

LifeWay Family Bible Series for Nov. 23: Paul shines the light of truth into the darkness_111703

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Paul shines the light of truth into the darkness

◆ *Acts 17:16-34*

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Athens was a noted center of philosophy, religion, art and architecture in the ancient world. Surrounded by mountains, it was the cultural capital of the world. Within its walls were four famous hills—a rocky hill known as the Acropolis on which stood the Parthenon, the crown of Greek architecture; the Areopagus, or Hill of Ares, north of the Acropolis, where Paul probably preached his famous Mars' Hill sermon; the Pnyx, farther west; and the Museum, which was located to the south.

Because Jews from Thessalonica were in hot pursuit of Paul, who was the object of their jealous wrath, some of the Bereans to whom he had been preaching escorted him overland to Athens. He sent word back to Silas and Timothy to meet him in the Grecian city as soon as possible.

A ministry in synagogue and marketplace

Because of his strict monotheistic background as a Jew, Paul found the pagan temples and statues of the gods in Athens totally repugnant. It was said there were more statues to the gods in Athens than in the rest of Greece put together. Though no longer the political power she had been in the past, Athens still was a great university town. People came from all over the world to drink from her fountains of learning. 

Frustrated and grieved by this overwhelming influence of paganism, Paul quickly sought out the synagogue. There he could reason with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles concerning Christ as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies in Old Testament Scripture. The synagogue apparently was near the downtown marketplace or city square where the people met to talk-for in Athens, they seemed to do little else. In the synagogue and in the Agora (marketplace), Paul “reasoned” with the people. He opened his teaching to a general, free discussion. Luke recording that Paul did this “every day” suggests a somewhat protracted ministry in Athens.

The sermon on Mars' Hill

Of the four famous schools of philosophy founded in Athens, only two remained in Paul's day-the Stoics and of the Epicureans. The Stoics, who believed in many gods, were religious and sober-minded thinkers. The Epicureans were irreligious materialists who had an atheistic outlook and believed pleasure was the chief end of humanity. They considered the world a place of chance, without God or meaning.

Judging from their remarks, neither the Stoics nor the Epicureans understood the nature of Paul's preaching at first. They associated him with one of many itinerant philosophers who came through Athens. Paul had preached Jesus and the resurrection, and they considered Jesus a “strange

god” they had not heard of before. The resurrection particularly was offensive because the Stoics held only a vague belief in life after death, and the Epicureans believed everything terminated with death.

Both the Romans and Athenians considered it unlawful to teach or worship unauthorized gods. Even though this placed Paul in jeopardy, they were willing to take him to the Areopagus (or court) to hear him more fully. The Areopagus was noted for its justice, where 12 superior judges held court.

Paul's message before the court was divinely inspired as he seized upon the concept of this altar dedicated “to an unknown god.” This very God, whom nobody seemed to know, became the subject of Paul's preaching. What a stroke of divine wisdom God gave Paul to use this tool to “legally” preach Christ! They had built an altar to this God whom they did not know!

Recognizing the philosophical thinking of his audience, Paul's message to them answered the three great questions of philosophy: “whence, what and whither.” If we were to outline his sermon, we would discover three points: (1) The origin of all things (vv. 24-26); (2) the nature of all things (vv. 27-30) and (3) the end of all things (v. 31). Paul's powerful conclusion was that the desired end of humanity is fellowship with God through repentance and faith in the resurrection of Christ. To reject God is certain destruction.

The product of Paul's preaching

Paul's mention of the resurrection sparked quite a reaction among his hearers, with some mocking him and others wanting to hear more. Apparently the court found insufficient cause for punishment in Paul's teachings.

We are not told how many were won over to faith in Christ by Paul's sermon. Among the new believers who were named was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagite court. He was a man of good reputation,

intelligence and social position in Athens. Also listed was “a woman named Damaris and others.” These constituted the first fruits of the gospel preached in Athens. Whether or not a church developed immediately as a result of Paul's visit in Athens, we are not told. Nonetheless, the high court of Athens and many of the people heard, from the lips of Paul, the good news of God's redeeming grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Questions for discussion

- ◆ How did Paul deal with the frustration caused by his pagan surroundings in Athens?
- ◆ How can Christians bear witness for Christ in hostile situations?

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