

# Session #16: Acts, Chapter 17-18:17

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**Before we begin** today's study let's take a moment to regroup and remember what has



happened so far in this trip. After the successful meeting at the Council of Jerusalem (Chapter 15), Paul and Barnabas decide to revisit the communities they had established in their first trip and possibly expand the message of salvation even further. Paul and Barnabas cannot agree on Mark joining them so the two split, deciding to go in different directions – St. Paul taking Silas and heading north; St. Barnabas taking Mark and going west. The journey north is successful until St. Paul tries to go further north into Asia and is struck by some serious ailment. This illness is serious enough to call for a doctor and St. Luke joins the journey. St. Paul has a vision which sends him eastward into Macedonia and the city of Philippi. It is here that he meets Lydia who becomes a believer, heals a slave girl of a demon and is then thrown into jail because of that healing. It is here that Sts. Paul and Silas witness to a Jailer who in turn devotes his and his family's life to Christ. Unfortunately, because of the uprising this visit to Philippi creates, Paul, Silas and Timothy are asked to leave the city which they do heading to where we begin our study today – Thessalonica.

## **Uproar in Thessalonica 17:1-9**

It is here we get a bit of an insight into St. Paul's strategy as he went throughout the land. When he arrives at a city he goes first to the synagogue, an obvious place to find people who are searching for the truth and faith. He presents those listening with his two-part proof: first from scripture – that the Messiah was to suffer & die and then rose from the dead; second

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from life -- Jesus did just that. While a much more extensive discussion the hope of St. Paul was that people would conclude that therefore Jesus is the Messiah. Paul is using the Greek method of logic and reason to convince those who would hear. We also see, in this section of the typical response St. Paul gets – some will believe and others, out of resentment that this stranger is seeking to convert the crowd seek to do him harm. So, just like Jesus, St. Paul is arrested, brought before the authorities accused of inciting the people claiming Caesar is not King.

### **17:1 Thessalonica**

Historians have shown that Thessalonica was a major city for the Roman empire in Macedonia. Rome built a great road so as to move goods and troops that went from Rome to the middle east called the *Egnatian Way*. This road ran straight through Thessalonica. Thessaloniki exists today as a Greek port city on the Gulf of the Aegean Sea and located central to many other cities in Macedonia. It is highly likely that many traveled to and through Thessalonica which makes it a wonderful place to establish the word of God. St. Paul and his companions had to travel 100 miles from Philippi to arrive here. While their stay here is brief (approximately 3 weeks) it is significant enough to establish a Church here. St. Paul will return here on this third missionary trip as well as write his earliest letters, First and Second Thessalonians to the community here. It must be said that scholars believe there are more letters written specifically to this community which have been lost.

### **17:2 as was his custom**

With this statement: *as was his custom*, St. Luke is telling us of St. Paul's regular strategy when coming into a new community. Much of Paul's work preaching and teaching was centered in and around the local Jewish Synagogues. This strategy was shaped by practical as well as theological reasons: On the one hand, synagogues already served as a weekly gathering place. Both Jews and "righteous" gentiles gathered at the synagogue for prayer and religious instruction. All too often the Jews would reject St. Paul but those Gentiles gathered outside the synagogue were receptive and eager to respond to his message. One other reason that St. Paul would go to the synagogue first is because St. Paul shared in Jesus' initial conviction that Israel stood first in line to inherit the blessings of the messianic age. In other words, this message of salvation was for them initially but then most certainly to everyone else who would listen. (See Matthew 15:24, Romans 1:16)

### **17:4 and not a few of the leading women**

Let's take a moment to notice, once again, that St. Luke is the only author who is not afraid to show the significant role women played in the spreading of the gospel message. In our last session we read of Lydia, the woman who sold purple cloth, who he names yet does not give the name of Paul's second convert, the jailer. Why, because Lydia becomes significant enough in the Christian community that many would know of her. Here in Thessalonica we hear of a substantial number of women who came to believe in Jesus Christ. Later we will hear of Priscilla, wife of Aquila (Acts 18) and Phoebe (Romans 16:1) who was a deaconess of the early Church.

### **17:5 recruited some worthless men**

Every community throughout time has had those individuals who are more than willing to sell themselves to create trouble for others.

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Here those unhappy *jealous* Jews hire those thugs to start the trouble. We should note that it was out of jealousy and envy that Jesus was handed over to be crucified (Matthew 27:18, Mark 15:10)

### **house of Jason**

We know nothing more about this gentleman other than what we read in this section: that he was one of the believing Jews who hosted Sts. Paul, Timothy and Silas. It is highly likely that this Jason is the same Jason St. Paul mentions in Romans 16:21. Jason will later move to Tarsus and become the first Bishop there. In the Catholic Church we celebrate his feast on July 12.



### **17:6 turn the world upside down**

An interesting turn of phrase and one with deep and significant meaning. We even today understand this phrase as meaning that our perspective on how we have understood something has been challenged and we must now consider a completely different option and view. The civil authority is charging Jason with harboring “the enemy”, in this case political nonconformists believed to be causing rebellion.

### **17:7 another king**

Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as “king” was meant as a personal and spiritual leadership but those who bring the charges offer it as a political threat to Rome and therefore as a direct challenge to the rule of Caesar Claudius (41-54AD). Interesting that St. Paul would be condemned on the very thing that Jesus was condemned for. Of course, we understand that one can give allegiance to both a political authority while still honoring our Spiritual leader as Lord of all. But what happens when these come into conflict. We know from the scriptures and Catholic teaching that in the end Christ demands our highest allegiance. God’s rule is over ALL creation including political powers (even if they don’t recognize it). When God’s demands come in conflict with those in authority above us, what are we to do?

### **17:9 taken security**

Most likely this means that the Magistrates took some sort of cash deposit or payment, and along with his, Jason’s wd  here would be no more trouble the authorities were satisfied. Some scholars suggest that this could have been a bribe but most agree that it was common practice for Roman citizens to “post a bond” so as to get

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someone out of jail. In that no further trouble occurred the individual might get their money back.

### **Paul in Beroea 17:10-15**

In the dark of night Paul and his companions are ushered out of the city of Thessalonica and head south west. What begins as a wonderful opportunity to spread the message of salvation to eager hearts and minds once again turns sour. Those who opposed Paul in Thessalonica hear of Paul's success and travel to Beroea to continue their work to shut Paul down.

**17:10 Beroea** If we look on a map today this city would be identified as Veria. It is 60 south west of Thessalonica. Nothing else is really known of this community other than they were more receptive to the teaching and preaching of Paul.

**17:11 examining the scriptures daily** A part of their receptivity to Paul seems to have been in their already tireless pursuit of the truth. Scholars suggest that it is very likely the Beroeans studied scripture daily and not just on the Sabbath. Some scholars have suggested that maybe the Beroeans, unlike most of Judaism relied on scripture alone as the sole foundation for their faith. Since they would have had limited access to the Temple if ever at all. Other scholars argue that this suggested is unwarranted. It would only be good theology to test Paul's message by searching the prophecies of the Old Testament. Either way these were people who already were of deep faith and in their continued search for the truth of God, belief in Jesus Christ made sense. One lesson we can all learn from the Beroeans, when in doubt search the scriptures

**17:12 not a few Greek women** Once again, St. Luke mentions the women who came to belief.

**17:13 came there too to cause commotion** This gives us insight on just how hateful these men of Thessalonica were against Paul and his teaching/preaching that they would travel 60 miles to stir up more trouble.

**17:14 but Silas and Timothy remained** St. Paul is escorted by some of the "brothers" of the new Christian community to Athens leaving Silas and Timothy behind. Maybe as a way to continue support for this fledging community, or maybe because it was only Paul the crowd was interested in. Either way, Paul moves on to Athens without Silas and Timothy but urges them to follow soon.

### **Paul in Athens 17:16-21**

From the first line, we know it was not Paul's intention to do anything more in Athens than wait for Timothy and Silas but who could remain silent when there is so many people hungering to hear the message of salvation. So, Paul steps out and once again teaches the Word of God. This is a key moment in the spread of the gospel for two reasons. One it shows the capacity of the Gospel to reach any and all since the crowd St. Paul is preaching to are Greek Gentiles coming at the truth of Jesus Christ from a philosophical point of view rather than theological/scriptural one. Secondly, it shows the gifts and ability of Paul to take the message and teach it in any way that allows all minds & hearts to hear it.

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**17:16 Athens** Paul has left Macedonia and is now in the region of Achaia. Athens is the main city in that region of Southern Greece. It wasn't until the fifth century (BC) that the fame of the city began to diminish but even today it still celebrated as a cultural center of philosophy, art, and literature and was so during New Testament times. Because of its history, the city was filled with shrines and statues to the Greek gods.

**17:17 market place** Notice that Paul is branching out. The market place in most communities of that era was the gathering place for all peoples. Paul first destination is not to the synagogue. Because they didn't have one? We don't know but we certainly can surmise that St. Paul is willing to go where ever he has a willing audience.

**17:18 Epicurean** Epicurus was a third century, BC philosopher who taught that the highest value in life was happiness reached by careful thought and reasoning and therefore believed the goal of life was to avoid any and all pain and discomfort. By the first century AD , Epicurean philosophy had been reduced to a general pursuit of sensual pleasure. Most followers felt that if any gods existed, they were disinterested in human affairs. Against this philosophy, Paul argues and insists that God does exist. He is near to everyone and he will judge the world for its conduct.

**Stoic philosophers** These individuals were followers of Zeno, a younger contemporary of Alexander the Great. Those who followed this philosophy were committed to living a disciplined life that was in harmony with nature as much as possible. Their view of god was that god existed in all of nature – trees, flowers, water... Everything is filled with divinity. Against this philosophy Paul makes a clear distinction between the Creator and creation.

**Babbler/Scavenger** The literal translation of the Greek word used is “seed picker” like a bird who picks up the seeds that other birds leave behind. The phrase will later be used of scrap collectors and garbage pickers and those people to take others ideas and represent them as their own. Obviously it is said and is meant to insult Paul making the accusation that what he teaches/preaches is unoriginal.

He was preaching about “Jesus” and “Resurrection” Those who have heard Paul have misunderstood his message and now are misrepresenting it. They think Paul is preaching about two individuals – Jesus and Anastasis who is also called “Resurrection”.

**17:19 the Areopagus** The literally translated of the word Areopagus means “the hill of Acres” and it refers to a low hill in Athens west of the Acropolis. The Areopagus is the place were the a council of elders met there as professional consultants, known as the Royal Colonnade, to discuss Greek education, philosophy and religion.



### 17:22-33 Paul's Speech at the Areopagus.

So now we have Paul's famous speech in Athens. It is his longest to a pagan/Gentile audience and it is our first model of Christian apologetic method (logical proof of God.). In other words, this

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speech is more theological than Christological, more focus on theological/philosophical concepts than on the historical/biblical truths. Paul seeks to show these Athenians the reasonableness of belief in God by using their own philosophical processes.

*Paul's discourse appeals to the Greek world's belief in divinity as responsible for the origin and existence of the universe. It contests the common belief in a multiplicity of gods supposedly exerting their powers through their images. It acknowledges that the attempt to find God is a constant human endeavor. It declares, further that God is the judge of the human race, that the time of the judgment has been determined, and that it will be executed through a man whom God raised from the dead. The speech reflects sympathy with pagan religiosity, handles the subject of idol worship gently, and appeals for a new examination of divinity, not from the standpoint of creation but from the standpoint of judgment.*

New American Catholic Study Bible Notes on Acts 17:22-31

### **17:23 the objects of your worship**

Even those of us who never took a Greek Mythology class know that the Greeks venerated a vast pantheon of gods. They were so scrupulous in their desire to honor all the gods and because they feared offending any god through neglect, they would build shrines for unnamed gods to ensure that every deity was properly honored. One way to look at this was they were hedging their bets.

#### ***To an unknown god***

Here in the United States we have the Tomb of the Unknown soldier and while someone might know who is buried there, it is a mystery to the rest of us. Who is this shrine to the unknown god dedicated to? Well, historians link the poet and philosopher Epimenides as the founder of the shrine. In Crete in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century a plague ravaged Athens. The elders reached out to Epimenides to drive away the plague. Epimenides complied to their wishes and cried out to the unnamed god to come and save the city and was successful lifting the plague from the city. The Athenians, in their gratitude built an altar on the slope of Areopagus to honor and remember the unnamed god who saved them. St. Paul, aware of the story and the writing of Epimenides offers that why the Athenians may not know the name of that god, he does. Then using the gospel St. Paul offers the story of salvation

### **17:26 every nation of men**

The entire human family stems from one common ancestor, the first man, Adam.

### **17:27 they should seek God**

St. Paul is trying to make the point that God is the God of all creation and it was God's hope that, after revealing Himself in this way, that humanity would seek after him. Think of it this way, you seek a great work or art or watch an outstanding football play, don't you want to know who is the composer, who is the player? Only those who are too self-absorbed ignore the greatness in others. God reveals Himself, His goodness and existence in the visible world if one is willing to look and then see.

### **17:28 in him our being**

Scholars believe that this is most likely a citation from the Greek poet Epimenides who wrote in the sixth century BC. This line summarizes Paul's teaching

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that God created and sustains the world. (See the Catechism of the Catholic Church #301)

*For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. How would anything have endured, if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved? You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living*

Wisdom 11:24-26

### ***We are indeed his offspring***

This is a citation from the *Phaenomena*, a work by the Greek writer Aratus, who wrote in the third century BC. We should take a moment and revel in the mind of St. Paul who know only knows scripture inside and out but know Greek philosophy, literature and more. St. Paul will use Greek poetry in his writings (1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12)

### ***17:32 the resurrection***

St. Paul ends this speech with the resurrection of Jesus. The concept of resurrection would not play well on most Athenians. While those who believe in the Greek God believe there is an afterlife, they do not believe in the resurrection of the body. They would have understood the body as a prison that with death the soul escapes. It is the soul alone that has immortality for the Greeks.

### ***17:34 Dionysius the Areopagite***

While biblically there is nothing more written about this man there is a strong tradition in the Orthodox Catholic Church that holds that after being raised in Greece went to Egypt where he studied astronomy. In his writing we read that Dionysius witnessed the solar eclipse that occurred at the moment of the death of Jesus, our Lord. For three years Saint Dionysius remained a companion of the holy Apostle Paul in preaching the Word of God. Later on, the Apostle Paul selected him as bishop of the city of Athens

### ***Damaris***

Scholars believe this woman was someone of high social status, and probably a foreigner otherwise she would not have been allowed at these meetings. There are those scholars who suggest that she might have been the wife of Dionysius or at the very least an educated woman who provided companionship and intellectual conversation to the rich and powerful of that period.

### **Paul in Corinth 18:1-11**

Paul now moves on from Athens and heads west to Corinth. He meets husband and wife Aquila and Priscilla and works alongside them at making tents while he waits for Timothy and Silas. Paul will later remind the Corinthians that he did not take from them choosing to rather support himself while he ministered in the area.

### ***18:1 Corinth***

This city was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia what is now southern Greece. During the first century this city was home, like much of Greece, to numerous religious cults and faiths. There was also at least on Jewish synagogue that became the center of St. Paul mission and ministry. The worship of Aphrodite was the order of the day, the goddess of love

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which made many Corinthians and those who visited vulnerable to sexual impropriety and impurity and ruthless business tactics. Paul arrived in the city around 51 AD and would later address several letters to the community – 1 & 2 Corinthians, although scholars believe there is one letter which is now lost written prior to the two we have.

**18:2 Aquila Priscilla** This married couple were Roman Jewish and among Paul's first converts while in Corinth. They were tent makers, like Paul and it is possible that they not only shared the work but a home as well while St. Paul remained in the city. They would move on to Ephesus with Paul but later return to Rome. (See Romans 16:3-5)

**Claudias** He was the Roman Caesar from 41 to 54 AD. This emperor would expel the Jews from Rome in 49 AD. It is very likely that Aquila and Priscilla were among those Jews forced to leave. And the cause of this forced banishment? Historians write of disturbances instigated by the teachings of a certain "Chrestus". Scholars believe this "Chrestus" to be a reference to Christ. The Latin for Christ would be Christus. Educated opinion is that as Christian Jews returned to Rome from the middle east they brought with them the their belief in and teachings of Christ. This would have caused much heated debated about Jesus' messiahship in the synagogues to the point of public disturbances. Too many disturbances and the powers to be (Ceasar) sweeps the entire population out of the country in hopes of regaining control.

**18:5 Silas and Timothy arrived** Finally the two make it from Beroea. Scholars believe that it is while St. Paul is in Corinth that he writes his letters to the church in Thessilonica.

**18:6 shook out his garment** In the Gospels we hear Jesus send the Apostles out. In condemnation to those who would not listen and accept the Gospel Jesus said: "*to shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.*" (Luke 9:5, Mark 6:11) The idea comes from the practice of shaking off any impurity as one enters into the Temple. The act of shaking off the dust from your clothes or your feet is an act of rejection. Paul does shook their dust off his clothes to show the Jews of Corinth that their rejection of the Gospel leaves him no choice but to reject them. It gives us pause to ask the question – When is enough, enough? We are called to be witnesses to all but sometimes our work is seeming for naught and we are at a point of losing our faith. It is important to remember to protect our own faith as it is to bring the Word of God to others who, in this case, refuse to hear.

**18:8 Crispus** All we have on this gentleman is what little we can glean from the scripture. He was a ruler or leader in the synagogue that comes to faith and Paul baptized.

**18:9 one night in a vision** Paul might have been concerned about his own safety or

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maybe trying to discern the possibility of continuing his travels. Maybe St. Paul was getting restless for home. Whatever the reason for this vision God comes to him using the words we often hear the angels proclaim in scripture: *“Do not be afraid.”* St. Paul is given his orders. *The mission trip is to stall for a while as Sts Paul, Silas and Timothy take up residence in Corinth to teach, preach and bring all who are open to belief in Jesus Christ.*

### **Accusations before Gallio 18:12-17**

Paul is once again attacked by the Jewish community who this time brings charges against him to the Roman courts. But the Jew’s plan did not go as hoped. We can date Paul’s time in Corinth so closely because history shows Gallio was only proconsul of Achaia from 51 to 52 AD.

#### **18:12 Gallio**

There is little know of this man other than he was Roman proconsul for one year and a man of good nature. He probably left Achaia and returned to Rome because of poor health. He was the older brother of a famous Roman philosopher Seneca.



**18:13 contrary to the law**

These men against Paul are now trying yet another way to silence the man. This time they are asking Roman law to discredit this fledgling religious community because it is not one of the religions official recognized and protected by Rome. Gallio dismisses the charge (18:15) because he considered the matter one to be debated within the Jewish community and settled in the synagogue; not one to take up his time.

#### **18:17 Sosthenes**

We know from the verse itself that this man was *“the ruler of the synagogue”*. It is very probable that Sosthenes was a Christian convert from Judaism which shows us why the strife within the synagogue. When the Jews of this synagogue came to belief in Jesus, rather than separate themselves from the synagogue they continued in their roles and responsibilities. It would be like Catholics converting and becoming Baptists continuing as Parish Counsel president or catechists in the Religious Education program. We today would not stand for that so we can understand the strife created in this synagogue. So frustrated were they that after the meeting with Gallio they beat their Jewish/Christian. In First Corinthians 1:1 we have a Sosthenes as co-author of the letter. There is debate among some scholarship if they are the same.

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## Reflection Questions:

1. At the very beginning of this study the question came up of what to do when civil authority is in conflict with God's demands. What do you think you would/should do? Can you think of an example of this?
2. Where ever St. Paul preached, he seemed to incite the crowds in both a positive and negative way. Some might say St. Paul incited a revolution. While most people today may not act as violently as in the New Testament (beatings, arrests, persecution) why do you think the message of salvation causes such strong reactions in people?
3. Do you think that civil authority should ever become involved in religious matters? If so when?
4. St. Paul lived in Corinth for almost two year. During that time he mentored those who came to faith in Christ. What do you think of Christian mentoring today? Do you have one? If so, what does this person provide for you?

## Catechism of the Catholic Church

God is the God of all creation: 282-289

Ways of Coming to know God: 31-35

Universal Call to Prayer: 2566-2567

The progressive revelation of the Resurrection: 992-996

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