

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 15

Paul's Second Missionary Journey – Part 2

When I was in law school, some friends introduced me to a board game called “Risk.” Risk is a strategic game where the goal is conquering the world, an idea that appealed to a number of us law students!

The game has the world divided into six continents (Asia, Africa, Australia, North America, South America and Europe). The goal is to take the continents until you drive your opponents from the board. One of the hardest and yet most valuable continents is Europe. If you can conquer and hold Europe, you make incredible progress toward winning the world.

A French movie director, Albert Lamorisse, invented the game. Originally named *The Conquest of the World* (*La Conquête du Monde*), the game was based on the political map of the Napoleonic-era (early 1800's). The conquest of Europe, however, is not new with the game. Julius Caesar set his sights on fully conquering Europe, as have countless generals and rulers ever since. Europe is a prize because of its location, its resources, its people, as well as its geographical centrality. It is at once a diverse cultural center and a political challenge.

If history were to note any effective conquest of Europe, one could not overlook the results of a vision we considered last week. Paul was in Troas, on the edge of modern Asia. Asia and the “East,” the “Orient,”¹ were the birthplace of Christianity and the church. The church might have expanded into Europe based on the account of Acts 2 and the presence of people from Rome and other places, but we do not know for certain. What we do know is that God stopped Paul and crew from evangelizing in Asia on Paul's second missionary journey, instead sending them to Troas. In Troas, a port city, Paul stood on the very edge of Asia.

At Asia's edge, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling Paul to come. Not one to delay when the will of God was involved, Paul, Luke and others “got ready at once to leave for Macedonia” (Acts 16:10). So we see Paul and his small mission team leaving Asia and bringing the gospel into Europe; and Europe, and the world, has never been the same. Ultimately Europe was conquered, at least for a good bit of its history, by the Christian faith. God did what generals were not

¹ Even the languages of Israel and Syria are considered “Oriental languages.” That is why that area of the world to this day is called the “Middle East” as opposed to China, Japan, and other countries called the “Far East.”

able to do. We are able to see the start of the church's European growth as we continue our study of Paul's second missionary journey.

THE TRIP CONTINUES

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 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)², Paul starts 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 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.

² Darrell Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker Academic 2007) at 550)

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.³ 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. The missionaries went to Berea, about 45-50 miles southwest of Thessalonica.⁴ 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 Thessalonican 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.471-399 B.C.) 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.348 B.C.) and Xenophon (c.431-355 B.C.) 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 (384-322 B.C.).

³ 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.

⁴ 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."⁵ 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.⁶ To the Epicureans, even the soul was formed of matter.

⁵ Witherington at 511.

⁶ 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 Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy – Introductory Readings* (Hackett Publishing Co. 2d Ed., 1997).

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.⁷

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."⁸ 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."⁹ 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.¹⁰

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."¹¹ 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

⁷ *Ibid.* at xviii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* American Edition (Oxford 1996) at 484.

¹⁰ *Letter to Menoeceus* contained in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* at 10.131. Loeb Classical Library edition translated by R. D. Hicks.

¹¹ *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.¹² Diogenes Laertius (who most scholars place in the third century¹³) 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.”¹⁴

Stoics tried to avoid being emotional. Passion and emotion were considered “an irrational and unnatural movement in the soul.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

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!

¹² 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.

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 1 at xvi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Vol 2, VII.23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* at VII.110

¹⁶ *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,¹⁷ said...” Before we examine Paul’s speech, we should examine his stance! Paul assumed the orator’s position.¹⁸ 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 17:22-23). 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.¹⁹ 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

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at 517.

¹⁹ 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.

served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24).

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.”²⁰

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 17:25).

Paul then takes 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).

Paul is quoting from two different poets. We believe the first quote comes from Epimenides.²¹ The second quote is from a poem by Aratus named “Phaenomena.”

²⁰ *Ibid.* at VII.136-137.

²¹ This original poem did not survive antiquity, so scholars cannot state for certain where it is from.

(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..."²² 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).

Next week, we read Paul's further Greek journey into Corinth!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. From Thessalonica: Jason was arrested because of Paul and Paul's ministry. Life turns that way sometimes for Christians. We are sometimes found bearing challenges and problems because of the deeds of others. Jason never fled from the Lord, nor did he attack his persecutors. Jason walked the path before him with the strength and confidence of God's provision. May we always remember the words of Jesus, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:44-45).
2. From Berea: Wow! The Bereans are known forever as those who "were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all

²² Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Loeb Classical Library, translation by G. R. Mair, lines 1-5.

eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” May we all strive to be like the Bereans! (Acts 17:11)

3. From Athens: Paul was right, as he put into Greek thought the point Jesus made so clearly, we were made to know and relate to God. Jesus said, “this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). To know God in the biblical sense is to have an intimate relationship. That gives meaning to any philosophy, to know and relate to God. It is possible, in spite of our sin, by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who died and was resurrected into an eternity we can share with God. Paul’s mission was to bring that message. Let us continue to pray for our missionaries taking out that message.