

CHAPTER 17

We have here a further account of the travels of Paul, and his services and sufferings for Christ. He was not like a candle upon a table, that gives light only to one room, but like the sun that goes its circuit to give light to many. He was called into Macedonia, a large kingdom, ~~4466~~ Acts 16:9. He began with Philippi, because it was the first city he came to; but he must not confine himself to this. We have him here,

I. Preaching and persecuted at Thessalonica, another city of Macedonia (v. 1-9).

II. Preaching at Berea, where he met with an encouraging auditory, but was driven thence also by persecution (v. 10-15).

III. Disputing at Athens, the famous university of Greece (v. 16-21), and the account he gave of natural religion, for the conviction of those that were addicted to polytheism and idolatry, and to lead them to the Christian religion (v. 22-31), together with the success of this sermon (v. 32-34).

~~4470~~ ACTS 17:1-9

PAUL AND SILAS AT THESSALONICA

Paul's two epistles to the Thessalonians, the first two he wrote by inspiration, give such a shining character of that church, that we cannot but be glad here in the history to meet with an account of the first founding of the church there.

I. Here is Paul's coming to Thessalonica, which was the chief city of this country, called at this day *Salonech*, in the Turkish dominions. Observe,

1. Paul went on with his work, notwithstanding the ill usage he had met with at Philippi; he did not fail, nor was discouraged. He takes notice of this in his first epistle to the church here (~~5186~~ 1 Thessalonians 2:2): *After we were shamefully treated at Philippi, yet we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God.* The opposition and persecution that he met with made him the more resolute. Note of these things moved him; he

could never have held out, and held on, as he did, if he had not been animated by a spirit of power from on high.

2. He did but *pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia*, the former a city near Philippi, the latter near Thessalonica; doubtless he was under divine direction, and was told by the Spirit (who, as the wind, bloweth where he listeth) what places he should pass through, and what he should rest in. Apollonia was a city of Illyricum, which, some think, illustrates that of Paul, that he had preached the gospel *from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum* (⁴⁵⁹Romans 15:19), that is, to the borders of Illyricum where he now was; and we may suppose though he is said only to *pass through* these cities, yet that he staid so long in them as to publish the gospel there, and to prepare the way for the entrance of other ministers among them, whom he would afterwards send.

II. His preaching to the Jews first, in their synagogue at Thessalonica. He found a synagogue of the Jews there (v. 1), which intimates that one reason why he passed through those other cities mentioned, and did not continue long in them, was because there were no synagogues in them. But, finding one in Thessalonica, by it he made his entry.

1. It was always his manner to begin with the Jews, to make them the first offer of the gospel, and not to turn to the Gentiles till they had refused it, that their mouths might be stopped from clamouring against him because he preached to the Gentiles; for if they received the gospel they would cheerfully embrace the new converts; if they refused it, they might thank themselves if the apostles carried it to those that would bid it welcome. That command of beginning at Jerusalem was justly construed as a direction, wherever they came, to begin with the Jews.

2. He met them in their synagogue on the sabbath day, in their place and at their time of meeting, and thus he would pay respect to both. Sabbaths and solemn assemblies are always very precious to those to whom Christ is precious, ¹⁸¹⁰Psalms 84:10. It is good being in the house of the Lord on his day. This was Christ's manner, and Paul's manner, and has been the manner of all the saints, the *good old way* which they have walked in.

3. He *reasoned with them out of the scriptures*. They agreed with him to receive the scriptures of the Old Testament: so far they were of a mind. But they received the scripture, and therefore thought they had reason to reject Christ; Paul received the scripture, and therefore saw great reason to

embrace Christ. It was therefore requisite, in order to their conviction, that he should, by reasoning with them, the Spirit setting with him, convince them that his inferences from the scripture were right and theirs were wrong. Note, The preaching of the gospel should be both scriptural preaching and rational; such Paul's was, for he *reasoned out of the scriptures*: we must take the scriptures for our foundation, our oracle, and touchstone, and then reason out of them and upon them, and against those who, though they pretend zeal for the scriptures, as the Jews did, yet wrest them to their own destruction. Reason must not be set up in competition with the scripture, but it must be made use of in explaining and applying the scripture.

4. He continued to do this *three sabbath days* successively. If he could not convince them the first sabbath, he would try the second and the third; for *precept must be upon precept, and line upon line*. God waits for sinners' conversion, and so must his ministers; all the labourers come not into the vineyard at the first hour, nor at the first call, nor are wrought upon so suddenly as the jailer.

5. The drift and scope of his preaching and arguing was to prove that *Jesus is the Christ*; this was that which he opened and alleged, v. 3. He first explained his thesis, and opened the terms, and then alleged it, and laid it down, as that which he would abide by, and which he summoned them in God's name to subscribe to. Paul had an admirable method of discourse; and showed he was himself both well apprized of the doctrine he preached and thoroughly understood it, and that he was fully assured of the truth of it, and therefore he opened it like one that believed it. He showed them,

(1.) That it was necessary the Messiah should *suffer, and die, and rise again*, that the Old-Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah made it necessary he should. The great objection which the Jews made against Jesus being the Messiah was his ignominious death and sufferings. The *cross of Christ was to the Jews a stumbling-block*, because it did by no means agree with the idea they had framed of the Messiah; but Paul here alleges and makes it out undeniably, not only that it was possible he might be the Messiah, though he suffered, but that, being the Messiah, it was necessary he should suffer. He could not be made perfect but by sufferings; for, if he had not died, he could not have risen again from the dead. This was what Christ himself insisted upon (⁴²⁸⁵Luke 24:26): *Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?* And

again (v. 46): *Thus it is written, and therefore thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead.* He must needs have suffered for us, because he could not otherwise purchase redemption for us; and he must needs have risen again because he could not otherwise apply the redemption to us.

(2.) That Jesus is the Messiah: “*This Jesus whom I preach unto you, and call upon you to believe in, is Christ, is the Christ, is the anointed of the Lord, is he that should come, and you are to look for no other; for God has both by his word and by his works (the two ways of his speaking to the children of men), by the scriptures and by miracles, and the gift of the Spirit to make both effectual, borne witness to him.*” Note,

[1.] Gospel ministers should preach Jesus; he must be their principal subject; their business is to bring people acquainted with him.

[2.] That which we are to preach concerning Jesus is that he is Christ; and therefore we may hope to be saved by him and are bound to be ruled by him.

III. The success of his preaching there, v. 4.

1. Some of the Jews believed, notwithstanding their rooted prejudices against Christ and his gospel, and they *consorted with Paul and Silas*: they not only associated with them as friends and companions, but they gave up themselves to their direction, as their spiritual guides; they put themselves into their possession as an inheritance into the possession of the right owner, so the word signifies; they first *gave themselves to the Lord*, and then to them *by the will of God*, ~~408~~ 2 Corinthians 8:5. They adhered to Paul and Silas, and attended them wherever they went. Note, Those that believe in Jesus Christ come into communion with his faithful ministers, and associate with them.

2. Many more of the devout Greeks, and of the chief women, embraced the gospel. These were proselytes of the gate, the *godly among the Gentiles* (so the Jews called them), such as, though they did not submit to the law of Moses, yet renounced idolatry and immorality, worshipped the true God only, and did not man any wrong. These were *hoi sebomenoi Hellenes* — *the worshipping Gentiles*; as in America they call those of the natives that are converted to the faith of Christ the *praying Indians*. These were admitted to join with the Jews in their synagogue-worship. Of these

a great multitude believed, more of them than of the thorough-paced Jews, who were wedded to the ceremonial law. And not a few of the chief women of the city, that were devout and had a sense of religion, embraced Christianity. Particular notice is taken of this, for an example to the ladies, the chief women, and an encouragement to them to employ themselves in the exercises of devotion and to submit themselves to the commanding power of Christ's holy religion, in all the instances of it; for this intimates how acceptable it will be to God, what an honour to Christ, and what great influence it may have upon many, besides the advantages of it to their own souls. No mention is here made of their preaching the gospel to the Gentile idolaters at Thessalonica, and yet it is certain that they did, and that great numbers were converted; nay, it should seem that of the Gentile converts that church was chiefly composed, though notice is not taken of them here; for Paul writes to the Christians there as having *turned to God from idols* (~~5009~~ 1 Thessalonians 1:9), and that at the first entering in of the apostles among them.

IV. The trouble that was given to Paul and Silas at Thessalonica. Wherever they preached, they were sure to be persecuted; bonds and afflictions awaited them in every city. Observe,

1. Who were the authors of their trouble: the *Jews who believed not, who were moved with envy*, v. 5. The Jews were in all places the most inveterate enemies to the Christians, especially to those Jews that turned Christians, against whom they had a particular spleen, as deserters. Now see what that division was which Christ came to send upon earth; some of the Jews believed the gospel and pitied and prayed for those that did not; while those that did not envied and hated those that did. St. Paul in his epistle to this church takes notice of the rage and enmity of the Jews against the preachers of the gospel, as their measure-filling sin. ~~5025~~ 1 Thessalonians 2:15, 16.

2. Who were the instruments of the trouble: the Jews made use of *certain lewd persons of the baser sort*, whom they picked up and got together, and who must undertake to give the sense of the city against the apostles. All wise and sober people looked upon them with respect, and valued them, and none would appear against them but such as were the scum of the city, a company of vile men, that were given to all manner of wickedness. Tertullian pleads this with those that opposed Christianity, that the enemies of it were generally the worst of men: *Tales semper nobis*

insecutores, injusti, impii, turpes, quos, et ipsi damnare consuestis — *Our persecutors are invariably unjust, impious, infamous, whom you yourselves have been accustomed to condemn.* — Apologia, cap. 5. It is the honour of religion that those who hate it are generally the *lewd fellows of the baser sort*, that are lost to all sense of justice and virtue.

3. In what method they proceeded against them.

(1.) They *set the city in an uproar*, made a noise to put people in a fright, and then every body ran to see what the matter was; they began a riot, and then the mob was up presently. See who are the troublers of Israel — not the faithful preachers of the gospel, but the enemies of it. See how the devil carries on his designs; he sets cities in an uproar, sets souls in an uproar, and then fishes in troubled waters.

(2.) They *assaulted the house of Jason*, where the apostles lodged, with a design *to bring them out to the people*, whom they had incensed and enraged against them, and by whom they hoped to see them pulled to pieces. The proceedings here were altogether illegal; of Jason's house must be searched, it ought to be done by the proper officers, and not without a warrant: “A man's house,” the law says, “is his castle,” and for them in a tumultuous manner to assault a man's house, to put him and his family in fear, was but to show to what outrages men are carried by a spirit of persecution. If men have offended, magistrates are appointed to enquire into the offence, and to judge of it; but to make the rabble judges and executioners too (as these Jews designed to do) was to make truth fall in the street, to set servants on horseback, and leave princes to walk as servants on the earth — to depose equity, and enthrone fury.

(3.) When they could not get the apostles into their hands (whom they would have punished as vagabonds, and incensed the people against as strangers that came to spy out the land, and devour its strength, and eat the bread out of their mouths), then they fall upon an honest citizen of their own, who entertained the apostles in his house, his name *Jason*, a converted Jew, and drew him out with some others of the brethren to the rulers of the city. The apostles were advised to withdraw, for they were more obnoxious, *Currenti cede furori* — *Retire before the torrent*. But their friends were willing to expose themselves, being better able to weather this storm. *For a good man*, for such good men as the apostles were, *some would even dare to die*.

(4.) They accused them to the rulers, and represented them a dangerous persons, not fit to be tolerated; the crime charged upon Jason is receiving and harbouring the apostles (v. 7), countenancing them and promoting their interest. And what was the apostles' crime, that it should be no less than misprision of treason to give them lodging? Two very black characters are here given them, enough to make them odious to the people and obnoxious to the magistrates, if they had been just: —

[1.] That they were enemies to the public peace, and threw every thing into disorder wherever they came: *Those that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.* In one sense it is true that wherever the gospel comes in its power to any place, to any soul, it works such a change there, gives such a wide change to the stream, so directly contrary to what it was, that it may be said to turn the world upside down in that place, in that soul. The love of the world is rooted out of the heart, and the way of the world contradicted in the life; so that the world turned upside down there. But in the sense in which they meant it, it is utterly false; they would have it thought that the preachers of the gospel were incendiaries and mischief makers wherever they came, that they sowed discord among relations, set neighbours together by the ears, obstructed commerce, and inverted all order and regularity. Because they persuaded people to turn from vice to virtue, from idols to the living and true God, from malice and envy to love and peace, they are charged with turning the world upside down, when it was only the kingdom of the devil in the world that they thus overturned. Their enemies *set the city in an uproar*, and then laid the blame upon them; as Nero set Rome on fire, and then charged it upon the Christians. If Christ's faithful ministers, even those that are most quiet in the land, be thus invidiously misrepresented and miscalled, let them not think it strange nor be exasperated by it; we are not better than Paul and Silas, who were thus abused. The accusers cry out, “They are *come hither also*; they have been doing all the mischief they could in other places, and now they have brought the infection hither; it is therefore time for us to bestir ourselves and make head against them.”

[2.] That they were enemies to the established government, and disaffected to that, and their principles and practices were destructive to monarchy and inconsistent with the constitution of the state (v. 7): They all *do contrary to the decrees of Caesar*; not to any particular decree, for there was as yet no law of the empire against Christianity, but contrary to Caesar's power in general to make decrees; for they say, *There is another*

king, one Jesus, not only a king of the Jews, as our Saviour was himself charged before Pilate, but *Lord of all*; so Peter called him in the first sermon he preached to the Gentiles, ~~406~~ Acts 10:36. It is true the Roman government, both while it was a commonwealth and after it came into the Caesar's hands, was very jealous of any governor under their dominion taking upon him the title of king, and there was an express law against it. But Christ's *kingdom was not of this world*. His followers said indeed, Jesus is a king, but not an earthly king, not a rival with Caesar, nor his ordinances interfering with the decrees of Caesar, but who had made it a law of his kingdom to *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's*. There was nothing in the doctrine of Christ that tended to the dethroning of princes, nor the depriving them of any of their prerogatives. The Jews knew this very well, and it was against their consciences that they brought such a charge against the apostles; and of all people it ill became the Jews to do it, who hated Caesar and his government, and sought the ruin of him and it, and who expected a Messiah that should be a temporal prince, and overturn the thrones of kingdoms, and were therefore opposing our Lord Jesus because he did not appear under that character. Thus those have been most spiteful in representing God's faithful people as enemies to Caesar, and hurtful to kings and provinces, who have been themselves setting up *imperium in imperio* — *a kingdom within a kingdom*, a power not only in competition with Caesar's but superior to it, that of the papal supremacy.

4. The great uneasiness which this gave to this city (v. 8): *They troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things*. They had no ill opinion of the apostles or their doctrine, could not apprehend any danger to the state from them, and therefore were willing to connive at them; but, if they be represented to them by the prosecutors as enemies to Caesar, they will be obliged to take cognizance of them, and to suppress them, for fear of the government, and this troubled them. Claudius, who then held the reins of government, is represented by Suetonius as a man very jealous of the least commotion and timorous to the last degree, which obliged the rulers under him to be watchful against every thing that looked dangerous, or gave the least cause of suspicion; and therefore it troubled them to be brought under a necessity of disturbing good men.

5. The issue of this troublesome affair. The magistrates had no mind to prosecute the Christians. Care was taken to secure the apostles; they absconded, and fled, and kept out of their hands; so that nothing was to be

done but to discharge Jason and his friends upon bail, v. 9. The magistrates here were not so easily incensed against the apostles as the magistrates at Philippi were, but were more considerate and of better temper; so they *took security of Jason and the other*, bound them to their good behavior; and perhaps they gave bond for Paul and Silas, that they should be forthcoming when they were called for, if any thing should afterwards appear against them. Among the persecutors of Christianity, as there have been instances of the madness and rage of brutes, so there have been likewise of the prudence and temper of men; moderation has been a virtue.

◀477▶ ACTS 17:10-15

PAUL AND SILAS AT BEREIA

In these verses we have,

I. Paul and Silas removing to Berea, and employed in preaching the gospel there, v. 10. They had proceeded so far at Thessalonica that the foundations of a church were laid, and others were raised up to carry on the work that was begun, against whom the rulers and people were not so much prejudiced as they were against Paul and Silas; and therefore when the storm rose they withdrew, taking this as an indication to them that they must quit that place for the present. That command of Christ to his disciples, *When they persecute you in one city flee to another*, intends their flight to be not so much for their own safety (“flee to another, to hide there”) as for the carrying on of their work (“flee to another, to preach there”), as appears by the reason given — *You shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man come*, ~~◀103▶~~ Matthew 10:23. Thus out of the eater came forth meat, and the devil was outshot in his own bow; he thought by persecuting the apostles to stop the progress of the gospel, but it was so overruled as to be made to further it. See here,

1. The care that the brethren took of Paul and Silas, when they perceived how the plot was laid against them: They *immediately sent them away by night, incognito, to Berea*. This could be no surprise to the young converts; *For when we were with you* (saith Paul to them, ~~◀510▶~~ 1 Thessalonians 3:4), *when we came first among you, we told you that we should suffer tribulation, even as it came to pass, and you know*. It should

seem that Paul and Silas would willingly have staid, and faced the storm, if the brethren would have let them; but they would rather be deprived of the apostles' help than expose their lives, which, it should seem, were dearer to their friends than to themselves. They *sent them away by night*, under the covert of that, as if they had been evil doers.

2. The constancy of Paul and Silas in their work. Though they fled from Thessalonica, they did not flee from the service of Christ. When *they came to Berea, they went into the synagogue of the Jews*, and made their public appearance there. Though the Jews at Thessalonica had been their spiteful enemies, and, for aught they knew, the Jews at Berea would be so too, yet they did not therefore decline paying their respect to the Jews, either in revenge for the injuries they had received or for fear of what they might receive. If others will not do their duty to us, yet we ought to do ours to them.

II. The good character of the Jews in Berea (v. 11): *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica*. The Jews in the synagogue at Berea were better disposed to receive the gospel than the Jews in the synagogue at Thessalonica; they were not so bigoted and prejudiced against it, not so peevish and ill-natured; they *were more noble, eugenesteroi* — *better bred*.

1. They had a freer thought, and lay more open to conviction, were willing to hear reason, and admit the force of it, and to subscribe to that which appeared to them to be truth, though it was contrary to their former sentiments. This was more noble.

2. They had a better temper, were not so sour, and morose, and ill-conditioned towards all that were not of their mind, As they were ready to come into a unity with those that by the power of truth they were brought to concur with, so they continued in charity with those that they saw cause to differ from. This was more noble. They neither prejudged the cause, nor were moved with envy at the managers of it, as the Jews at Thessalonica were, but very generously gave both it and them a fair hearing, without passion or partiality; for,

(1.) *They received the word with all readiness of mind*; they were very willing to hear it, presently apprehended the meaning of it, and did not shut their eyes against the light. *They attended to the things that were spoken by Paul*, as Lydia did, and were very well pleased to hear them.

They did not pick quarrels with the word, nor find fault, nor seek occasion against the preachers of it; but bade it welcome, and put a candid construction upon every thing that was said. Herein *they were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica*, but walked in the same spirit, and in the same steps, with the Gentiles there, of whom it is said *that they received the word with joy of the Holy Ghost, and turned to God from idols*, ¹ Thessalonians 1:6-9. This was true nobility. The Jews gloried much in their being Abraham's seed, thought themselves well-born and that they could not be better born. But they are here told who among them were the most noble and the best-bred men — those that were most disposed to receive the gospel, and had the high and conceited thoughts in them subdued, and *brought into obedience to Christ*. They were the most noble, and, if I may so say, the most gentleman-like men. *Nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus* — *Virtue and piety are true nobility*, true honour; and, without these, *Stemmata quid prosunt?* — *What are pedigrees and pompous titles worth?*

(2.) *They searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so*. Their readiness of mind to receive the word was not such as that they took things upon trust, swallowed them upon an implicit faith: no; but since Paul reasoned out of the scriptures, and referred them to the Old Testament for the proof of what he said, they had recourse to their Bibles, turned to the places to which he referred them, read the context, considered the scope and drift of them, compared them with other places of scripture, examined whether Paul's inferences from them were natural and genuine and his arguments upon them cogent, and determined accordingly. Observe,

[1.] The doctrine of Christ does not fear a scrutiny. We that are advocates for his cause desire no more than that people will not say, *These things are not so*, till they have first, without prejudice and partiality, examined whether they be so or no.

[2.] The New Testament is to be examined by the Old. The Jews received the Old Testament, and those that did so, if they considered things aright, could not but see cause sufficient to receive the New, because in it they see all the prophecies and promises of the Old fully and exactly accomplished.

[3.] Those that read and receive the scriptures must *search them* (¹ John 5:39), must study them, and take pains in considering them, both that they may find out the truth contained in them, and may not mistake the sense of

them and so run into error, or remain in it; and that they may find out the whole truth contained in them, and may not rest in a superficial knowledge, in the outward court of the scriptures, but may have an intimate acquaintance with the mind of God revealed in them.

[4.] Searching the scriptures must be our daily work. Those that heard *the word in the synagogue on the sabbath day* did not think this enough, but were searching it every day in the week, that they might improve what they had heard the sabbath before, and prepare for what they were to hear the sabbath after.

[5.] Those are truly noble, and are in a fair way to be more and more so, that make the scriptures their oracle and touchstone, and consult them accordingly. Those that rightly study the scriptures, and *meditate therein day and night*, have their minds filled with noble thoughts, fixed to noble principles, and formed for noble aims and designs. *These are more noble.*

III. The good effect of the preaching of the gospel at Berea: it had the desired success; the people's hearts being prepared, a great deal of work was done suddenly, v. 12.

1. Of the Jews there were many that believed. At Thessalonica there were only *some of them that believed* (v. 4), but at Berea, where they heard with unprejudiced minds, many believed, many more Jews than at Thessalonica. Note, God gives grace to those whom he first inclines to make a diligent use of the means of grace, and particularly to search the scriptures.

2. Of the Greeks likewise, the Gentiles, many believed, both of *the honourable women*, the ladies of quality, *and of men not a few*, men of the first rank, as should seem by their being mentioned with the honourable women. The wives first embraced the gospel, and then they persuaded their husbands to embrace it. *For what knowest thou, O wife, but thou shalt save thy husband?* ⁴⁰⁷⁶1 Corinthians 7:16.

IV. The persecution that was raised against Paul and Silas at Berea, which forced Paul thence.

1. *The Jews at Thessalonica* were the mischief-makers at Berea. They had notice that *the word of God was preached at Berea* (for envy and jealousy bring quick intelligence), and likewise that the Jews there were not so inveterately set against it as they were. They came thither also, to turn the

world upside down there, *and they stirred up the people*, and incensed them against the preachers of the gospel; as if they had such a commission from the prince of darkness to go from place to place to oppose the gospel as the apostles had to go from place to place to preach it. Thus we read before that the Jews of Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra on purpose to incense the people against the apostles, ~~4419~~ Acts 14:19. See how restless Satan's agents are in their opposition to the gospel of Christ and the salvation of the souls of men. This is an instance of the enmity that is in the serpent's seed against the seed of the woman; and we must not think it strange if persecutors at home extend their rage to stir up persecution abroad.

2. This occasioned Paul's removal to Athens. By seeking to extinguish this divine fire which Christ had already kindled, they did but spread it the further and the faster; so long Paul staid at Berea, and such success he had there, that there were brethren there, and sensible active men too, which appeared by the care they took of Paul, v. 14. They were aware of the coming of the persecuting Jews from Thessalonica, and that they were busy in irritating the people against Paul; and, fearing what it would come to, they lost no time, but *immediately sent Paul away*, against whom they were most prejudiced and enraged, hoping that this would pacify them, while they retained Silas and Timothy there still, who, now that Paul had broken the ice, might be sufficient to carry on the work without exposing him. They *sent Paul to go even to the sea*, so some; *to go as it were to the sea*, so we read it; *hos epi ten thalassan*. He went out from Berea, in that road which went to the sea, that the Jews, if they enquired after him, might think he had gone to a great distance; but he went by land to Athens, in which there was no culpable dissimulation at all. *Those that conducted Paul* (as his guides and guards, he being both a stranger in the country and one that had many enemies) *brought him to Athens*. The Spirit of God, influencing his spirit, directed him to that famous city, — famous of old for its power and dominion, when the Athenian commonwealth coped with the Spartan, — famous afterwards for learning; it was the rendezvous of scholars. Those who wanted learning went thither to show it. It was a great university, much resorted to from all parts, and therefore, for the better diffusing of gospel light, Paul is sent thither, and is not ashamed nor afraid to show his face among the philosophers there, and there to preach Christ crucified, though he knew it would be as much foolishness to the Greeks as it was to the Jews a stumbling-block.

3. He ordered *Silas and Timothy to come to him to Athens*, when he found there was a prospect of doing good there; or because, there being none there that he knew, he was solitary and melancholy without them. Yet it should seem that, great as was the haste he was in for them, he ordered Timothy to go about Thessalonica, to bring him an account of the affairs of that church; for he says (^{<S181>}1 Thessalonians 3:1, 2), *We thought it good to be left at Athens alone, and sent Timotheus to establish you.*

~~<476>~~ ACTS 17:16-21

PAUL AT ATHENS

A scholar that has acquaintance, and is in love, with the learning of the ancients, would think he should be very happy if he were where Paul now was, at Athens, in the midst of the various sects of philosophers, and would have a great many curious questions to ask them, for the explication of the remains we have of the Athenian learning; but Paul, though bred a scholar, and an ingenious active man, does not make this any of his business at Athens. He has other work to mind: it is not the improving of himself in their philosophy that he aims at, he has learned to call it a vain thing, and is above it (^{<S188>}Colossians 2:8); his business is, in God's name, to correct their disorders in religion, and *to turn them from the service of idols*, and of Satan in them, to the *service of the true and living God* in Christ.

I. Here is the impression which the abominable ignorance and superstition of the Athenians made upon Paul's spirit, v. 16. Observe,

1. The account here given of that city: it was *wholly given to idolatry*. This agrees with the account which the heathen writers give of it, that there were more idols in Athens than there were in all Greece besides put together, and that they had twice as many sacred feasts as others had. Whatever strange gods were recommended to them, they admitted them, and allowed them a temple and an altar, *so that they had almost as many gods as men — facilius possis deum quam hominem invenire*. And this city, after the empire became Christian, continued incurably addicted to idolatry, and all the pious edicts of the Christian emperors could not root it out, till, by the irruption of the Goths, that city was in so particular a manner laid waste that there are now scarcely any remains of it. It is

observable that there, where human learning most flourished, idolatry most abounded, and the most absurd and ridiculous idolatry, which confirms that of the apostle, that when *they professed themselves to be wise they became fools* (^{<412>}Romans 1:22), and, in the business of religion, were of all other the most *vain in their imaginations. The world by wisdom knew not God,* ^{<412>}1 Corinthians 1:21. They might have reasoned against polytheism and idolatry; but, it seems, the greatest pretenders to reason were the greatest slaves to idols: so necessary was it to the re-establishing even of natural religion that there should be a divine revelation, and that centering in Christ.

2. The disturbance which the sight of this gave to Paul. Paul was not willing to appear publicly till Silas and Timothy came to him, that out of the mouth of two or three witnesses the word might be established; but in the mean time *his spirit was stirred within him*. He was filled with concern for the glory of God, which he saw given to idols, and with compassion to the souls of men, which he saw thus enslaved to Satan, *and led captive by him at his will*. He beheld these transgressors, and was grieved; and horror took hold of him. He had a holy indignation at the heathen priests, that led the people such an endless trace of idolatry, and at their philosophers, that knew better, and yet never said a word against it, but themselves went down the stream.

II. The testimony that he bore against their idolatry, and his endeavours to bring them to the knowledge of the truth. He did not, as Witsius observes, in the heat of his zeal break into the temples, pull down their images, demolish their altars, or fly in the face of their priests; nor did he run about the streets crying, “You are all the bond-slaves of the devil,” though it was too true; but he observed decorum, and kept himself within due bounds, doing that only which became a prudent man.

1. He *went to the synagogue of the Jews*, who, though enemies to Christianity, were free from idolatry, and joined with them in that among them which was good, and took the opportunity given him there of disputing for Christ, v. 17. He discoursed *with the Jews*, reasoned fairly with them, and put it to them what reason they could give why, since they expected the Messiah, they would not receive Jesus. There he met with the devout persons that had forsaken the idol temples, but rested in the Jews' synagogue, and he talked with these to lead them on to the Christian church, to which the Jews' synagogue was but as a porch.

2. He entered into conversation with all that came in his way about matters of religion: *In the market* — *en te agora*, in the exchange, or place of commerce, *he disputed daily*, as he had occasion, *with those that met with him*, or that he happened to fall into company with, that were heathen, and never came to the Jews' synagogue. The zealous advocates for the cause of Christ will be ready to plead it in all companies, as occasion offers. The ministers of Christ must not think it enough to speak a good word for Christ once a week, but should be daily speaking honourably of him to such as meet with them.

III. The enquiries which some of the philosophers made concerning Paul's doctrine. Observe,

1. Who they were that encountered him, that entered into discourse with him, and opposed him: *He disputed with all that met him, in the places of concourse*, or rather of discourse. Most took no notice of him, slighted him, and never minded a word he said; but there were some of the philosophers that thought him worth making remarks upon, as they were those whose principles were most directly contrary to Christianity.

(1.) *The Epicureans*, who thought God altogether such a one as themselves, an idle inactive being, that minded nothing, nor put any difference between good and evil. They would not own, either that God made the world or that he governs it; nor that man needs to make any conscience of what he says or does, having no punishment to fear nor rewards to hope for, all which loose atheistical notions Christianity is levelled against. The Epicureans indulged themselves in all the pleasures of sense, and placed their happiness in them, in what Christ has taught us in the first place to deny ourselves.

(2.) *The Stoics*, who thought themselves altogether as good as God, and indulged themselves as much in the pride of life as the Epicureans did in the lusts of the flesh and of the eye; they made their virtuous man to be no way inferior to God himself, nay to be superior. *Esse aliquid quo sapiens antecedit Deum* — *There is that in which a wise man excels God*, so Seneca: to which Christianity is directly opposite, as it teaches us to deny ourselves and abase ourselves, and to come off from all confidence in ourselves, that Christ may be all in all.

2. What their different sentiments were of him; such there were as there were of Christ, v. 18.

(1.) Some called him a babbler, and thought he spoke, without any design, whatever came uppermost, as men of crazed imaginations do: *What will this babbler say? ho spermologos houtos* — *this scatterer of words*, that goes about, throwing here one idle word or story and there another, without any intendment or signification; or, *this picker up of seeds*. Some of the critics tell us that the term is used for *a little sort of bird*, that is worth nothing at all, either for the spit or for the cage, *that picks up the seeds that lie uncovered, either in the field or by the way-side, and hops here and there for that purpose* — *Avicula parva quae semina in triviis dispersa colligere solet*; such a pitiful contemptible animal they took Paul to be, or supposed he went from place to place venting his notions to get money, a penny here and another there, as that bird picks up here and there a grain. They looked upon him as an idle fellow, and regarded him, as we say, no more than a ballad-singer.

(2.) Others called him *a setter forth of strange gods*, and thought he spoke with design to make himself considerable by that means. And, if he had strange gods to set forth, he could not bring them to a better market than to Athens. He did not, as many did, directly set forth new gods, nor avowedly; but they thought he seemed to do so, *because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection*. From his first coming among them he ever and anon harped upon these two strings, which are indeed the principal doctrines of Christianity — Christ and a future state — Christ our way, and heaven our end; and, though he did not call these gods, yet they thought he meant to make them so. *Ton Iesoun kai ten anastasin*, “Jesus they took for a new god, and *anastasis*, the resurrection, for a new goddess.” Thus they lost the benefit of the Christian doctrine by dressing it up in a pagan dialect, as if believing in Jesus, and looking for the resurrection, were the worshipping of new demons.

3. The proposal they made to give him a free, full, fair, and public hearing, v. 19, 20. They had heard some broken pieces of his doctrine, and are willing to have a more perfect knowledge of it.

(1.) They look upon it as strange and surprising, and very different from the philosophy that had for many ages been taught and professed at Athens. “It is a new doctrine, which we do not understand the drift and design of. *Thou bringest certain strange things to our ears*, which we never heard of before, and know not what to make of now.” By this it should seem that, among all the learned books they had, they either had

not, or heeded not, the books of Moses and the prophets, else the doctrine of Christ would not have been so perfectly new and strange to them. There was but one book in the world that was of divine inspiration, and that was the only book they were strangers to, which, if they would have given a due regard to it, would, in its very first page, have determined that great controversy among them about the origin of the universe.

(2.) They desired to know more of it, only because it was new and strange: “*May we know what this new doctrine is? Or, is it (like the mysteries of the gods) to be kept as a profound secret? If it may be, we would gladly know, and desire thee to tell us, what these things mean, that we may be able to pass a judgment upon them.*” This was a fair proposal; it was fit they should know what this doctrine was before they embraced it; and they were so fair as not to condemn it till they had had some account of it.

(3.) The place they brought him to, in order to this public declaration of his doctrine; it was *to Areopagus*, the same word that is translated (v. 22) *Mars' Hill*; it was the town-house, or guildhall of their city, where the magistrates met upon public business, and the courts of justice were kept; and it was as the theatre in the university, or the schools, where learned men met to communicate their notions. The court of justice which sat here was famous for its equity, which drew appeals to it from all parts; if any denied a God, he was liable to the censure of this court. Diagoras was by them put to death, as a contemner of the gods; nor might any new God be admitted without their approbation. Hither they brought Paul to be tried, not as a criminal but as a candidate.

4. The general character of the people of that city given upon this occasion (v. 21): *All the Athenians*, that is natives of the place, and strangers who sojourned there for their improvement, *spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing*, which comes in as the reason why they were inquisitive concerning Paul's doctrine, not because it was *good*, but because it was *new*. It is a very sorry character which is here given of these people, yet many transcribe it.

(1.) They were all for conversation. St. Paul exhorts his pupil to *give attendance to reading and meditation* (~~5013~~ 1 Timothy 4:13, 15), but these people despised those old-fashioned ways of getting knowledge, and preferred that of telling and hearing. It is true that good company is of great use to a man, and will polish one that has laid a good foundation in

study; but that knowledge will be very flashy and superficial which is got by conversation only.

(2.) They affected novelty; they were for *telling and hearing some new thing*. They were for new schemes and new notions in philosophy, new forms and plans of government in politics, and, in religion, for new gods that came newly up (^{<4507>}Deuteronomy 32:17), new demons, new-fashioned images and altars (^{<260>}2 Kings 16:10); they were given to change. Demosthenes, an orator of their own, had charged this upon them long before, in one of his Philippics, that their common question in the markets, or wherever they met, was *ei ti le etai neoteron* — *whether there was any news*.

(3.) They meddled in other people's business, and were inquisitive concerning that, and never minded their own. Tattlers are always *busy bodies*, ^{<483>}1 Timothy 5:13.

(4.) *They spent their time in nothing else*, and a very uncomfortable account those must needs have to make of their time who thus spend it. Time is precious, and we are concerned to be good husbands of it, because eternity depends upon it, and it is hastening apace into eternity, but abundance of it is wasted in unprofitable converse. To tell or hear the new occurrences of providence concerning the public in our own or other nations, and concerning our neighbours and friends, is of good use now and then; but to set up for newsmongers, and to spend our time in nothing else, is to lose that which is very precious for the gain of that which is worth little.

^{<4472>}ACTS 17:22-31

PAUL AT ATHENS

We have here St. Paul's sermon at Athens. Divers sermons we have had, which the apostles preached to the Jews, or such Gentiles as had an acquaintance with and veneration for the Old Testament, and were worshippers of the true and living God; and all they had to do with them was to open and allege *that Jesus is the Christ*; but here we have a sermon to heathens, that worshipped false gods, and were without the true God in the world, and to them the scope of their discourse was quite different

from what it was to the other. In the former case their business was to lead their hearers by prophecies and miracles to the knowledge of the Redeemer, and faith in him; in the latter it was to lead them by the common works of providence to the knowledge of the Creator, and the worship of him. One discourse of this kind we had before to the rude idolaters of Lystra that deified the apostles (~~44~~Acts 14:15); this recorded here is to the more polite and refined idolaters at Athens, and an admirable discourse it is, and every way suited to his auditory and the design he had upon them.

I. He lays down this, as the scope of his discourse, that he aimed to bring them to *the knowledge of the only living and true God*, as the sole and proper object of their adoration. He is here obliged to lay the foundation, and to instruct them in the first principle of all religion, that there is a God, and that God is but one. When he preached against the gods they worshipped, he had no design to draw them to atheism, but to the service of the true Deity. Socrates, who had exposed the pagan idolatry, was indicted in this very court, and condemned, not only because he did not esteem those to be gods whom the city esteemed to be so, but because he introduced new demons; and this was the charge against Paul. Now he tacitly owns the former part of the charge, but guards against the latter, by declaring that he does not introduce any new gods, but reduce them *to the knowledge of one God, the Ancient of days*. Now,

1. He shows them that they needed to be instructed herein; for they had lost the knowledge of the true God that made them, in the worship of false gods that they had made (*Deos qui rogat ille facit — He who worships the gods makes them*): *I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious*. The crime he charges upon them is giving that glory to others which is due to God only, that they feared and worshipped demons, spirits that they supposed inhabited the images to which they directed their worship. “It is time for you to be told that *there is but one God* who are multiplying deities above any of your neighbours, and mingle your idolatries with all your affairs. *You are in all things too superstitious — deisidaimonesteroi*, you easily admit every thing that comes under a show of religion, but it is that which corrupts it more and more; I bring you that which will reform it.” Their neighbours praised them for this as a pious people, but Paul condemns them for it. Yet it is observable how he mollifies the charge, does not aggravate it, to provoke them. He uses a word which among them was taken in a good sense: *You are every way more than ordinarily*

religious, so some read it; *you are very devout in your way*. Or, if it be taken in a bad sense, it is mitigated: “You are as it were (*hos*) more superstitious than you need be;” and he says no more than what he himself perceived; *theoro* — *I see it, I observe it*. They charged Paul with setting forth new demons: “Nay,” says he, “you have demons enough already; I will not add to the number of them.”

2. He shows them that they themselves had given a fair occasion for the declaring of this one true God to them, by *setting up an altar, To the unknown God*, which intimated an acknowledgment that there was a God who was yet to them *an unknown God*; and it is sad to think that at Athens, a place which was supposed to have the monopoly of wisdom, the true God was an unknown God, the only God that was unknown. “Now you ought to bid Paul welcome, for this is the God whom he comes to make known to you, the God whom you tacitly complain that you are ignorant of.” There, where we are sensible we are defective and come short, just there, the gospel takes us up, and carries us on.

(1.) Various conjectures the learned have concerning this *altar dedicated to the unknown God*.

[1.] Some think the meaning is, *To the God whose honour it is to be unknown*, and that they intended the God of the Jews, whose name is ineffable, and whose nature is unsearchable. It is probable they had heard from the Jews, and from the writings of the Old Testament, of the God of Israel, who had proved himself to be above all gods, but was *a God hiding himself*, ²³⁵⁵ Isaiah 45:15. The heathen called the Jews' God, *Deus incertus, incertum Mosis Numen* — *an uncertain God, the uncertain Deity of Moses*, and the God without name. Now *this God*, says Paul, *this God, who cannot by searching be found out to perfection, I now declare unto you*.

[2.] Others think the meaning is, *To the God whom it is our unhappiness not to know*, which intimates that they would think it their happiness to know him. Some tell us that upon occasion of a plague that raged at Athens, when they had sacrificed to all their gods one after another for the staying of the plague, they were advised to let some sheep go where they pleased, and, where they lay down, to build an altar, *to prosekonti Theo* — *to the proper God, or the God to whom that affair of staying the pestilence did belong*; and, because they knew not how to call him, they inscribed it, *To the unknown God*. Others, from some of the best historians of Athens,

tell us they had many altars inscribed, *To the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa — To the unknown God*: and some of the neighbouring countries used to swear *by the God that was unknown at Athens*; so Lucian.

(2.) Observe, how modestly Paul mentions this. That he might not be thought a spy, nor one that had intruded himself more than became a stranger into the knowledge of their mysteries, he tells them that he observed it *as he passed by, and saw their devotions, or their sacred things*. It was public, and he could not forbear seeing it, and it was proper enough to make his remarks upon the religion of the place; and observe how prudently and ingeniously he takes occasion from this to bring in his discourse of the true God.

[1.] He tells them that the God he preached to them was one that they did already worship, and therefore he was not a setter forth of new or strange gods: “As you have a dependence upon him, so he has had some kind of homage from you.”

[2.] He was one whom they ignorantly worshipped, which was a reproach to them, who were famous all the world over for their knowledge. “Now,” says he, “I come to take away *that reproach*, that you may worship him understandingly whom how you worship ignorantly; and it cannot but be acceptable to have your blind devotion turned into a reasonable service, that you may not worship *you know not what*.”

II. He confirms his doctrine of one living and true God, by his works of creation and providence: “The God whom I declare unto you to be the sole object of your devotion, and call you to the worship of, is *the God that made the world* and governs it; and, by the visible proofs of these, you may be led to this invisible Being, and be convinced of his *eternal power and Godhead*.” The Gentiles in general, and the Athenians particularly, in their devotions were governed, not by their philosophers, many of whom spoke clearly and excellently well of one supreme *Numen*, of his infinite perfections and universal agency and dominion (witness the writings of Plato, and long after of Cicero); but by their poets, and their idle fictions. Homer's works were the Bible of the pagan theology, or demonology rather, not Plato's; and the philosophers tamely submitted to this, rested in their speculations, disputed them among themselves, and taught them to their scholars, but never made the use they ought to have made of them in opposition to idolatry; so little certainty were they at concerning them, and

so little impression did these things make upon them! Nay, they ran themselves into the superstition of their country, and thought they ought to do so. *Eamus ad communem errorem* — *Let us embrace the common error*. Now Paul here sets himself, in the first place, to reform the philosophy of the Athenians (he corrects the mistakes of that), and to give them right notions of *the one only living and true God*, and then to carry the matter further than they ever attempted for the reforming of their worship, and the bringing them off from their polytheism and idolatry. Observe what glorious things Paul here says of that God whom he served, and would have them to serve.

1. *He is the God that made the world, and all things therein; the Father almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth.* This was admitted by many of the philosophers; but those of Aristotle's school denied it, and maintained "that the world was from eternity, and every thing always was from eternity, and every thing always was what now it is." Those of the school of Epicurus fancied "that the world was made by a fortuitous concourse of atoms, which, having been in perpetual motion, at length accidentally jumped into this frame." Against both these Paul here maintains that God by the operations of an infinite power, according to the contrivance of an infinite wisdom, in the beginning of time made the world and all things therein, the origin of which was owing, not as they fancied to an eternal matter, but to an eternal mind.

2. He is therefore *Lord of heaven and earth*, that is, he is the rightful owner, proprietor, and possessor, of all the beings, powers, and riches of the upper and lower world, material and immaterial, visible and invisible. This follows from his making heaven and earth. If he created all, without doubt he has the disposing of all: and, where he gives being, he has an indisputable right to give law.

3. He is, in a particular manner, the Creator of men, of all men (v. 26): *He made of one blood all nations of men.* He made the first man, he makes every man, is the former of every man's body and the Father of every man's spirit. He has made the nations of men, not only all men in the nations, but as nations in their political capacity; he is their founder, and disposed them into communities for their mutual preservation and benefit. He made them all of one blood, of one and the same nature; *he fashions their heart alike.* Descended from one and the same common ancestor, in Adam they are all akin, so they are in Noah, that hereby they might be

engaged in mutual affection and assistance, as fellow-creatures and brethren. *Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us?* ^{<300>}Malachi 2:10. *He hath made them to dwell on all the face of the earth,* which, as a bountiful benefactor, *he has given, with all its fulness, to the children of men.* He made them not to live in one place, but to be dispersed over all the earth; one nation therefore ought not to look with contempt upon another, as the Greeks did upon all other nations; for those on all the face of the earth are of the same blood. The Athenians boasted that they sprung out of their own earth, were *aborigines*, and nothing akin by blood to any other nation, which proud conceit of themselves the apostle here takes down.

4. That he is the great benefactor of the whole creation (v. 25): *He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.* He not only *breathed into the first man the breath of life*, but still breathes it into every man. He gave us these souls he formed the spirit of man within him. He not only gave us our life and breath, when he brought us into being, but he is continually giving them to us; his providence is a continued creation; he *holds our souls in life*; every moment our breath goes forth, but he graciously gives it us again the next moment; it is no only *his air that we breathe in, but it is in his hand that our breath is*, ^{<212>}Daniel 5:23. *He gives to all the children of men their life and breath*; for as the meanest of the children of men live upon him, and receive from him, so the greatest, the wisest philosophers and mightiest potentates, cannot live without him. *He gives to all*, not only to all the children of men, but to the inferior creatures, to all animals, *every thing wherein is the breath of life* (^{<167>}Genesis 6:17); they have their life and breath from him, and where he gives life and breath he gives all things, all other things needful for the support of life. *The earth is full of his goodness*, ^{<122>}Psalms 104:24, 27.

5. That he is the sovereign disposer of all the affairs of the children of men, according to the counsel of his will (v. 26): *He hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.* See here,

(1.) The sovereignty of God's disposal concerning us: he *hath determined* every event, *horisas*, the matter is fixed; the disposals of Providence are incontestable and must not be disputed, unchangeable and cannot be altered.

(2.) The wisdom of his disposals; he hath *determined* what was *before appointed*. The determinations of the Eternal Mind are not sudden

resolves, but the counterparts of an eternal counsel, the copies of divine decrees. *He performeth the thing that is appointed for me,* ^(~~1324~~) Job 23:14. *Whatever comes forth from God was before all worlds hid in God.*

(3.) The things about which his providence is conversant; these are time and place: the times and places of our living in this world are determined and appointed by the God that made us.

[1.] *He has determined the times* that are concerning us. Times to us seem changeable, but God has fixed them. *Our times are in his hand,* to lengthen or shorten, embitter or sweeten, as he pleases. He has appointed and determined the time of our coming into the world, and the time of our continuance in the world; our time to be born, and our time to die (^(~~201~~) Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2), and all that little that lies between them — the time of all our concernments in this world. Whether they be prosperous times or calamitous times, it is he that has determined them; and on him we must depend, with reference to the times that are yet before us.

[2.] He has also *determined and appointed the bounds of our habitation.* He that *appointed the earth to be a habitation for the children of men* has appointed to the children of men a distinction of habitations upon the earth, has instituted such a thing as property, to which he has set bounds to keep us from trespassing one upon another. The particular habitations in which our lot is cast, the place of our nativity and of our settlement, are of God's determining and appointing, which is a reason why we should accommodate ourselves to the habitations we are in, and make the best of that which is.

6. That *he is not far from every one of us,* v. 27. He is every where present, not only is *at our right hand, but has possessed our reins* (^(~~1313~~) Psalm 139:13), has his eye upon us at all times, and knows us better than we know ourselves. Idolaters made images of God, that they might have him with them in those images, the absurdity of which the apostle here shows; for he in an infinite Spirit, *that is not far from any of us,* and never the nearer, but in one sense the further off from us, for our pretending to realize or presentiate him to ourselves by any image. He is nigh unto us, both to receive the homage we render him and to give the mercies we ask of him, wherever we are, though near no altar, image, or temple. The Lord of all, as *he is rich* (^(~~1312~~) Romans 10:12), so *he is nigh* (^(~~1307~~) Deuteronomy 4:7), *to all that call upon him.* He that wills us to *pray every where,* assures us that he is no where far from us; whatever country, nation, or

profession we are of, whatever our rank and condition in the world are, be we in a palace or in a cottage, in a crowd or in a corner, in a city or in a desert, in the depths of the sea or afar off upon the sea, this is certain, *God is not far from every one of us.*

7. That *in him we live, and move, and have our being*, v. 28. We have a necessary and constant dependence upon his providence, as the streams have upon the spring, and the beams upon the sun.

(1.) *In him we live*; that is, the continuance of our lives is owing to him and the constant influence of his providence; *he is our life, and the length of our days.* It is not only owing to his patience and pity that our forfeited lives are not cut off, but it is owing to his power, and goodness, and fatherly care, that our frail lives are prolonged. There needs not a positive act of his wrath to destroy us; if he suspend the positive acts of his goodness, we die of ourselves.

(2.) *In him we move*; it is by the uninterrupted concourse of his providence that our souls move in their outgoings and operations, that our thoughts run to and fro about a thousand subjects, and our affections run out towards their proper objects. It is likewise by him that our souls move our bodies; we cannot stir a hand, or foot, or a tongue, but by him, who, as he is the first cause, so he is the first mover.

(3.) *In him we have our being*; not only from him we had it at first, but in him we have it still; to his continued care and goodness we owe it, not only that we have a being and are not sunk into nonentity, but that we have our being, have this being, were and still are of such a noble rank of beings, capable of knowing and enjoying God; and are not thrust into the meanness of brutes, nor the misery of devils.

8. That upon the whole matter we are *God's offspring*; he is *our Father that begat us* (⁴⁵¹⁶Deuteronomy 32:6, 18), and he hath *nourished and brought us up as children*, (²¹⁰Isaiah 1:2. The confession of an adversary in such a case is always looked upon to be of use as *argumentum ad hominem* — *an argument to the man*, and therefore the apostle here quotes a saying of one of the Greek poets, Aratus, a native of Cilicia, Paul's countryman, who, in his *Phenomena*, in the beginning of his book, speaking of the heathen *Jupiter*, that is, in the poetical dialect, the supreme *God*, says this of him, *tou gar kai genos esmen* — *for we are also his*

offspring. And he might have quoted other poets to the purpose of what he was speaking, that *in God we live and move*: —

*Spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus
Mens agitat molem.*

*This active mind, infus'd through all the space,
Unites and mingles with the mighty mass.
— Virgil, Aeneid 6*

*Est Deus in nobis, agitante calescimus illo.
'Tis the Divinity that warms our hearts.
— Ovid, Fast. 6*

*Jupiter est quodeunque vides,
Quocunque moveris.*

*Where'er you look, where'er you rove
The spacious scene is full of Jove.
— Lucan, lib. 2*

But he chooses this of Aratus, as having much in a little. By this it appears not only that Paul was himself a scholar, but that human learning is both ornamental and serviceable to a gospel minister, especially for the convincing of those that are without; for it enables him to beat them at their own weapons, and to cut off Goliath's head with his own sword. How can the adversaries of truth be beaten out of their strong-holds by those that do not know them? It may likewise shame God's professing people, who forget their relation to God, and walk contrary to it, that a heathen poet could say of God, *We are his offspring*, formed by him, formed for him, more the care of his providence than ever any children were the care of their parents; and therefore are obliged to obey his commands, and acquiesce in his disposals, and *to be unto him for a name and a praise*. Since in him and upon him we live, we ought to live to him; since in him we move, we ought to move towards him; and since in him we have our being, and from him we receive all the supports and comforts of our being, we ought to consecrate our being to him, and to apply to him for a new being, a better being, an eternal well-being.

III. From all these great truths concerning God, he infers the absurdity of their idolatry, as the prophets of old had done. If this be so,

1. Then God cannot be represented by an image. If we are *the offspring of God*, as we are spirits in flesh, then certainly he who is *the Father of our spirits* (and they are the principal part of us, and that part of us by which we are denominated God's offspring) is himself a Spirit, and we ought not to think that the Godhead is *like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device*, v. 29. We wrong God, and put an affront upon him, if we think so. God honoured man in making his soul after his own likeness; but man dishonours God if he makes him after the likeness of his body. The Godhead is spiritual, infinite, immaterial, incomprehensible, and therefore it is a very false and unjust conception which an image gives us of God, be the matter ever so rich, *fold or silver*; be the shape ever so curious, and be it ever so well *graven by art or man's device*, its countenance, posture, or dress, ever so significant, it is a teacher of lies.

2. Then *he dwells not in temples made with hands*, v. 24. He is not invited to any temple men can build for him, nor confined to any. A temple brings him never the nearer to us, nor keeps him ever the longer among us. A temple is convenient for us to come together in to worship God; but God needs not any place of rest or residence, nor the magnificence and splendour of any structure, to add to the glory of his appearance. A pious, upright heart, *a temple not made with hands*, but by *the Spirit of God*, is that which *he dwells in*, and *delights to dwell in*. See ^{<1182>}1 Kings 8:27; ^{<286>}Isaiah 66:1, 2.

3. Then he is *not worshipped*, *therapeuetai*, he is *not served*, or *ministered unto*, *with men's hands*, *as though he needed any thing*, v. 25. He that made all, and maintains all, cannot be benefited by any of our services, nor needs them. If we receive and derive all from him, he is all-sufficient, and therefore cannot but be self-sufficient, and independent. What need can God have of our services, or what benefit can he have by them, when he has all perfection in himself, and we have nothing that is good but what we have from him? The philosophers, indeed, were sensible of this truth, that God has no need of us or our services; but the vulgar heathen built temples and offered sacrifices to their gods, with an opinion that they needed houses and food. See ^{<885>}Job 35:5-8; ^{<1808>}Psalms 50:8, etc.

4. Then it concerns us all to enquire after God (v. 27): *That they should seek the Lord*, that is, fear and worship him in a right manner. Therefore God has kept the children of men in a constant dependence upon him for life and all the comforts of life, that he might keep them under constant

obligations to him. We have plain indications of God's presence among us, his presidency over us, the care of his providence concerning us, and his bounty to us, that we might be put upon enquiring, *Where is God our Maker, who giveth songs in the night, who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven?* ^{<858D>} Job 35:10, 11. Nothing, one would think, should be more powerful with us to convince us that there is a God, and to engage us to seek his honour and glory in our services, and to seek our happiness in his favour and love, than the consideration of our own nature, especially the noble powers and faculties of our own souls. If we reflect upon these, and contemplate these, we may perceive both our relation and obligation to a God above us. Yet so dark is this discovery, in comparison with that by divine revelation, and so unapt are we to receive it, that those who have no other could but *haply feel after God and find him*.

(1.) It was very uncertain whether they could by this searching *find out God*; it is but a peradventure: *if haply* they might.

(2.) If they did find out something of God, yet it was but some confused notions of him; they did but feel after him, as men in the dark, or blind men, who lay hold on a thing that comes in their way, but know not whether it be that which they are in quest of or no. It is a very confused notion which this poet of theirs has of the relation between God and man, and very general, that *we are his offspring*: as was also that of their philosophers. Pythagoras said, *Theion genos esti brotoios* — *Men have a sort of a divine nature*. And Heraclitus (*apud Lucian*) being asked, *What are men?* answered, *Theoi thnetoi* — *Mortal gods*; and, *What are the gods?* answered, *athanatoi anthropoi* — *Immortal men*. And Pindar saith (*Nemean, Ode 6*), *En andron hen theon genos* — *God and man are near a-kin*. It is true that by the knowledge of ourselves we may be led to the knowledge of God, but it is a very confused knowledge. This is but feeling after him. We have therefore reason to be thankful that by the gospel of Christ we have notices given us of God much clearer than we could have by the light of nature; we do not now feel after him, but *with open face behold, as in a glass, the glory of God*.

IV. He proceeds to call them all to repent of their idolatries, and to turn from them, v. 30, 31. This is the practical part of Paul's sermon before the university; having declared God to them (v. 23), he properly presses upon them *repentance towards God*, and would also have taught them *faith*

towards our Lord Jesus Christ, if they had had the patience to hear him. Having shown them the absurdity of their worshipping other gods, he persuades them to go on no longer in that foolish way of worship, but to return from it to the living and true God. Observe,

1. The conduct of God towards the Gentile world before the gospel came among them: *The times of this ignorance God winked at.*

(1.) They were times of great ignorance. Human learning flourished more than ever in the Gentile world just before Christ's time; but in the things of God they were grossly ignorant. Those are ignorant indeed who either know not God or worship him ignorantly; idolatry was owing to ignorance.

(2.) These times of ignorance God winked at. Understand it,

[1.] As an act of divine justice. God despised or neglected these times of ignorance, and did not send them his gospel, as now he does. It was very provoking to him to see his glory thus given to another; and he detested and hated these times. So some take it. Or rather,

[2.] As an act of divine patience and forbearance. He winked at these times; he did not restrain them from these idolatries by sending prophets to them, as he did to Israel; he did not punish them in their idolatries, as he did Israel; but gave them the gifts of his providence, ^{<4446>}Acts 14:16, 17. *These things thou hast done, and I kept silence,* ^{<5871>}Psalms 50:21. He did not give them such calls and motives to repentance as he does now. He *let them alone*. Because they did not improve the light they had, but were willingly ignorant, he did not send them greater lights. Or, he was not quick and severe with them, but was long-suffering towards them, because they did it ignorantly, ^{<5113>}1 Timothy 1:13.

2. The charge God gave to the Gentile world by the gospel, which he now sent among them: *He now commandeth all men every where to repent* — to change their mind and their way, to be ashamed of their folly and to act more wisely, to break off the worship of idols and bind themselves to the worship of the true God. Nay, it is to turn with sorrow and shame from every sin, and with cheerfulness and resolution to every duty.

(1.) This is God's command. It had been a great favour if he had only told us that there was room left for repentance, and we might be admitted to it;

but he goes further, he interposes his own authority for our good, and has made that our duty which is our privilege.

(2.) It is his command to *all men, every where*, — to men, and not to angels, that need it not, — to men, and not to devils, that are excluded the benefit of it, — to all men in all places; all men have made work for repentance, and have cause enough to repent, and all men are invited to repent, and shall have the benefit of it. The apostles are commissioned to preach this every where. The prophets were sent to command the Jews to repent; but the apostles were sent to preach *repentance and remission of sins to all nations*.

(3.) Now in gospel times it is more earnestly commanded, because more encouraged than it had been formerly. Now the way of remission is more opened than it had been, and the promise more fully confirmed; and therefore now he expects we should all repent. “Now repent; now at length, now in time, repent; for you have too long gone on in sin. Now in time repent, for it will be too late shortly.”

3. The great reason to enforce this command, taken from the judgment to come. God commands us to repent, *because he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness* (v. 31), and has now under the gospel made a clearer discovery of a state of retribution in the other world than ever before. Observe,

(1.) The God that made the world will judge it; he that gave the children of men their being and faculties will call them to an account for the use they have made of them, and recompense them accordingly, whether the body served the soul in serving God or the soul was a drudge to the body in making provision for the flesh; and *every man shall receive according to the things done in the body*, ~~450~~ 2 Corinthians 5:10. The God that now governs the world will judge it, will reward the faithful friends of his government and punish the rebels.

(2.) There is a day appointed for this general review of all that men have done in time, and a final determination of their state for eternity. The day is fixed in the counsel of God, and cannot be altered; but it is his there, and cannot be known. A day of decision, a day of recompence, a day that will put a final period to all the days of time.

(3.) The world will be judged in righteousness; for God is not unrighteous, who taketh vengeance; far be it from him that he should do iniquity. His knowledge of all men's characters and actions is infallibly true, and therefore his sentence upon them incontestably just. And, as there will be no appeal from it, so there will be no exception against it.

(4.) God will judge the world *by that man whom he hath ordained*, who can be no other than the Lord Jesus, to whom all judgment is committed. By him God made the world, by him he redeemed it, by him he governs it, and by him he will judge it.

(5.) God's raising Christ from the dead is the great proof of his being appointed and ordained the Judge of quick and dead. His doing him that honour evidenced his designing him this honour. His raising him from the dead was the beginning of his exaltation, his judging the world will be the perfection of it; and he that begins will make an end. God hath *given assurance unto all men*, sufficient ground for their faith to build upon, both that there is a judgment to come and that Christ will be their judge; the matter is not left doubtful, but is of unquestionable certainty. Let all his enemies be assured of it, and tremble before him; let all his friends be assured of it, and triumph in him.

(6.) The consideration of the judgment to come, and of the great hand Christ will have in that judgment, should engage us all to repent of our sins and turn from them to God. This is the only way to make the Judge our friend in that day, which will be a terrible day to all who live and die impenitent; but true penitents will then *lift up their heads with joy, knowing that their redemption draws nigh*.

ACTS 17:32-34

PAUL AT ATHENS

We have here a short account of the issue of Paul's preaching at Athens.

I. Few were the better: the gospel had as little success at Athens as any where; for the pride of the philosophers there, as of the Pharisees at Jerusalem, prejudiced them against the gospel of Christ.

1. Some ridiculed Paul and his preaching. They heard him patiently till he came to speak of the resurrection of the dead (v. 32), and then some of them began to hiss him: they *mocked*. What he had said before was somewhat like what they had sometimes heard in their own schools, and some notion they had of a resurrection, as it signifies a future state; but, if he speak of a *resurrection of the dead*, though it be of the resurrection of Christ himself, it is altogether incredible to them, and they cannot bear so much as to hear of it, as being contrary to a principle of their philosophy: *A privatione ad habitum non datur regressus* — *Life when once lost is irrecoverable*. They had deified their heroes after their death, but never thought of their being raised from the dead, and therefore they could by no means reconcile themselves to this doctrine of Christ's being raised from the dead; how can this be? This great doctrine, which is the saints' joy, is their jest; when it was but mentioned to them they mocked, and made a laughing matter of it. We are not to think it strange if sacred truths of the greatest certainty and importance are made the scorn of profane wits.

2. Others were willing to take time to consider of it; they said, *We will hear thee again of this matter*. They would not at present comply with what Paul said, nor oppose it; but *we will hear thee again of this matter*, of the resurrection of the dead. It should seem, they overlooked what was plain and uncontroverted, and shifted off the application and the improvement of that, by starting objections against what was disputable, and would admit a debate. Thus many lose the benefit of the practical doctrine of Christianity, by wading beyond their depth into controversy, or, rather, by objecting against that which has some difficulty in it; whereas, if any man were disposed and determined to *do the will of God*, as far as it is discovered to him, he should *know of the doctrine of Christ*, that it is *of God, and not of man*, ^{<407>}John 7:17. Those that would not yield to the present convictions of the word thought to get clear of them, as Felix did, by putting them off to another opportunity; they will hear of it again some time or other, but they know not when; and thus the devil cozens them of all their time, by cozening them of the present time.

3. Paul thereupon left them for the present to consider of it (v. 33): *He departed from amongst them*, as seeing little likelihood of doing any good with them at this time; but, it is likely, with a promise to those that were willing to hear him again that he would meet them whenever they pleased.

II. Yet there were some that were wrought upon, v. 34. If some would not, others would.

1. There were certain men that adhered to him, and believed. When he departed from amongst them, they would not part with him so; wherever he went, they would follow him, with a resolution to adhere to the doctrine he preached, which they believed.

2. Two are particularly named; one was an eminent man, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, one of that high court or great council that sat in Areopagus, or Mars' Hill — a judge, a senator, one of those before whom Paul was summoned to appear; his judge becomes his convert. The account which the ancients give of this Dionysius is that he was bred at Athens, had studied astrology in Egypt, where he took notice of the miraculous eclipse at our Saviour's passion, — that, returning to Athens, he became a senator, disputed with Paul, and was by him converted from his error and idolatry; and, being by him thoroughly instructed, was made the first bishop of Athens. So *Eusebius, lib. 5, cap. 4; lib. 4, cap. 22*. The woman named *Damaris* was, as some think, the wife of Dionysius; but, rather, some other person of quality; and, though there was not so great a harvest gathered in at Athens as there was at other places, yet, these few being wrought upon there, Paul had no reason to say he had *laboured in vain*.