

# ACTS

## Chapter 17

### *In Thessalonica*

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. <sup>2</sup> As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that the Christ <sup>a</sup> had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ, <sup>b</sup>” he said. <sup>4</sup> Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. <sup>5</sup> But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>c</sup> <sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

**17:1** *Amphipolis ... Thessalonica.* The Egnatian Way crossed the whole of present-day northern Greece east-west and included Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia and Thessalonica on its route. At several locations, such as Kavalla (Neapolis), Philippi and Apollonia, the road is still visible today. If a person traveled about 30 miles a day, each city could be reached after one day’s journey.

*Thessalonica.* About 100 miles from Philippi. It was the capital of the province of Macedonia and had a population of more than 200,000, including a colony of Jews (and a synagogue). All these contributed to Paul’s decision to preach there. See Introduction to 1 Thessalonians: The City and the Church. – The Thessalonian Christians would become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, and even beyond (1 Thess. 1:7). (PBC)

**17:2** *synagogue.* See note on 13:14.

*three Sabbath days.* These two weeks represent the time spent in the synagogue reasoning with the Jews, not Paul’s total time in Thessalonica. An analysis of the Thessalonian letters reveals that Paul had taught them much more doctrine than would have been possible in two or three weeks. – Paul’s method in the synagogue was to take passages from the OT and compare them with the facts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The idea of a suffering Messiah was a stumbling block to the Jews, and so it was important to show that he must suffer. (PBC) – The verb here has the sense of a

philosophical discussion on the basis of the texts of the Torah. Such activities of study and discussion were a common feature of the synagogue in its realization as Beth ha Midrash (house of study). (Sacra)

**17:4** *God-fearing Greeks*. See notes on 10:2; 16:14.

*prominent women*. Perhaps the wives of the leading men of the city, but women who deserve notice and position in their own right (see also v. 12).

**17:5** *were jealous*. Because of the large number of people (including some Jews, many God-fearing Gentiles and many prominent women) who responded to Paul's ministry (cf. 13:45).

**BAD CHARACTERS** – People who hang about in the public square. Could rightly be translated as “low life's.” They were the sort of folk who as day-laborers were often at loose-ends and therefore ready for mischief. (Sacra)

*Jason's house*. Paul had probably been staying there.

**17:6** *city officials*. The Greek term *politarch* (lit. “city ruler”), used here and in v. 8, is found nowhere else in Greek literature, but it was discovered in 1835 in a Greek inscription on an arch that had spanned the Egnatian Way on the west side of Thessalonica. (The arch was destroyed in 1867, but the block with the inscription was rescued and is now in the British Museum in London.) The term has since been found in 16 other inscriptions in surrounding towns of Macedonia, and elsewhere.

**17:7** *defying Caesar's decrees*. Blasphemy was the gravest accusation for a Jew, but treason—to support a rival king above Caesar—was the worst accusation for a Roman.

**17:9** *post bond*. Jason was forced to guarantee a peaceful, quiet community, or he would face the confiscation of his properties and perhaps even death. – The church in Jason's house flourished, however and this is the core congregation that had the honor of receiving the first two documents ever written in what would later be called the NT, namely 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Jason himself would later join Paul in Corinth (Romans 16:21). Here was another man marked by the Gospel, and appropriately so, since Greek Jews generally chose the name Jason in Greek for their Semitic names Joshua or Jesus. (LL)

### *In Berea*

<sup>10</sup> As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. <sup>12</sup> Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. <sup>13</sup> When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. <sup>14</sup> The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and

**Timothy stayed at Berea.<sup>15</sup> The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.**

**17:10** *Paul and Silas.* It has been suggested that Timothy was left at Philippi and rejoined Paul and Silas at Berea (compare v. 10 with v. 14).

*Berea.* Modern Verria, located 50 miles from Thessalonica in another district of Macedonia.

*synagogue.* See note on 13:14.

**17:11** MORE NOBLE CHARACTER...EXAMINED THE SCRIPTURES – Here the emphasis is entirely on behavior, demonstrated by their “complete eagerness.” (Sacra) – No passage in the NT better demonstrates how important it was for earliest Christian preaching that Jesus’ person and work be proclaimed as the fulfillment of OT prophecy. For that reason, the first creed of the church was simply “Jesus Christ,” which means: “Jesus is the Messiah,” the one whom the Scriptures (i.e., the OT) point. (LL)

**17:13** AGITATING THE CROWDS – In the eastern Mediterranean there was always an idle but reliable rabble in each town for such purposes – dry kindling just waiting to be set aflame. One good, decent riot was better than days of boredom! (LL)

**17:14** *the coast.* One might conclude that Paul went by boat to Athens. But the road to Athens is also a coast road, and Paul may have walked the distance after having been escorted to the coast (some 20 miles). In any event, Christian companions stayed with him until reaching Athens.

SILAS AND TIMOTHY STAYED – Now another congregation had been founded in Macedonia, and it too would prosper. Doubtless the Sopater of Berea who accompanied Paul for part of third mission journey was one of the apostle’s converts at the time (20:4). (LL)

**17:15** *Athens.* Five centuries before Paul, Athens had been at the height of its glory in art, philosophy and literature. She had retained her reputation in philosophy through the years and still maintained a leading university in Paul’s day.

### *In Athens*

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but

talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.<sup>24</sup> “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.<sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.<sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.<sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.<sup>28</sup> ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’<sup>29</sup> “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill.<sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.<sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”<sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council.<sup>34</sup> A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

**17:17** *synagogue*. See note on 13:14.

*God-fearing Greeks*. See note on 10:2.

**17:18** *Epicurean ... philosophers*. Originally they taught that the supreme good is happiness—but not mere momentary pleasure or temporary gratification. By Paul’s time, however, this philosophy had degenerated into a more sensual system of thought. – (341-270 B.C.) taught that the gods are not interested in the affairs of men and that there is no afterlife in which we will be called to account. By the first century A.D. this philosophy had degenerated to hedonism, the love of pleasure: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” (PBC)

*Stoic philosophers*. They taught that people should live in accord with nature, recognize their own self-sufficiency and independence, and suppress their desires. At its best, Stoicism had some admirable qualities, but, like Epicureanism, by Paul’s time it had degenerated into a system of pride.

*babblers*. The Greek word meant “seed picker,” a bird picking up seeds here and there. Then it came to refer to the loafer in the marketplace who picked up whatever scraps of learning he could find and paraded them without digesting them himself. – This uncomplimentary term suggested that Paul was like a bird picking up seeds of knowledge here and there, but not really knowing much. (PBC)

**17:19** *Areopagus*. † Means “hill of Ares.” Ares was the Greek god of thunder and war (the Roman equivalent was Mars). The Areopagus was located just west of the acropolis

and south of the Agora and had once been the site of the meeting of the Court or Council of the Areopagus. Earlier the Council governed a Greek city-state, but by NT times the Areopagus retained authority only in the areas of religion and morals and met in the Royal Portico at the northwest corner of the Agora. They considered themselves the custodians of teachings that introduced new religions and foreign gods. Since the Greek text does not contain the term “a meeting of” either here or in v. 22, Paul may not have appeared before the court of the Areopagus, but on the “hill of Ares,” which would accommodate a larger audience.

**17:21** LATEST IDEAS – These Athenian philosophers, however, were not so set in their ways that they would ignore new teachings. In fact, Luke points out that in the cosmopolitan climate of Athens in that day, new ideas were a big item. So Paul had a ready-made audience in Athens. (LL)

**17:22** *religious*. Or “superstitious.” The Greek for this word could be used to congratulate a person or to criticize him, depending on whether the person using it included himself in the circle of individuals he was describing. The Athenians would not know which meaning to take until Paul continued. In this context it is clear that Paul wanted to be complimentary in order to gain a hearing.

**17:23** *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*. The Greeks were fearful of offending any god by failing to give him attention; so they felt they could cover any omissions by the label “unknown god.” Other Greek writers confirm that such altars could be seen in Athens—a striking point of contact for Paul.

**17:24** *The God who made the world*. Thus a personal Creator, in contrast with the views of pantheistic Stoicism. – Dominating the landscape of Athens was the Parthenon whose ruins still stand. It is the temple dedicated to the patron goddess of the city, the virgin Pallas Athene. Paul said, “The creator of the universe does not need anything that human beings might make for him, any dwelling that they might build for him. (PBC)

**17:26** *From one man he made every nation*. All people are of one family (whether Athenians or Romans, Greeks or barbarians, Jews or Gentiles).

*determined the times*. He planned the exact times when nations should emerge and decline.

*places where they should live*. He also planned the specific area to be occupied by each nation. He is God, the Designer (things were not left to Chance, as the Epicureans thought).

**17:27** SO THEY WOULD SEEK HIM – God demonstrated his power and intelligence in creation and in the history of nations so that people would realize that an intelligent and powerful being is in charge of the universe. In God’s intention this should make them see him, reach for him and find him. (PBC)

**17:28** *some of your own poets*. There are two quotations here: (1) “In him we live and move and have our being,” from the Cretan poet Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.) in his *Cretica*,

and (2) “We are his offspring,” from the Cilician poet Aratus (c. 315–240) in his *Phaenomena*, as well as from Cleanthes (331–233) in his *Hymn to Zeus*. Paul quotes Greek poets elsewhere as well (see 1Co 15:33; Tit 1:12 and notes). – The Stoic philosopher agreed with the idea that God is not far from each one of us. In fact, most philosophers of Paul’s time were pantheists. They confused the creator with his creation by teaching that everything is god. Paul used their mistaken beliefs as a starting point from which to go on and preach the gospel of the true God. (PBC) – His quotations from the Greek writers Epimetheus and Aratus demonstrate that Paul was at home in Greek literature. (LL)

**17:30** *overlooked such ignorance*. God had not judged them for worshiping false gods in their ignorance (see v. 31). – God did not immediately punish idolatry in the past. Ignorance was not innocence, but he chose not to destroy the idolaters at once. Now he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and he calls on people everywhere to turn from idols to him. (PBC)

**17:31** *the man he has appointed*. Jesus, the Son of Man (see Da 7:13; cf. Mt 25:31–46; Ac 10:42).

**17:32** *resurrection of the dead*. Immortality of the soul was accepted by the Greeks, but not resurrection of a dead body. – When he spoke of the resurrection of Christ, they stopped listening. They did not persecute Paul, for they were tolerant of virtually everyone and everything. Tolerance, however, easily becomes indifference. (PBC)

**17:34** A FEW MEN BECAME FOLLOWERS – Even if Paul may have thought his mission to Athens less than successful statistically, Mar’s Hill and the Acropolis stand today at the intersection of two streets in modern Athens named “Avenue of Dionysius the Areopagite,” and “St. Paul’s Street.”

*Dionysius*. Later tradition states, though it cannot be proved, that he became bishop of Athens.

*Damaris*. † Some have suggested that she must have been a foreign, educated woman to have been present at a public gathering on the Areopagus. She surely was not a member of the court. It is also possible that she was a God-fearing Gentile who had heard Paul at the synagogue (v. 17).