

Paul Comes to Athens.
Acts 17:15-21.
Sunday morning, May 22, 2011.

I. The journey to Athens.

- A. By now the outcome of the Jewish opposition to the gospel has become somewhat predictable; ministry on the part of the apostles would become impossible.
- B. So when the Jews learned that the gospel was being preached by Paul in Berea, and they undertook the two day journey to that city for the purpose of stirring up the crowds against the apostles, the apostles in consultation with the brothers of Berea know that it is time for Paul to move on.
- C. Some of the Berean brethren escort Paul to the coast, from where they undertook the 250 mile journey South to Athens; presumably they did so by boat.
- D. Silas and Timothy, who had been less visible than Paul as a preacher, remained in Berea for the time being to strengthen the brethren there.
- E. When the Berean Brethren, who escorted Paul to Athens, take their leave of him to return to Berea, Paul instructs them to have Timothy and Silas come to him in Athens as soon as they can. They would however not meet up again until Paul had already moved on to Corinth in Acts 18:5.

Application:

What do we make of the pattern of persecution to which Paul and the preaching of the gospel were subjected? He does not get the chance to stay in any given city for very long before the Jews stir up the crowds against him and he is forced to move on to the next city, where the same pattern would unfold again.

Could not the Lord, who even holds the wrath of His enemies in His hands, have restrained the wrath of His enemies so as to give the apostles some breathing room for ministry?

Certainly the Lord could have facilitated that, but now, by way of the wrath of His enemies, the Lord causes the gospel with great speed to move across Asia Minor and on into Europe. So the wrath of the enemies of the Lord is made serviceable to the progress of the Kingdom of God.

And so it is still; all the Lord's and our enemies (in whatever form) must ultimately serve the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let this truth inform your thoughts and prayers as you think and pray about your enemies. "Lord only make them serviceable to the progress of the gospel in my life and in Your Kingdom."

II. The city of Athens.

- A. The Athens of Paul's day had sharply declined in political influence. Athens had its heyday in political matters in the fifth and fourth century before Christ, after which Rome had become the dominant political and military power.
- B. Athens of Paul's day remained famous however, throughout the Roman world, for its art work, its intellectual sophistication, and its devotion to the gods.
- C. Not only did images of every imaginable Greek deity adorn the magnificent temples on the acropolis that rose some 500 ft. above the city, but they also lined the streets and the marketplace, the very center of economic and academic life.

“The city was full of idols” Acts 17:16. There was nothing like it in all the ancient world.

III. Ministry in Athens.

- A. Paul seems to have wanted to wait for the arrival of Timothy and Silas before he started to preach, but seeing the city so fully given over to idolatry he can not stay silent. “His spirit was provoked within him to speaking.” Acts 17:16.
- B. On the Sabbath days he seeks out the Jewish worshippers with the Gentile proselytes in the synagogue of Athens.
- C. During the week Paul would visit the marketplace. In Athens this was where not only the trade of commercial goods took place, but also the trade in world-views.

IV. World views in collision.

Two of the dominant schools of thought clash here with Paul: The Epicureans and the Stoics. They look down on him as a “Seed-picker,” that is one who makes a living picking up scraps (of a material or intellectual kind).

Others were more inquisitive about Paul’s proclaiming some new gods namely Jesus and the resurrection. The Greeks had gods representing abstract qualities such as Love, Effort, Shame, Mercy and Fate among others. Hence the confusion about “the Resurrection” (Anestasis) being some companion deity to Jesus.

These folks lead Paul to the Areopagus which was a governing body that among other things regulated the many visiting lecturers wishing to address the city’s intellectual elite. The Areopagus, or Mars Hill, was also the place where this was commonly done, and Paul is given the opportunity to address the men of Athens in this place. More about this next week.

A. The Epicureans. (Pleasure)

A school of thought which taught that the chief end of man is the pursuit of pleasure. The more refined Epicureans included the delights of the mind in concepts like beauty, music, the arts and literature. The courser kind sought it in the indulgence of the bodily appetites of food and drink and sexual desires.

B. Stoics (Pride)

These taught that the chief end of man is to become one with the world-soul which inhabits all things and is God. There is no point in joy or grief, for all things are a part of you and you are a part of all things and the great world-soul fills and governs it all. A passionless conformity to this world-soul is the perfection of virtue. It alone is worth being excited (and proud) about.

Applications:

1. What is the heartbeat, the passion and the drive of your life? Are you a functional Epicurean? Over against this the Kingdom of God places its value system of the worth of human hearts and lives redeemed by Christ for His Father’s Kingdom.
2. Like the Stoics have you, for your well-being, bought into the “back to nature, being one with nature” way of thinking, as though nature were possessed of some kind and benevolent spirit able to bless us. You need to be reminded that nature is under the curse and that the course of nature brings its curse to you in the form of disease and death and calamity. Being one with nature does not bring blessing to you, but being one with the God of nature does; and that brings us to the Lord’s table.