

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 17 August 2003

No. T0279

Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

Acts 17:1-18:22 -The second missionary Journey

We turn today to that portion of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys that is recorded in Acts 17:1 through to 18:22. In the course of our study, we shall see how he visited Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus and arrived at Antioch.

At the outset, we find Paul at Thessalonica. In line with his normal practice, Paul went first of all to the synagogue, so that, as usual, the Jews might be given the first opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel. He was there for a period covering three weekends, preaching that Christ must, of necessity, suffer, be crucified, and be raised from among the dead. He thus emphasised the fundamental terms of the gospel message, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As is said of so many things, from such a tiny acorn the mighty oak of Christianity has grown. From this relatively brief visit, the thriving New Testament church at Thessalonica was planted and grew. Reading the details of Paul's letters to them, later on, will remove any shadow of doubt in that respect.

When God and His servants are at work, Satan invariably does his utmost to oppose the work. Sure enough, misrepresentation of what was said was given to the local Roman authorities. They, however, were not inclined to make a major issue of things. Nevertheless, the local believers thought it wise to encourage Paul and Silas to move on to Berea, which they did, overnight.

Once Paul and Silas were established at Berea, a great thing is recorded of the Bereans. It is often quoted as the ideal Christian approach. It says, "the Bereans were more noble than those of Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." We read in verse 12, "many of them believed, also of honourable women, which were Greeks, and of men, not a few."

Sadly, religious but unconverted Jews from Thessalonica, when they heard about this ready response to the preaching of the gospel, came over and caused trouble. This proved, once more, that religion, without Christ, can be very dangerous. Once again, it was felt wise that Paul should move on to Athens. His companions, Silas and Timothy, stayed on for a while, but followed on later when Paul was settled in.

While Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, he was greatly disturbed to see how the Athenians were deeply involved in idolatry. So much so, that he began to enter into disputation about the matter, not only with the Jews in the synagogue, but also with the philosophers who gathered in the market place. Now, there was at Athens what we might call a thriving debating club, something like a literary and philosophical society. Two of the groups who attended there, the Stoics and the Epicureans, noticed what he was saying, and said to each other, "We've never heard anything like this before. Let's get him to Areopagus, Mars Hill, and invite him to expound his ideas to the philosophical "experts" who congregate there. Then we can question him about what he says." Of course, Paul jumped at the chance. Typically, he jumped in with both feet. "The trouble with you Athenians is that you have itching ears. You are always craving for some new idea. Then, when you get it, you still aren't satisfied. Straightaway, you want something else. All you are interested in is the latest novelty. By the way, I've noticed that you've left room in your rows of idols for one you've dedicated to what you call 'the unknown God'. You've heard about so many so-called gods that you are worried in case you've missed one out. Well," he went on, "you should be glad I've come today. I can tell you about the God Who is unknown to you. He is the God Who created us, the One to Whom we owe our very breath. He sets the very limits of our existence. Your own poets speak about Him, and still you know nothing about Him. This God, in Whom we live and move and have our being, has exercised longsuffering towards mankind for thousands of years. But the time has come for us to listen to His message. We must repent of our sins. We must realise that there is a living God Whom each of us must meet as individuals. He will judge each of us as individuals. He has appointed a judgment day. He has appointed a Judge to act on His behalf. He has made plain His confidence in that Judge by raising Him from among the dead." By this statement, Paul identified the coming Judge as our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for our sins according to the scriptures, and was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the scriptures. Again, in line with the preaching of the gospel in the early years of Christianity, Paul hammered home the essential features of the message. First of all, the need for us to repent of our sins. Secondly, the recognition that there was, and is, nothing that we can do for ourselves, or by ourselves, to get right with God. But, thanks be to God, He has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He has provided a wonderful Saviour, Who has taken our place, and borne the necessary wrath of God upon sin. Now, if we abandon any thought

or pretext that we can satisfy the claims of God by anything we can do, and accept once and for all that only the death of Christ is acceptable to God on our behalf, only then can we receive the forgiveness of sins that the loving God is so anxious to bestow upon us.

As usual, there was a mixed response to the preaching of the gospel message. Some of the audience mocked. The simple, direct terms of the Christian gospel obviously had no intellectual appeal to their sophisticated minds. They considered themselves far too clever to need to repent of their sins. Indeed, that was their main problem. They had no sense of spiritual need. Happily, since then, some of the most brilliant minds in history have experienced the joy and blessing of obeying the gospel of God concerning His Son. By faith in Christ, they have rejoiced in the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and entered into the joy of eternal life. Others said, "We aren't sure. We need more time. We'd like to think about it. We'll listen to what you have to say some other time." That's it! Time! It's so precious! You will have heard the expression, "Procrastination is the thief of time." There were those who listened to Paul and then avoided making a decision by putting off. How often that happens. You know, I've developed a personal saying over the years. I am not claiming it to be original. There's nothing new under the sun. But, whoever else might have said it, it's certainly true of my own experience. It's this. When I have a decision to make, my difficulty is not usually that I don't know what to do. My problem, if I have one, is that I don't want to do it. I'm sure many others can identify with that. Certainly, it would be true of some of those who said to Paul, "I'll leave it for the moment. It's far too important to rush into a snap decision. We'll talk about it again some other time." Deep down, they did not want to face up to the major issue. They were sinners, by nature and practice. Just like you and me! They needed a Saviour, just like you and me. They needed to confess their sins and accept the Substitute that a merciful God had provided for them. Rather than face up to these truths, they put off. Let none of us make the same mistake.

There were, happily, some there who listened to the same preaching and came to the opposite conclusion. They thought it through and said to themselves, "This is too important to leave. It demands an immediate decision. The preacher is right. I must make up my mind without delay. There's no telling whether or not I will ever have another opportunity." And so they were prepared to commit themselves. They believed. Their sins were forgiven. They received eternal life. They were ready for heaven while living on earth. How nice that two of them are named in the narrative. Here they are in the roll of honour. Dionysius the Areopagite, evidently one of those philosophers who frequented Mars' Hill. A woman named Damaris. Others, too, who are not named here, but whose names are registered in heaven, in the Lamb's book of life. And you and I can have our own names registered there in the same way, by trusting the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

"After these things, Paul departed from Athens and came to Corinth; And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because the Emperor Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome) and came unto them. And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers." After the excitement and trauma of events at Athens, it must have been relaxing for Paul to find some Christians with whom he had so much in common. Most important, of course, was the fact that they were like-minded in the faith. In addition, having learned the same trade, they would always find something of mutual interest to talk about. Then again, Paul would be most happy to contribute to the work of the household by plying his trade alongside them.

Before we move on, there is an important matter I must mention. Six times over, we read in the New Testament of this happy Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla. On each occasion, we find them together. What a grand example of the blessing and balance of Christian marriage. Of course, there would be times and things when they acted individually, as with each of us. Nevertheless, it must be significant that scripture never refers to one without the other also being there. Furthermore, of the six occasions we hear of them, three times Aquila is mentioned first. On the other three, Priscilla is mentioned first. There is no suggestion that one dominated the other. Much more could be said about that, but I will leave it to you to enjoy in your own private studies. Look at the circumstances in each case. Notice how each of them was available to help things on, in the home, and in their Christian witness, in a way that was appropriate to the circumstances.

Apart from enjoying the Christian fellowship in the home, Paul was able to speak every Sabbath in the synagogue, not only to the Jews, but also to any Greeks who were willing to listen to what he had to say. At this point, we are told that Silas and Timothy rejoined him, and Paul preached to the Jews, with renewed zeal, that Jesus was indeed the Christ. That is, Paul identified Jesus as the long-promised Messiah, foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures we know as the Old Testament. The long-cherished hope of every devout Jew was to be alive on earth when Messiah, the Anointed One of God, came on the scene, in answer to all the prophecies recorded for the Jews, and indeed for all of us, in Holy Scripture. They knew that, when He came, He would, eventually, usher in for the Jews, and indeed the whole world, a time of unprecedented peace, plenty, prosperity and true justice. This would be the fulfilment of what Paul preached to the philosophers on Mars' Hill, although they would have had no idea about that at the time. Let me refresh your memory.

“God has appointed a day, in which He will rule the world in righteousness by that man Whom He has ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead.” The message was so direct, and therefore to many of the religious Jews, so unpalatable, that many of them opposed Paul vehemently. So much so, that he had to say to them, “If you are determined to reject the message, I’ll leave you alone. I’ve discharged my responsibility. I’ve cleared myself. I won’t insist on telling you what you don’t want to hear. Your blood is on your own heads. In future, I will take the message to the Gentiles, non-Jews.” With that, he left them, and took up residence with a godly man named Justus, whose house was next door to the synagogue.

Here, a very encouraging thing happened. Listen to the text. “Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptised.” There is no doubt that if someone who is prominent or well-known becomes a committed Christian, it does have an impact on those who know him, or her. Saul of Tarsus, who became the great Apostle Paul, was himself a shining example of this.

At this stage, the Lord spoke to Paul in a night vision. “Don’t be afraid. Speak out. There is no need to be nervous. I am with you. I will look after you. I will support you. Carry on with your preaching. You are here on My behalf. You are representing Me. Don’t worry. Keep going.” And so Paul continued there for a period of a year and a half, preaching and teaching amongst those who were prepared to listen.

Eventually, however, opposition reared its ugly head once more. It might have been because there was a change of the regional official representing the Emperor. The name of the incumbent at the time is certainly given, Gallio. How accurate scripture is in recording every necessary detail. It might just be that the Jews thought they would try it on again. Certainly, the Jews arrested Paul, dragged him before Gallio, and made their charges against him. Having heard them out, Gallio said, “Look, this is not in my sphere. If your charges were about moral matters, I would listen to what you have to say. But, your accusations are wholly concerned with your own religious affairs. You don’t need me to sort such things out. I have no intention of getting involved in the detail of your religion. Sort it out for yourselves.” We are then told that the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the judgment seat. That was the end of the matter for the moment, but the last comment is that Gallio wasn’t very pleased at having been dragged into the Jews’ religious affairs. He didn’t want to get involved.

Paul apparently enjoyed his spell at Corinth. The text tells us that, even after having to appear before Gallio, he stayed on a good while. He then sailed, away from Corinth, with Syria as his eventual destination. Once more, we meet that excellent couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who accompanied Paul on this phase of his trip. Their first port of call was Ephesus. While there, Paul, as was his habit, took the opportunity to engage in discussion with the Jews in the synagogue. It would seem that they were, at least, interested in what he had to say, because they pleaded with him to stay longer. However, he told them that he had already committed himself to being at Jerusalem for the forthcoming feast. He did promise that he would come again, God willing, when it became possible.

Leaving Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, Paul moved on to Syria. Landing at Caesarea, he sought out the local Christians, enjoyed a little fellowship with them, and moved on to Antioch. We shall have to leave to another day what happened when he got there, and indeed, what happened to Aquila and Priscilla during their further stay at Ephesus. But, before we leave it, let us think a little more about this devoted Christian couple. What was it about them that made them such suitable travelling companions for the great servant of God? I wonder! If such a need arose today, would you or I, would my wife and I, have the kind of personal and moral qualities that would make us fitting companions for such a busy servant of the Lord? Have I, I wonder, any personal habits or idiosyncrasies that would prove such a distraction or irritation as to render me totally unsuitable for such a role? At all events, Paul obviously considered them to be eminently suitable to take with him for at least part of the journey. And, when there was something to be attended to in his absence, he had sufficient confidence in them to leave them to do it while he proceeded with the next phase of his journey. We should do all that we can to demonstrate that we, too, are available, and suitable, to help on the Lord’s work, and the Lord’s servants, in our day, as opportunity arises.

Let us seek grace to do so.

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