

Paul's Ministry in Athens

“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. Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.”
—Acts 17:15,16

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S

first visit to Greece, also called Achaia at that time, came during his second missionary tour. As he began this second journey with his traveling companion Silas, and a short time later joined also by Timothy, Paul first revisited several of the places where he had established churches during his first tour. These were all located in Asia Minor. Now, on his second journey, the apostle desired to continue his travels further north and east into that region.

Paul's plans, however, were changed by the Lord. “A vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” (Acts 16:9) Paul and his companions

immediately changed course and headed west, sailing across the sea to Macedonia, and arrived at their first stop, Philippi.

EXPERIENCES IN MACEDONIA

The experiences of Paul in Philippi are recorded in Acts 16:12-40. The first of these was the conversion of Lydia and her household. Following this, Paul cast out an evil spirit from a young damsel, resulting in her masters' loss of income which they had enjoyed because of her soothsaying. Upon complaining to the town's leaders, Paul and Silas were severely beaten with rods and then cast into prison. This led to their miraculous deliverance by God and the conversion of the jailer and his family.

Upon leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas next came to Thessalonica. These experiences are recorded in Acts 17:1-9. There Paul went to the synagogue of the Jews on three consecutive Sabbath days and "reasoned with them out of the scriptures." Some believed and continued with Paul and Silas. Other Jews who believed not, were envious and created an uproar in the city. They captured a believer named Jason, thinking that he had kept Paul and Silas in safety. When the unbelieving Jews were not successful in finding Paul and Silas, they let Jason go. For safety's sake, the brethren in Thessalonica immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.—vs. 10

Berea was Paul and Silas' final stop in Macedonia, the events of which are noted in Acts 17:11-14. The believers in Berea were spoken of as "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." Nevertheless, there soon was trouble. Unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica had found out that the Gospel was now being preached with good results in Berea, less than fifty miles away, so they came and stirred up more trouble. Once again, the brethren sent Paul away, though Silas and Timothy remained in Berea a while longer.

With the foregoing background of Paul's second missionary tour briefly stated, we now turn our attention more directly to our subject, Paul's ministry in Athens, Greece.

ARRIVAL IN ATHENS

Reasonable precaution was taken to help the apostle elude his persecutors who had stirred up trouble in Berea. When the brethren sent him away, it was in the direction of the sea, but actually, those who were conducting the apostle had him turn south and went by land to Athens. Arriving safely at Athens, and for a time safe from his enemies, Paul instructed his guides, when they returned to Berea, to inform Silas and Timothy to join him as quickly as possible.—Acts 17:15

Paul now waited in Athens until his companions joined him. However, the great apostle to the Gentiles could not be idle. "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."—vss. 16,17

Then "certain philosophers," for which the Greeks were noted, encountered Paul, and they took him to the Areopagus, also called Mars Hill, which could

be best described as an outdoor courtroom, reputed to be the court of highest authority in Athens. He was not put under arrest, but taken to this location and invited to set forth his “new doctrine.” “Thou bringest certain strange things to our ears,” they said, and “we would know therefore what these things mean.”—vss. 18-20

Some of the philosophers who had heard Paul in the marketplace charged that he was a “setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” (vs. 18) These philosophers—even as most of the so-called wise men throughout the ages—did not believe in the reality of death. To them, therefore, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead would seem strange indeed, for how could there be a resurrection of the dead if none were truly dead?

ON MARS HILL

Without question Paul welcomed this opportunity to present the Truth to the intellectuals of Athens. In doing so, he was at times diplomatic, but in some instances very forthright. The *King James Version* of his opening statement does not carry the proper meaning. Paul did not say to the Athenians, “Ye are too superstitious,” but rather, “I perceive that ye are very religious.”—Acts 17:22, *American Standard Version*

This was a compliment. Paul himself was very religious. He was so wholeheartedly devoted to the furthering of the Christian religion that he had given up every other interest in life. In his religious fervor he worshiped but the one God, and one Lord Jesus Christ, who had given his life for the sins of the

world. (I Cor. 8:6) In Paul's mind there was nothing wrong with being very religious. His mission in life was to preach the true religion—the Truth concerning the true and living God.

The error of the Athenians was in worshiping a multiplicity of gods, none of them real. Paul was vividly reminded of this as he stood on Mars Hill. Facing the area where the audience sat, just below the apostle was the great array of idols, each one ascribed to a different god. He probably passed even nearer to these idols as he walked along the road leading to the hill.

Towering above the apostle was a large and beautiful temple—the remains of which are there even today. Here the false gods of the Greeks were worshiped. Indeed, the Athenians were “very religious.” Although they knew the names of many gods and had set up idols to represent them, they thought it possible that there might be one which they did not know—an “Unknown God”—so they had built and dedicated an altar to it as well.—Acts 17:23

Paul took advantage of this situation, explaining that he was there to acquaint them with the “Unknown God” whom they ignorantly worshiped. This was a wise approach, well calculated to gain the attention of his audience, at least temporarily. Paul began to tell them some of the truths concerning the God who was unknown to them. He was the great Creator, the apostle explained, the God who “made the world and all things therein.” Having created the whole universe, it belongs to him, and is his domain, therefore he “dwelleth not in temples made with hands.”—vs. 24

In making this statement we can imagine Paul glancing up toward the Acropolis, where the great heathen temple stood above him, perhaps even pointing to it, with the implication that the true and living God of the universe could not be expected to dwell in such a place. Perhaps this was not too diplomatic, but it would certainly help the sincere among the Athenians to realize that their conception of deity was very limited.

Paul continued, “Neither is [God] 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 the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 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.”—vss. 25-27

To a large extent the gods of the heathen are visualized as being quite demanding. They have to be continually appeased by gifts, or otherwise. However, Paul told these “men of Athens” that the true and living God, who by their own confession was unknown to them, was quite the opposite. He did not need anything, since he “giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.”

Paul encouraged his audience to “look for God,” assuring them that he was not far away, for, after all, “we live, move, and exist because of him; as some of your own poets have said: For we are his children, too.” Agreeing with this quotation from one of the Greek poets, Paul continued, reasoning that “if we are God’s children, we shouldn’t think

that the divine being is like gold, silver, or stone, or is an image carved by humans using their own imagination and skill.” Even if they were not convinced by Paul’s eloquence, those listening could not refute this logic.—Acts 17:28,29, *International Standard Version*

IGNORANCE OVERLOOKED

Continuing his sermon, Paul referred to the past ignorance of humanity concerning the true God. He said, “The times of this ignorance God winked at.” (Acts 17:30) The Greek word here translated “winked at” means to overlook, and is so rendered in many other translations of this verse. God overlooks the ignorance of the people concerning him, holding them responsible only when they refuse, willfully, to be enlightened and to obey the light of Truth.

Human reasoning has often reached the conclusion that those who die in ignorance of God, and of Christ, will not be held accountable. It has been suggested that people will be saved in their ignorance. This is poor logic. If it were true, then it would be a mistake to preach the Gospel at all. Instead, it would be best to allow everyone to remain ignorant of God, and thus all would be saved.

Paul did not reach any such conclusion. He knew the plan of God and that in the divine arrangement a future time of enlightenment had been provided. He refers to it as the Judgment Day. While God overlooked the past ignorance of the people, now he “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

The word “because” in this argument is related to two things. First, God overlooks ignorance “because” there is a future Judgment Day; and second, the command to repent is also “because” that future Day of Judgment has been appointed in his plan for mankind’s salvation.

The Scriptures bear out this reasoning. The Judgment Day is to be a time of enlightenment. The Prophet Isaiah wrote that when the Lord’s judgments are in the earth the people will “learn righteousness.” (Isa. 26:9) This enlightenment of the people during the Judgment Day is symbolized in Revelation 20:12 as the opening of “books.”

In Peter’s second epistle, he speaks of the time when this present sinful order of things will give way to a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:7-13) That new day of righteousness is the same period referred to in the foregoing words from the books of Isaiah and Revelation. Peter also equates this new day to a period of a thousand years, saying, “One day with the Lord is as a thousand years.” (II Pet. 3:8) By combining all of these words with Paul’s testimony on Mars Hill, we see that the Judgment Day he spoke of is to be a thousand years in length, and will take place during the same time period as the “new heavens and a new earth,” the Messianic kingdom day, which is also to be a thousand years in length.—Rev. 20:4,6

During that thousand year “day” all who have died without enjoying a knowledge of the true God

will be awakened from death and enlightened. Upon the basis of their obedience or disobedience to that enlightenment, they will be judged worthy or unworthy of everlasting life.

With the exception of the Jewish nation, which enjoyed God's special blessing, practically all mankind prior to Jesus' First Advent were in ignorance of these divine arrangements. Beginning at Pentecost, following Jesus' death and resurrection, a change took place. Paul and others of the apostles now preached repentance to all those desiring to be in covenant relationship with God. (Acts 2:38; 20:21) Jesus had explained to his disciples that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations." (Luke 24:47) In other words, the command to repentance was not to be limited to the Jewish nation, as it had been in the ministry of John the Baptist, but was now to be proclaimed among all nations.

However, this by no means implies that every individual in all nations has intelligently heard the command to repent. It simply implies that it had been God's will for the Gospel to be preached everywhere throughout the earth as a witness, regardless of nationality or race. (Matt. 24:14) The matter of how many, as individuals, have actually heard the message, and their degree of understanding and responsibility, are questions which can be determined only by the Lord.

The Scriptures do set forth certain principles which will help us to reach fairly accurate conclusions. For example, the Scriptures inform us that it is only through the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit that one can really know the mind and

will of the Lord to a degree that makes them wholly responsible. Paul speaks of those who have been enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, have received the Word of God, and who know something of the world to come. (Heb. 6:4,5) Only those described in this passage of Scripture are wholly responsible before the Lord at the present time.

All others, even those who have heard the Gospel preached, are not now on trial for life. John the Baptist preached repentance to the Jewish nation. Jesus and the apostles did also, but very few repented. Yet, Paul wrote that “all Israel shall be saved,” referring to the future time of resurrection and judgment.—Rom. 11:26

Addressing a church conference at Jerusalem, the Apostle James, speaking also of the future, when the work of this Gospel Age will be complete, asserted that “the residue [Greek: the rest] of men,” and “all the Gentiles” upon whom the Lord’s name has been called—those to whom the witness has been given, many of whom having made some profession of belief—will then be given an opportunity, with full enlightenment, to “seek after the Lord.”—Acts 15:14-18

How thankful we should be that all the people, living in every age, who have been ignorant of God, as well as those who have been only partially enlightened, are to be wholly enlightened in the Judgment Day by that “true Light” that in God’s due time will enlighten every person who has, or will, come into the world! No one will be saved because of ignorance, but all will receive a knowledge of the Truth, and upon the basis of that

knowledge, be given an opportunity to accept Christ, obey the laws of his kingdom, and live forever.—John 1:9; I Tim. 2:3-6

Paul said to those gathered at Mars Hill that God has given assurance of this future day of enlightenment and judgment by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. (Acts 17:31) This proves that divine power can raise the dead. This affords hope, because the ignorant will have to be awakened from the sleep of death before they can be enlightened concerning God. Truly, Christ became the “firstfruits of them that slept” in death!—I Cor. 15:20

“SOME MOCKED”

Apparently Paul held the attention of his audience fairly well as he told the Athenians about the “Unknown God,” but it was different when he mentioned the resurrection of the dead. This was too much for many of them. “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.” —Acts 17:32

The resurrection is a difficult doctrine for people to believe. Satan’s lie to mother Eve, “Ye shall not surely die,” has led to the assumption by many that there is no death. (Gen. 3:4) Apparently it is easier to believe that the dead are more alive than the living, than it is to accept the reality of death, and to believe that the Creator will restore life to those who have died.

We may not know why this is, except that it is a further delusion which has been foisted upon mankind by the Devil. Yet, this unwillingness to believe in the reality of the resurrection is just as prevalent

in the world now as it was when Paul preached to the Athenians. Try to tell anyone today about the “times of restitution of all things” and the usual response is, spoken directly or implied, one of doubt. —Acts 3:20,21

However, not all who heard Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill were doubters, for we read that “certain men clave unto him, and believed.” (Acts 17:34) Among the believers was “Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” An Areopagite was a member of the court which held its sessions on Mars Hill. It was known as the “court of the Areopagites.” It is interesting to realize that one of the members of this court became a believer. This must have encouraged Paul, despite the fact that others in the audience mocked him. The Lord always gives his people the encouragement they need when they continue faithful in his service.

Thus ends the Bible account of Paul’s ministry in Athens. There is no further scriptural record that he returned there later, though we cannot be certain. From Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth, also in Greece. In contrast to his apparent short stay in Athens, the apostle remained in Corinth a minimum of eighteen months, and perhaps longer. (Acts 18:11) Many of his experiences there are recorded in Acts 18:1-17.

Upon leaving Corinth, Paul sailed back to Syria, stopping briefly in Ephesus while in route. From there he continued on toward Syria, finally landing at Caesarea, then traveled over land to his home base of Antioch. (vss. 18-22) Paul’s second missionary tour had now come to an end. While the record

does not so state, we may assume that he reported to the Antioch church the many blessings the Lord had showered upon him on the journey. The record does state that Paul spent some time in Antioch before embarking on his next and third missionary journey. (Acts 18:23) How thankful we are for the record of Paul's missionary journeys, in which he and those with him were so fully engaged in proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom. ■