

The Heavenly Call is Heard at Athens

“Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.”

—Acts 17:14, New American Standard Bible

FROM THE SCRIPTURAL RECORD, we learn that it was necessary for the Apostle Paul and his companions to suddenly leave his newly found brethren at Thessalonica and Berea in order to escape mob violence and threats to his life. He was escorted to safety by his friends to a port city where he then boarded a ship bound for Athens. As he departed, he left word for both Timothy and Silas to join him at Athens when they had finished their ministerial activities in Thessalonica and Berea.

PAUL'S CHANGE IN PLANS

In Luke's scriptural record, we learn about some of the important and interesting details that led up to the apostle's sudden change in plans, and that

led to his escape to Athens. Soon after arriving at Thessalonica on his pilgrimage, the Jews began to be threatened by the apostle's ministry in that area. "The brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews." (Acts 17:10) The church at Berea was composed of serious students of the Truth. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."—vs.11

Paul was overjoyed with the new brethren in Christ at Berea because of their keen interest and love for the Truth. This could be seen in their spiritual growth as revealed in the historian's account. Reading further, we note, "Many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people."—vss.12,13

SILAS AND TIMOTHY

Although Paul departed from Berea, Silas remained there. "Then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still. And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed."—vss. 14,15

From the apostle's other writings, we learn that Timothy went to Thessalonica for a time. This is recorded in his first letter to the Thessalonians, where he said, "When we could no longer forbear,

we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.”—I Thess. 3:1,2

THE AFFLICTIONS OF CHRIST

Preaching the wonderful word of Truth and of the heavenly calling during this present Gospel Age was a cause for much affliction to those who carried forth its message during the time of the Early Church. The apostle addressed this point in his letter, as we further read, “That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.”—vss. 3-5

TIMOTHY’S GOOD REPORT

The young brother Timothy’s presence with the church at Thessalonica was a blessed one, and he carried back to Paul a very good report of his experiences when he arrived at Athens. “Now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God.”—vss. 6-9

ATHENS A CULTURAL CENTER

While waiting in Athens for his two companions to arrive, Paul was not idle. “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.” (Acts 17:16,17) Athens was the most celebrated city in ancient Greece, and it was especially noted as a learning and cultural center. This included studies in the arts, sciences, music and philosophy. A few centuries before, when Alexander the Great conquered the world, and during the height of the Grecian Empire, it was known as the capital of the world. Although it was forced to yield that distinction to Rome, it still retained its reputation as the cultural center of the then known world. Many outstanding men came from Athens, including Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, and Demosthenes.

SEARCHING FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

Athens, however, did not immediately appear to be part of the Apostle Paul’s plans to search out a people for God’s name. He found himself there mainly because persecution and the providence of the loving Heavenly Father had driven him there. He probably did not expect to stay there any longer than was necessary, and as soon as Silas and Timothy joined him there he planned that they would leave.

Here among the most learned men of the ancient world, there were three thousand idols. It has been said that no matter where anyone would stand in Athens, his eyes would range over innumerable

temples, altars, and various statues of gods. Of all the cities in the world, Athens boasted of having the most learned and cultural activities, and yet it was the most idolatrous. Religion was exploited in stone, silver, and gold.

When Paul went to the synagogue, it is recorded that he reasoned with the Jews, but there are few details written about his visit there. It is not indicated whether he found either acceptance or violent opposition. Perhaps the Jews had come considerably under the influence of worldly wisdom, and that he found little by way of response to the Truth. Not only did he attempt to reason with the Jews, but he also sought out people who were religious, successfully finding them in the marketplace. As the apostle could speak Greek fluently, he was able to reason effectively with many people, informing them of Jesus and the heavenly calling extended to believers in Christ during this Gospel Age. Luke records some of what took place at these meetings. “Disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.”—Acts 17:17

ATHENIAN PHILOSOPHERS

We read, however, “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.”—vs. 18

Men in all parts of Athens soon heard about the Apostle Paul’s presentations of new ideas and thoughts that they were not familiar with. He was

assisted in his efforts to spread these glad tidings by the customs of Athenians themselves, who spent their leisure time in discussing and deliberating over the newest thoughts on philosophy. We are informed that this was their major form of entertainment. “They took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)”—vss. 19-21

GODS AND GODDESSES

Throughout ancient civilizations there were numerous deities. The pattern among each was similar, but each god or goddess had a different function that mainly consisted of control over the natural elements of the earth. Unknown to Paul, a law had been passed in Athens that prohibited the introduction of any more new gods. It seems that the three thousand they already had were more than enough.

Perhaps one of the reasons for adopting the new Athenian law which attempted to limit the introduction of any more gods was that the number they already had was so large. When Paul’s preaching relating to the resurrection of Jesus reached the ears of the Epicureans and Stoicks—two major groups of philosophers—they decided to charge him with violation of this law and brought him before the Areopagus, which was the supreme court of Athens.

The Greek deities were thought to live on the top of Mount Olympus, or sometimes in the air above it. However, they were free to wander about the world at will. Although Zeus was the chief ruler, there were many other gods and goddesses. Some of the well-known were Hera, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Hermes, Aphrodite, Athena, Poseidon, Demeter, and Persephone.

MYTHOLOGY

It is thought by some that much of this mythology may have had its origin during the time that the angelic creation materialized and came to earth in the days before the Flood. During that early time in the earth's history, some of these mighty beings took on human form and intermarried with the daughters of men. The scriptural record explains, "It came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose."—Gen. 6:1,2

MIGHTY MEN OF OLD

This unauthorized union produced a hybrid race, and it also contributed to much evil in the earth during Noah's time. "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."—vss. 4,5

Greek mythology even refers to this, speaking of gods coming and going to and from the earth, marrying fair maidens and of their offspring performing mighty deeds. The number of deities increased with mythology, as these events of Noah's day began to be told and were being handed down from one generation to another. This is a possible indication that mythological worship had its beginning with the fallen angels of Noah's day.

PAUL'S SKEPTICAL AUDIENCE

Some of the men of Athens believed that the Apostle Paul was a proclaimer of strange gods, and they wanted to know what his new doctrine was. (Acts 17:18,19) However, their statements about Paul were not complimentary and they called him a 'babbler.' It seems more likely that they wanted to prevent him from speaking in public and found an opportunity in what they thought was a violation of the law.

Paul's teachings were contrary to theirs, and he had introduced an entirely new idea of there being a resurrection from the dead. His audience no doubt realized that their law forbidding new gods could then be used to prevent him from further preaching these strange new truths. We are not told what the penalty would have been if the Areopagus had decided that the apostle was guilty, but whatever the prospect may have been he was not in a very friendly environment.

TEMPLES, ALTARS AND STATUES

While looking around Athens, Paul had examined many of the inscriptions on the various altars, temples and statues, and noticed that one of them

was dedicated particularly to an ‘Unknown God.’ Perhaps in their concern to not overlook any deity, the Athenians had erected this special altar in their honor. It was around the existence of this distinctive altar to the unknown god, that Paul wisely took advantage in developing his message in response to the people of Athens.

THE UNKNOWN GOD

From Luke’s account of what actually happened when the Apostle Paul rose to preach the wonderful message from God’s Word, we read, “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”—Acts 17:22,23

In Paul’s opening remarks, it is interesting to note that he referred to the men of Athens as being ‘too superstitious.’ The word superstitious is derived from a Greek word meaning, ‘a demon or pagan god.’ [*Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words*] The apostle thus made the important connection with the giants or mighty men of Noah’s day who had not kept their former estate and had married the daughters of men. This produced a hybrid race of people that were destroyed during the flood.

THE TRUE GOD

The apostle then quickly turned his attention to explaining the meaning of the true God, the supreme ruler of the universe. He emphasized that they could never make a likeness of him with gold, silver, or precious stones and place him in a man-made

temple. He explained to them, “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.”—vs. 24

Paul proclaimed to the people of Athens that the mighty Creator that he worshipped had created all life upon earth and that all life was dependent upon him for their existence. He continued, “Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.”—vss. 25,26

The apostle spoke of the loving and eternal Heavenly Father, and that “they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.”—vss. 27-29

THE APOSTLE’S LOGIC

It is interesting to note the great tact and logic that the Apostle Paul used in presenting his message, and how well he was able to use a form of teaching that was accepted as truth by them. Upon this foundation of truth he built the further structure of God’s wonderful plan and design for his human creation. He did this by quoting from the writings of their own Greek poets.

As Paul stood there being judged by the supreme court of Athens, he reminded his listeners that they will come under judgment too. He then said, "The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."—vss. 30,31

ONLOOKERS MOCKING

The great Supreme Creator of the universe, of whom he spoke, has appointed a day in which he will judge all the inhabitants of the world, and has appointed his own judge for this task. Paul proclaimed that the proof of this lay in the fact that this judge had been raised from the dead. "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."—vss. 32-34

Paul had made it clear to his listeners that he was not introducing a new god, but was speaking about a God that they already worshiped as the unknown God. It was not necessary for the court to hear more of his defense, so he was free to go. When the crowd took over with its shouts and disorder he then left.

THE LORD'S CALLED ONES

Athens was not a place that the Apostle Paul had particularly planned to visit, but it seems reasonable

to conclude that the Lord overruled in his circumstances to take him there. His peculiar trials helped to put him in contact with several of the Lord's people who were being called. Only two of these are named, and their names appear only here in the Scriptures. One of these was Dionysius, a judge of the Areopagus, and the other was a woman called Damaris. These newly called brethren adhered to Paul and he became their teacher, and established a congregation there.

Although the Scriptures do not provide us with much information concerning them, it is possible that Paul may have spent several weeks in Athens while waiting for the arrival of Silas and Timothy. They had been very busy helping the brethren in Berea and in Thessalonica, and did not come as quickly as Paul had anticipated.

It is necessary to go to sources outside of the Scriptures to obtain information about our Christian brethren who were living in Athens. It has been said that Dionysius, the most prominent of these, was immersed and later became an elder in the congregation. According to traditional historical writings he is known as the first bishop of Athens, and later suffered martyrdom. Our Heavenly Father has often shaped the circumstances in the lives of those he calls to be his people so they can hear his Word and to be brought into the body of Christ. He knew in advance about Paul's detour to Athens where a few were waiting to learn about God's plan and the wonderful features concerning the heavenly call. ■