

PAUL'S SERMON ON MARS' HILL

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 17:1-34

LESSON 335 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (I Corinthians 1:18).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 17:1-34

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:

² And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,

³ Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.

⁴ And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.

⁵ But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

⁶ And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;

⁷ Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, *one* Jesus.

⁸ And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.

⁹ And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.

¹⁰ And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I At Thessalonica

1. The missionary company passed through two smaller cities to reach Thessalonica and a synagogue, Acts 17:1.

2. Paul preached in the synagogue that Jesus is the Christ, Acts 17:2,3;

Acts 9:20

²⁰ And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

3. A few Jews and many Greeks believed, Acts 17:4;

1 Thessalonians 2:13

¹³ For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received *it* not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

1 Thessalonians 2:14

¹⁴ For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they *have* of the Jews:

4. The envious Jews moved the city to an uproar, Acts 17:5-9.

II Reception at Berea

1. Paul and Silas were sent away from Thessalonica by night and came to Berea, Acts 17:10;

Acts 9:23-25

²³ And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:

²⁴ But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.

²⁵ Then the disciples took him by night, and let *him* down by the wall in a basket.

Matthew 10:23

²³ But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

2. The Bereans received the Word of God readily, Acts 17:11,12;

Matthew 13:16

¹⁶ But blessed *are* your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

James 1:19

¹⁹ Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

3. The Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea to stir up the people, Acts 17:13,14.

III Paul at Athens

1. Paul's spirit was stirred by the idolatry in Athens and he reasoned with the people, Acts 17:15-17.

2. Certain philosophers brought Paul to the high court, Acts 17:18-21.

3. Paul set forth the fact of only one true and living God, Acts 17:22, 23.

4. All who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth, Acts 17:24-29;

John 4:23

²³ But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

unto Berea: who coming *thither* went into the synagogue of the Jews.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

¹⁷ 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.

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

¹⁹ And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, *is*?

²⁰ For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

John 4:24

²⁴ God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.

5. God commands all men to repent, Acts 17:30,31;

John 12:46-48

⁴⁶ I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.

⁴⁷ And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

⁴⁸ He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.

2 Timothy 4:1

¹ I charge *thee* therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;

6. Paul's message gained small visible results in Athens, Acts 17:32-34.

NOTES:

Missionaries

Jesus said to His disciples, "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another" (Matthew 10:23). Paul, the missionary Apostle, certainly put this command into practice. On this second missionary journey, Paul and Silas had gone into Macedonia because they felt the Spirit of God calling in that direction. In the chief Macedonian city of Philippi, hungry hearts received the Word of God, but the magistrates and many of the people desired the company of Christians to leave their city. Though he and Silas had undergone painful persecution in Philippi, Paul knew that God had called them into this land for a purpose.

Leaving Philippi, the missionaries passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia that they might reach Thessalonica, for in that city was a synagogue of the Jews. As was his usual manner whenever possible, Paul went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews out of the Scriptures. Paul's constant theme was the Christ, or Messiah, for whom every Jew had been looking. Paul proved by the Scriptures that Christ must needs have suffered, dying on the cross for the sins of the world, but rising again for the justification of all believers in Him. A small number of Thessalonian Jews did believe the Word that Paul preached, but the missionaries received a far greater hearing among the devout Greeks, and the chief women of the city.

The Thessalonian Church

Though Paul and Silas were permitted to labour unhindered in the city of Thessalonica for a space of only about three weeks, yet the Word took firm root in the hearts of the believers. At a later date, in writing to these people and the church that was established through their efforts, Paul recounted that they had turned from idols to serve the true and living God and that they waited for the second coming of Jesus. Paul mentioned that these people sounded out the Word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but "also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad." (**1 Thessalonians 1:8-10** ⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. ⁹ For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; ¹⁰ And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, *even* Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.)

"And Satan came also." Since the beginning of time the devil soon puts in his appearance whenever and wherever the cause of God and of righteousness has been advanced. This is especially

²¹ (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.)

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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;

²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

²⁶ 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;

²⁷ 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:

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

³¹ 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

true of Christianity, for the devil has fought desperately the Kingdom of Christ from its birth. The devil knows that eventually Christ and His Kingdom will bring about the eternal defeat of the devil and all his emissaries. Jesus said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). Though the cause of Christ seems at times to suffer unduly, God sees and knows. In His own time and way, He will cause the opposition to cease and the work to progress in the manner in which it should.

Persecution

In Thessalonica the Jews who would not believe the true report of the Gospel became envious of the success that Paul and Silas had among the people. These Jews gathered to themselves some of the rabble of the city and started a riot, causing the whole city to be in an uproar. They sought for Paul and Silas at the house of Jason; but not finding the missionaries, they brought Jason and certain of the brethren to the rulers of the city. They charged: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (Acts 17:6). The devil had turned the world upside down many years before when he tempted man to sin; and here he tried to shift the blame to somebody else. The Apostles were turning the world, all right; but they, through the power of God, were righting that which was upside down already. The Gospel has ever restored harmony to the discordant soul — a great calm to the heart of the storm-tossed life; it has given rest to those who labour and are heavy-laden with sin; it has restored health to the body and soul of the sin-sick when they come in full surrender to the Saviour.

These Thessalonian Jews caused a city-wide riot, then blamed the Christian missionaries for disturbing the peace and turning the world upside down. They claimed to honour and uphold Caesar's regime, when actually every true Jew hated the thought of being ruled by a foreign power. Guilt and condemnation for sin make partners out of very opposite people. Manners and morals of men have not changed greatly since the time of the Thessalonians, for men are still inventing excuses for not serving Jesus Christ. The devil and unbelieving people of the world seem to go to any length to prove that the Christian and his faith are wrong; but the harder the Christian is persecuted, just so much the greater will the light of Christianity shine out and the beauty of the Gospel be displayed. Many false charges have been laid at the door of Christianity, but not one charge has yet been proved against it. The rulers took security of Jason and of the others, then let them go; for no specific charge of law-breaking could be proved against them.

Bible Study

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas by night unto Berea, in which city another synagogue was found. The people of Berea proved to be an entirely different type of men from those of Thessalonica who persecuted the Christian missionaries. They were a type of men who are scarce in the world, even today. These people received the Word of God with all readiness of mind, and they searched the Scriptures daily to know whether the things that Paul and Silas preached were so or not. Such diligent Bible study is certain to produce favourable results, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ bears up perfectly under an honest investigation. Soon many — both Jews and Greeks, men and women — believed the true report that Jesus is the Christ. No man in Berea seemed to oppose the Gospel in any way, but such remarkable success was not to go unchallenged by the devil. News of the Berean revival travelled to Thessalonica, and the evil men of that city came to Berea to stir up the people against the Apostles. Paul, the chief speaker and leader of the Christian group, seemed to be the target of the persecution; so the brethren sent him away from the city, but Silas and

unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this *matter*.

³³ So Paul departed from among them.

³⁴ Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which *was* Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Timotheus abode there still and instructed the new converts in the deeper truths of the Christian faith.

In Athens

Leaving Berea, Paul was conducted to Athens, from whence he immediately sent for Silas and Timotheus. As Paul waited for his companions in the Gospel, his spirit was stirred when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. We are told in secular history that Athens contained more idols than all the rest of Greece combined – that there were almost as many idols in Athens as there were men. This was too much for Paul to ignore; and while he waited for Silas and Timotheus, he disputed with the Jews in the synagogue and daily with the people in the markets who met with him.

Personal Work

So Paul was not only a missionary and evangelist, he was a personal worker besides — one of the highest and most fruitful callings in God's list. Personal work has always produced fruitful results in the history of Christ's Church, but it is most needful and essential in this darkening end-time of the Christian era. There was a day when hundreds of people found the new-born experience at the altars of great revivals and evangelistic campaigns, but now those who come to Christ almost invariably come as the result of the influence of some personal worker. Paul went into the market daily to speak to those who would listen to him.

The Master of the Great Supper sent his servants into the streets and lanes of the city to invite the poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind; and into the highways and the hedges to compel men to come in to the prepared feast (**Luke 14:16-23** ¹⁶

Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: ¹⁷ And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. ¹⁸ And they all with one *consent* began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. ¹⁹ And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. ²⁰ And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. ²¹ So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. ²² And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. ²³ And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel *them* to come in, that my house may be filled.). The Lord of Glory has commissioned His servants to do likewise, inviting all men to the great feast that He is preparing. We pray that the Lord will give us a truly enlarged vision of this abundant, needful, productive work in His vineyard. The man on the street, the shopkeeper, the employer, the fellow workman, the neighbour, the teacher — everyone is a candidate and may respond favourably to the Gospel with its words of hope and cheer spoken personally by one of God's servants.

Gentile Audience

Paul's personal work soon led him to a wider sphere of influence. Certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoicks encountered him and brought him unto Areopagus, the highest court in Athens. In this court, the doctrine of Jesus Christ was to be heard and passed upon, whether it should be admitted into Athens or not; for the men of Areopagus, or Mars' Hill, passed their judgement upon every new religious idea that was introduced in Athens.

The Epicureans and the Stoicks held together on a few common beliefs, but were largely divided on others. Neither group believed in a future state after death; and no doubt Paul's preaching of the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of the Church brought these

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Paul go through Amphipolis and Apollonia without preaching to them?
2. What sort of reception did Paul and Silas receive at Thessalonica?
3. Why did the missionary company leave Thessalonica?
4. How did the people of Berea differ from the people of Thessalonica?
5. What different types of people believed the Christian story in Berea?
6. Why did Paul have to leave Berea?
7. Why was Paul's spirit stirred when he visited Athens?
8. What happened at Areopagus, or Mars' Hill?
9. How has God given assurance unto all men that a judgement day is coming?
10. How many people followed Paul's teachings at Athens?

questioning scoffers upon him. One commendable thing, the Athenians desired to hear the matter of Christianity before they judged its merits. Many people of this age pass their opinion and falsely judge Christianity without knowing about its power to redeem the sinful life, or of the peace, joy, and hope that the Gospel will give to the human heart.

God's Message

When Paul preached to the Jews about Christ, he used the whole history of God's dealings with the Children of Israel. He spoke of the sacrifices, the prophecies, and the hopes of every Jew that pointed to the Messiah; and all could follow his line of reasoning, whether they agreed with him or not. But on Mars' Hill, in the very centre of heathenism, of what was Paul to speak and make himself understood? Jesus said: "when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak" (Matthew 10:19). In that hour Paul received the words of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, for every sentence was aglow with light and meaning for these superstitious people. The declaration of God's universal creation and rulership over creation hit the Epicurean and Stoick alike — they did not believe it. Paul's arguments against idol worship, with sacrifices and gifts to stay the anger of the gods, struck home to every Athenian heart — all were guilty. The men of Athens believed themselves a separate race from all other men, but Paul told them that God had made all nations of one blood — that men were the offspring, the creation, of God. Being created in the image of God, men should not think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. If men would serve God, they must seek the Lord and "feel after" Him, for He is not far from every one. Those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

God winked at the former times of heathen ignorance, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent. "The true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9) is shining forth in all its brilliance, and men are without excuse for remaining in darkness. Paul told the Athenians that a judgement day was coming for those who would not repent — that God had appointed the day, that He had ordained the Judge, and that He had given the assurance of judgement unto all men in that He had raised that Judge from the dead. How important to receive the Gospel message!

Not in Vain

Paul hit the sin and idolatry of Athens with a sledge-hammer blow, but seemingly it produced little result. When the men of Mars' Hill heard of the resurrection, some mocked and others put off the day of decision, promising to hear Paul again of this matter but perhaps never coming to the knowledge of Christ's truth. Paul left the city of Athens realizing that the Greeks in their search after wisdom considered the preaching of Christ as foolishness, but it did not daunt the intrepid Apostle. He went on his way to seek new fields and to find those who would welcome the Gospel call. However, Paul's efforts in Athens were not in vain; for certain men believed and "clave unto him," among whom was Dionysius, one of the judges of the high court on Mars' Hill. Tradition relates that this man was thoroughly instructed by Paul and later became the first bishop of Athens. God considers the value of one soul more than the whole world; therefore it is not surprising that He sent Paul through Athens to win these few people.