

“LIGHT PENETRATING THE HEART OF DARKNESS”

Acts 17:16-21

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INTRODUCTION

Athens was “the mother of Arts and Eloquence” and was a city of “studious walks and shades” (Bruce, Gk. Text, 331). It was “the cradle of democracy” (p. 331). It had attained a leading status among Greek city-states in the 5th century BC when it led resistance against the Persian invasions. The city was at the height of its power between 478 and 431 BC. It suffered defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War between 431-404 BC, but soon regained prominence. In the 4th century and led in resisting Philip’s advance; but after Philip won at Chaeronea in 338 BC, Philip was generous in his treatment of Athens and permitted the city to keep much of its freedom. The Romans conquered Greece in 146 BC but also dealt generously with the city; Athens still had its “own institutions as a free and allied city within the Empire” (Bruce, 331). Though a “free city,” the Demos or People, did not really have the authority like they did in Thessalonica and Ephesus (Rack. P. 302). The ancient Areopagus still had authority in the areas allowed by Rome (see below).

Paul was there about 49 or 50 AD. Athens was not politically significant at this time; however it was the “university seat” and philosophical capital “of the world.” *Imagine Paul, the Jew of Tarsus confronting the city of “Pericles and Demosthenes, Socrates and Plato [native city of the latter two] and Aristotle [his adopted city], Sophocles and Euripides. In its Agora Socrates had taught, here was the Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle, the Porch of Zeno, the Garden of Epicurus. Here men still talked about philosophy, poetry, politics, religion, anything and everything. It was the art centre of the world. The Parthenon, the most beautiful of temples, crowned the Acropolis”* (Robertson, p. 277). It was also the religious capital of the world—being the stronghold of Greek mythology. The poets of Athens had given its local religious sanctuaries such renown around the world, and the artists had filled the streets and temples with images of its gods. The city was like one large altar, sacrifice, and offering to the gods! (Rackham, 302) Their Areopagus was a kind of Sanhedrin for Hellenism (p. 302). When conquered, “Athens led her captors captive” (R. 303) and Athens “became the university of the empire” of Rome. Its streets were lined with students from around the world. Royal families from both east and west competed to see who could bestow the most honor or wealth upon Athens. Even Herod the Great made numerous offerings or dedications to the city. Philo, the Jewish philosopher was enthusiastic about Platonic philosophy.

Philosophers were turning from abstract search for truth and the meaning of existence to the more practical “application of moral philosophy.” This led to more interest in the teachings of Stoicism and Epicureanism; their primary aim was “practical and ethical” and focused on “the blessed life.” At this time these were the only two philosophies that really had much vitality.

Paul was not insensitive to all of this, and he does make allusion to Greek writers. Maybe Paul did not have original plans to evangelize this city, but trouble in Macedonia had driven him here in the providence of God. While waiting for his companions, and while carefully observing the city, his provoked spirit led him to begin evangelizing.

Culture, literature, poetry, art, sculpture, religious architecture and beautiful images, philosophy—Athens had it all. Surely God must be impressed with all of this, right? Surely Paul would be overwhelmed with it all! Instead, we read that Paul was **provoked in his spirit** as he was beholding the city full of idols.

We need to view our world the way God does. **Athens was “the heart of darkness”** and the Gospel of Jesus Christ was about to confront it. It isn’t that Paul did not appreciate the beauties of Athens. It isn’t that he had never been exposed to culture and education and the arts—He was from Tarsus, no mean city itself and a large and very important university town! He saw what was really important. He saw life from the **divine perspective—do you?**

Athens had the greatest philosophers and religious teachers in the world; the whole world fawned over the culture of Athens. Even her conquerors worshiped at her altars! But God had a different perspective:

“For all the Athenians and strangers who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new [newer] thing.” (v. 21)

God was not impressed. Are you impressed with what this world has to offer?

- *The latest spectacular movie*
- *The latest technology*
- *The newest work of art, sculpture, novel, poem, philosophical view etc.*

How impressed are you with this world?

You must have God’s perspective on this world and live your life for Christ and be consumed with Him!

In this passage we see The Divine Provocation, The Devoted Preaching, The Deviant Philosophers, and The Diligent Apology.

I. THE DIVINE PROVOCATION (16; cf. **Ezek. 3:14**)

Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him (v. 15) after the brethren of Berea had quickly enabled his escape and had escorted him to Athens (vv. 14-15).

- **Paul being alone in Athens was the first time during either the first or second missionary journeys.**
- At first his intention may have been to take in all the sights and sounds of the city—it was an amazing city! He was doing some careful observation—meaning of the verb.
- However, he could not help but observe that the majority of the “culture” of Athens was connected with **idolatry**—and God’s evaluation of idolatry is found in **Rom 1:21-23**. He did not confuse the mere works of art with idols—he knew the difference! **The idolatry and sensualism of it all glared at him (Rom. 1:18-32)**” (Robertson, p. 278).
- *It is far too easy for us to absorb the culture about us instead of combating it.* Compare also I Cor. 10:20—“They sacrifice to demons and not to God.”
- Pausanias says that Athens had more images than all the rest of Greece put together. Pliny states that in the time of Nero Athens had over 30,000 public statues besides countless private ones in the homes. Petronius sneers that it was **easier to find a god than a man in Athens**. Every gateway or porch had its protecting god. They lined the

street from the Piraeus and caught the eye at every place of prominence on wall or in the agora (pp. 278-79).

- The word *provoked* is a very strong word; its only other NT use is I Cor. 13:5; see the noun form in 15:39 of the “paroxysm” between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark.
- “Full of idols” occurs only here—like a forest “full of trees”!

But note that Paul’s provocation did not paralyze him—it pushed him to action: He began preaching and reasoning with the residents of the city.

II. THE DEVOTED PREACHING (17)

Athens was an example of Paul’s statement: “in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God” (I Cor. 1:21).

- A. With the Jews in the synagogue (17a) [“reasoning”—same word as v. 2 and often in this section in Macedonia and Greece.] Not likely many Jews in this city.
- B. With the “God-fearers”—Gentiles, *Proselytes of the Gate*, as in other cities.
- C. With the other citizens—Gentiles all, both common people and Philosophers themselves.
 - Note that he went to the “marketplace”—the **agora**, the **FAMOUS AGORA OF ATHENS**. The agora is west of the Acropolis and southwest of the Areopagus where cultural, political, and economic activities took place. Compare the agora of Philippi (16:19) and the wicked men of the agora in Thessalonica in 17:5-6.
 - Around the agora were the public buildings and the temples, its “senate-house, town-hall, and law-courts” (R. 309). Also there were “stoas or porticoes, i.e. *porches* or colonnades, which were used for exchanges or places of concourse; and the rest of the circuit would be filled up with shops.” 1) Shops would be active all morning with country people, merchants, business men, buyers and sellers etc. 2) People would be there to handle civic business with the magistrates and other civic workers. (309). 3) Idlers and gossips would fill the area at all times when they had no other business to transact—whether those of the more sophisticated class or the rabble. 4) There would be those there who desired an audience to communicate their messages: “philosophers and travelling rhetoricians, or charlatans and quacks. Such teachers or declaimers, if they came to stay, would take up their station in some porch and there gather round them a body of disciples. Of all the agoras of Greece most famous was that of Athens.”
 - Rackham speaks of some of the famous sites in the Athens agora (p. 309):
The Senate house, The Temple of Zeus Eleutherius (the god of freedom)
“The Stoa Basilica (royal porch) where the Archon Basileus held his sessions and where the court of the Areopagus frequently met”
“A gymnasium built by Ptolemy Philadelphus king of Egypt”
“A porch built by an Attalus king of Pergamum”
The Painted Porch of Zeno of Citium covered with frescoes done by Polygnotus.
 - He did this day after day—for an extended period.
 - With whomever “happened to be there”-- These would be casual listeners.
 - Paul could not be silent with such prevalent idolatry all around. The borders of the Agora varied, but Paul could have used the *Poikile Stoa* (“Painted Porch”) to the

west of the Acropolis; there 'Zeno and other philosophers and rhetoricians held forth from time to time. Paul may have stood near this spot" (Robertson, 279).

III. THE DEVIANT PHILOSOPHERS (18)

- A. **Their identification:** Epicurian and Stoic—the two most popular and relevant forms of philosophy in the first century Roman Empire. Though unified in their desires for argumentation and in their disdain for Paul, these groups were very different—and in fact rivals, “succeeding the more abstruse theories of Plato and Aristotle.

[STOICS] Zeno (340-265 BC) “taught in the *Stoa Poikile* (Porch) and so his teaching was called Stoicism.” Bruce shows that Stoicism at its best is “marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty” (Gk. Txt. p. 332). His many noble ideas were advanced by such philosophers as Seneca, Marcus Aurelius. “Duty, law, and virtue were their favorite conceptions; virtue for its own sake their doctrine. However, Zeno stressed “self-mastery and hardness with an austerity that ministered to pride or suicide in case of failure, a distinctly selfish and unloving view of life and with a **pantheistic** philosophy” (p. 280). Rackham shows that Stoicism “was the nurse of pride and rigidity. It was not a religion for the vulgar; from them the philosopher stood apart in self-sufficing and contemptuous exclusiveness” (p. 306).

Bruce shows that Stoicism “aimed at living consistently or according to nature.” Reason was the highest expression of nature. Though Stoicism had a strong belief in God and in spirit, God was the “world soul”; a creative “word of God” pervades the universe and even the human spirit; thus the system was thoroughly pantheistic. Both the human and divine soul consisted of “refined matter”, so their system was as materialistic as was Epicurianism. At times all the universe, including human spirits, “will be reabsorbed into the fire of the divine spirit” (p. 304).

Some similarities between Stoics and Christians:

- The universal presence of God
- Divine predestination
- The city of God
- The brotherhood of man [only in Christ; more broadly through creation]
- The ideal of the wise man
- A doctrine of joy after virtuous activity
- It helped prepare “a moral ground for Christianity.”

The poem of W. E. Henley called *Invictus* well expresses the thoughts of the Stoics:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. [Quoted in Bruce, *NIC*, p. 350]

[EPICURIANS] Epicurus (341-270 BC) based his theory on “the atomic theory of Democritus” (Bruce, Gk. 332) and promoted practical atheism and denied a future life; pleasure was the “chief thing to be gotten out of life.” Even the human soul consisted of atoms. Atoms continued to exist at death, but personal existence did not. The best pleasure was a “life of tranquility (*avtaraxia*), free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears” (Gk. Text, 332). He believed that the gods were really not concerned about the affairs of men since they lived in “eternal calm in intermundane spaces.” (Gk. Text, 332) This theology resembles modern **Deism** or materialism. Stoics called him an atheist. His view of life was set forth in the poems of Lucretius and Horace. Though Epicurus was far from a mere sensualist, such a view of life often led to “sensualism” as it still does today: “Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Lucretius has “the best known exposition of Epicureanism” in his *De Rerum Natura* (Gk. Txt., 332). Epicurians frequented the Garden of Epicurus in Athens.

The real ideal was not exactly pleasure, but happiness, “which he found in freedom from the distractions of life and in which the enlightened pleasures of the mind and of social intercourse form the chief ingredients.” It can be said to be the ancient form of modern utilitarianism (Rackham, 304). Theories of physical science or of the universe were studied only to deliver their followers from “popular superstitions and the fear of death” (R. p. 304). As far as society, they regarded **friendship** very highly as one of life’s greatest pleasures and a large factor in his happiness. Rackham summarizes:

- The Epicurian was the Utilitarian.
- “The practical common-sense man of the world, the philosopher who could make the best out of circumstances.”
- Skepticism concerning God.
- The “Sadducees” of Hellenism—lawlessness, i.e. “freedom from arbitrary restrictions.”
- Suited the Greek temperament well (Harrison, 267).
- Their philosophy did help to undermine the “prevailing acceptance of a gross and crude mythology.” It also provided an alternative to “a paralyzing fatalism” in their doctrine of “the freedom of man’s will” (Knowling, 366).

Bruce quotes another poem, this one by A. C. Swinburne entitled *The Garden of Proserpine* which expresses “distinctively Epicurean” ideas:

From too much love of living,
 From hope and fear set free,
 We thank with brief thanksgiving
 Whatever gods may be
 That no life lives forever;
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.

This is likely a **new experience for Paul**. These philosophers “had a natural contempt for all Jews and for rabbis in particular”—yet Paul presented a different take. But Paul **was up to the task!**

- Paul was raised in Jerusalem—the world’s religious capital.
- Ended his life in the political capital—Rome.
- Here he spends time in its philosophical capital.
- But, Athens was “a body without a soul” and its people “were a degenerate people who lived upon the glories of their past and by flattering their masters” (Rackham, 306). Luke’s attitude toward them is seen in v. 21: **“Their one aim in life was to satisfy their vanity by the display of originality, and their curiosity by the hearing of some novelty.”**

B. **Their Activity**—“conversing” or “disputing” with Paul. Such professional philosophers were always ready for argumentation and quarreling; they “frequented the agora for that purpose.

C. **Their evaluation of Paul**

1. Some (maybe Epicurian as well as the general crowd) called him **A SEEDPICKER** “If he had something worth saying, which he doesn’t, what would he say? If we were even of a mind to listen to him! This was some **Athenian slang** for use concerning Paul. The word is similar to the word “marketplace men” of v. 5 in its implications. They accused Paul of “parading his pickings without having been able to digest them himself” (R. 310). Paul, they felt, “was quite outside any literary circle, an ignorant, vulgar plagiarist” (K., p 367).
2. Others thought him to be “a proclaimer of **strange deities**: Jesus and the Resurrection.”
3. Rackham shows that these cities were very tolerant of other deities unless they seemed to infringe upon their special native “tutelary deities” (R. p. 310). Their worship was bound up with the welfare of the city itself! If they did not keep such rites or if they were distracted to follow some other strange deities, their city could suffer—it could be “treason” to their gods. Thus the public nature of the concern over religious issues: whether at Rome (the Senate) or at Athens (the Areopagus). This is why Socrates had been condemned to death on this charge—he said the city’s gods were “no gods” and introduced “new deities.” Many new religions had been introduced to Athens in recent years—but they were tolerant of other deities and did not threaten the city’s native worship. But, as they would find out, Christianity was different and did require exclusive adherence. God is a “jealous God.” But see comments below.

IV. THE DILIGENT APOLOGY (19-21)

- A. Paul taken for an Initial Inquiry—not an Official Trial [no sentence passed, no witnesses called, etc.]
- B. The Areopagus could be either:
1. The famous Hill of the Areopagus in Greece (**Mars Hill** in Roman language) which was often used by the ancient and famous Athens court and tribunal also called the Areopagus.
 2. The Governing body itself by that name that often met in the Agora itself esp. in the Stoa Basilica (royal porch).
 3. The language of the text favors #2—note v. 22 where Paul “stood in the midst of the Areopagus”—how does one stand “in the midst” of a hill? Also v. 33 where Paul “went out of their midst.” Also, the hill was not very spacious for such a large gathering.
- C. The Gentle Inquiry: “May we know what this **new teaching is?**”(v. 19)—far too polite for a strict trial. Note also the reference to “some strange things” for their “ears” and “we want to know what these things mean.” (v. 20) Twice they ask to **KNOW.**
- This is **significant in light of Paul’s terms “unknown” in v. 23 and “ignorance” in v. 23.** “The supposed leaders in the realm of knowledge were sadly in need of being informed.” “In Athens . . . the solid quest for truth which was the glory of the ancient philosophers, had largely given way to a passion for novelty, at least on the part of the population as a whole” (Harrison, p. 269).
- D. The Athenian Thirst of **SOMETHING NEW—literally “newer.”** (v. 21)
1. A Habit of All the Athenians and of the resident strangers (cf. our “winter residents”).
 2. They “used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new”!
 3. *How much does this sound like our contemporary quest for:*
 - More technology of all kinds
 - More corruption and pornography and sexual perversion
 - More forms of entertainment and media expressions
 - More forms of gaming—gambling.
 - More forms of video games.
 - More forms of sports and more ways to watch sports.
 - **When will we get enough?**
 - **Is the quest for something NEW limited to ancient Athens?**

CONCLUSION

“A crucial moment in world history had come, as a Jew faced a cultivated Greek audience and discoursed on that which could bring them together. Basic to true religion is a right understanding of God, an issue which Greek philosophy had wrestled with but had failed to resolve, because it lacked specific, divine revelation. Paul’s line of thought moved majestically from God to man and then to the God-man who must become the focal point of faith if a right relationship to God is to be achieved” (Harrison, 269).

In this passage we have seen The Divine Provocation, The Devoted Preaching, The Deviant Philosophers, and The Diligent Apology.

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