

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
November 22, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 17:1-4, 10-12, 22-25, 28
Lesson Title: Making God Known

Introduction

After ministering in Lystra, Troas, and Philippi, Paul arrived in Athens where he had a twofold ministry. Every Sabbath he taught and reasoned with the Jews (Acts 17:2, 17). On week days he preached in the market place (Acts 17:17). As in every place he ministered, Paul encountered some who believed, some who rejected, and much persecution.

Paul viewed Athens as a city full of lost men and women enslaved by idolatry. He was “*stirred*” within to try reaching the people at Athens with the gospel (Acts 17:16). The word “*stirred*” means “infuriated, angered, and in sharp disagreement.” The city was “*wholly given to idolatry*” (Acts 17:16) which infuriated Paul. Paul hated idolatry because it robbed God of His glory (Romans 1:23).

Paul channeled his anger and frustration into reasoning and debated with the Athenians’. Paul could not sit idly by and allow the shallow and empty ideology of philosophy to silence the message of the cross. True faith is not blind acceptance. It does not do away with reason, evidence, and argument. Those who mock the gospel must be confronted with truth. That is what Paul did in Athens.

Making God Known in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4)

Verse 1-3

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”

Paul’s second missionary journey took him to Europe in what is now the country of Greece. The first church was established at Philippi (Acts 16). From Philippi, the missionary team traveled “through Amphipolis and Apollonia,” about thirty miles to the west. From there they traveled down the coast to “Thessalonica” which is about a hundred miles from Philippi.

“Thessalonica” is the capital of the province of Macedonia and was one of the wealthiest cities in the area. It was also one of the most influential cities in all Macedonia with an estimated population of 200,000 people.

Paul did not follow his normal custom of going first to the synagogue in “Amphipolis” and “Apollonia” because there were no synagogues in those cities. Upon his arrival in “Thessalonica,” Paul resumed his custom of going to the synagogue. He “went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” He opened the “scriptures” and “alleged that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”

“Reasoned” is a process of deduction and argument. “Alleged” means “to place alongside or present.” Paul’s methodology in presenting the gospel involved premises and conclusions, gathering evidence, presenting facts, laying all the results side by side, asking questions and answering questions. For “three Sabbath’s” he repeated this procedure.

Paul’s entire discussion with the Thessalonians was centered on what the Scriptures said about Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:8). No one can share the gospel if he does not know the Scriptures. Paul based his presentation of the gospel upon the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. He “opened and alleged” which means he explained and proved the historical record of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection with the prophetic Scriptures. He took the Scriptures which they had read all their lives and proved how it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Today the church must focus on making God known through preaching and teaching God’s Word and the message of the cross. People do not need more human advice about how to live better lives or cure their problems. They do not need the false gospel of health and wealth. They need to be confronted with Jesus Christ and his claim upon their lives. Only Christ can meet the deepest human needs. He alone can forgive sin and give eternal life to all who call upon his name (Romans 10:13).

Verse 4

“And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.”

“Some” of the Jews “believed” and “consorted” or were not ashamed to be identified with “Paul and Silas.” Luke calls them “devout Greeks,” or Gentile godfearers who had most likely joined the synagogue by becoming Jewish proselytes. Among this group were some “chief” or leading “women” in the city. The words “not a few” means an influential number of these “women” believed the gospel and were converted.

When the “devout Greeks” and “women” were saved, other Jews responded in jealous anger. They organized a group of city thugs to attack the house of Jason where Paul was staying (Acts 17:5). Their thinking was if they could not get Paul, they would get the man who was providing him lodging. Jason and other Christians were taken to the city magistrates and charged with disloyalty to Caesar (Acts 17:6-9).

Note: People have always been proud of their own religion and want no part of the gospel. Christians must not be surprised when those we witness to respond with hostility and violence. Religious people are for the most part lost and blinded to the truth of the gospel and the message of the cross. If you are faithful in making God known, expect some form of persecution.

Making God Known in Berea (Acts 17:10-12)

Verse 10

“And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews.”

Because of the hostility of the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica, it was impossible for Paul to continue a fruitful ministry there. Therefore, “the brethren,” knowing Paul and Silas’ ministry is opposed in Thessalonica, sent “Paul and Silas by night unto Berea.” They sneak out of town during the “night” and travel fifty to sixty miles to the small town of “Berea.”

Upon arrival in “Berea,” Paul followed his practice of preaching in “the synagogue of the Jews.” We can assume his message was the same as the one he preached at Thessalonica: Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, based on the Scriptures.

Verse 11

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

“These were more noble” means the Bereans were more “open-minded, or fair minded” toward Paul’s preaching. They “received the word with all readiness of mind” means they had a mental predisposition to be willing listeners.

The Jews at “Berea” were not only willing to listen to Paul they “searched the scriptures daily” examining what he preached. The word “search” means “scrutinized, investigated, and literally ransacked the pages of the Old Testament.” They heard Paul preach but accepted nothing at face value. They

wanted to discern if the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Paul preaching Jesus Christ.

Verse 12

“Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.”

The result of the open-mindedness and commitment to search the Scriptures resulted in the conversion of “many” in Berea. As in Thessalonica, many “honourable Greek women and men” were converted. These were men and women of high social standing in the city.

What was true of Berea is still true today. God’s Word when searched and obeyed results in salvation. Paul said, *“And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15). James said, *“Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls”* (James 1:21).

Once again trouble arose as a result of the preached Word and sinners being converted. When word reached Thessalonica of the conversions in Berea, some of the Jews traveled to Berea and stirred up the crowds against Paul and the missionary team. Silas and Timothy remained in Berea but Paul moved on. Even though his ministry was cut short at Berea, Paul left the nucleus of a new church (Isaiah 55:11).

Making God Known at Mars’ Hill (Acts 17:22-25, 28)

In the ancient world Athens represented the height of Greek civilization. Athens represented the seat of pagan philosophy and religion. It was saturated with fleshly intellectualism and curiosity (Acts 17:21). Like Americans, the people of Athens lived to learn, but never learned to live.

Paul was not impressed by the city’s art, literary genius, social or political achievements. What bothered him was their professed intelligence and political correctness had resulted in spiritual ignorance of the true God and captivity to false gods. He came to Athens to make the One True and Living God known.

After arriving in Athens Paul *“disputed in the synagogues”* and *“in the market”* place (Acts 17:17). Paul was called a *“babbler”* and one who *“set forth strange gods”* because he preached Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18). *“Babbler”* means “seed picker.” They accuse Paul of picking up little pieces of philosophy here and there and trying to come up with something new.

Paul created enough of a stir that he was brought to “*Areopagus*” (Acts 17:19). The “*Areopagus*” was a court where Paul was informally required to give an account of his teaching. The informal court proceedings opened with the question, “*May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?*” In answer to the question from this intimidating group of intellectuals, Paul proceeded to give what F.F. Bruce has rightly called “a masterpiece of communication.”

Verse 22

“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.”

“Mars Hill” is the same expression which is transliterated “*Areopagus*” in Acts 17:19. Literally it is the “hill of Ares,” the Greek name for the Roman god Mars. The court of the “*Areopagus*” met on “Mar’s Hill,” and derived its name from this location. “Mar’s Hill” is where all the philosophers met to discuss their philosophy. They spent hours there discussing their own brands of philosophy. They take Paul there expecting him to sit in the circle with them and discuss his brand of philosophy.

“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mar’s hill” proves the apostle was not intimidated by the scholars and philosophers. Paul is a trained Rabbi and a scholar himself. Paul preached in Lystra and was stoned. He preached in Philippi and was imprisoned. He is not intimidated by these educated men. But he is looking for an edge, any available advantage. So, he “stood.” That is a huge advantage because at “Mar’s Hill” the men normally sat and argued back and forth. Sitting meant everyone’s argument was equally valid. Not Paul! This little Jew “stood” with an authority this assembly had never witnessed.

Paul addressed himself to the “men of Athens” and said, “I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” This seems like an untactful approach to this prestigious group of men, maybe even discourteous. That was not Paul’s intention. He simply stated, “You are a very religious” people in a city filled with gods everywhere. He is laying the foundation for the heart of his message.

Verse 23

“For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”

As Paul “passed” through the city he “beheld” or noticed their “devotions.” “Devotions” are objects of worship. In this context the word means Paul carefully observed their objects of worship. He observed “an altar with this

inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” Paul then says, “This god you worship ignorantly, is the one I will now declare unto you.” In other words, the god they worshipped as unknown, Paul is about to make known.

Paul uses wisdom in his declaration of truth at Mars Hill. He starts his witness where they are. He takes what they say and uses their “altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” as the basis of his testimony. He does not introduce new thoughts or new things. Eventually he will take them to God’s Word and the message of the cross.

Verse 24-25

“God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;”

Paul identifies the “UNKNOWN GOD” the Athenians profess to worship as the “God that made the world and all things therein...” This “God” is the Creator of life. “World” here does not mean the earth, as we would think about everything on a map. It is the Greek word *cosmos*, which means “orderly universe, the arrangement.” This “arrangement” includes “heaven and earth.” The true “God” is “Lord of heaven and earth” because He has created it all.

These Athenians, although intellectual, did not have the revelation of God through the Scriptures. What they did have was God’s revelation through nature, so Paul appealed to this. They could see God’s creative handiwork. The Greeks were students of nature. What they needed to see was the observable world around them was created by an omnipotent God. The “heavens” and the “earth” did not create itself. That truth may not seem profound to those of us who believe God is Creator, but it challenged the theology of the Athenians.

The “God” Paul preached “dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” When King Solomon built a temple for God, one of the most expensive and magnificent buildings of all time, he cried out, “*But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded*” (1 Kings 8:27).

“Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” are words that challenged the minds of these intellectuals listening to Paul. The word “worshipped” is the Greek word meaning “to serve.” Paul is saying, “The Creator God does not need you to serve him like you serve the gods you have created here in Athens.”

The true God is not dependent upon man. He created all life and sustains all life. He “giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Colossians 1:16-17).

Verse 28

“For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”

The first part of this verse, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” is believed to be a quote from the Greek god Zeus to his son Minos. The last part of the verse, “For we are also his offspring” is attributed to the Greek poet Aratus. All of us, Athenians included, are “his offspring,” not in the sense of God’s redeemed children, but in the sense that we are all created by God and receive life and breath from him.

Paul was not endorsing the pagan writing of the Greek poets. Rather he pointed out the Greek poets recognized a god that gave life and breath to all. The God Paul declared was the true and living God which could be found by all who seek Him in sincerity and truth. He is found in the person of Jesus Christ who suffered, died, and rose again.

Conclusion

Making God known begins with a burden. The Apostle Paul’s burden was to evangelize, debate, preach and teach in the synagogue, the marketplace, to whoever happened to be there. He preached the same message to the ignorant and the learned, the religious and the heathen.

Paul met the Athenians’ where they were. They did not have a Bible. They were lost Greeks. So Paul begins making God known by reminding them they were surrounded by the revelation of God in nature. He spoke of a Creator, and the fact that they are His creation. From there he took them to the cross, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the judgment.

The church needs committed Christians to take the gospel to the world. We need men, women, and young people, who are educated and able to stand and declare truth in any arena and context. Every Christian is not gifted to stand and debate intellectuals. But some are. Could that be you?

Amen.