

Acts 17

Paul's company consisting of Titus, Timothy and himself bid Philippian brethren "good-bye" for they have been asked by the magistrates to leave the city (16:35-39). They entered Lydia's house where they had been staying (16:15) and it was a sad gathering when Paul indicated they would leave Philippi. Yet it was a note of joy and comfort as well for they could rejoice in the addition of the jailor and his family to their number and be comforted that Luke was left there to teach and strengthen their faith; for the "we" passages end at this point and the narrative commences again in the third person. Such will continue until Paul travels through this area again at the end of his third journey and once more the historian is Paul's companion (see Acts 2:6). If Luke remained the whole time in Philippi, he would have spent six or more years there. Paul stayed a year and half and "many days" in Corinth after leaving Philippi, three years in Ephesus and three months in Greece on his third journey (18:11, 18; 20:1, 3). The care of love Philippi had for Paul compliments the same care Luke had for the apostle, which care likely had nurtured the concern of the Philippians (Phil. 4:10, 15-16; 2 Cor. 11:8f).

Passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, Paul came to Thessalonica. Unlike Philippi, there was a Jewish synagogue here and Paul reasoned for three Sabbath days with its members (17:1). This was both Paul's custom and the Lord's instructions: Jews first, then the Greeks (Rom. 1:16).

Paul's message there was the same he preached everywhere: Jesus was the Messiah and the scriptures declared he must be put to death but arise from it. Such preaching was the proclamation of all the apostles and disciples beginning from Peter's Pentecost sermon to eloquent Apollos, who powerfully confuted the Jews and that publicly, "showing by the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (18:28). Do we today assume that people believe the very thing we ought to be clearly and emphatically proving to them? Belief in Jesus' claim that He was the long awaited Messiah and that although he had been crucified, he had arose from the dead was powerfully moving force. Perhaps we need to examine what we are preaching when we wonder why so few are baptized today.

Paul's preaching met opposite reactions in Thessalonica. Some (Jews) were persuaded as well as a great multitude of devout Greeks (Gentile proselytes to Judaism) (17:4). Also many of the chief women of the city

were persuaded and while these may also have been Jewish proselytes, they may have been idolaters. However, the bulk of the converts in Thessalonica came from idolatrous Gentiles for Paul commends them that "they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

Some were persuaded but others were not. These latter were filled with jealousy because Paul had convinced many of their own synagogue to accept his teaching and in addition to this, had led many Gentiles to accept the doctrine about Christ. Their jealousy led them to set the city in an uproar, seize Jason (who must have been a prominent citizen in the city) along with other brethren and carry them before the rulers of the city where they laid charge of half-truths against them. "These act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, even Jesus" (17:7). It was true they proclaimed there was another king, but not true they acted contrary to Caesar. Pilate knew Jesus claimed to be a king -- that was the inscription he put on his cross. As these in Thessalonica, Jerusalem Jews also said Jesus claimed to be a king. But the claims of Jesus to be a king posed no threat to Roman authorities for Pilate, having examined him and his alleged subversive activities, concluded "I find no fault in him" (John 18:36; Luke 23:14).

Brethren wasted no time in getting Paul out of the city for immediately they sent him and Silas by night to the Bereans. Once more they entered the synagogue and taught, (17:10). These Jews were of a better spirit than their counterparts in Thessalonica: for "these were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and examined the scriptures daily whether these things were so" (17:11). Many converts were made there. Still, Paul would not be allowed to remain here to teach for his enemies from Thessalonica came, stirred up the people and Paul was compelled to flee--this time to Athens.

The text says "Paul and Silas" left Thessalonica for Berea with the implication that Timothy remained in the city. If this happened, he soon went to Berea for he and Silas were left behind when Paul went to Athens (17:14). When the text says they brought "Paul as far as the sea" the implication is that he sailed to Athens, although some dispute this (17:14). However Paul was not alone: "they that conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens" and then were asked to tell Silas and Timothy to come to him there.

There was a Jewish synagogue in Athens. Paul reasoned with the Jews

of it but Luke does not tell us their reactions to his preaching. It would seem Jews had been unsuccessful in winning many converts to their religion there. The city was given "wholly" to idolatry and Paul's spirit was troubled when he saw this great city steeped in such ignorance (17:16). He reasoned in the synagogue and market place with folks who would talk with him (17:17). Paul's teaching aroused curiosity among Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and they asked that he speak to them of his views (17:19). Paul stood on Mars Hill and preached his sermon about God, which sermon in reduced form, is recorded in 17:22-31. He began his sermon by referring to an altar he had seen in their city with an inscription, "To an unknown God" (It is believed the altar was raised by superstitious Athenians lest they offend some minor deity whom they had neglected to pay homage to). He told them that "unknown God" was the One who made the world, the One in whom we live, move and have our being, that He did not dwell in temples made with hands, was not served by men's hands and that he was not to be likened to images of gold, silver and costly stone. He told them God has once "winked at their ignorance" but now commanded all men everywhere to repent inasmuch as he had appointed a day in which he would judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he had ordained and had given assurance unto all men in that he had raised him from the dead" (17:30f). With Paul's assurance of a future resurrection and judgment, the crowd had had enough. They mocked him but did no physical violence to him. A few converts were made here but apparently not many.

It was while here that Timothy and Silas had come to Paul and had been sent back to Thessalonica (Timothy) and Macedonia. Paul had had to flee three of the last four cities he has preached in and while he had not been forced to leave Athens, he had met with little success there. These things tend to discourage a man and it was likely Paul was so disposed when he came to Corinth. But Paul's fleeing was now over, for a while at least.

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