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THE APOSTLE PAUL IN ATHENS

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 71
ACTS 17:15-22

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ACTS 17:15-22 "And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed. Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange thing to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."

We have now come to Paul's long awaited visit to Athens. In many ways Athens was the greatest city in the ancient world. "They that conducted Paul" refers to the new converts in Berea who brought Paul on the way to Athens. You remember, the new Christians in Berea were very outstanding people for of them we read, "They searched the scriptures daily to prove that Paul was right". They didn't disagree with Paul. They were so thrilled with the message of grace that they searched the scripture to vindicate Paul's position.

"Conduct" in this sentence means that they gave Paul an honor guard for the journey to Athens. Athens was the great city of Demosthenes and Pericles and Euripides. Socrates had taught in Athens, and his great student, Plato, had followed in his great teacher's steps. This is the great city of Aristotle. The most beautiful buildings in the earth stood in Athens atop the Acropolis. Here was the Parthenon, the temple of Athena. It has been said of Athens that it was easier to find a god here than it was to find a man. They had over 30,000 idols in the city. They had idols erected to every concept one could imagine. This was during the reign of Nero and Athens was trying to recover her former glory. Their past greatness had been built on the mentality of the people who lived there, but now this mentality had degenerated and had been replaced with mediocrity. In fact, the history of Athens of that day and the history of our own times is almost parallel. So here we find Paul came to a city that had lost her glory.

ACTS 17:16 "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy and while he waited Paul began to walk around the city of Athens and his human spirit was stirred to bitter anger. His human spirit was the area of his mind where he had stored up Bible doctrine. Everything he saw and heard was a direct contradiction to the truth he had within his mind. Remember that Paul had in his mind the greatest store of Bible truth of anyone living in the earth and what he saw in Athens angered him greatly. Paul had deep well-formed emotions in his soul and this evidence of 30,000 different gods brought sharp resentment to his mind. The word here for stirred was "Parazuno" and it means to become filled with extreme anger. This was justified anger, and anger toward heathen and pagan conceptions of God. So Paul developed a plan and he was going to make Athens judge him. In order to do this Paul would have to go all over Athens and make his position known to the people. Then Paul would be brought before the city officials on Mars Hill, which was called the Areopagus. This great outdoor courtroom had been in existence for more than 500 years. Here many great men of Athens had stood trial. So when Paul saw the city of Athens completely filled with idols, he was deeply angered.

ACTS 17:17 "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him." Paul always went to the Jewish synagogue first and at that time, Athens had a very large Jewish population. The word "disputed" comes from the word "dia-legomai" and from this we get the word "dialogue". This means that Paul used the question and answer method to introduce his arguments. Paul would go to the synagogue or the marketplace and would begin with a question, possibly something like, "Now to you, what is God really like?" With questions like this Paul would open the discussion. This had been the method of Socrates. It means that you revolve things around in your mind with questions and answers. He did this in the synagogue and in the marketplace. Paul discussed "even with the religious Jews" and in the marketplace. Therefore within a few days after his arrival, the whole city of Athens was talking about this strange man and his very "far out" philosophy.

ACTS 17:18 "Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection." Across the centuries the philosophers of Athens had built two great schools of thought. These philosophies evolved around people and how people thought. Out of this system came the two great schools called the Epicureans and the Stoicks.

The Epicureans got their name from their founder, Epicurus. He came to Athens and founded this school. The main thesis of this system was the idea of happiness. They concluded that happiness should be achieved through all sorts of pleasure. They concluded that true pleasure could be found by leaving truth behind. They concluded that the enjoyment of self was the chief goal in life. This came to be known as Hedonism. To them, the chief instinct was to seek pleasure. In their quest for pleasure they let themselves go in all kinds of gratification of their physical desires. They said that man was a soul but that the soul and the body were one and the same, and if you gratify your body, then you gratify your soul. To these people there was no life beyond the present. Indeed their philosophy was, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die". So when Paul came to Athens and preached about sin, about the cross, and about life after death, they immediately threw up walls of resentment. Their only thought for happiness was the gratification of their physical desires.

The Stoicks were founded by the Athenian named Zeno. He taught on the porch or portico of the various temples and a porch was called "Stoa" and from this came the word "Stoic". Zeno took issue with the Epicureans and said that the most important thing was not pleasure but the mind. He said that the body and pleasure was not the great end and goal of life. Zeno claimed that the Epicureans were far too emotional. Reason was the great controlling factor of Stoicism. Virtue was the great goal of the Stoicks. They felt that you should never display your emotions and should go through life dependent on thought and reason. To the Stoic right thinking led to God. This is where the Stoicks disagreed with Paul. So men in Athens belonged to one of these two schools of thought and Paul's message of salvation through faith in Christ cut straight across their beliefs. These people of Athens resented everything Paul said and they tried to ridicule all his messages.

In the midst of this verse they said, "What will this seed-picker say?" In our version it is translated "babblers" but the word is seed-picker. A seed-picker usually referred to a little insignificant bird like a sparrow, the lowest of the birds. In the marketplace they had lots of garbage and sometimes the wild dogs would come and eat it up, but what they left the sparrows would come and pick up. But about 200 years before Paul got to Athens this word "seed-picker" had been transferred to men and it referred to the tramps and poor who passed through the garbage dumps and picked up their food that way. So this was a very nasty thrust at Paul when they called him "seed-picker".

They claimed Paul had learned some little smattering truths about their philosophy and was parroting what he had heard others say. But some of the others said that Paul was an announcer of strange gods, gods that had not previously been announced in Athens. You see, Jesus and the resurrection was the theme of Paul's message all over Athens. Paul told them about the cross and how sins were paid for on the cross. These Epicureans who lived for pleasure didn't like for Paul to mention sin for that stepped right down on their basic goal of living. You see, for 500 years Athens had been the immoral and homosexual center of the world. Naturally they resented Paul when he preached to them that all sin was judged at the cross. Paul's explanation of the resurrection made the Stoics very resentful for they couldn't reason anything out concerning the resurrection. You must realize Paul's deep and bitter resentment and anger toward heathenism in order to get the spirit of this passage and understand why Paul spoke as he did to the men of Athens. Since Paul preached the cross and the resurrection, they are not really going to put Paul on trial but they are going to put Christianity on trial.

ACTS 17:19-21 "And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)" These three verses go together and they explain the background against which Paul spoke. They violently grabbed him and brought him to the hill called the Areopagus. We call it Mars Hill. It had three things that frightened people. It had the Temple of Mars. Then it had lower down on the rock a gigantic courtroom where trials were held and on down still lower was another Temple of "Furies" where criminals were punished. This is where Socrates gave his great "Apology" and where he was sentenced to death.

So in verse 19 we see that the judges have been seated in the courtroom and Paul is brought before them and their first statement is this--
 "Are we able to know what this new doctrine is?" There was a great deal of sarcasm in what they had to say. They just couldn't believe that man was a sinner and needed a Saviour. Remember that the people of Athens were on negative signals and just had no conviction of sin at all. In fact they had a vacuum in their souls and minds and the vacuum had been filled with religion and reason.

Then in verse 20 we have the indictment. Paul had brought certain shocking things to their ears. This really means that he had shocked them in their minds.

Verse 21 is an aside which explains the activity of thousands of these people in Athens. It says that the Athenian citizens and the Jews in their midst spent their time in intellectual snobbery. Actually they were mediocre as compared with the great men who had lived several centuries before them. They just didn't have thinkers like the great Pericles. They spent all their time hearing or telling "Some newer thing". So these people in Athens were novelty seekers. They were bored with life and had to have some new thing to entertain them. We see this in our day in the trend toward drugs, or in the trend in dress and music. The novelty seekers always tend toward being mediocre. Athens was in her day of decline. Her day of greatness had passed and it has never returned to greatness to this very day.

ACTS 17:22 "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious." So Paul began his message with a very unusual and bitter statement. They hit Paul with a very bitter statement of ridicule and Paul handed back to them a very straight answer. He couldn't have shocked them more if he had taken a club and had struck them in the face. No one in Athens actually believed in God and the 30,000 idols they had in their city stood for certain mental concepts. Paul said to them, "I have discovered that you are too

religious". Paul was, without doubt, the greatest preacher in the world. Probably he was the greatest preacher who ever lived in history. I don't think any of our modern churches, including Immanuel, would have called Paul as a Pastor. His doctrine was too demanding. He really upset the city of Athens and next week we will study why his sermon stirred the whole city.