. It was during this time in Corinth that Paul wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians that are preserved in the New Testament. Paul now heads home, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him as far as Ephesus. It seems that Timothy and Silas stayed in Macedonia and Achaia province, probably to continue giving guidance to the new churches there. On the voyage back to Palestine, Paul stops off briefly in Ephesus. When the Jews there invite him to stay longer, he promises to come back again if God works it out that way. The ship lands in Caesarea and he visits the church in Jerusalem before finally making it back to his sending church in Antioch of Syria.





DISCUSSION POINTS

Paul continues visiting and teaching in the Aegean area

1. What are you understanding from the Narrative is our role in *persuading* people about the truth? What is the Holy Spirit's role? Can you draw out any general principles from the Acts account about how we can play our part? (Note: We're focusing here on how people become convinced in their *minds*, but there are, of course, other dimensions such as *emotion* and *will* involved in the process of coming to faith.)
2. Picture yourself being involved in a church planting effort in a community where there are no other believers...what do you expect would be the most likely sources of discouragement for you personally? How do you think you'd try to deal with that? What principles embedded in the Acts Narrative would be good to remember if you were struggling with discouragement?
3. How much financial security do you feel that we can expect as God's children and co-workers? Should there be a different level of expectation for those who stay in their home churches and those who move to a different community as church planters? What responsibility do parents (in the latter situation) have to ensure their children have all the same opportunities as kids who grow up in their home society?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Do some research on the contemporary movement of 'tent-making' in missions. Then in less than a page explain why you feel: (1) Proponents of this approach do or do not have adequate support from the Acts account for their claims, (2) The approach is always, never, or sometimes, a good idea in light of the Great Commission and current realities.