

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 32

August 4-10, 2014

Acts 15:36 – 17:34
1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13

Introduction to the Context Bible

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, it makes reading like an ordinary book quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John’s gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week thirty-two, along with the readings for week thirty-two appended. Join in. It’s never too late to read the Bible in context!

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Reading Purpose: Based on Paul's history, Philippi would not be a logical stop on his mission trip. As we saw in the last lessons, Paul's *modus operandi* was consistent: go into the local synagogue and speak to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, teaching about Jesus as Messiah and Savior. But Philippi was different. There was no synagogue, likely because there were not enough Jews. Paul went there at God's direction, not from his own careful planning. The results? Profound! The church would not be the church it is otherwise. Oh the marvelous plans of God!

The Journey's Preparation and Early Stages (Acts 15:36-16:5)

After the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15, where the church deliberated and came to a Spirit led conclusion about integrating Gentiles in the church, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. Luke tells us that for some unspecified time, "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also" (Acts 15:35).

It does not take great imagination to think of Paul seeing daily the presence of "many others" teaching in Antioch and wondering whether Antioch was where he was most needed and most useful. Paul also must have wondered how the churches he and Barnabas had started were doing. How had they received Paul's letter we call Galatians? Did the churches understand Paul's reasoning and positions? Were they following his counsel and instructions? Were the false teachers set right?

Luke does not give us those inward thoughts of Paul, but they can fairly be assumed as we read right after the statement that "many others" were also teaching in Antioch that, "Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are'" (Acts 15:36).

Barnabas was all for the trip, but there was a sticking point. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John Mark again. Paul was against it. Paul did not want to take Mark after Mark had prematurely abandoned the last mission effort, leaving in Pamphylia. Luke says, "there arose a sharp disagreement" (Acts 15:39). Luke does not pull any punches in his writing. The word he uses for "sharp disagreement" we find in other passages like Deuteronomy 29:28 and Jeremiah 32:37. In those passages we read, "the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great *wrath*" and "Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation." This was not a mild difference in opinion. These two godly men truly struggled with each other trying to determine what was right for them to do before God.

Luke uses *parazusmos* (παράζυσμός) translated "sharp disagreement. The Deuteronomy and Jeremiah passages cited above are from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the "Septuagint." This is the Old Testament version used most often by Paul and Luke. It gives a good sense of how the Greek word was used in his circles.

We inserted the reading of Proverbs 27:17,

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

Reading the English, it makes sense that as iron can be used to help shape and mold iron in beneficial ways (“sharpening”), so can the interactions of one with another.

The Greek translation of that Proverb in the Septuagint, prompts the context reading of this Proverb along with Paul and Barnabas’s “sharp disagreement.” The same Greek word Luke chose to describe the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, *parazusmos*, was used by the Septuagint translators of Proverbs 27:17. In the Greek, the idea of iron sharpening iron is compared to one man’s sharp disagreement with a friend or companion. When friends disagree, it can work to bring a good edge that makes each better, or it can disturb the edge in ways that deform the person. Obviously for the Christian believer, the Lord would have disagreements result in an improvement in the people and the work!

The net result of the disagreement was the separation of Paul and Barnabas. We should remember here that initially Paul wanted the two to go out together. It was Paul’s suggestion, “Let *us* return and visit the brothers in every city.” Instead of the two going together, Barnabas took John Mark and returned to the first churches started on the first missionary trip, those on the island Cyprus. (This made sense because Cyprus was Barnabas’s home and was also the one part of the first mission trip where Mark was present.) Paul took Silas and went back to Galatia and Phrygia.

From here, the Acts history follows Paul. Barnabas is not mentioned again in the New Testament beyond a reference by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:6 about Barnabas and Paul both having to work for a living.

There is a writing called *The Acts of Barnabas*, which claims to be John Mark’s account of the activities and death of Barnabas on Cyprus. The writing, however, is quite late. Some scholars date it in the 400’s to 500’s.¹

Paul sets out on this trip taking Silas as his partner. This time when Paul went to the Southern Galatian churches, he did so by the land route rather than by sea.

¹ J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1993) at 523.



Luke tells us that Paul and Silas used the trip as an opportunity to strengthen the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41).

Silas made a wonderful choice as a traveling companion for Paul.² The Jerusalem church had previously used Silas as a voice for their opinions (Acts 15:22ff) and so he was in a position to speak of (if not for) the Jerusalem church. Because Paul was taking the Jerusalem decree with him, Silas also was another voice to explain the decree. From the notes Paul adds in later letters (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:19) Silas was obviously a good co-worker and probably either a coauthor or a secretary of at least two of Paul's letters. Silas also (just like Paul) was a Roman citizen. This would come in handy in the traveling as well.

Paul then went through Derbe and into Lystra. In Lystra, Paul came upon a young man whose mother and grandmother was Jewish, but whose father was a Greek. The church in Lystra spoke highly of this young man, not only in Lystra but also in nearby Iconium. Paul decided to bring the young man on the journey, and so we find Timothy making his first appearance in the New Testament.³

² These points are made, albeit a bit differently, by Ben Witherington III in *The Acts of the Apostles – A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 473.

³ Acts is not too clear on when or how Timothy was converted. Witherington believes that Luke implies that Timothy was converted “through the previous efforts of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra.” *Ibid.* at 474. Some argue support for this in Paul's characterization of Timothy as his “beloved and faithful child in the Lord” in 1 Cor. 4:17.

Paul chose to have Timothy circumcised before they ventured out together. One might fairly ask why Paul, who had written such a clear letter to the Galatian churches about NOT circumcising Greek Christians in order to comply with the law, would have Timothy circumcised? The answer likely lies in Timothy's heritage. Timothy's father was Greek, but his mother ("Eunice"—2 Tim. 1:5) and her mother ("Lois," Timothy's grandmother—2 Tim. 1:5) were Jews. Under Jewish law and custom, one's Jewish heritage was passed on through the mother, not the father!⁴ Because Timothy was Jewish through his maternal side, he was deemed by Jews (including Paul) to be Jewish.

Paul never had a problem with Jews following their laws and customs. Paul himself followed a number of Jewish traditions. Paul still considered himself a Jew and a Pharisee even after accepting Jesus as his Lord and risen Savior. (See, *e.g.* Acts 23:6). For Paul, who would be going into synagogues on the trip teaching the Jews about their Deliverer, it seemed best to have Timothy the Jew circumcised. Luke noted Paul circumcised Timothy, "because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all new that his father was a Greek" (Acts 16:3). Timothy would be a visible testimony whether Paul was teaching that the Christian faith was a fulfillment of Judaism or simply a way out of it. Paul wanted there to be no doubt.

Bruce writes, "Paul therefore recognized his status (and, in Jewish eyes, legitimized him) by circumcising him."⁵

As Paul and Silas continued through these young churches, Paul took with him and delivered to them the decisions about binding Jewish law on the Greeks "reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem" (Acts 16:4). This was the letter that, under the timing we set out in the previous lessons, would have come about *after* Paul had written Galatians to these churches. One would suspect that Paul took delight in the confirmation that the Jerusalem decision gave to Paul's instructions and guidance written in our Galatian letter.

The Macedonian Call and Lydia's Conversion (Acts 16:6-16:15; and Pslm. 113).

Luke tells us that Paul went through Phrygia and Galatia, but was "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). For that reason, when Paul and his crew came to Mysia, their attempts to go into Bithynia were stopped by the Holy Spirit. We are not told *how* the Holy Spirit closed that door, but we are told it happened! Instead, Paul, Silas, and Timothy went over to Troas!

⁴ For a good discussion on the matrilineal Jewish heritage laws, see "Who is a Jew?" at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/whojew1.html>. See also Witherington at 475.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 1951), at 308.

Guess whom Paul found in Troas? Luke! Our author of Acts was there and joined the mission effort. Luke goes into no detail, but simply changes how he writes the events. For the first time in Acts, Luke begins speaking of what “we” did, instead of what “Paul” did or what “they” did. The transition verse is Acts 16:8-16:10:

So, passing by Mysia, *they* went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately *we* sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them.

Luke keeps a good accurate narrative of the journey with his involvement. Suddenly, instead of writing about what was done in generic terms (“after some days” or “he went through...” or “they went on their way”), Luke writes with great precision! “Setting sail from Troas, *we* made *a direct voyage to Samothrace*, and *the following day to Neapolis* and from there to Philippi” (Acts 16:11-16:12).⁶

In Philippi, Paul and the team did not go to a synagogue. Rather, we find them in the city for some days. On the Sabbath, they “went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13). Scholars believe that there must not have been enough males to constitute the quorum needed for an official synagogue. We read in the Mishnah that 10 males were needed. It makes additional sense when we see Luke adding that at “the place of prayer” (as opposed to a synagogue) were “women who had come together” (Acts 16:13).

The women were receptive! One, a wealthy merchant named Lydia, asked the missionary team to return to her home. Why? Because, Luke says, “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Lydia and her household were baptized at that time. She then had Paul and crew come stay at her home as guests.

We paired this conversion with Psalm 113. This is a psalm of praise that exalts the Lord for the way he takes care of people in need – the poor, the needy, the barren, etc. These the Lord takes care of, transforming them into those with abundance. Our God is not an absent God or a preoccupied God. He is an attentive and caring God. Our God is to be praised!

The Philippian Jailor (Acts 16:16-16:40; Ps. 56, 59, 112, 138, 145, 149)

⁶ Scholars note that Samothrace was a full day’s sail from Troas. Neapolis was yet another day’s sail.

When Paul and crew were in Philippi, they reached a point where a slave girl who had a spirit of divination⁷ started following them daily crying out, “these men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). After it continued on for a number of days, Paul put a stop to it. While walking to the “place of prayer,” Paul finally had had enough. As Luke saw it, “Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the Spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’” (Acts 16:18).

The spirit indeed left the girl, much to the chagrin of her owners. The slave girl had been making her owners a good bit of money off her divining. When the owners saw “that their hope⁸ of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers” (Acts 16:19). It is worth noting that the people would have seen Luke and Timothy as Greeks. These two were left alone and just Paul and Silas (the Jews) were arrested.

The owners managed to incite the town magistrates and the crowd against Paul and Silas. The men were stripped and beaten. Their feet were shackled into a torture instrument that forced the legs far apart⁹ and they were thrown into prison. Paul and Silas reacted by singing hymns and praying to God in the depth of their cell well into the night.

⁷ Her possession in the Greek is noted by the word *pythona* (πύθωνα). We get the word “python” from it. Bruce calls the slave girl a “Pythoress” noting that these possessed diviners were deemed to be “inspired by Apollo, the Pythian god, who was embodied in a snake (the python) as Delphi (also called Pytho).”

⁸ This is a great teaching verse in the New Testament worth marking in your Bibles. It is a clear example of the true meaning of the Greek word *elpis* (ἐλπίς) translated as “hope.” The owners had a moneymaking machine in the girl. She had made them money before and was thoroughly expected to make them money in the future. Now, the future money was not made yet, but it was confidently expected – business as usual! It was this confident expectation that was taken away. That is the thrust of meaning in the Greek word *elpis*, confident expectation. Too often in English, we use “hope” to mean a long shot or a desire that might possibly come about, but not likely! So, when we read of our “hope” in God (1 Tim. 6:17), the “hope” to which we are called (Eph. 1:18), or Christ in us, the “hope” of glory (Col. 1:21), we think of something speculative, but wished for. We should understand that these are not pie in the sky wishes, but confident expectations!

⁹ The translators use the English “stocks” for the torture device. In Greek, the device is termed a *zulon* (ξύλον). That is the Greek word for “wood,” which was used for different slugs of wood put to use, much like the English word “stock.” Thus in English, the “stock” may refer to a chunk of wood, or to the wood when used as the butt of a gun (the gun “stock”), or the stocks used to place neck/hands/feet in a torture context. These stocks likely had multiple holes to force the legs wide in a torture position. Bruce, at 318.

We have inserted into the core text three psalms to give a flavor for the attitudes that would bring forth songs of praise from these two believers, in a foreign land, far from friends, family, resources, connections, or official help.

Psalm 56 is the cry of one being oppressed by enemies. While others might fear the attacks, the psalmist instead refuses to fear, putting trust in God!

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Ps. 56:3-56:4).

Why shouldn't Paul feel that way? Paul had been the persecutor before becoming the persecuted. Paul saw Stephen in faith face death without fear. Paul knew Jesus had suffered for Paul! Paul knew God was not absent, and Paul was ready to suffer for the kingdom!

That did not make Paul a masochist. Paul was not looking to be hurt. Psalm 59 cries out against persecutors as well as persecution. But Paul knew that the ultimate power was not the jailor or Philippian authorities. There was a God who was gracious, merciful, and righteous. And in the end, the score would reflect that righteousness. It allowed Paul, in the interim, to reflect the promises of Psalm 112.

For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid (Ps. 112:6-112:8).

Around midnight, an earthquake gave Paula and Silas release and freedom. But instead of taking flight, Paul and Silas remained in their cells!

The jailer awoke and saw that the prison doors were open. Fearing the prisoners had escaped, the jailer decided to kill himself (for his life would be forfeit had the prisoners escaped under his watch). As the jailer pulled his sword, Paul called out to him loudly, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). The jailer was no doubt stunned. He called for lights, ran in before Paul and Silas, and fell trembling with fear. The jailer brought them out and asked them the most important question in his entire life, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

This jailer would certainly have been hearing the prayers and praises Paul and Silas proclaimed while in the cell. Paul and Silas had something that enabled them to stay in a prison hole, when most anyone else would have disregarded the consequences to the jailer and fled when the opportunity presented itself.

Paul and Silas answered the jailer's question, instructing him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Luke then tells of Paul and Silas telling the jailor and his house "the word of the Lord." Then we have a

beautiful contrast of the usage of water! The jailer took Paul and Silas out “the same hour of the night” and washed their wounds. The water was used to wash the jailer and his household.¹⁰ “He was baptized at once, he and all his family.” Through the centuries the joy of that moment is not lost. Each word of Luke brings the smile and happiness current over that incredible night in Philippi!

We have added three psalms of joy and praise. Psalm 138 proclaims praise to the Lord because of his regard for the lowly and for those who walk in the midst of trouble. God promises to fulfill his purposes for those who seek his face.

Psalm 145 speaks of God’s greatness and splendor as a God who is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. A psalm like this would have no doubt moved the Philippian jailor to tears of joy, love, and appreciation for the God who cared enough for him to bring about Paul’s trip to Philippi, Paul’s imprisonment, Paul’s attitude of love and caring, and the resulting conversion of not only the jailor, but his household.

The jailer brought Paul and Silas into his house and set food before them. “And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:34). What a story Luke must have heard upon awakening the next morning! The town went to sleep with Paul and Silas in chains under the jailer’s watchful eye. The dawn came with Paul and Silas in the jailer’s home fed, washed, and celebrating the Christian birth of the jailer and his family! Wow!

We are not surprised that later when Paul, again imprisoned in another city, writes the church at Philippi and begins by saying, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy” (Phil. 1:3).

The next day, the magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be let go! Paul, however, was not leaving so easily! Paul wanted the actual people responsible for beating and imprisoning Paul and Silas without a trial to come confront them face-to-face. For at this time, Paul let the authorities know that he and Silas were Roman citizens. Of course, this made the beatings and imprisonment illegal. The authorities were mortified! They came to Paul and Silas with great apologies on their lips. After receiving the apologies, Paul and Silas willingly left Philippi (but not without first going back to see Lydia and the other Christians and encouraging them).

¹⁰ John Chrysostom (347-407), who we studied in Church History (see lessons at [www. Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com)), comments on this passage saying, “Do you mark what happened? There a girl was released from a spirit, and they cast them into a prison...Here, they...show the doors standing open, and it opened the doors of his heart, it loosed two sorts of chains...And he took them...and washed their stripes, washed them and was washed: those he washed from their stripes, himself was washed from his sins: he fed and was fed” (homilies 36:2).

Paul and the Thessalonians (Acts 17:1-17:9; 1 Thess. 1:1-3:13)

After the great success in Philippi, the conversion of Lydia and her household, the jailer and his household as well as others we do not have stories for, Paul and Silas left for other parts of Europe. Luke seems to remain behind in Philippi for we see his narrative language return to the third person. Luke writes, “When *they* had seen the brothers, *they* encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16:40). Luke then writes of the continued mission, “Now when *they* had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, *they* came to Thessalonica...” (Acts 17:1). So at this point, Paul’s mission team included Silas and Timothy. Luke apparently stayed behind at Philippi.

In Thessalonica, about 70 miles from Philippi (a five day walk).¹¹ Thessalonica was a cosmopolitan town placed at a key port along the road that ran West-East connecting the strength of the Roman Empire with outlying Eastern areas. This road, the Via Egnatia, was a principal thoroughfare that made Thessalonica a major trading point and a commercial center. Thessalonica was also the Roman administrative center for the region of Macedonia.¹²

The Jewish presence was strong in Thessalonica, but so were a number of cults that worshiped various deities. At the time of Paul, the chief city cult was that of Cabirus. The notables in Thessalonica threw the community support behind this cult and the ceremonies that went with it. This was a bonding tie that sought to create community allegiance and continuity. A second important cult was the Caesar cult. Also called the Imperial Cult, this religion fostered worship of the Roman Emperor as a god. Anything contrary to the community cult or the imperial cult was, no doubt, deemed destructive for the community. Certain other religions had official sanction that allowed them to exist anyway. Among these allowed faiths was the Jewish faith.

Paul started by going to the synagogue, “as was his custom” (Acts 17:2). For three weeks in a row, Paul went. Each time, Paul worked from the Old Testament explaining and showing why the Messiah (“Christ” in Greek) had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Paul told the Jews of Jesus, proclaiming him as the Messiah. Paul never sought to appeal simply to emotion. Paul presented well-reasoned arguments for his faith. Some of the Jews “were persuaded” as were a great many Greeks.

Paul was supported in his work there by gifts that came from the church in Philippi. Paul later writes the Philippians mentioning their “partnership in the gospel from the first day” (Phil. 1:5). Paul later speaks of their kindness as “even in Thessalonica you

¹¹ Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic 2007) at 550)

¹² Charles Wanamaker, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary – The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 1990) at 4.

sent me help for my needs once and again” (Phil. 4:16). Paul did not rely on the support of the Philippians alone. Paul, Silas, and Timothy also worked “night and day” so as not to burden the new believers (I Thes. 2:9).

As we have seen in other places, the success of God’s work incited jealousy among disbelieving Jews who worked up the crowd. Thinking Paul was in the house of one named Jason, a mob descended upon the house. When Paul was not found there, the mob grabbed Jason and some other converts and took them before the city authorities. Arguing that the Christians were traitors who had a king (named Jesus) in the place of Caesar, the mob convinced the authorities to arrest the believers. After posting bond, Jason and the others were released.

The term Luke uses for the security Jason posted indicates that money was paid and Jason also gave assurance that Paul and Silas would leave the city.¹³ Evidently, Timothy was exempt from this requirement, which would explain why Timothy soon came back to the city (1 Thes. 3:2).

After posting this security, the church sent Paul and Silas away from Thessalonica by night. Shortly thereafter, Paul wrote back to the church in the letter we call First Thessalonians, seeking to resolve some questions and issues that were left unresolved as Paul left unexpectedly.

First Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13; Jeremiah 4; Psalm 134; and assorted Proverbs)

Paul begins his letter writing on behalf of himself as well as his co-missionaries Silvanus and Timothy. We read in Acts that the two accompanied Paul on his trip to Thessalonica, although Luke used the shortened name of “Silas” for “Silvanus.”

At the very beginning, Paul tells the Thessalonians that he constantly prays for them, with thankfulness as he remembers the work that their faith produces, the labor that comes from their love, and the steadfastness that flows from their confidence in the return of Christ.

Paul emphasizes that it was clear God had chosen the Thessalonians because when Paul preached, they did not merely hear the word. The word came into them with conviction, with power, and with the Holy Spirit. As such, the Thessalonians became Christian examples known throughout all of Macedonia. This fits with Thessalonica being the leading city and capital of Macedonia. Paul adds, though, that the reputation of the church in Thessalonica extended even to Achaia (modern Greece).

¹³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 509. See also Paul’s reference to being torn away, in spite of his desire to stay in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-18 and the comment in reference thereto in Bock at 553.

How was the reputation so noteworthy? The Thessalonians had ceased worshiping dead idols! Instead they were serving the living and true God while awaiting the promised return of Jesus, who will bring salvation from the wrath to come.

We have inserted into the contextual readings, Jeremiah 4. It provides a contrast between the actions and reputation of the Thessalonians with that of the Jews before the Babylonian captivity. Judah's refusal to remove "detestable things" (idols) brought God's wrath and punishment, some thing effect the Jews and their reputation forever. Instead, the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols" (1 Thes. 1:9). That became their reputation, both in their own day and secured in Paul's writing for the ages.

[Y]ou became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

We also inserted into this reading Psalm 134. This is a brief psalm calling for praise from the people of God, asking people to bless the God who blesses his people! Paul both pronounced the blessings upon God and his people for the work of God in the lives of his people and the works of the people coming from their faith in God.

From there, Paul detailed the value of his visit to Thessalonica. While it came on the heels of his suffering and poor treatment in Philippi, it was a valuable visit anyway. Paul came into Thessalonica boldly declaring the gospel. He did so, even though Thessalonica also had its share of conflict. Paul never tried to flatter the Thessalonians, never used his message to line his pockets, nor did Paul seek to exalt himself in his preaching. Paul's desire was not for Paul, but for the Thessalonians. Like a mother nurses her child, Paul felt tenderly toward the church there.

That is why Paul would work day and night, using his tent maker craft to support himself while he evangelized the unsaved. It did not end there, either. After the unsaved found faith, Paul continued to teach, exhort, encourage, and edify the church like a father does his children, so that they might walk worthy of their calling!

Paul writes special appreciation that the Thessalonians never thought of themselves as receiving simply Paul's words. They understood God was behind the message. They were willing to suffer just as the mother church had in Judea.

Paul expresses concern about his rapid departure from Thessalonica ("we were torn away from you" 2:17). He tells the Thessalonians he continually wanted to come back and visit them, but was hindered from doing so by Satan. Paul was willing to be left without Timothy in Athens, so that Timothy could at least go back to Thessalonica to minister to the church there. Paul was also worried about how the church was faring and how the church held up to Satan's temptations.

Timothy made the journey, and Paul tells the church about the great comfort and thankfulness he had once Timothy returned and reported on the church's faith and steadfastness. Paul prays that the church's love and holiness would increase more and more until the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

Next week's readings finish 1 Thessalonians.

Paul in Athens (Acts 17:10-17:34; Genesis 9:1-9:7, 9:18-9:29; 11:10-11:32; and Numbers 1-2)

The missionaries went to Berea, about 45-50 miles southwest of Thessalonica.¹⁴ Have you ever heard of a church named after Berea? There are many! The reason why is the account of the Bereans in Acts 17. Luke says that the Jews in Berea "were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Jews and Greeks (especially Greek women of high standing) put their faith in Christ.

When the Thessalonian Jews heard of Paul's Berean presence, they came into Berea and tried working up those crowds also. Paul left Silas and Timothy in Berea and was ushered on a boat to Athens by some Berean brothers. After arriving in Athens, Paul sent the brothers back with instructions for Timothy and Silas to come as soon as possible.

Paul was alone in Athens. Wow. Wouldn't it be wonderful to know what was going through Paul's head? Athens was not just another town. It was one of the oldest cities of Paul's day. For nearly one thousand years, Athens had given the world culture and education. Athens was the birthplace of philosophy, theater, and democracy. In the 7th century B.C., while the rest of the world was ruled by kings and tyrants, Athens was ruled by an elected council (albeit elected by the rich and nobles from their own ranks) ruling from the Areopagus ("Mars Hill"). By 508 B.C. that changed and all citizens were given a voice in government. Democracy is born!

In the 400's, the famous Parthenon was built on the Acropolis in Athens. That same century, Socrates (c.471-399BC) brought his voice to Athens teaching and questioning others as the gadfly of the city. Socrates has a number of students who take philosophy further. Plato (c.424-c.348BC) and Xenophon (c.431-355BC) are two of his more noteworthy followers. Plato laid foundations of the West that still undergird most of western culture and thought. Plato's impact is also strong through his student Aristotle (384-322BC).

¹⁴ Bock at 555.

Aristotle wrote on physics, metaphysics, poetry, music, theater, logic, rhetoric, politics, government, ethics, theology, biology, and zoology – all from Athens, moving there when he was 18. Aristotle was tutor to Alexander the Great, one of history’s greatest military geniuses.

To this day, Athens is referred to as the cradle of European civilization.

Athens was also a pagan city, its name coming from the goddess Athena, who also had a temple in her honor on the Acropolis. There were many temples set up in Athens, both on the Acropolis and in the agora (marketplace).

Paul must have had a myriad of thoughts, as he was alone in this historical mecca of philosophy and culture. We know Paul was well versed in writers of Athens because he is able to quote them as needed in his conversations.

Athens was a brand new experience for Paul. First, it is the first recorded missionary account of him alone. We know he spent time in Cilicia and Syria after his conversion, but we have no accounting of what happened in those years.

Paul has just finished reasoning from the Scriptures with Jews and Jewish influenced Greeks in Berea, but in Athens, he did not stop there! While Luke notes that Paul reasoned in the synagogues, he also tells us that Paul went daily to the agora (marketplace) to reason with the pagans there.

The agora was a long area of shops, food stalls, schools, and councils. It was the center of the town’s life and can be found at the foot of the Acropolis. In the agora, Paul came across the philosophers of the day. These were “Epicureans” and “Stoics.” These Epicureans and Stoics engaged Paul in discussion.

Epicureans

Paul’s speech was to “an educated and rather philosophical pagan [audience] without contacts with the synagogue.”¹⁵ The Epicureans derived their name from the Athenian philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). Philosophers call Epicureans “materialists.” By that term, philosophers are referring to the general Epicurean belief that matter (material) was necessary for existence. There was no real belief by the Epicureans in non-matter (or “incorporeal”) entities.¹⁶ To the Epicureans, even the soul was formed of matter.

¹⁵ Witherington at 511.

¹⁶ The exception to this was the Epicurean acceptance of “void” as a concept that existed, although not in a material form. For a good overview and selected source readings in Epicurean philosophy, see

Not surprisingly, Epicureans believed that one could only accept truth that came from reasoning based solidly on what was evident. Reason was an inherent part of the material soul of man. They believed that man's happiness or misery was based on the exercise of reason.¹⁷

In the area of ethics, reason again played a prominent role. A precise understanding of the nature of man was the key to "a true conception of the good life for man."¹⁸ Epicureans believed that pleasure or happiness was the highest goal of life. This gives birth to the modern usage of "epicurean" as a word expressing "pleasure-seeking, hedonistic...pampered, luxurious."¹⁹ But Epicureans were not so hedonistic themselves! Epicurus wrote that reasoning through the consequences helps one understand:

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.²⁰

Epicurus taught that one should live simply without a great deal of expectation and one could then more readily enjoy whatever life throws at you!

Epicurus did believe in the existence of gods, but "not as the multitude believe."²¹ Common sense taught of gods and their true nature, which Epicurus believed to be good, and also interested in their own good pleasure. The gods were not, however, interested or involved in humans. Epicurus also believed that death ends one's existence. There is, he taught, no afterlife with reward or punishment from the gods.

Stoics

Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy – Introductory Readings* (Hackett Publishing Co. 2d Ed., 1997).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at xviii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* American Edition (Oxford 1996) at 484.

²⁰ *Letter to Menoeceus* contained in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* at 10.131. Loeb Classical Library edition translated by R. D. Hicks.

²¹ *Ibid.* at 10.123.

The Stoics were also materialists like the Epicureans. In the matters we set forth earlier under “Epicureans,” the Stoics held very similar views.²² Diogenes Laertius (who most scholars place in the third century²³) wrote on the lives of key Stoic philosophers.

The father of the Stoic movement was the Greek Zeno (334-262 B.C.). Once Zeno moved to Athens, he paced on a covered walkway/colonnade to teach his philosophy. The Greek word for this colonnade was *stoa* (στοά); hence the name for his followers, “Stoics.”

Zeno himself was “sour” and frowned a great deal. He was famous for his “one liners” that were supposed to make people think. For example, it was Zeno who said, “The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less.”²⁴

Stoics tried to avoid being emotional. Passion and emotion were considered “an irrational and unnatural movement in the soul.”²⁵ The emotions were divided into four groups: grief, fear, desire and pleasure. Stoics would have loved Star Trek’s Dr. Spock.

Stoics taught that God was “a living being, immortal, rational, perfect or intelligent in happiness, admitting nothing evil [into him], taking providential care of the world and all that therein is.”²⁶

Paul

Paul was discussing his faith with various philosophers of the Epicurean and Stoic schools. Paul provoked enough interest for some to ask what he was talking about. The response was that Paul was “speaking of foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18). This perception of “foreign divinities” came about because Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

These Athenians took Paul to the Areopagus counsel for a hearing. Luke notes that the Athenians spent an inordinate amount of time “in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Paul certainly had something new!

²² Philosophy students will find certain distinctions that do not matter in our discussions here. For example, the Stoics believed in four kinds of “incorporeal” entities: void (like the Epicureans), place, time and “things said.” See Inwood at xvi.

²³ Diogenes Laertius, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 1 at xvi.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Vol 2, VII.23.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at VII.110

²⁶ *Ibid.* at VII.146.

The council asked Paul to explain the “strange things” in his new teaching. That was all the open door Paul needed!

Luke notes, “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus,²⁷ said...” Before we examine Paul’s speech, we should examine his stance! Paul assumed the orator’s position.²⁸ Accomplished orators would strike a standing pose, typically holding out a hand as they gave their presentation. Paul became a Greek to the Greek, a philosopher to the philosophers, so that he might win some to Christ.

Paul began his explanation noting the devotion of the Greeks. Standing on the Areopagus commands great views of Athens. One view is down to the agora, where one would find idols galore. A second view is up towards the Acropolis with its temples to Athena and others. A huge temple to Zeus was also easily visible nearby. In the face of these temples, Paul begins, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar also with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-17:23). Paul begins with a point of familiarity and contact. Paul uses the altar to an unknown god to position himself into that area where the Athenians had already admitted there were likely aspects of divinity beyond their own knowledge.

Paul then dives straight into the character and nature of God in a way that would not have caused alarm to the philosophers around him.²⁹ Paul explains the divine power and nature of God.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24).

²⁷ Many consider Paul to be standing on the hill called the Areopagus. Other scholars point out that the ruling council of Athens was called by the name of the Areopagus because they originally met there. By the time of Paul, these scholars point out, the Areopagus council likely met in the *agora* (marketplace). See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 515.

²⁸ *Ibid.* at 517.

²⁹ Paul makes points of contact in this speech, relating to the Greek philosophers in language and approach that would all seem familiar to them. That is not to say that Paul has abandoned scripture. While Paul never quotes scripture (which would have no impact on these philosophers) Paul’s speech is firmly rooted in Isaiah 42. In Isaiah 42 we read of God “who created the heavens ... gives breath to the people on it.” This same passage speaks of God making his people (which would include Paul) “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.” God also speaks in Isaiah 42 of his historic patience, “For a long time I have held my peace” which was coming to an end.

This statement itself was not foreign to the Stoics. The Stoics believed that, “God is one and the same with Reason, Fate, and Zeus; he is also called by many other names. In the beginning he was by himself; he transformed the whole of substance... He created first of all the four elements, fire, water, air, earth.”³⁰

Paul makes a very logical statement that more and more philosophers were coming to realize made sense (even apart from Paul’s argument). Namely, in spite of all the beautiful temples, anyone who created the world and everything in it did not really need man’s help. The rational approach Paul used in this argument was dead on what the Epicureans and Stoics believed was the proper way to consider such issues.

Paul then begins to sharpen his focus on the relation between God and mankind. Indeed, a creator God is one thing, but what interaction with humanity is involved? Paul explained,

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place (Acts 17:26).

We inserted into this section passages from Genesis setting out Paul’s historical base for these statements. We also added Numbers 1 and 2 as examples of the specific interest God expressed in placing people into allotted periods and boundaries, specifically the Israelites upon their exit from Egypt.

Paul then took it further, establishing the purpose for the Creator God’s work,

That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him (Acts 17:27).

At this point Paul has finally taken a sharp deviation from the Greek philosophers. Both Epicureans and Stoics alike taught that the chief goal of life was achieving happiness by moderating expectations. Paul proclaims the purpose of life is fulfilling the Creator’s design to know God.

To support his argument, Paul made an appeal to Greek poets. Paul urges the Athenians to accept that:

He is actually not far from each one of us, for, “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, “For indeed we are his offspring” (Acts 17:28).

³⁰ *Ibid.* at VII.136-137.

Paul is quoting from two different poets. We believe the first quote comes from Epimenides.³¹ The second quote is from a poem by Aratus named “Phaenomena.” (Aratus was from Cilicia, Paul’s birthplace!). The Aratus poem is a description of the stars and heavenly bodies as well as a bit of weather! The poem begins with a tribute to Zeus, “From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we have need of Zeus. For we also are his offspring...”³² Of course Paul leaves out Zeus as the beginning of humanity. Paul has already told the Athenians that a God they had never been able to name was the source of creation.

Paul draws the natural conclusion from these Greek thinkers asserting that if we are God’s offspring then we need to quit thinking of God as some image formed by man’s imagination and represented by gold, silver or stone. Paul says that while God may have overlooked such ignorance before, God now was commanding repentance. Paul explained that God has fixed a day for judging the world in righteousness by an appointed man (Jesus). God has given assurance on this judgment by raising Jesus from the dead.

Paul’s proclamation on this matter brought snickering and mocking from some. Others expressed a desire to hear more. Paul left but not alone! Even though many scholars equate this Athenian excursion as a “failure,” it is certainly not fair to say so. Luke informs us that Paul went out from the Areopagus, but not alone! “Some men joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others” (Acts 17:34).

Questions for Discussion

Consider building questions around these passages:

1. Have you found any psalms that speak into your life? Which ones? In what ways?
2. How do you handle the events of life that drive many to fear and worry? Are you good at leaving those to God?
3. Have you experienced times of unbridled joy in the Lord? How do you keep those as treasures for needed nourishment in dark days?
4. Paul moved from people group to people group, finding ways God could be understood by each. Are there people for whom you do not see any basis for

³¹ This original poem did not survive antiquity, so scholars cannot state for certain where it is from.

³² Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Loeb Classical Library, translation by G. R. Mair, lines 1-5.

speaking to them about God? Is that something you could discuss with other believers in hopes you might see a way to speak of God into their lives?

Week Thirty-Three Readings

<p>8/11 Paul Paul to Thessalonians – Life Pleasing God 1 Thes 4:1-4:12</p> <p>Luk 14:34-14:35 Prov 21:5 Lev 18:6-18:30 1 Tim 2 Titus 2 Mrk 12:28-12:34 Prov 25:28</p> <p>8/12 Paul to Thessalonians – The 2d Coming 1 Thes 4:13-5:11</p> <p>Luk 17:20-17:37 Luk 18:1-18:8 Mrk 13</p> <p>Paul to Thessalonians – Closing Instructions 1 Thes 5:12-5:28</p> <p>1 Tim 2 Prov 6:1-5 Jas 5:13-5:20 Prov 30:24-30:33 Prov 20:23</p>	<p>8/13 Paul’s Second Letter to Thessalonians –Coming Judgment 2 Thes 1</p> <p>Deut 7</p> <p>8/14 Paul’s Second Letter to Thessalonians – The Man of Lawlessness 2 Thes 2:1-2:12</p> <p>Pslm 119:9-119:40, 119:49-119:80</p> <p>8/15 Paul’s Second Letter to Thessalonians – The Man of Lawlessness 2 Thes 2:1-2:12</p> <p>Pslm 119:89-119:96,119: 113-119:128, 119:145-119:176 Prov 29:18 Ezek 14:1-14:11</p>	<p>8/16 Paul to Thessalonians – Life Instructions 2 Thes 2:13-3:18</p> <p>Prov 6:6-6:11 Prov 10:3-10:5 Prov 12:11, 24, 27 Prov 13:4 Prov 15:19 Prov 19:15,24 Prov 20:4, 13 Prov 21:25-21:26 Prov 23:19-23:25 Prov 24:30-24:34 Prov 26:13-26:16 Prov 10:15-10:16 Prov 14:4 Prov 18:9</p> <p>8/17 Off</p>
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