

WEDNESDAY BIBLE STUDY- Acts Chapter 17

Verse 16-17- While Paul was in Athens, waiting for his companions, Timothy and Silas, he had a little time to observe the city. His attention was drawn to the fact that there were many idols there and this disturbed him. So, he began to speak about this, but he was aware that he was working at the same time in two different environments. He spoke in the synagogue, where he had Jews and God-fearing Greeks. These people were at least familiar with the scriptures and with the promises of God. On the other hand, he spoke in the marketplace with whoever happened to be there. These people were all different types of cultures and backgrounds, mostly businesspeople, buying and selling wares and information. The people that Paul was speaking to at Athens were considered highly educated because they valued information, not unlike the Bereans, however, they valued all information with the same weight. The scriptures were not known by them, but many philosophies (ideas of prominent thinkers) were well known and accepted. Paul found himself having to defend the gospel to these people who understood mostly through logic which proved to be an extremely difficult task. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25 ESV 1054). (1 Timothy 6:20-21, ESV 1097) (Isaiah 29:12-13 and 16, ESV 657) The problem with these thinkers and philosophers is that they placed more value on their own thoughts and ideas than they placed on the omniscience (all-knowing power) of God. That is why they had all these idols. They could only understand what they could see, so they assigned power to things that had no power.

Verse 18- Then Paul was approached by particular philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Epicurean Philosophy	Stoic Philosophy
Gods <u>may</u> exist but live in complete detachment from humans. They do not create, judge or intervene in any way.	Many gods exist (pantheistic). Or perhaps divine reason (Logos) is present and directing the universe with no regard for humans or human emotion.
The highest good is achieved by the absence of physical pain or mental anxiety. This “pleasure” is based fully on one’s own senses.	The highest good is achieved by living in agreement with nature and reason. This is based on practicing self-control and fulfilling duty with virtue.
Death is the end of existence. The soul dissolves with the body therefore there will be no judgment.	Skeptical of any type of resurrection. The body is believed to dissolve in a universal “divine fire.”
Whatever happens in the universe is by random chance due to the movement of atoms rather than any divine design.	The gods have created a unified, rational, highly organized system of the universe. Humans may benefit in it, but it cannot be altered.

These two philosophies were somewhat opposites of each other; however, they shared one common idea which they debated with Paul. They called him a “babbler,” because he spoke of things they had not heard of. To some, he was speaking too much about meaningless things. To others, he was talking about gods they had no knowledge of. In reality, Paul was simply telling them about Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Verse 19-21- Unlike the Thessalonians, the Athenians were accustomed to discussion and debate. It was their regular practice to listen and talk over different ideas or theories. So, they invited Paul to come to explain his teaching at the Areopagus (literally, “Hill of Ares”), a large rocky meeting place in Athens where criminal trials, religious meetings, and political councils were held. Though this was the place for trials, there is no indication that Paul was under arrest or being held on trial at that time. He was invited there, so that these “thinkers” and “philosophers” could decide if his teaching was credible. (Proverbs 1:5, ESV 586), (Proverbs 16:16, ESV 600), (Proverbs 18:15, ESV 602) They were similar to the Bereans because they sought to know the truth, however, since they did not know the scriptures like the Bereans, they did not have a good point of reference with which to judge what they heard. To them all ideas were good if they seemed right according to the understanding of the majority. (Romans 11:33-36, ESV 1049), (Colossians 2:8-10, ESV 1087), (1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV 1054) (Isaiah 55:8-9, ESV 686) (1 Corinthians 3:19-20, ESV 1055)

Verse 22-23- Paul then stood in the middle of these very arrogant, self-absorbed people who do nothing but talk about what they think and subtly told them that they were all wrong. The word used in many English translations is “superstitious,” but this does not really give us Paul’s meaning and purpose. The actual Greek word was, “deisidaimonesteros (dice-ee-dahee-mon-es’-ter-os) which is translated as, “more religious than others.” It is actually a compound of two Greek words- daimon (a bad supernatural spirit or devil) and deilos (one who is faithless and fearful). Paul intentionally used this word because it had a double meaning. In the good sense it meant that they were very devout, showing deep devotion for divine powers. In the bad sense it meant that they were driven by a fearful, anxious dread of unseen spiritual forces. This was surely used by Paul on purpose so that their arrogance might cause them to take the word in the good sense as a compliment. Then, he uses the idols that they are obviously very proud of to make his point about the error of their thinking. He says that he has seen all these things that they worship all around and he even has seen an altar. Finally, he uses their own inscription, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD,” to point to their ignorance of the Almighty God. He tells them that by their own admittance they do not know God, so he is going to tell them about Him. When we read the King James Version, we usually feel that Paul is being quite

bold insulting these so-called, learned men, but in looking at the original Greek we can see that Paul was actually being somewhat diplomatic. (Colossians 4:5-6, ESV 1088), (Ephesians 4:29, ESV 1081), (Proverbs 15:1, ESV 599), (1 Peter 3:15, ESV 1118) He got their attention without insulting them. This opened the door for him to explain God further.