

# **CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian  
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

## **DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 18 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 17**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Paul's first missionary trip, which took him and his team through Salamis, Paphos (Cyprus), Perga (Pamphylia), Antioch (Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (Lycaonia) was a great success despite the oppositions and the stoning in Lystra. Paul had established churches in these cities. In his second missionary trip, he revisited Derbe and Lystra where he met Timothy whom he recruited into his team. His second visit to these churches evidenced the strengthening of the faith among the believers and the Lord increased the number of believers daily. His intention to penetrate into Bithynia on the eastern border was forbidden by the Holy Spirit. Instead, he and his team were directed to the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. His ministry in Philippi was dramatic and successful. Lydia, the seller of garments, was converted and opened her home for Christians to worship. When Paul and Silas were wrongly imprisoned, they led the jailer and family into the kingdom of God.

This chapter records the continuation of Paul's missionary trip in Macedonia. Paul's next stop was Thessalonica, Berea, and then to Athens. In these cities, Paul dealt with God's promise of a coming Messiah and

the religion and philosophy of the Gentiles. Paul needed to dispel the idea held by some people that the Christian gospel had a political agenda aimed at subverting the government of the day. As in the other missionary trip, there were violent oppositions. Paul and his missionary brethren behaved themselves very well. If Paul and his Christian brethren had to protect their Christian faith by violence and the law, then their faith is very insecure.

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **Paul in Thessalonica**

Paul and his team travelled along the great Roman road, the *Via Egnatia*, from Philippi to Amphipolis which was 33 miles south, and passing through that city to Apollonia, a further 30 miles south. From Apollonia they travelled another 37 miles to Thessalonica (today Saloniki). Thessalonica was a large and an important commercial city. The Roman proconsul resided there. It had a large Jewish community and therefore there was a synagogue.<sup>1</sup> Paul was obviously directed by the Holy Spirit to visit a synagogue in this strategic centre. He stayed three weeks in the city and reasoned with the Jews and Jewish proselytes. Paul shared with them that despite the ill treatment he and his team received in Philippi, they were not afraid to preach and contend with them the gospel of God.<sup>2</sup> He taught and debated with them why the man

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<sup>1</sup> Saloniki still has a large population of

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:1 For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain: 2 But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention.

Jesus must die and rise again from the dead, and that He is the Christ (to the Jews, the Messiah). Paul's preaching and teaching for three Sabbaths were effective. It resulted in some Jews believing the gospel message, and a great number of devout proselyte Greeks believed too. Among them were quite a number of prominent ladies of the city. A reading of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians shows that Paul covered all the great truths of the Gospel.

But the unbelieving Jews were envious. They stirred "certain lewd fellows of the baser sort" (the idle and dangerous classes) who were always ready for mischief and rioting, to create disturbance in the city. They marched to the house of Jason intending to drag Paul and Silas out to the people. It was possible that Paul and Silas had wind of their intention and left Jason's house. When the rioters failed to find the missionaries, they dragged Jason to the "rulers" (magistrates) instead. They charged him for receiving the missionaries who had "turned the world upside down" and who taught the people to oppose the decrees of Caesar by saying that there was another king named Jesus (v.6). These rioters kept on chanting these false charges before the people and the magistrates. Jason and his friends were given bail as a guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city and not come back lest there be further disturbance. (Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians referred to this ban on him from returning to the city, as the work of Satan.<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. 18 Wherefore we would

Consequently, the Christian brethren sent Paul and Silas away that very night. The missionaries left Thessalonica.

### **Paul in Berea**

Paul and Silas came to Berea, another important commercial city. It had also a large Jewish population. Paul found and entered a synagogue where he preached and taught about the man Jesus and that He is the promised Messiah or the Christ of God. He died and rose again from the dead. Luke, the writer, mentioned that the Bereans were "more noble" than the Thessalonians. It means that they were noble in character. They readily gave Paul and Silas a hearing but not without diligently searching the Scriptures daily to prove whether the things that were being taught by the missionaries were scripturally true. The result was that many believed and among the believers, there were also many honourable Greek men and women. Paul's missionary work in Berea was successful. But the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica came to hear of Paul's presence and successful work in Berea. Once again, motivated by jealousy, they went to Berea to stir up the people. They were actually opposing the work of God. The Christian brethren in Berea immediately sent Paul away. Paul must have instructed Silas and Timothy to remain in Berea to encourage the brethren there. Paul left by sea to Athens and sent a note through the brethren to ask Silas and Timothy to join him at Athens as soon as they could.

### **Paul in Athens**

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have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.

Paul arrived in Athens. While he was in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to come, his heart was deeply moved. He was greatly distressed by the degree and extent of idolatry in the city. The city was full of idols. It was said that there were more idols than men in Athens. Therefore, he began to teach in the synagogue. As usual, he taught that the promised Messiah was Jesus Christ who must suffer and die, and rise again from the dead. Paul also preached in the market place daily with people who met with him. The market place was called the “agora”, a beautiful open space with colonnades and fountains. It was usually crowded with gossiping idlers and strangers from all parts of the world to study in Athens. The city was the centre of Greek science, art and philosophy. It was the great learning centre of the Roman world. People were more interested in gratifying their intellectual curiosity. Among the philosophers were the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The Epicurean philosophers postulate that nature is the supreme thing. They are atheists who believe there is no God. Death to them means the end of everything. There is neither judgement nor punishment after death, nor is there life to come. Materialism is their main doctrine and the chief aim of man is to enjoy life to the fullest. They strive to live a quiet life, which is free from fear, pain and anger, and a life of enjoyment of sensual pleasures. The Stoic philosophers postulate “whatever will be, will be”. They hold to the idea of fatalism. They therefore encourage their followers to accept and submit to the laws of nature and conscience. They try to be indifferent to pleasure and pain as well as joy and grief. They believe that man must maintain calmness of

mind and heart in all circumstances and situations, especially bad ones. They are expected to suffer pain without complaining, control their emotions, and accept whatever should happen to them philosophically. Pleasure to them is unacceptable. They lived a very Spartan life.

Some Epicureans and Stoics philosophers met Paul. They engaged with him concerning his teaching on Jesus and His resurrection. They were proud of their philosophies and were quite insulting when they called Paul a “babbler” (a foolish and empty talker). Nevertheless, they took Paul to the “Aeropagus”, which was the highest court or council in Athens. It was situated on Mars Hill, a rocky ridge facing the Acropolis. These Athenian philosophers asked Paul concerning his teaching.

### **Sermon on Mars Hill**

Paul stood on Mars Hill and addressed his distinguished hearers. Paul began on a positive note. He told the Athenians that they were somewhat “too superstitious” – a better translation would be “too religious”. Paul was not insulting them but stated it as a fact, which he observed. The first thing that Paul singled out of paramount importance was “God” whom the Athenians admitted that they were ignorant of. Paul declared Him to them as the Creator of the world and everything therein. Paul also declared that God is the “Lord”, the supreme and sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth. He then mentioned that God does not live in temples made by men as though men’s worship of God means that God needs them. Paul stated to the contrary and declared that God actually is the Giver of life and breath to all men and

things (vv.22-25). Paul continued to declare that God made men of all nationalities. Athenians were but one of the different peoples. They were all made of the same blood to live on earth, and the boundaries of their dwelling were already determined.

Paul then directed the thrust of his sermon to the Athenians. In view of whom God is, their natural response should be to seek the Lord and hopefully they might “feel after Him, and find Him” for He was not far from every one of them. Paul further stressed that man’s life, movement and existence revolved around God. Paul even quoted the words of some of their poets stating that “for we are also his offspring” (v. 28).

Paul took this cue and urged the Athenians to change their thinking about God being like gold, or silver, or stone carved by men’s skilfulness. They were ignorant and God had overlooked their ignorance. But now that God had declared to them the truth, they should repent because God had appointed a day in which Jesus would judge the world righteously and He had confirmed this truth by raising Jesus from the dead. When the Athenians heard of the resurrection of the dead, some straightaway mocked him. But others desired to hear him again. Paul stopped and left them. We are reminded of the Lord Jesus Christ’s words (Matthew 7:6): *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.* Nevertheless, some men were convicted and firmly believed Paul. One was Dionysius, who was a member of the Council of Aeropagus, and another was a woman named Damaris.

## PRACTICAL VALUE

Is the Christian gospel a political programme aimed at subverting the government of any country? There are people, like some in Thessalonica, who would instigate the people to think that the proponents of the Christian Faith were politically motivated. In most of the cases, we observe that the accusers trumped up false charges against Christian missionaries for teaching the people to oppose the established government. Christians need to defend their faith by boldly reaffirming their intent and purpose for preaching and teaching the gospel message that is for the good of the people spiritually. At the same time, they need to promote loyalty and responsible citizenship among the people and for the people. Paul and Silas and their missionary team had proven that they were for the good of the people. Actually, the opponents and agitators of Christians are themselves the real culprits and enemies of society.

Once again, Christians must be prepared to endure oppositions, physical attacks and harm, and even imprisonment for the cause of Christ. These happened to Paul and his missionary team in the two evangelistic missions, which they undertook beyond Israel and Antioch, Syria. If possible, we try to avoid any ugly confrontation that is not helpful or beneficial. At the same time, there is no let down in the preaching and teaching of the gospel truth.

An encouraging note in all faithful and genuine Christian efforts to spread the gospel of salvation is that there will always be good results. God is behind the preaching and teaching of His Word for the good of the people. He will bless and bring about the good results as we

have seen that some believed after the preaching of Paul in Thessalonica, Berea and Athens. These believers eventually formed the church in their locality and carried on the work of witnessing Christ to their fellow countrymen.

The Bereans exemplify the need for every Christian to study and search the Scriptures. In this way, they could not be easily deluded by false preachers and teachers of the Word. How important it is for every Christian to embark on a systematic study of the Word of God. Every Christian should set up a time for such a spiritual exercise on a daily basis just as one has set aside time for his breakfast, lunch and dinner.

In Paul's address to the Athenians, he made a significant point that the religious beliefs of the Athenians were not the truth. In this regard, the adherents of the various religions in the world today, though sincere and some even militantly faithful, do not have the truth. In other words, sincerity does not prove truth at all. Paul, on the other hand, demonstrated that there is only one true and living God whose Son is the Lord Jesus Christ. If God had raised Jesus Christ from the dead and is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and all mankind, then people must repent and turn from idols to worship and serve the one living and true God just as the Thessalonians did.<sup>4</sup>

Paul preached and taught his fellow Jews who were conversant with the Old Testament and also the pagan Gentiles who were ignorant of the living and true God. In this chapter, Paul's address to the Athenians serves as a model for evangelism especially to those who have no religious background or are uninformed. We learn that the first and most important thing to establish about accepting the gospel message, is that the existence of God has to be clearly and properly understood. Everything hangs on the fact that there is God and that He is the Creator of all, and that He has appointed a day when He will judge all men, some to eternal bliss and some to eternal damnation. If this truth is not acknowledged and accepted, there is no point to carry on telling more of the gospel message. Paul was tactful in his opening statement to the Athenians to catch their attention. He managed to hold their attention until the mention of the resurrection of the dead, when the Athenians became sceptical. But not all was lost, for some believed. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:8 For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. 9 For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; 10 And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom

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he raised from the dead, *even* Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Daily Readings**

**Monday:** Acts 17:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

**Tuesday:** Acts 17:4-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13.

**Wednesday:** Acts 17:10-15; 2 Timothy 2:14-16.

**Thursday:** Acts 17:16-21; Psalm 115:1-18.

**Friday:** Acts 17:22-34; 2 Timothy 4:2-5.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why are sinners against the preaching of the gospel? In other words, what is so offensive about the gospel?

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2. What can we learn from the Bereans in dealing with the new and startling teaching?

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3. Why can't sincerity be used to determine truth? What is the function of sincerity in the believer's life?

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4. What did the cultured men think of Paul, and why?

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5. How did Paul show sympathy and tact in the opening words of his speech?

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6. What did Paul say about God in relation to the universe and to man?

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7. What did Paul say about the current duty of man and why?

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