

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 39, Chapter 17

Last week in Acts chapter 16 we saw that Paul and Sila were arrested in the town of Philippi and thrown in jail accused of inciting a riot. It took a miraculous action of God (an earthquake) to free them before any permanent harm was done to the disciples. We're going to see something similar (minus jail) happening in chapter 17. We must ask ourselves what it is that is causing such outrage in towns that have mostly gentile populations. We'll address that at the appropriate time during today's lesson.

As we open Acts 17, Paul, Sila and Timothy were again on the road; it is probable that Luke was still with them even though he is not mentioned. For the most part, since Luke is the author of Acts, he doesn't insert his personal presence except by implication. They were in Macedonia on the western shore of the Aegean Sea. This is an area that today we consider part of Europe. Let's read about their next destination. Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 17.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 17 all

Paul had a particular destination in mind when he left Philippi: Thessalonica. Thus we are told that the group of disciples traveled through Amphipolis and Apollia to get there. No doubt they took the well known Via Egnatia highway to make the 90 mile trek. Thessalonica was perhaps the major metropolis of Macedonia and so there was a sufficient Jewish population to have a synagogue. What we are seeing is that most every city of any consequence in the Roman Empire had a representative Jewish population; and when the population was big enough, there a synagogue would be built.

Paul's custom was to immediately go to the local synagogue wherever one was present. This served two purposes. First, Paul was an observant Jew and so going to synagogue at least once per week, and usually more, was a requirement for him; not an option. Second, because that's where he would find brethren that would offer hospitality to him. We know that when he arrived in Thessalonica he was there for at least 4 weeks because he went to synagogue for 3 **Shabbatot** (3 Sabbaths). We are told that Paul "reasoned" with the members of the synagogue from the Scriptures. The CJB substituted the word **drashot** for reasoned; and while that is not a direct translation it is (from the Jewish cultural perspective) correct. **Drash** is one of several Scriptural study methods used by Jewish teachers and Rabbis. The word means searching. About the closest we can get in English to translate **drash** would be exegetical Bible teaching (what we do in Seed of Abraham Torah Class); that is the Scripture passage is read, and then an interpretation or explanation is given. Allegory was sometimes used but in general a **drash** is an attempt to extract a straightforward meaning including an application. We might call it Bible study. However when given at a synagogue, it would always be accompanied with ritual prayers and worship as part of an overall customary synagogue service.

Since Paul was at a synagogue then naturally whatever argument he would make for his point of view would revolve around quoting the **Tanakh** (the Old Testament). That might sound a bit redundant for me to tell you that; but my reason for doing so is because when Paul talked to pagans he tended **not** to use Scripture. Jews of course knew, and were thus receptive, to Scripture passages as a source of evidence for Paul's statements. Pagans knew nothing of the **Tanakh** so for Paul to try to persuade them by quoting from the Bible would have been fruitless as pagan gentiles had no familiarity with Scripture. Thus because Paul was in a synagogue he was speaking to Jews and to God-fearers and his goal was to persuade the congregation that Yeshua was the Messiah. That involved explaining how Yeshua could be that person if in fact he had been killed; but even more Paul had to convince them that Yeshua was resurrected. Since synagogues were usually run by Pharisees or at the least they adopted Pharisee doctrines, then resurrection was not a foreign concept to them. Yet just as with the Jews in Judea, few could accept the thought of a suffering and executed Messiah. Standard synagogue teaching and belief was that a Messiah would be a charismatic military leader who would come to lead the Jews in rebellion against Rome, with an outcome that Israel would rise again as an independent Jewish kingdom and essentially replace the Roman Empire. So at best it was a pretty hard sell.

Vs. 4 tells us that Paul had the typical results that he experienced in all the synagogues he taught in: some of the congregation believed, but the majority did not. And it was a mix of Jews and God-fearers who became Believers. As typical, the Jews who did not accept Paul's doctrine became upset and took action against him. In this case the Jews enlisted the help of some unemployed troublemakers and they aroused the passions of the townsfolk against the disciples.

Apparently in Thessalonica the disciples were enjoying the hospitality of a man named Jason; probably a Believing Jew. Jason was one of the Greek language forms that Diaspora Jews took for the standard Hebrew name Joshua. If he wasn't a Believing Jew it is hard to imagine why he would have put himself at such risk to shelter Paul and the other 3 disciples; however we're not told one way or the other. These no-goods that were used to foment the riot were hanging around the Agora. The Agora was a public open space (a park if you would) typical of Greek cities, which was used for meeting and for those who had something to say to make speeches; athletic events would often be held there.

Apparently Paul and the others got wind of the trouble and fled Jason's house before the mob arrived. The rioters confronted Jason, looked through his home, and couldn't find the disciples so they hauled Jason before the town politarchs. Politarchs were a particular kind of high level magistrates. The crowd charged Jason with harboring these Jewish agitators. Naturally angry mobs tend to exaggerate whatever claims they might have; in this case they said that these particular Jews had upset the entire world and now they were here in Thessalonica to do the same! This would be a good time to explain the issue at the heart of the upset of the entire town because this would be the same issue that would follow Paul wherever he went.

The Roman Empire had a policy of religious tolerance. In general anyone could worship their local gods without interference. Thus the Jews were also free to worship their God, to build synagogues, etc. But what no one was permitted to do was neither to create disturbances nor

to challenge the authority of Roman law or local magistrates, and especially one could not challenge the supremacy of the Roman Emperor. To put it another way: while there was plenty of religious tolerance there was no political tolerance. The Jews represented a particularly troublesome conundrum for the Romans; they were unlike any other ethnic group in that they tended to stay true to their religion and to their ethnic identity because the Jews considered those two aspects of Jewish life as inseparable. And the Jews, while appreciative of the tolerance shown to them, were themselves not at all tolerant towards the pagan religions that represented the majority of the citizens of the Empire. The more pious among the Diaspora Jews showed open contempt for the gods of the many pagan religions that they lived among. They also tended to refuse participation in the national festivals that invariably involved Roman or Greek gods and goddesses; festivals that were intended to unite the smorgasbord of peoples and nations that formed the Roman Empire. The Jews also had a bent towards creating ghettos and boroughs where they would practice their unique Jewish lifestyle, shunning the local and national traditions and observances.

Because of their Babylonian exile some 600 years earlier, the Jews had scattered (mostly on their own accord) far and wide; but most of them did not assimilate into the gentile world (although some did to varying degrees). Jews therefore remained quite identifiable, which was their intent; they stuck out like sore thumbs. So while the Romans were busily trying to institute a universal Hellenist culture throughout their Empire, the Jews led the way in resisting it. The Jews had entirely different moral standards; they educated their children differently and conducted their lives differently. This made them visibly separate and distinct from the many other ethnic groups. It is not at all unlike in Europe or America today where we have growing immigrant populations of Muslims who wear their own peculiar garb, meet at Mosques, eat only halal foods, usually prefer to speak Arabic or Farsi or some other unfamiliar Middle Eastern dialect, and tend to take over certain areas of cities in order to cluster together, generally refusing assimilation. Our national principle of religious freedom allows them to worship their unique god; but that doesn't mean we're entirely comfortable with it.

The Muslims also usually do not celebrate our national holidays and so combined with these other factors it makes the more traditional Europeans and Americans suspicious of them, partly because their ways are so foreign to us we can't tell if what they are doing is benign or potentially harmful to us as a nation. It bothers us that they don't seem to want to be American or European; rather they want to import their culture to our nation or even try to change us to their ways. Provided these people stay to themselves and don't start trouble, we tolerate them. But when something unsettling happens involving Muslims, it ups the level of our suspicion and lowers our level of acceptance of them as a group. This is a good analogy of how the Jews were viewed in the Roman Empire.

Now as concerns Paul and his merry band of evangelist disciples; they represented a particular problem. They didn't just bother the local gentile population in similar ways as did the other Jews who lived there, they also seemed to rile up the local Jewish population. It is not that the gentiles understood why Paul was embraced by some of the local Jews but rejected by others; they weren't at all familiar with the intricacies and nuances of Judaism. All they knew is that this particular group of itinerant Jews caused upset wherever they went. And when they upset the local Jews, the local Jews upset the local gentiles. And when the local Jews and

gentiles together began forming a mob to take action against Paul and the local Believers, this upset the Roman authorities who were always on the lookout for rebellion. And when the Roman authorities got upset, the local politicians feared for their jobs. And when the local politicians feared for their jobs, they looked for someone to blame. And so they blamed those that seemed to be to the source of the problem: the Jews.

Bottom line: for the gentiles and for the Roman authorities, this wasn't about religion; this was about political and civil unrest. And of course when we read in verse 7 that the gentiles think that Paul is declaring Yeshua to be a king, who is in defiance of the Emperor of Rome, they can't make the distinction between his meaning this in a religious sense versus their paranoid thinking that he means it in a political sense. This is probably the most serious allegation of all because to the average citizen this seems like sedition. So when the politarchs heard these charges they joined the mob in being perturbed because if they didn't do something about it, they could be accused of being complicit. This was essentially the same charge that had been leveled at Paul and company at Philippi; a charge that resulted in jail. Of course everyone knew that this charge was bogus; after all the supposed rival king, Yeshua, had been executed some 15 years earlier. So it was the mere thought of some Jews wanting a king that might challenge the Emperor that was the issue; it was words and thoughts that simply could not be uttered no matter how remote or benign the reality of it. It was essentially the ultimate political incorrectness. But for these itinerate Jews to be the ones to say those words? That made them little more than traveling troublemakers.

At least the politarchs of Thessalonica didn't react as did the judges in Philippi; or better they didn't overreact. Rather they approached this matter more thoughtfully. First; any evidence of a conspiracy to enthrone a new king over Rome didn't exist; but second, the supposed conspirators were nowhere to be found. So essentially the proposed solution was to make Jason and friends responsible to see to it that no further trouble occurred. They had to put up a bond that ensured that Paul and his 3 companions would behave or better, leave and go be some other city's problem. As much as the fearless crusader Paul would have liked to stay, face his detractors, and continue preaching the Gospel, it would have come at Jason's expense. So with the help of some local Believers the disciples stealthily left for Berea. Verse 10 picks up with that story.

But before we go there, I think now would be a good time to make a connection that is easily overlooked. I mentioned last time that as we see the names of these several cities in Macedonia where Paul established Believers among several synagogue congregations (names like Corinth, Philippi and Thessalonica) we need to immediately connect the New Testament books Corinthians, Philippians and Thessalonians because Paul's letters bearing those titles were to the congregations who resided in those aforementioned cities.

So understanding what just went on in Philippi and now Thessalonica, let's read the first couple of chapters of 1st Thessalonians because Paul is writing very shortly after they got run out of town. Thus what we just studied in Acts 17 is the context for the letter called 1st Thessalonians. And without the context of Acts 17 then we miss the point of the 1st book of Thessalonians. Open your Bibles to 1st Thessalonians.

READ 1st THESSALONIANS CHAPTERS 1 AND 2

So the troubles we just read about in Acts 17 (some of it also carried over from chapter 16 concerning Philippi) are what Paul is writing to the Thessalonians about in order to explain his abrupt departure and why he had not returned to the Thessalonian congregation. No doubt this congregation in Thessalonica was continuing to take the brunt of the ire of the local gentiles. I advise that you finish reading the remaining 3 short chapters of 1st Thessalonians on your own, now that you have the context for better understanding it. My point in going here is to keep emphasizing that the Bible is organic; it is not a series of unconnected dots. It all works together and we have to approach it that way. Then our learning and understanding multiplies.

Back to Acts 17 verse 10. Now in Berea the disciples headed to the local synagogue. Berea, Philippi and Thessalonica were the 3 largest cities in Macedonia. It turns out that the synagogue members in Berea were much more receptive to the Gospel than those in Thessalonica; why that is we don't know for certain. But my speculation is that it is because they studied the Scriptures to seek truth, rather than relying on long held Traditions and doctrines of Judaism. I think this is the case because the defining characteristic of the Berean congregation is spoken in verse 11: "They accepted the message with eagerness and examined the scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

Here is a principle that is too often violated in Christian circles. Instead of listening to what our teachers and pastors say and then checking carefully in the Scriptures for confirmation, too often teachers and Church leaders are set on a pedestal and it is assumed that they would never be wrong, or don't have a hidden agenda, or are simply defending a questionable Church doctrine. Is this unwise trust on our part? Or is it a profound laziness? I suppose I don't know. But either way, the congregation has the responsibility to ensure that what they're accepting from anyone is truth and light. And the gold standard by which all is to be measured against is not how we feel in our hearts or what tickles our ears; it is what God's Word actually says.

Just as at Thessalonica, in addition to many Jews who embraced Yeshua in Berea so did many God-fearers. It is made clear that among the Believers were female and male Greeks, and even the wealthy. But the good times were to dissipate quickly; when word reached Thessalonica of Paul's presence in Berea, some unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica made the trip to Berea to try and foment trouble for the disciples. I'll reiterate: this was not a religious issue that was the cause of these Thessalonians coming to town; rather it was political and civil. And since Paul and his companions had escaped Thessalonica without facing the music, the Thessalonians wanted payback.

Since Paul was the spokesman and obvious leader, it was he that was the primary target. So Timothy and Sila (and probably Luke who as a gentile was generally incognito) sent Paul to the seacoast to catch a ship to Athens. Some of the brethren from Berea accompanied Paul to Athens no doubt as protection. Paul sent a message back with them to tell Sila and Timothy to come to Athens to join him as quickly as they could.

Athens was a unique place; it was considered as the birthplace of democracy and a seat of intellectualism; it is what today we might call a college town. But it was also a Greek city, not a Roman City, and so they enjoyed a special status that exempted them from the Roman provincial system. All Paul saw was the myriad of idols placed all over the city and it greatly offended his Jewish sensibility; the 2nd commandment specifically addressed this issue and forbade having anything to do with idols. Now Paul had seen idols in cities since he was a child; he was, after all, a Diaspora Jew who was born and raised in Tarsus of Cilicia. But Athens was a veritable garden of idols and Paul could barely control his outrage.

Depending on how pious a Jew thought of himself, we read in the Talmud of Jews that would not pass through the gates of cities that were adorned with welcome idols. We also read from an early Christian theologian Hippolytus that some Jews wouldn't carry or even touch a coin if it had a likeness or image on it, and most coins did. Paul might not have been this radically zealous, but verse 16 makes it clear that he was greatly troubled and agitated by what he saw in Athens. If I might comment: I think the more a person spends time in prayer and in Scripture study, doing things that bring us closer to God, the harder it is for us to ignore the worldly, if not downright wicked, things that surround us. Things that have always been there; things that most people don't think twice about but merely accept as usual and normal. Things we simply overlooked but suddenly their presence arouses a deep righteous indignation within us and we can't stop pondering them, although we wish we could. Such is the uncomfortable state of a devout follower of Christ, but less so for those of the more liberal Christian mindset that constantly adjusts their faith to whatever new trends and political correctness arises. Paul had lived much of his early years viewing idols every day; now his spirit is deeply disturbed by them and he can't help but take action.

So what did Paul do? He redoubled his effort to spread the Gospel, with Athens being Exhibit number one of why humans needed to hear about Yeshua and the God of Israel. It is a strange irony in this world that the more that humanism increases, the more that godliness decreases. The more that intellectualism is sought after, the more that wisdom is shunned. And thus in verse 17 we see that Paul goes to the local synagogue congregation in Athens; but unlike with the Bereans who compared what Paul said with Holy Scripture, we find only that Paul **reasoned** with the members of the Athens synagogue. And that he also went to the local marketplace to reason with the pagan gentiles. No mention is made of the Torah or Scripture being involved. The point is that in this city of Athens that prided itself with self-governance, always seeking a progressive lifestyle, embracing the newest thoughts and latest philosophies, Paul couldn't even deal with the Jews and God-fearers of Athens using Scripture because it was primarily intellectual reasoning that impressed them.

Paul also encountered a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who listened to what he said in the streets of Athens; but because they considered themselves as the intellectual elite, they considered him but a babler. Let's understand what Epicureans and Stoics were and what they believed because it will help us to understand why Paul necessarily approaches them as he does.

First understand that these two groups were rivals; so our first clue is that whatever philosophies that they embraced, they consisted of mostly opposite principles. The Epicureans

were named after their founder Epicurus who lived 3 centuries earlier. They denied the existence of an all-powerful, purposeful God and claimed that the universe was created spontaneously and all that existed was purely the result of mathematical chance (sound familiar?). In fact, they had no regard for the Greek and Roman god systems and expressed contempt towards the idols and all the temples and priests and flocks of followers. Yet, ironically, they did not dismiss the existence of gods. Rather even though the gods were human-like in their qualities, they did not involve themselves in the affairs of humans.

The Epicureans did not believe that a soul lived on after the death of the body (the Jewish Sadducees would have agreed with them); in fact the soul was not ethereal, it was as material as flesh and blood. Thus since there was no life after death the here and now is all that mattered and so they fashioned their life's aim as the pursuit of pleasure and gratification. Morality was a meaningless and needless burden. Essentially the Epicureans were early anarchists.

The Stoics claimed Zeno of Cyprus as their founder, and not surprisingly he lived at exactly the same time as the founder of the Epicurean school of philosophy. For them God was like The Force in a Star Wars movie. They adhered to some hazy concept of God being embodied in the totality of the universe, or perhaps as the moving spirit that gave energy and life to the universe. A human had an ethereal soul, but at death this soul would lose any individuality and instead join into the life force of the universe, and thus essentially they were absorbed into whatever God was.

The Stoics sought an unmoved, passionless existence. They were mainly concerned with being in harmony with nature, and thus were apathetic regarding the human condition. They did not seek pleasure as the be-all end-all like the Epicureans, because for them neither pleasure nor discomfort mattered. Essentially outside of a never ending search for knowledge, there was nothing worth living for. Reason and enlightenment were the only reasons to exist; and so when a Stoic reached a point in which they either physically or mentally could not gain more knowledge, or they had lost any interest in learning more, then the only reasonable and logical solution was suicide. Their founder took this path and many thousands of Stoics did as well.

Thus both Stoicism and Epicureanism find Biblical religion to be a childish fantasy and illogical. I don't think after my descriptions of these two mainstream philosophies of Athens that I need to draw the comparisons with what we see going on all around us today. They certainly don't go by those names in our times, but the underlying principles remain. And what these principles bring to humanity is a hopeless existence, with a hopeless future. The 18th century Enlightenment brought about by the likes of the European intellectuals Hume and Kant and Voltaire, which is the basis for virtually all of the societies of the Western world today, and that has greatly infected the Church at large (and much of Judaism as well), is nothing but a deadly mixture of ancient Epicurean and Stoic philosophies.

So these are the people that Paul would next try to reach. How could he possibly go about this in terms they would be willing to hear and accept as at least plausible? That is what we'll look at in our next lesson.