

Acts 16 & 17

We continue with the second volume of Luke's Gospel known as Luke-Acts. Throughout what we call Acts, Luke speaks not only of "Jews" and "Gentiles", but also of a third group – an in-between group who are "both/and" rather than "either/or". He calls those ambiguous individuals or groups "those fearing God" or "God-fearers", or "those worshipping".

Paul and his three companions are in Philippi where they spend time at the home of Lydia, the first convert on European soil. The second person whose life was transformed by Paul came from the exact opposite end of the social spectrum. She was a nameless slave girl whose owners were making a lot of money from her fortune telling. She was possessed by an evil spirit that spoke through her. Through occult power, soothsayers are able to know many things. Their knowledge is limited to the influence of Satan and his demons. One of Satan's demons possessed her and spoke through her. Owned, possessed, and exploited - how much lower could she get?

As Paul and his three companions started out for the place of prayer beside the river, the evil spirit within this girl cried out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

It seems strange that an evil spirit would herald the messengers of salvation. It reminds us of the Gerasene demoniac who bowed down before Jesus and asked, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that

you won't torture me." Evidently the presence of Jesus and his workers tormented demons. The demons knew exactly who they were and the message they were spreading.

Paul knew the source of this prophesying from the slave girl. He also knew how to speak to evil spirits in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet this slave girl kept repeating her message "for many days". Maybe Paul should have cast out this evil spirit at once, but after several days, Paul finally became exasperated and fully understood that Satan was trying to disrupt their ministry in Philippi. It was causing havoc as he was trying to spread the gospel, so Paul spoke directly to the evil spirit, commanding in the name of Jesus Christ that it come out.

Not everyone was happy with this miracle. The girl's owners were furious. Touch their income and see their response! Instead of responding to the obvious power of God, they immediately took Paul and Silas by force to the magistrate of the city. Their accusation: "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews! They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice."

Paul and Silas are arrested and put in prison, locked up securely, in the innermost cell of the jail with their feet locked in stocks. Yet the things keeping them locked up are miraculously disabled. An earthquake opens all the prison doors and releases all the chains on prisoners while Paul and Silas are singing hymns.

However, no one escapes. When the jailer finds the doors all opened, he wants to commit suicide to avoid the shame and punishment that will come from

having failed his duty, but Paul quickly shows him that no prisoner has left.

Just because no prisoner escapes does not mean that there is no captive who is set free. The irony here is that it is the *jailer* who is set free! Upon seeing the miracle of the prison being opened and yet seeing that the prisoners had not left, the jailer asks the question, “What must I do to be saved?”

Paul replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” After he washed the wounds of Paul and Silas, he and his whole household were in turn washed in the waters of baptism. The man who had imprisoned Paul and Silas now hosted them in his own home for a feast – while his household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. A man who had not known God, a man who was about to take his life – had been set free and was now a member of the body of Christ!

They become a model for Luke’s readers for how we can serve God’s will and how God can use us as vessels of divine grace even when we are in dire straits. Often, we think of stewardship and service in terms of giving and working out of our abundance – a proper perspective, but only when we understand abundance correctly. We should not think of our abundance in materialistic or prosperity terms. Instead, we should think of the abundance of God’s grace, filling our lives with meaning and purpose even in times when it seems everything is against us.

The ways we experience being imprisoned in contemporary life are many and varied. They are physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. They are real and can be

very powerful. But they do not have the ultimate word over our lives. That word is reserved for the God to whom we pray and of whom we sing in good times and bad, the God revealed to us not only in the resurrection but also in the cross of Jesus Christ. The word that God speaks is like an earthquake reminding us of our baptismal vocation that includes loving both our neighbours and our enemies, even those who would keep us captive.

Leaving Philippi, Paul and his companions travelled to Thessalonica, then on to Berea, and finally Athens. The gospel reached a number of important cities. From a political standpoint, the three most important cities were Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. Jerusalem was the religious capital and centre of the Jewish world. That was where the temple was and where the high priests lived. It was the religious centre of Judaism. Rome was the political capital of the world. Its dominance was obvious because of its political and military structure, which governed the whole ancient world. But Athens, with a population of about a hundred thousand, was still the cultural capital. Even though the Greek empire established by Alexander the Great had given way to the Romans, the culture, language, and religion of the day were still largely Greek. That is why most of our New Testament was originally written in Greek.

Athens was a city full of idols. Its most prominent feature was the Parthenon. Below the Parthenon was the agora, the marketplace. Around the perimeter of the market stood the Greek gods – hundreds of idols sculpted in stone. From early morning to late night Athenians worshipped their idols. Each family had an altar to

Zeus to protect their home. A pillar was dedicated to Apollo to protect family members. They kept and daily fed a non-poisonous snake representing Zeus. At every meal, food was offered to Hestia, the spirit of the hearth. Whenever wine was served, some was offered to “Agathos Daimon” – the good demon.

Paul’s spiritual frustration pushed him as he set out to influence this city for Christ. He reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, but was also out in the marketplace speaking with anyone present. Some would like to spend their time reasoning with the religious establishment. But Paul was not content with just that. He went out into the marketplace daily, speaking with the shopping public who knew nothing about the gospel. Paul cast the net of the gospel widely and waited to see what God would do. From around the four sides of the market, the Greek idol gods looked on, expressionless, motionless, and silent. But Paul was witnessing there every day about Jesus and the resurrection.

Athens was a city full of idols, philosophers, and intellectuals. Three centuries before, founders of western thought had lived here: Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Contrasting philosophies had developed. The Stoics believed one should submit patiently to whatever fate might bring with self-control. They acknowledged an impersonal and unalterable higher power, following the teaching of Socrates and Zeno. The Epicureans, on the other hand, believed that there was nothing outside this life, so one may as well “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”. The Stoics called the Epicureans atheists. Both groups adhered to Greek mythology and worshipped the gods.

Paul's life demonstrates the good qualities of both these philosophies. Like the Stoics, he showed how to be brave in all kinds of conflict. At the same time, Paul had much joy and happiness in his life. His joy is what the Epicureans were looking for. He got this joy not from indulging in the things of the flesh, but rather from living life under the influence of God's Holy Spirit. His theme was "rejoice in the Lord."

The Epicureans and the Stoics shared a common reaction to the gospel. As Paul spoke of Jesus and the resurrection, these philosophers drew near, asking, "What is this babbler trying to say?" "Babbler" from the original Greek, literally means "seed picker." In the Agora, the marketplace, the seed pickers were those who wandered around picking up scraps or seeds that the merchants had dropped. Apart from the demeaning accusation of being a "seed-picker", the charge against Paul was that he was "proclaiming strange deities". The word "deities" here is the Greek daimonion, which can be translated "demons".

The Acropolis is the top of a massive rock hill above the agora. It was the site of religious shrines and sacred structures, including the Parthenon. This gigantic temple had already existed for nearly five hundred years. Near this temple was the powerful Athenian court called the Areopagus. It exerted its influence over all of Greece. Under Roman rule, it did not have political power, but was recognized as a place to hear disputes in regard to morals, ethics, philosophies and religion. Just as the Jewish Sanhedrin was dominated by Scribes and Pharisees, the Areopagus was dominated by Epicureans and Stoics. So Paul was taken into the Areopagus and challenged to present his new teaching about the gospel.

As usual, Paul was able to seize the moment. Even though he was, in a sense, on trial here, he used the opportunity to turn the tables. Before he was done, those who were to be his judges were themselves on trial, found guilty and told to repent!

Paul was dealing with Greek philosophers. They might have known some Jewish history, but the Old Testament was not among their points of reference. They would have had little knowledge of the Jewish anticipation of a coming Messiah, so Paul had to find a different point of contact, a reference point from which he could begin the discussion. He did not refer to the Scriptures, the Law, or the prophets. His first appeal was to general revelation – that is, the things that were intuitively known about God from creation and reason.

As Paul walked the agora, he had seen the hundreds of stone idols lining the marketplace. Underneath one of these gods was a peculiar inscription: “to an unknown god”. Several hundred years before Paul ever got to Athens, a plague had killed many of the Athenians. In order to stem the plague, the people made sacrifices to every god they knew. When the plague continued, a soothsayer from Crete advised the Athenians that this particular plague came from a god they did not know. If they would sacrifice to him, the plague would be removed. When they made the sacrifice to this unknown God, the plague suddenly subsided. As a result, a statue was erected to the unknown God.

Paul began his defence by offering a greeting to the Athenian audience and

acknowledging that he recognizes how religious they are. This element of praise is meant to encourage a positive hearing from the audience. He makes a connection with them in this way and sets up the unique claim he wants to make that will challenge their religious worldview. Paul used the inscription to the “unknown god” and began to tell them about the One True God. He said, “This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.”

Paul continues with a general revelation – what they know about god already through conscience, observation, or reason. While he acknowledges they may have, at one point, worshipped the true God, Paul is quick to correct their mistaken perceptions of him. He is not a god made with hands, nor one of many gods. He cannot be worshipped in a temple made with human hands. But after talking about general revelations, and their misconceptions of the true God, Paul quickly moves on to special revelation, which is what can only be known about God if someone explains it to us and God reveals it to us. That is the gospel, about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Then, Paul argues that the one about whom he is “babbling” is actually this God they fail to know. Were he preaching to Jews or God-fearers, Paul could have referred to Jewish traditions and quote Jewish scripture to support his argument. Instead, he speaks of God as creator in a way that would have been familiar and acceptable to his audience. He quotes two Greek philosophers affirming we, all humanity, is this God’s offspring. This assertion serves to set up Paul’s critique of the very material objects of worship he previously praised. The centerpiece of the

speech then is a gentle condemnation of idolatry.

The speech concludes with a call for the audience to repent in preparation for the judgment by the one appointed by God. Proof that this man is the appointed judge is that God raised him from the dead. Notice that while Paul condemned idolatry and called for repentance, he did not specifically condemn his hearers. This may seem like a game of semantics, but it is not. There is a vast difference between rejecting something another holds dear and rejecting the person.

We live in a day of religious pluralism. We live in a day of “spiritual but not religious”. We live in a day of an individualized, privatized cafeteria approach to picking and choosing what we “like” from different religious, political, and philosophical worldviews, often in ways that contain no logical consistency. We live in Luke’s version of Athens. Paul’s Areopagus speech, then, offers a helpful analogy for how the church should live in this new day. Simply saying the church is *in* but not *of* the world may not be enough.

The manner of the church’s engagement with the world modelled in this passage is one in which the church respects society and different expressions of it and speaks to the world on terms the world will respect. It recognizes good religious intent and desire in society. Still, however, the church presents its own unique faith for others to consider, offering an invitation for those interested and willing to join us. It is no wonder this passage has been so heavily used by the church through the years as a model for apologetics and evangelism.

Some in the audience scoffed at Paul's words, some were interested in hearing more from him, and some joined him becoming believers. Implicitly, these lines describe the way the church should respond to the variety of responses our message gets in the world. Note that Paul does not condemn those who do not convert. He simply leaves. Luke does not say he left in a huff, so much as he simply indicates it was time for Paul to move on, and so he did.

We should not expect our faith to resonate with all those with whom we share it, and it is not our place to condemn those who choose a different path. We welcome in those who desire to join us and hopefully open ourselves to further conversation with those willing to engage us again.

Amen.