

There are two mistakes to be avoided here. One is to think that the gospel minister has no right to be supported. It is to imagine that he is obliged to pay his own way. Paul later explained to the Corinthians that this thinking was quite wrong. The worker is worthy of his hire; even animals are fed and watered as they go about their work - how much more servants of the Son of God? (1 Corinthians 9:1-14). The word of God is quite clear: "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). To *force* a minister to have to work, is ungodly and will bring judgment upon us. There is, though, a mistake on the other side. It is to think that a minister cannot work for money at all. It is to imagine that either a man must give all of his hours to preaching the word, or none at all. Paul obviously did not believe that. He saw that there was an advantage to raising his own funds in Corinth. It would allow him to present the gospel freely, and give no excuse to any to say that he had any other motive (1 Corinthians 9:12). It allowed him to rejoice, knowing that his service was done willingly, for which he would receive a reward (1 Corinthians 9:17).

Paul's heart and mind were consumed with the gospel of Christ. He was amazed at the Saviour who had loved him so much. There was nothing that was too much to do for his sake. He had the right to be fed and housed by those who were being blessed by his preaching. But he gave up that right, so that the gospel might have even more success. If more people would give his good news a better hearing because of this, then he was willing to do it. He did not serve because he had to (though he did); he served because he was thrilled by the kindness of his Lord. He thought that the preaching of God's word was worth paying for from his own time.

Let us ask ourselves - how much do we value the gospel? What do we think about the suffering, crucified Lord? How much do we really know about his great and free love towards sinners? Do we have the sense that we owe Jesus everything we have and everything we are? Would we count it a small thing to give up all things for his sake, and then give some more if we possibly could? Are we willing to serve Christ, because we are convinced there is nothing better we could do? If so, then this will be shown in how we work - and what we do with our money. We can easily find excuses - but true love will always show itself. It cannot remain contained for long. One day God will ask us what we did with our money. Our accounts will show what we thought of Christ. Let us make sure they show something good!

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 13 (Chapter 17:1-18:3)

Grace Church Belper

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(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

Acts 17:1-5

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. 5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

Paul and Silas have now travelled over one thousand miles since they began their travels from Antioch. They have preached the gospel in places it had never been heard before. They have seen new churches planted, and gained new co-workers. They have travelled to a new continent, and they have been imprisoned. Now, they arrive in a new town - Thessalonica. This was about a hundred mile journey from Philippi, by a road which still exists today. Let us examine what the Holy Spirit has recorded for us in these words.

The first thing we notice is that *Paul pressed on after being treated so badly*. In Philippi, greedy men had assaulted him and dragged him to a public place. A mob had risen up against him, and he had been illegally beaten and imprisoned. But what did he do after all of this? He did not lick his wounds, and return home again. He did not decide that he had seen enough suffering for one journey, and go back to Antioch. No; he moved on to the next town, and began to preach Christ there also. His master had given him a commission; he was to be the great "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13). His work was to preach the gospel where it had not been preached before (Romans 15:20). And he believed that Christ would be sufficient for whatever work he had for him (Philippians 4:13). If it was God's will that he should do a work, then God would also provide for it: and so he pressed on.

We see in Paul what great things God's grace can do in a man. There is no human explanation for this behaviour. It is only a mad-man who is unfazed when he meets with so many hardships. The power of God's Holy Spirit is the reason why Paul was able to keep going. We should learn from this. We live in an age where there is little spirit of adventure, and few are willing to lose too much comfort. At the first sign of difficulty, we are ready to run and hide, and shelter back in a safe place. But this is not godly behaviour; it is not "taking up our cross", as the Lord commanded. We must be willing to keep going whatever comes our way. This is the faith which receives a reward; this is the perseverance which wins the prize. Our Saviour is alive, and he will be all the help we need if we lean upon him.

depart from Rome); and he came to them. 3 So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.

Luke now moves swiftly on to the next city. There are some things he has passed over and not told us. Surely the new believers in Athens were taught, so that they might be a proper church. We know that Timothy met up with Paul, and was sent back to Thessalonica again, before he came to Corinth (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Corinth was an important city, where a lot of trade was done. It had both Jews and Gentiles, a synagogue and pagan temples too. Let us read how the church began there.

In these verses, we first meet Aquila and Priscilla. Nothing else is said of them at this time. But later on, they will be very significant people for the gospel's advance. Paul would call them "my helpers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3). Let us see from this then, *God in his sovereignty will provide all that is needed for the gospel's advance*. At this time, Paul did not know anything about Apollos. He could not know what Aquila and Priscilla would do to train this servant of Christ, and the blessing it would bring to the church at Corinth (verses 24-28). All that would happen after he had moved on to another place. But God knew what he was doing. It was a wonderful thing that these two should be in Corinth at that time. They would rather have been in Rome where they lived, but the emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from that place (verse 2). And Paul would still not have stayed with them, unless they had done the same work. Both they and he were makers of tents, and so naturally came together (verse 3).

To the unbelieving eye, this just seems like a marvellous coincidence. It is just a fluke, an act of chance. But the believer knows that flukes do not exist; "luck" is an atheist's idea, not a Christian one. There is no luck, because there is a God who rules from heaven. And that God has provided everything necessary for his peoples' help, and the gospel's advance. Nothing has been left to chance, because everything is included in God's eternal decree. This ought to encourage every child of God. We are not at the mercy of blind forces. We might be tempted to think so, and find it hard to see where our help is going to come from. But God sees further than we do, and has already planned it well in advance. He knows precisely when we need help, and will provide it when he sees it is most wise. When Israel came out of Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness and grumbled against God. They did not believe that God could really provide for them each day. But in the end, they did make it to the promised land, and did receive all that God had said. How much better it would have been, if they had not complained, rebelled and grumbled along the way! If we are in Christ, then we shall make it to glory, and we shall see him as he really is. How much better it will be, if we trust him along the way!

We see in these words secondly that *it is not wrong for a gospel preacher to earn his keep*. Paul was skilled in making tents - and he did this in Corinth. Verse 3 says that he "worked". He was there to preach the gospel; his command was to spread the message about Jesus Christ. But as he did so, he also earned his keep.

all. He said that the standard of judgment would be righteousness (verse 31). That is, it will be according to the perfect standards of God. He will see how our lives compare to his perfect, just and holy law. Paul underlined that this judgment was certain. There is a day, already appointed. God has already given assurance of this to everyone. And the identity of the judge is already known. It is Jesus Christ, "the man whom he has ordained" - the one who God has raised from the dead.

When God raised the Lord Jesus from the grave, it was not a meaningless act. Neither did Jesus rise for himself alone. It was a great declaration by God, a voice which everybody was intended to hear. It proved, once and for all, that death was not the end. It announced to the world that there was life after death, and so we should not live as we please. It marked out the one who was the supreme man among men, the Son of God, who would rule over the rest of the human race. It declared that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, and would pass sentence on every other man, woman, boy and girl.

Do we understand these things? Judgment is coming; we must trust in Christ whilst we may. He offers us the perfection of his righteousness, so that we need not stand in our own filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Oh, flee to him whilst you can! Then he will not be a judge who condemns, but a friend who receives.

Finally, these verses show us *the different responses that the gospel receives*. All the hearers at Mars' hill had heard one preacher, and one message. But they reacted in very different ways. Some refused to listen to their consciences speaking; they laughed at what they did not want to hear. There will always be people like this. They may hear the truth in very clear terms, and cannot refute what is said; but it does not agree with the idolatrous world they have built for themselves, so they reject it. Others wanted to put off hearing about what Paul had to say. Their consciences could not be suppressed, so they tried to delay. How many there are like that! They find the gospel compelling, and cannot refute it - but they have no heart to obey it, so fool themselves by endless delay. Others, though, had heard enough: they knew that Paul spoke the truth, and they went with him and believed. No doubt Paul explained more about the way of salvation to them. Possibly some of them had heard more about Jesus in the market before (verse 18). But they yielded their hearts to God, and bowed to the Saviour Jesus Christ.

Reader, what is your response to the gospel of Christ? Do you reject it out of hand? Do you delay without any cause? Or have you obeyed and believed? Eternity hangs on our answers to these things.

Acts 18:1-3

1 After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. 2 And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to

Paul's sermons at Thessalonica tell us that *a crucified and glorified Christ is the subject of all the Scriptures*. There are not two messages, one in the New Testament and one in the Old. The Bible contains many deep and hard-to-understand things; but only one essential message. That message is about a Saviour who would both be lower than any other man, and yet also more highly exalted than all. It tells about one who was despised and rejected by men, and yet the ruler of all the nations. As Paul opened his Bible at Thessalonica, he showed them how these things could be. The same Christ could be both these things because he would suffer before rising again. The key to the prophecies was to see that his death would come before his glory. He would suffer and make atonement for sins, and then triumph over death, and be raised to the right hand of God. And all this was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (verse 3). What sermons these must have been to hear! What a wonderful thing to be sitting in that synagogue, and now to have the Scriptures made plain. For many hundreds of years there had been debate about how the Messiah could fulfil every prophecy spoken about him; now Paul was declaring how it had already been done.

Let us learn to have a proper sense of wonder and awe at the gospel. There is no story like it in the whole world. It's beauty and magnificence is a great proof that it comes from God, and not man. Whoever would have dreamt up such a scheme? What imagination could have devised such a thing - God becoming man, and suffering for men's sins, rising from the dead to win the nations? The more we search into the gospel mysteries, the more we shall find we have yet to learn. There is enough in there for many lifetimes of study. Let us resolve that every year that we are alive, we shall be seeking to delve more deeply into the great truths of the suffering and risen Christ.

Finally, these verses show us that *many reject the gospel because of foolish pride*. The Jews were hearing the most glorious words - like they had never heard before. And they were seeing a good number of Gentiles believing (verse 4). But did they believe themselves? They did not - because it cut across their Jewish pride. As they saw Gentiles submitting to the word of God, without becoming Jews, it offended their proud Jewish zeal. They did not want these people whom they considered inferior to become their equals. They were not willing to enter the kingdom of God on the same terms as them. When they saw the Gentiles embracing the Jewish God but without the Jewish distinctives, and saw the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit who was promised to Israel, they were not glad but became annoyed. Their anger became so great, that they stirred up violence against the missionaries. They were not content merely to reject the gospel, but opposed it with force too.

We must be careful how we hear God's word. What is the real reason why we resist and fight against it? It is not because it is not a good word for us. It comes from the giver of all good, and concerns our eternal salvation! It is not because God wishes us ill through it. It is because we are selfish, and secretly enjoy being independent of God. We are sinners, and do not like the gospel to humble us, and place us on a level with every other person in need of God's free grace. We want a message that allows us to keep a special place, and God's word never does this. Let us take care how we hear

- being ready to be humbled, and to receive whatever God has to say to us.

Acts 17:5-9

5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 Jason has harboured them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king - Jesus." 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Now Luke tells us what happened when the Jews became violently opposed to the gospel missionaries. The message of free grace to both Jew and Gentile had offended their religious pride; this was the outcome. Paul later wrote to the Thessalonian church and mentioned these things. The apostles had been "shamefully treated" at Philippi; and now "were bold in our God" in their preaching at Thessalonica; but it was "with much contention" (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Let us look at what happened.

We see in these verses *the possibility of religious hypocrisy on a great scale*. Until the missionaries came to Thessalonica, no doubt these Jews were very respectable people. They lived differently to all the pagans of the city. They lived uprightly, went to worship week by week, and were considered as God-fearing and godly people. But, when the gospel was preached in their synagogue, it revealed that this was all a cover for great wickedness.

We can see this hypocrisy in how they opposed the missionaries. They had no real grounds on which to accuse them of anything; so they incited the town's no-gooders to do it for them instead (verse 5). There was no real wickedness they could pin on Paul and Silas; so they turned to mob justice instead. They caused a great riot, and then blamed the apostles for turning the world upside-down (verse 6). There was a huge commotion - but it was obvious that the missionaries were not the cause of it, because they could not even be found! Paul's preaching was putting the world the right way up. Christianity teaches men to be at peace with God, at peace with their fellow-men, with their husbands and wives, employees and employers. It insists that Caesar should be obeyed in every lawful thing. The Jews' allegations were simply an enormous apostasy from God. Their true Messiah was preached to them; and they insisted that Caesar would be their only king. What awful words on the lips of a Jew! Their law and their psalms all insisted that Jehovah was the king over all, creator and judge of all men. Their own doctrine was that the Messiah would be mightier than every king of this earthly world. But now that he was preached to them, they abandoned all this in their rage against Jesus, and spoke like pure pagans. They perverted what Paul was preaching, as if Jesus' kingdom was like the kingdoms of this world.

One thing to see straight away is that *Paul called his hearers to repentance*. In fact, he called all people everywhere to repentance. In his sermon, he had showed the foolishness of failing to worship our creator God. He had exposed the folly of serving created things, and making gods out of our own imagination. That there was one infinitely powerful and glorious creator, he said, should be obvious to all. But instead of bowing down to their maker, the Athenians had made their own gods instead. They turned the whole thing on its head! Paul had now declared how great their guilt was, and having done so, insisted that they should repent. God had left the world to go its own way for a time. For many centuries he had dealt only with one chosen nation, Israel. But he would not do so any more - he now insisted that every people throughout the globe now turned back to him.

Preaching repentance is an essential part of true Christian witness. The good news is not just an invitation to forgiveness and life. It is also a command, that we turn away from everything that dishonours God. The Lord insists that all people everywhere now bow the knee to him. He is the universe's rightful king; to not do so is rebellion against him. He has been raised up from the dead to rule over all things in heaven and on earth. Every inch that exists anywhere at all belongs to him. We have been going our own way for too long: now we must turn around, and give him the glory. To not preach this is to preach something other than true Christianity. It is to preach a message that cannot save.

Repentance is a very big thing. It affects the whole of our lives. It is not a few easy acts of punishing our bodies for a short time. It is the turning of the whole person from serving self, to Christ. It must affect our minds; all of our own ideas, like the Athenians, must be rejected and we must instead receive God's truth. We must reject everything that is opposed to God, and worship and obey him alone. That is the heart of repentance: rejecting that which does not please God.

Have we repented? This is after all the great question. It is one thing to know what repentance is; it is another thing to do it, and that is what God requires of us. Have we confessed our sin, and rebellion, and that we have been going our own way? Have we bowed the knee to Jesus Christ, as our Lord? There is no benefit in merely seeing the folly of the philosophers. We must see our own, and repent ourselves.

Let us see secondly that *Paul preached judgment as part of his message*. He explained that there was a reason why men must repent. It is not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because God will judge the world. A day is coming (verse 31), when God will require an account for everything we have ever done. Every desire we have desired, every word we have spoken, and every deed we have done, will be looked into.

Paul made very clear what kind of judgment he was speaking about. He told us it would be a judgment for all. This is emphasised four times. God commands *all* men *everywhere* to repent; he is going to judge the *world*; he has given assurance of this to

might we cannot get rid of such clear testimonies to him. Many in our land live as if there were no God, and no reason to seek one. But the beauty and order of the world they live in day by day, are clear declarations which we must press upon their minds. Such vast brilliance and beauty, such abundance of life, are not the results of accidents or chaos. A vast mind, and one who has life in himself, is behind it all. No other explanation will do.

Paul did not aim to show his hearers that Christianity was reasonable and made sense, though he certainly did that. He aimed at something much higher. He aimed to show that his hearers had no excuse for accepting anything else. He insisted that they look at their own unbelief. They were willing to mock and scoff as he told them about the God who raised a man from the dead. But their own belief system could not account for the simplest facts about creation and the world about them. We must show our hearers the same things. Many people are very sceptical about every religious claim. But they ought to doubt their own scepticism too! Unbelief cannot account for the simplest things. The non-Christian has no reason to trust his own brain; if it is just an accident, why should he believe anything it thinks? If it is just molecules banging into each other, how can he know anything at all? Just who is the "he" who does all the knowing to begin with?

We live in an age of unbelief. But unbelief is completely absurd. It thinks that the universe began from nothing, contains only atoms, and is going to end up as nothing too. It cannot give any real explanation of meaning, truth or morality. Whenever it talks about right or wrong or any such thing, it is stealing Christian ideas. When it assumes that humans are important, it cannot do so on its own terms. We must show people that this is so. The world belongs to God: and we must bow to him.

Acts 17:29-34

29 "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man who he has ordained. He has given assurance of all of this to all by raising him from the dead." 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Now Luke tells us how Paul concluded his great speech at Athens. Here is the climax of what he said - and what stirring words they are. Here is the gospel, confronting the philosophers. Here is the truth which leads to salvation, taking on the day's sophisticated pagan lies.

We ought not to imagine that men's hearts are very different today. The unconverted mind is still in the same darkness. The same evil is still lurking, should it ever be stirred up and provoked. The same prejudice against a gospel which declares us all to be totally helpless, and all needing the same salvation, still exists. The same reluctance to accept that if we are to be saved, it must be in the same way as the worst of rapists, murderers and the like is still there. It is not true that such hypocrisy is not there; it is simply often left unexposed. There will though come a day when God will make everything clear. The secrets of every unconverted heart will be put on display. We can fool our fellow men, but we cannot fool our maker. We should not fool ourselves, that because we are respectable and decent, that therefore we are saved or God-pleasing people. Such things are found only by being in Christ. Christ is the test of the reality of our religion. Have we bowed to him, and come like little children to receive his free gift? Either we have done so, or we are still his enemies - whether we express it in great violence, or not.

We see in these verses too that *wickedness and hypocrisy often gain victories in this world*. Just a few moments' enquiry would have shown that the Jews' charges were absurd. How could Paul have incited a mob, if that mob did not even know where he was? A single question would have discovered what kind of king the Christians believed Jesus was. But no such questions were asked. The crowd and rulers were disturbed by the trouble being made, and chose the easiest way to deal with it, by taking it all as if true. The Christians were treated as if they really might be trouble-makers, and money taken from them for security. We do not know what was promised; maybe that Paul and Silas would not be seen again in the town. That seems quite likely, as they left the same night (verse 10).

Let us learn from all this that we should not believe an evil rumour just because we have heard it. Satan is a master of destroying men's reputations; we should not help him by being gullible. Paul later wrote that we should not receive an accusation against an elder, except with two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19). Satan's way is to slander men but with all the witnesses absent; God requires that we believe a thing only with good evidence. Let us not be gossips, or spreaders of rumours or bad news. If we have evidence of wickedness, we should take it to the proper authorities, and deal with it there. Otherwise, let us behave as if we had bricks in our ears whenever people try to pass on such rumours to us.

Let us learn too not to be discouraged by all of this. The devil often seems to have the world on his side, and to gain victories with little effort. But there is indeed another king, Jesus; and he is reigning. Nothing happens except by his permission. He has already defeated Satan decisively at the cross; soon he will permit him to trouble his people no longer. Let us carry on trusting that though we are badly treated by the unbelieving world, soon Jesus will vindicate us. There will be a day on which every lie will be exposed, and the truth made known to all. We must not despair, or become bitter, but keep trusting until that day arrives.

Acts 17:10-15

10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went in to the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. 13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

What faithful men Paul and Silas were! They were imprisoned in Philippi and opposed by furious Jews at Thessalonica. But what do they do upon coming to the next city, Berea? They go to the synagogue, and carry on preaching the gospel. They did not retire to a quieter life, or conclude that they needed some rest before continuing their works. They pressed on. The Lord Jesus was still Lord, and still mighty and powerful to save. The gospel was still true, and still the message which the world needed to hear: and so they carried on preaching it.

The believers at Thessalonica were wise; when they saw the danger, they sent the missionaries away, quickly and secretly. There is no special value in suffering for its own sake. Faithful Christians cannot avoid suffering; but there is no reason to seek it out when the gospel has already been clearly preached. So Paul and Silas came to Berea, to preach there instead. Let us admire their courage, and their devotion to the Lord - and do likewise, not giving up, but pressing on.

These verses show us *the attitude with which we ought to listen to the word of God*. The Holy Spirit has made special notice of the Jews at Berea. That which he has noted is that they were "fair-minded" and "received the word with all readiness". They were prepared to fully consider a message which came to them from the inspired Scriptures. Paul insisted that the Old Testament taught a suffering and resurrected Christ; they were eager to listen to what he had to say. And as Paul explained his teaching, they "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." They were not gullible people, who believed everything they were told. They were not simpletons who accepted everything as if it were all the same. They listened, as those who were willing and ready to obey the voice of God, and that voice alone.

This is the essential thing as we come to hear preaching and as we read our books. We must be eager to know all that God has to say, and to yield to it. The Jews at Thessalonica instead thought about their national privileges, and listened to their pride. They consulted their self-interest, and closed their minds against the gospel's message. But at Berea, they eagerly searched, ready to receive whatever the Lord had

not hide his intentions at all. He was not like one of them, a seeker after truth and needing insight to find it. He was an apostle of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who already knew the great truths about life, death and how to be saved. He viewed them as ignorant, and used their own altars to prove it. He showed that their own testimony was that even with so many temples and gods, they still knew there was something unknown. Paul said, that he would now declare and reveal the unknown to them.

In true gospel witness, a clash of ideas occurs. The truth of God comes into conflict with unbelieving lies. Two worlds collide. A whole system of God's reality confronts the false system which has before captured the hearer. If the Holy Spirit blesses it, the person sees that their whole way of thinking and living has been wrong, and that they must turn right around.

This is the kind of preaching we need. The human mind is far too dark, and the heart too deceitful, to be dealt with any other way. The Christian preacher must preach and insist on God's truth. He cannot pretend that it is up for grabs, or similar to what the world already thinks. No doubt he will be called arrogant or proud for doing so. But his confidence is not in himself - it is in the truth of God.

Next, let us see how Paul preached the gospel to people who knew nothing about his religion. *He began with creation, and declared God as the sovereign maker, sustainer and ruler of the world*. These people did not fear the Jewish God, or know anything about the law or the prophets. He had to start much further back - and he started at the very beginning, with the God who made the world. Here is the truth which exposes all idolatry and godless ways of life. This is the teaching which exposes every man's rebellion, showing him that he is a dependent being, dependent upon the God whom he has so long ignored.

Paul preached God as the maker of all things, above and below. He declared that he ruled over absolutely everything, at all times and in all places. He told the philosophers that they could not make their own gods by their clever words: God had made them. They were not superior beings to the rest of the world: the whole human race was "one blood" (verse 26). God was not impressed by their shrines and temples: such things were insulting to him. He as the maker of all: he could not be contained in a man-made house. They could not set limits upon God; it was God who set every limit upon them (verse 26). Every breath they drew, was by his permission; he sustained the minds with which they had run away from him. Paul's preaching was direct, and persuasive. He showed that even their own poets contained traces of these truths. They had tried to get away from the one true God with all their inventions - but they could not suppress the truth (verse 28).

Creation is what our country needs to hear about again. There is one world, and it contains one human race. That is because there is one true God, who has made it all. We all have a body and a soul, and none of us can keep ourselves alive. The world around us though reveals a magnificent, all-powerful, all-wise Creator, and try as we

When Paul preached his message at Athens, some people were very interested. Here was a new message. Here was something they would be delighted to hear more of, and discuss - in a more important place (verses 19-20). But the Holy Spirit has told us the reason for their interest. It was not because they were seekers after truth. It was not because their hearts and consciences were pricked with awareness of sin. It was simply because they enjoyed discussing new ideas, and throwing them around like toys. They were not so interested in arriving anywhere, as enjoying the view along the way. This was simply another kind of idolatry. They did not have hearts to worship the true God. He was just an idea to be tossed around for their own fun.

We must be sure that we do not study God's word like this. The things in it are far too important to be treated so lightly. God's glory and honour are worth far more than such a response. How seriously do we study our Bibles? Is it just a habit? Is it merely something that interests our minds? Or do we receive it as it really is - the voice of our maker and our judge?

Acts 17:22-28

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. 24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is he worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all life, breath and all things. 26 And he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us; 28 for in him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.'"

This is the longest recorded speech from Paul to non-Jews. It is one of the most famous speeches in the history of the world, and rightly so. Who can fail to be stirred by these words? How many souls have been blessed by them? Let us read them well!

The first thing to see is that Paul's evangelism was *proclamation*. He did not go to the Areopagus to negotiate with the philosophers. His intention was not to come to an agreement over what truth might be. He went as a man enlightened by the true God, with a message to pass on; he went to proclaim. He was not interested in twisting his message to make it more acceptable to Greek thinkers. Paul's goal was to be faithful to his master, in declaring what his master had given to him.

Paul's proclamation was not rude, or aggressive in an unfriendly way. He started with friendly words, and addressed his hearers with respect. But he was very direct, and did

to say. This is the thing to do. Do not ask the question "do I like this teaching?" but simply ask "is this teaching from God?" The fact is, that we do not know what is best for ourselves. We sinfully oppose our own true interests. But if we will yield to the voice of our Maker, we will find that nothing he has to say is truly harmful to us. It may be very harmful to our self-esteem, our self-interest and our self-love, because these things are all warped and spoilt by sin. But it is all for our ultimate best.

How many of us come to God's word with this attitude? If the state of our churches is any guide, then the answer is clear: only very few. The lack of eagerness, and desire to swiftly obey whatever truly comes from God, is all too evident. How many of us take time to prepare our hearts, before we come to the preaching of God's word? Do we set aside some minutes to consider what an important day the Lord's day is, and to empty our minds of all worldly thoughts so that we might give him our full attention? Do we make sure that we are settled in our seats and quiet well before the service starts, rather than rushing in flustered at the last moment? Do we take care to concentrate and follow what is being said - or are our thoughts full of the next week, and all its worldly matters? Is the sermon chewed over and discussed by us afterwards, and talked about over the lunch table - or is it forgotten almost as soon as it is finished? Do we make effort to look into anything that was unclear to us in it, and to compare it to what we already know from the rest of Scripture? Or do we just shrug and say "well, that sermon wasn't for me today - it must have been for someone else"? Let us take note of what kind of attitude God approves!

The outcome of a godly attitude to God's word is clear. The word "therefore" begins verse 12, and tells us all we need to know. Many Jews believed that at Thessalonica - precisely because they had come to God's word in the right way. It was not that Paul preached more beautifully in Berea. It was not that the preaching at Thessalonica had lacked the power of the Spirit of God (1 Thessalonians 1:5). It was that those who were listening, had hearts that were prepared. We must, then, be convinced that God is faithful. He has given us a word which can bring tremendous blessings to our souls - if we listen to it rightly. We find it easy to blame our busy lives, or say that the preacher is predictable, and the like. But the truth may be that we come with dullness in our hearts that separates us from the power of God.

We see in these verses also *the fury of the enemies of the gospel*. The Thessalonian Jews were not content to have removed the apostles from their town. When they heard that the gospel was preached within 60 miles of them, they were aroused to great anger. They travelled the distance to oppose it there too. We see in this a picture of the madness of the devil, the great enemy of souls. He will never give up, until his final defeat. As long as there is some way in which he can show his hatred of God, he will do so. We ought not to be surprised at the venom and malice of the enemies of the gospel. Their sinful pride demands that they remove every thought of it from their lives. As long as there is any reminder of the demands of God and his word coming to them, they cannot rest at ease. Their consciences are pricked and stirred - and if this does not drive them to Christ, it will drive them to insanity. Religious people who will

not yield to Christ, find it hard to stay indifferent once they know what the gospel is. It was so in Berea; we cannot expect any less.

Acts 17:16-21

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. 17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. 18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

The gospel began in Jerusalem, the religious capital of the world. Then it went into Judea, into Samaria and all of the ancient territory of Israel. After that it broke out into the pagan world, into Arabia, Cilicia and Galatia. Now it has come to Europe, and arrives at Athens, the capital of the philosophers. In some chapters and years time it will at last arrive at Rome, the political capital. The gospel is advancing; Christ is with his servants.

The first thing to see in these verses is that *those who are wise in this world are often very foolish in the eyes of God*. It was certainly so with Athens. Here was the capital of Greek wisdom and philosophy; the cultural capital of the known world. And yet what was there to be found there? A city which "was given over to idols". It was full of people so spiritually darkened, that when they heard the most glorious spiritual truth, they called it "babble". Their minds were so empty of truth, that they thought that "resurrection" must be the name of a god.

Athens had many schools of philosophers. Two of them are named here: the Epicureans and the Stoics. The first believed that the only thing that ultimately existed was atoms. The body, the soul, and even the Greek gods themselves, were made up of tiny particles. The point of life, they said, was found in the right use of pleasure. We should learn to indulge ourselves the right way. The Stoics, on the other hand, taught that we must become detached from the present world. Only when we become indifferent to all passions and emotions, will we be wise. They taught that there was no real distinction between any person, and the universe. All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit.

It ought to be clear to any Bible reader how much foolishness both of these philosophies contained. Both were far from the truth of God. They had virtually

nothing to say about God, creation or his ongoing rule of the world. They were ignorant of the truths about sin, judgment, and atonement. They knew nothing at all about the great truth of salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. In a word, their wisdom was empty, and no guide at all to the real world.

We must learn not to be impressed by man's empty wisdom. In the eyes of God, it is folly. The world's so-called wisdom has not solved any of humanity's great problems. Strife, wars, famine and poverty continue as strong as ever. This is because man's wise ideas only ever skim the surface of man's true problem - sin. The real problem is that our hearts are wicked. We are rebels against our Creator, and cannot find true peace until we find it with him. We are guilty in his eyes, and our sins need to be atoned for. We need our hearts to be changed, and our records to be wiped clean. There is only one way that this can be done: through the death of Jesus Christ. So Paul preached Jesus, crucified and resurrected: foolishness in the eyes of the unconverted world, but wisdom for those taught by God.

We should not be surprised when the world writes the gospel off. We should not be intimidated when those with far larger brains than us do so. They may have a string of degrees from every university in the world. They might have years of study and know more than a library could store. It was so in Athens. But we must remember that cleverness is not the question. The issue is a spiritual one. The real issues are about sin and judgment, and can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit. A child can get this right - and in God's eyes be wiser than a professor at a university.

Secondly, we see from Paul's preaching that *there is only one gospel, for every type of person*. When he was in Jerusalem, he preached Jesus, the risen Saviour. When in the Gentile world, he declared the same thing. And now in Athens, amongst all the philosophers, his proclamation had the same heart (verse 18). He did not change his message. He did not need to - Christ suffered, died and rose for Athenians too! He did not drop his stark message and start preaching philosophy. He did not try to win the philosophers' approval with a more sophisticated set of ideas. He preached Jesus Christ and the way of salvation in him. No doubt he changed his words so that he could be understood. Surely he spoke to each person according to where they were, and what they could understand. He did not assume that they understood the Old Testament, or the promises given to the Jews, but addressed them where they were. But the ideas he unfolded were all the same: Christ, and him crucified.

We must be faithful when we speak the gospel to others. We might be tempted to tone down the things they will not like. It is easy to emphasise only the things that we think might be acceptable to them. But this is not what our master told us to do. He gave us the gospel, and told us to preach it, not to change it into a different one. He does not hold us at fault if our hearers do not like our words. But he does, if we change them into something else.

Finally, let us take note that *we must take care to listen to the word of God sincerely*.