

ACTS Bible Study – (Acts: The Story Continues)

Acts 17: Different Ways of Hearing

At the end of Acts 16, Paul and Silas returned to Lydia's home, encouraged the new believers, and departed from Philippi. They left behind Lydia and her household, the jailer and his household, and the beginnings of a church.

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy continued westward through Macedonia.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church, he later described their arrival in Thessalonica this way:

“But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.” ~ 1 Thessalonians 2:2

The Road to Thessalonica

Read Acts 17:1

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.”

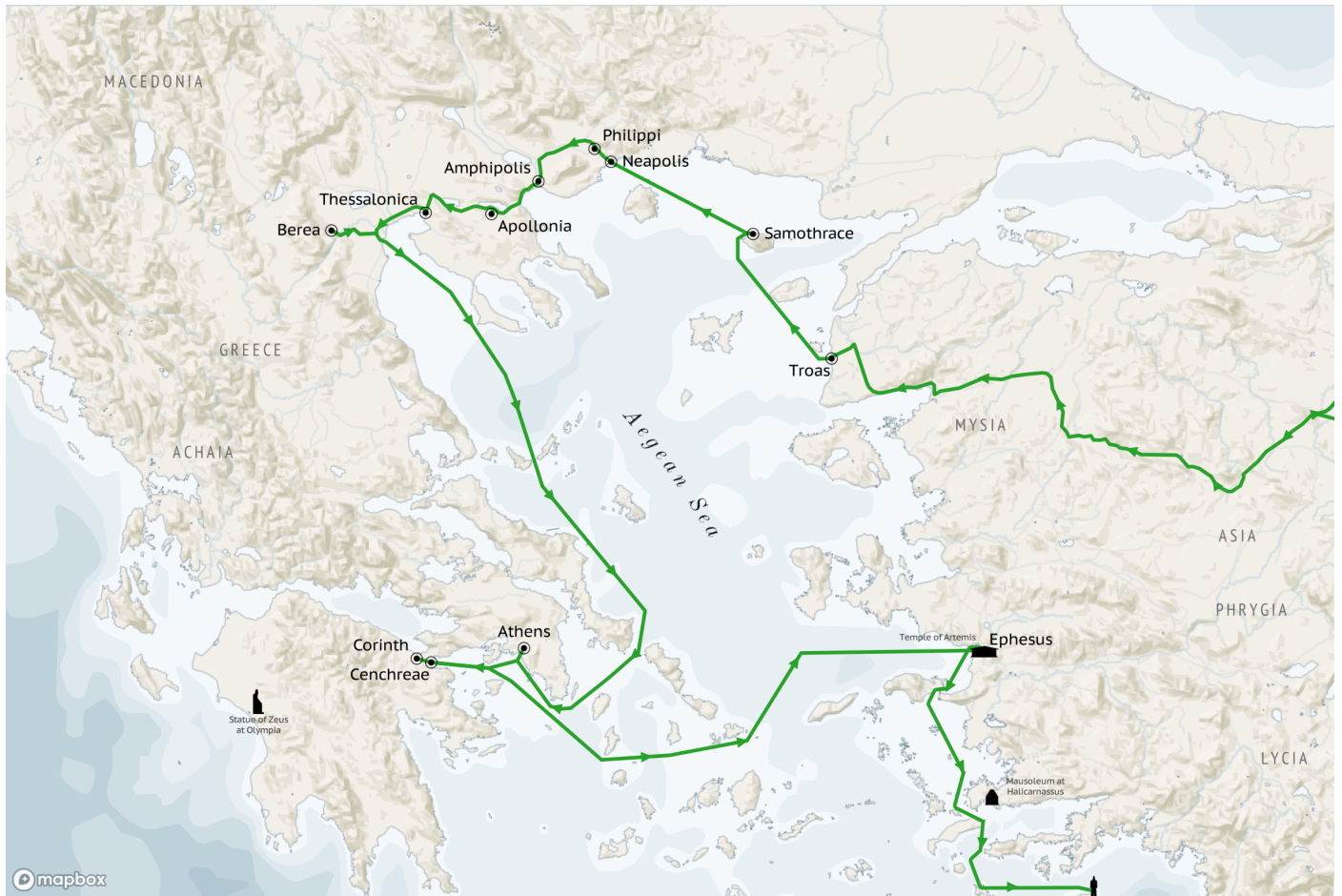
Paul and his companions traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia before reaching Thessalonica. All three cities stood along the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway that crossed Macedonia.

- **Amphipolis** was an important city near the Strymon River.
- **Apollonia** was another stopping point along the road.
- **Thessalonica** was a major port and the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia.

Luke doesn't record any ministry in Amphipolis or Apollonia.

- Likely they were stopping points along the journey.

- Thessalonica, however, had a Jewish synagogue, and Paul returned to his customary pattern of ministry.



Reasoning From the Scriptures

Read Acts 17:2–4

“And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

For three Sabbath days Paul reasoned with the people from the Scriptures.

How Paul reasoned with the Jewish people from the scriptures:

- He proved from the Bible that the Messiah had to suffer and die
- He “proclaimed Jesus”.
 - Likely sharing the life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus
 - Possibly with his own personal testimony and encounter with Jesus
- He proclaimed to them that this Jesus he proclaimed, “*...is the Christ.*”

Paul did not merely announce a conclusion. He opened the Scriptures and helped his hearers follow the evidence.

- For some Jewish hearers, the suffering of the Messiah challenged what they expected. Many were waiting for a victorious king who would deliver Israel from its enemies.
- Paul showed them that the Messiah’s suffering and resurrection were not a failure of God’s plan; they were the fulfillment of it. Isaiah 53 would have been one passage capable of supporting his argument.

“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ~ Acts 17:3

- Some Jewish hearers were persuaded, along with a great many devout Greeks and a number of leading women.
 - The devout Greeks were Gentiles already drawn toward Israel’s God and associated with the synagogue.

Hearing Turns To Resistance

Read Acts 17:5–9

‘But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting

against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.’

Luke tells us that some of Paul’s Jewish opponents became jealous.

- They gathered a mob, created an uproar, and attacked Jason’s house in an attempt to find Paul and Silas.
- When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and other believers before the city authorities.
 - The discussion was no longer about whether Paul’s message was true. Their purpose had become silencing the messenger.
- **Another King Jesus**
 - The accusation was carefully chosen. Paul and Silas were said to be acting against Caesar’s decrees by proclaiming another king... Jesus.
 - Paul was not organizing an armed revolt against Rome. But the gospel did announce a King whose authority stood above Caesar and every earthly ruler.
 - Jesus is not merely a private religious preference. He was, and is, the risen Lord.

The Politarchs of Thessalonica

Luke calls Thessalonica’s city officials politarchs, a specific title used for governing officials in Macedonian cities. For some time, critics thought this was an error in Luke’s writing, because the word was not used in classical Greek, but later he was proven to be accurate once again.

- Ancient inscriptions discovered in and around Thessalonica confirm Luke’s use of the title.
- **One such inscription used to span the Vardar Gate in ancient Thessalonika**

- It lists 6 politarchs – ruling magistrates at the time
- The Tamias – the City Treasurer
- The Gymnasiarch – In charge of education and athletic facilities



ΠΟΛΕΙΤΑΡΧΟΥΝΤΩΝ – Meaning, “While the Politarchs were ruling”

Paul’s friends placed on Bond

Jason and the other believers were required to provide money as security before being released.

- This was probably more than a simple fine. Jason may have been required to guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave and that there would be no further disturbance.
- Luke does not give us the exact terms. But if Paul returned and another uproar followed, Jason could lose the money he had pledged or face further consequences.
 - This helps explain why the believers sent Paul and Silas away by night.

Why Paul Could Not Return

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–18

“But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, again and again - but Satan hindered us.”

- **Paul later wrote that he wanted to return to Thessalonica again and again, but Satan hindered him.**
 - Jason’s bond may have been the obstacle Paul had in mind.
 - Opposition, mob violence, and legal pressure had created a situation in which Paul’s return could endanger the believers he loved.
- **Paul’s absence was not evidence that he had forgotten them.**
 - Because he could not safely return himself, he found another way to care for them.

A Different Kind of Hearing

Read Acts 17:10–12

“The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews 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. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.”

The believers sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. Once again, Paul entered the synagogue - but Luke tells us that the Bereans responded differently.

“They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” ~ Acts 17:11

Israel had been waiting for the promised Messiah for generations. The announcement that He had come should have awakened hope and eager curiosity.

- That appears to be what happened in Berea. The Bereans received the news eagerly and then searched the Scriptures to see whether it was true.
 - They were not gullible.
 - They did not believe Paul merely because his message sounded exciting
 - but neither did they reject him because it challenged their expectations.
 - They were willing to let God's Word disturb what was familiar.

My Personal Principle: *"If God's Word shows me that something I believe is wrong, I bend to God's Word. I do not bend God's Word to fit what I desire to believe."*

Around the Table

- What made the Bereans both eager and discerning?
- When God's Word challenges something familiar, what helps us remain teachable?

Opposition Follows Paul

Read Acts 17:13–15

"But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed."

When Paul's opponents in Thessalonica learned that he was preaching in Berea, they traveled there and stirred up the crowds.

- The believers sent Paul away, while Silas and Timothy temporarily remained behind.

Paul had been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, forced to leave Thessalonica, and driven out of Berea.

- Yet churches and believers remained behind in every place. Opposition repeatedly forced Paul to move, but it could not stop the Word of God from moving with him.

(RETURN TO JOURNEY MAP)

Paul Arrives in Athens

Read Acts 17:16–17

'Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.'

Paul arrived in Athens and waited for Silas and Timothy.

- Athens was no longer the political power it had once been, but it remained one of the most respected intellectual, artistic, and religious centers of the ancient world.

Paul Had Not Forgotten Thessalonica

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1–7

'Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.'

Luke records Paul's movements. Because Luke's purpose is not to give an exhaustive account of every movement of everyone on Paul's team, his account in Acts is compressed. We see more detail filled out in Paul's letter to Thessalonica

- He had been forced to leave the Thessalonian believers before he was ready, and he feared that persecution might unsettle their faith.
 - When Paul had arrived in Athens he sent back word for Silas and Timothy to join him as quickly as possible.
 - Likely they had come to him, then...
- **From Athens he sent Timothy back to strengthen and encourage them, even though it meant remaining there alone.**
 - Timothy eventually re-joined Paul in Corinth with wonderful news: they were continuing in faith and love.
 - His report completes the story. The believers Paul had hoped to strengthen became an encouragement to him in his own distress.
 - Paul's first letter to Thessalonica was written from Corinth

Paul cared not only that they began believing, but that they continued believing.

Around the Table

- What does Paul's concern reveal about the difference between making converts and making disciples?
- Why can another believer's faithfulness encourage us during our own suffering?

Paul in Athens

To many people, Athens represented the height of human wisdom and achievement. Paul, however, saw a city full of idols, and his spirit was deeply provoked within him.

The idols offended Paul because God alone is worthy of worship. John Stott describes this as a righteous jealousy for the honor due to God alone. Paul was also grieved for people

who were worshiping what could not save them. His distress did not drive him away from the Athenians; it moved him toward them in concern and compassion.



What Moved Paul to Speak

John Stott points to three motivations that should move Christians to share the gospel:

- **Commission:** Jesus has commanded His people to make disciples, so we speak in obedience to our King.
- **Compassion:** people are trapped in idolatry and moving toward judgment without Christ, so love moves us toward them.
- **Zeal for God's name:** the worship and honor belonging to the Creator are being given to created things.

Paul's response was not only horror or dismay. His righteous indignation opened his mouth in testimony.

- He answered false worship by proclaiming the good news of Jesus and calling people to turn from idols to the living God.

Around the Table

- Which of these motivations: commission, compassion, or zeal for God's name most often moves us to speak?
- How can grief over idolatry move us toward people with the gospel rather than away from them?

In the Synagogue and the Marketplace

Paul reasoned in the synagogue with Jewish people and God-fearing Gentiles. These hearers knew the Scriptures, so Paul could begin with God's promises concerning the Messiah.

He also spoke every day in the marketplace—the Agora—with whoever happened to be there. The Agora was not merely a place to buy goods. It was a center of business, government, religious activity, and public conversation.

Paul could reason with a remarkably diverse range of people: Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue, ordinary passersby in the marketplace, and trained philosophers. His starting point changed with the audience, but his message still led to Jesus. Paul's learning helped him understand his hearers; it never replaced the gospel.



(Recreation of the Ancient Agora at Athens)

The Epicureans and Stoics

Read Acts 17:18

“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” - because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”

Among those who encountered Paul were philosophers from two influential schools of thought.

- **Epicureans** believed that the world could be explained through matter rather than the activity of a Creator. The gods, if they existed, remained distant from human affairs. They sought tranquility and freedom from pain and fear.

- **Stoics** believed that divine reason ordered and permeated the universe. They emphasized virtue, self-control, duty, and accepting circumstances beyond their control.

Paul's message challenged both.

- God is neither distant from His creation nor identical with it.
- He is the personal Creator and Lord who gives life, rules history, and calls humanity to account.

What Does This Babblers Wish to Say

- Some philosophers dismissed Paul as a babblers. The Greek word originally described a bird picking up scattered seeds. It became a derogatory description for someone who collected scraps of information and repeated them without understanding them.
- Others thought Paul was preaching foreign divinities because he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection.
 - Paul was not offering another philosophy to add to their collection. He was proclaiming the TRUE and LIVING God...
 - and something God had done: Jesus had risen from the dead.

Brought Before the Areopagus

Read Acts 17:19–21

“And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”

The name Areopagus means Hill of Ares; its Roman name was Mars Hill. The word could refer to the physical hill but it also referred to the respected Athenian council associated with it.

- Luke may be describing the place, the council, or both.

The Athenians were eager to hear and discuss the newest ideas.

- But curiosity is not necessarily teachability.
- A person can enjoy discussing religion without ever becoming willing to submit to the truth.

The Unknown God

Read Acts 17:22–23

“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “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 also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

Paul had paid attention to Athens. As he walked through the city, he observed its temples and objects of worship, including an altar inscribed, ‘To the unknown god.’

- The altar probably reflected a desire not to overlook or offend a divine being whose identity was unknown.
- Paul used this familiar object as his starting point

“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” ~ Acts 17:23

The God Who Made Everything

Read Acts 17:24–29

“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. 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, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet 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 we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”

Paul’s message challenged the religious and philosophical assumptions of Athens:

- God made the world and everything in it.
- God is Lord of heaven and earth and cannot be contained in human temples.
- God does not depend upon us; He gives us life, breath, and everything else.
- God made all humanity from one man and rules over the times and places of history.
- God made humanity to seek Him, and He is not far from us.
- God cannot be represented by an image formed by human imagination and skill.

The Athenians had filled their city with temples and images.

- Paul proclaimed that the living God cannot be contained, managed, or defined by anything human beings create.
 - Humanity does not give life to God. God gives life to humanity.

Paul Quotes Their Poets

Paul used words familiar to his audience.

- ***'We are indeed his offspring'*** closely parallels the Greek poet Aratus.
- ***'In him we live and move and have our being'*** is traditionally associated with Epimenides

Paul was not endorsing everything these poets believed. He used a truth his hearers recognized to expose the weakness of their idolatry:

- if human beings receive life from God, God cannot be a lifeless image made by human beings.

Around the Table

- What do you notice about where Paul begins with the Athenians?
- What can we learn from Paul about speaking with someone who does not yet accept the Bible as God's Word?

God Commands a Response

Read Acts 17:30–31

'The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Paul did not invite the philosophers merely to add his teaching to their collection of ideas. God commands all people everywhere to repent. He has appointed a day of judgment and a righteous Judge, and He has given assurance by raising Jesus from the dead.

- Paul began with the Athenians' altar, but he led them to the Creator
 - their accountability before Him, repentance, judgment, and the risen Jesus.
 - The gospel may begin at different points in different conversations, but it must eventually bring people to Jesus.

Three Responses to the Resurrection

Read Acts 17:32–34

'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.'

When Paul proclaimed the resurrection, his hearers responded in three ways:

- **Some mocked.** The resurrection contradicted what they believed was possible, so they dismissed it.
- **Some postponed.** They expressed interest in hearing more, but they did not yet believe.
- **Some believed.** Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus; a woman named Damaris; and others with them.

Around the Table

- What kind of listener am I when God's Word challenges something I already believe?
- Is there anything God has shown me that I am still resisting or postponing?