

# Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 22 May 2023

*Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 17 – Paul and the unknown God*

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## **DAY 1: Read Acts 17:1-9**

Despite having suffered and been insulted in Philippi, Paul and Silas received strength from God to preach the Gospel in Thessalonica (see 1 Thess 2:2). It was a 160km journey from Philippi to Thessalonica, following the *Via Egnatia* all the way in a south westerly direction. Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia, was a harbour town, situated at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. Because of its situation, it was a flourishing commercial centre enjoying trade both via the Aegean Sea and by land by means of the *Via Egnatia*.

Note that even though Paul had decided to 'turn to the Gentiles' (Acts 13:46), he still went to the synagogue first. And note his emphasis and method – *he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead* and that this Jesus to whom he refers is indeed the Messiah. The heart of Paul's message of course, reflects Jesus' teaching. He repeatedly proclaimed that the Son of Man must suffer, would be killed, but would rise again and then following his resurrection, he opened the Scriptures to the disciples showing how the Old Testament taught these truths.

Note the reaction to Paul's preaching. Some of the Jews were persuaded – convinced by Paul's careful arguments. They joined Paul and Silas. There were also *a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women*. On the other hand, the unbelieving Jews were jealous and rounded up some bad characters to form a mob and start a riot. They arrested Paul's host, Jason and they were all accused of causing trouble – radical social upheaval. Further, Paul and Silas were charged with high treason because they proclaimed Jesus as King. It is hard to exaggerate the danger to which this exposed them; death was often the result of such a charge. It was probably for this reason, that Paul reports in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, that Satan prevented his return to that city.

Here is another reminder that when we faithfully and boldly take a stand for Christ, people *will* be persuaded and put their trust in Jesus!! Keep on keeping on!

## **DAY 2: Read Acts 17:10-15**

*As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea, smuggling them out of Thessalonica under the cover of darkness, in order to ensure no further public disturbance. After an 80km journey, they went first to the Jewish synagogue. Luke tells us that the Bereans were more open minded than the Jews at Thessalonica. Note the significant difference in that they themselves examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. And they did this every day – not just on the Sabbath. Luke obviously admires their enthusiasm for Paul's preaching, together with their faithfulness in studying the Scriptures for themselves. They combined receptivity with critical questioning – surely a great model for each of us as we listen to preaching and seek to grow and learn. The verb translated 'examined' in v11 was used for judicial investigations – as of Herod examining Jesus – and implies integrity and absence of bias. Ever since then, the adjective 'Berean' has been applied to people who study the Scriptures with due care and impartiality. The Berean's listening and studying, did not result, however, in a unanimous acceptance of the gospel. As in Thessalonica, there was a division with some believing from among the Jews and the Greeks but some being swayed by trouble makers who had travelled from Thessalonica. Paul was sent on to the coast and taken on to Athens by sea, a voyage of some 480kms. For reflection: how "Berean" are you?*

### **DAY 3: Read Acts 17:16-21**

Paul would have known about Athens since he was a boy, but this was his first visit. Athens has been the foremost Greek city-state since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It boasted a rich philosophical tradition inherited from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and was known for its literature and art. Although Paul hoped to return to Macedonia, he found himself here alone waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. What was his reaction? What should be the reaction of a Christian who visits or lives in a city which is dominated by a non-Christian ideology or religion; a city which may be aesthetically magnificent and culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent and spiritually deceived or dead?

What struck Paul as he toured the city was not its beauty or brilliance, but its idolatry. The words translated 'full of idols' mean that he found the city 'under' idols or 'smothered with idols' or 'swamped' by them. A Roman satirist wrote that it was easier to find a god there than a man! In the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena; elsewhere there were images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and Aesculapius. There were made of stone, brass, gold, silver, ivory and marble. But Paul was blind to their beauty but oppressed by the idolatrous use to which the God-given artistic creativity of the Athenians was being put.

*He was greatly distressed.* He was provoked by the idolatry – provoked to anger, grief and indignation – just as God is himself. I wonder if we are similarly provoked by the idolatry of our day? Are we jealous for our Lord God and filled with compassion for those who do not know the one true God? Whenever the Lord Jesus is denied his rightful place as Lord of all, we should feel inwardly wounded and jealous for his name! Note that although Paul is distressed, he is not overwhelmed, and sets about reasoning with people – both Jews in the synagogue and Gentiles in the marketplace. The Epicureans considered the gods to be remote and removed from human affairs and the Stoics saw the world as determined by fate and human beings as required to live in harmony with what comes their way. To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasise chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, and the Stoics to emphasise fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain. Both groups wanted to hear more, even though deriding what Paul had to say. At the least, they were open to hearing new ideas, something that many atheists or agnostics of our day will not entertain! Pray today for an openness among your friends to hear new ideas!

### **DAY 4: Read Acts 17:22-34**

The word 'Areopagus' means literally 'the Hill of Ares' – so Mars Hill. A little to the north-west of the Acropolis, it was once the place where the judicial court of ancient Greece met. In Paul's day, it was more of a council and its members were guardians of the city's religion, morals and education. Paul addressed that august senate, an amazing privilege and opportunity! Paul was asked to give an account of his teaching and in so doing told the court what he believed and taught but also made a quite personal statement of the gospel.

Paul took as his point of connection with them, the anonymous altar he had come across. He went on to proclaim the living and true God in five ways and so to expose the errors (and horrors) of idolatry. (1) God is the Creator of the universe and therefore is absurd to suppose that he lives in shrines built by people. (2) He is the sustainer of life, and therefore does not need anything from his creatures as if he was dependent on us for food and shelter. (3) God is the Ruler of the nations. The history and geography of each nation are ultimately under his control. His purpose has been that people might seek him and reach out to him as he is not far from each one of us. Paul quotes from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC poet Epimenides. (4) God is the Father of human beings. We are his offspring. Again, Paul quotes a pagan poet – this time the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC Stoic author Aratus as he connects with his audience. There are powerful arguments. All idolatry, whether ancient or modern is inexcusable. Idolatry is the attempt to localise God or to domesticate him – making him dependant on us. It is an attempt to dethrone God, demoting him to some image of our imagination. Idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between God and us in order to bring him under our control. It is an expression of rebellion against God and it leads to Paul's last point. (5) God is the Judge of the world. He will judge the world through the one he raised from the dead. And all ignorance, once overlooked in mercy, is now culpable. Now, all people everywhere are to repent.

Talk of the resurrection, brings the meeting to a hurried end! Some sneered, others wanted to hear more. But note with joy those who believed that day, responding to the summons to repent and turn from idols to serve the true and living God. That call must be on our lips today – one way or another. Those who are caught up and taken in by today's idols need to hear both the way in which those idols will deceive and entrap them and how worthless they are, and on the other hand, how wonderful is our great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Please pray that as God's people we may challenge the idolatry of our day!