

## II. Acts 17:1 - 18:18



## Acts 17:1-3

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to **Thessalonica**, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the **Messiah** Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’



## Acts 17:4-9

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. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly (δῆμος), they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.' (compare Luke 23:2, 5). The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

Acts 17:10-13 [see 1Thessalonians 2:14-16; 3:1-3]

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to **Beroea** (60ks in the hills); and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the Scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds.





## Acts 17:14-15

Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens (independent civitas foederata); and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.



## Acts 17:16-21

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace (agora) every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

So they took him and brought him to the **Areopagus** (near hill dedicated to the god **Ares** - place for philosophical debate) and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

## Acts 17:22-25

‘Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said: “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

The key point that Paul is making is that it is not what we are doing that matters; it is what God is doing. And when we stop, look and listen, we discover that there is only one source of everything that is. God has made ‘everything’ in the world. God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.



Paul is not going to offer to take them out of their ignorance by giving them some extra information that would give them the edge in argument. He is not going to fill an empty spot in their circle of gods. He is going to tell them that the God whom they do not know has been revealed, and he is going to call them to conversion. But first he speaks of the one God who is the creator of all.

## Acts 17:26-28

From one [Adam? God?] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times (καιρος) of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ [Epimenides of Crete, 6th century BC]; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ [Aretus of Cilicia, 3rd century BC]

The Stoics thought of the divine as involved in and caring for the world. The Epicureans, however, thought of the divine as being above such involvement and detached from the world.

The Roman Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, wrote in a letter to Lucilius: ‘God is near to you, and with you, and in you’ (41,1). We think of Jesus’ assurance: ‘the kingdom of God is among you’ (Luke 17:21).

## Acts 17:29-31

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given faith to all by raising him from the dead.

Paul declares that God has appointed a man to be our judge. Stephen saw this in a vision (see Acts 7:56) and Peter assured Cornelius of the same truth (see Acts 10:42-43). By raising this man from the dead, God has 'given assurance to all' that it is not God's will that death have the last word. God is calling all to life. The Athenians need to repent, but Paul is assuring them that God is offering them 'the repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11:18).

## Acts 17:32-34

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul's next stop after Athens is Corinth. When writing to the Corinthians some four years later, Paul reminds them that his proclamation of the gospel was not in terms of human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:17). This was because, in the person of Jesus, God had shown how foolish is 'the wisdom of this world' (1:20). 'The Greeks desire wisdom' (1:22), but they will find true wisdom only by renouncing their own and embracing the crucified and risen Jesus, who is 'the wisdom of God' (1:24).

‘My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’ (1 Corinthians 2:4-7).

We should not see this as the result of disillusionment following his experience in Athens, nor should we conclude that Paul discontinued the kind of proclamation which he gave in the Areopagus. Paul knows that human wisdom cannot reach the conclusions proclaimed in the gospel, but he in no way despises it. What he does challenge is the sin of self-sufficiency that undermines any genuine human searching for the truth

A philosopher must recognise the limits of human logic and human wisdom. To attain to truth we must open ourselves to the gift of God's love revealed in Jesus, and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which can change our minds as well as our hearts and open us to 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent or worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8).

Paul throws down a challenge to human wisdom to enter into dialogue with God who is present in the depths of our being and, indeed, is at the heart of everything that is, including human wisdom, limited though human wisdom necessarily must be. Paul issues this challenge in a way that is faithful to the best of Hebrew thought, but that is sensitive to the different experiences and different ways of thought of his Greek audience.

He does this from the conviction that Gentiles do not have to follow the law of Moses. Furthermore, they also do not have to think in the categories of Hebrew thought. What is necessary, for Hebrews and Greeks alike, and for anyone else who would attain truth, is that we recognise the limits of our thinking and behaviour, and accept responsibility for our prejudices, ideologies and errors. To do so, we must be open to see, hear and touch the real world and to open ourselves to an encounter with the God who encounters us there. To be able to do this, we must believe in what God has revealed in Jesus, and in the presence of Jesus' Spirit in our lives and in the world of which we are part.

Paul's message, as we have seen on numerous occasions, is a message of liberation. In Athens, it is liberation from fear of the gods, expressed in the 'city full of idols' (Acts 17:16). It is also liberation from the self-sufficiency that blinds us to the wonder and mystery of our own being and of the world around us.

# Acts 18:1

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth



**Gulf of Corinth** →

↑ **Saronic Gulf**

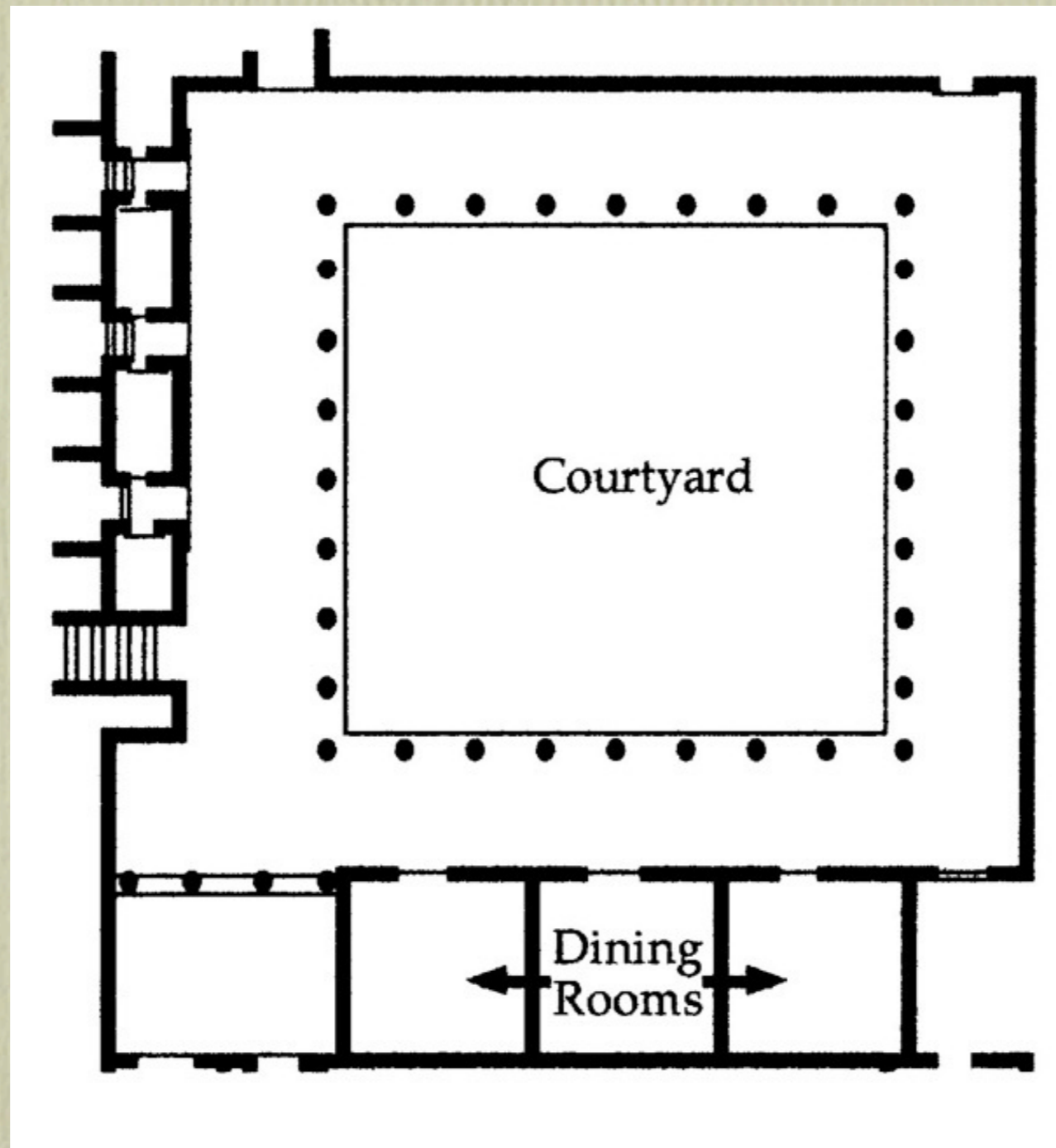


Corinth was the capital of Achaia. Ancient Greek Corinth was totally destroyed by a Roman army in 146BC. It was only in 44BC that Julius Caesar had a Roman colony erected on the ruins. The Roman city rapidly expanded and was made the seat of the proconsul of Achaia in 27BC. Its rapid expansion is explained by its geographical position. It dominates the narrow isthmus which connects the Peloponnesus to the rest of Greece. It commands two ports. Two and a half kilometres to the north the port of Lechaenum on the Gulf of Corinth opens westward to the Adriatic , and so to Spain, Italy and Sicily . Nine kilometres to the southeast the port of Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf opens onto the Aegean and so to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. Many traders chose the overland haulage between the two ports in preference to the treacherous sea voyage round the Peloponnesus.

Population 100,000 plus 200,000 slaves

Ancient Corinth boasted a host of temple prostitutes attached to the sanctuary of Aphrodite, and had a reputation for lax morals. Roman Corinth seems to have inherited some of this reputation. At the time of Paul's arrival, the population was somewhere in excess of three hundred thousand. However, two-thirds were slaves and most of the others had one focus, which was to get rich through commerce. Apart from the constant turnover due to trade, Corinth also attracted visitors because of the healing sanctuary of Aesculapios (son of Apollo), and the Isthmian games which took place every two years. Its position and the constant movements of people made it an excellent choice for Paul's mission.

# Corinth: Courtyard of Temple of Asclepios



Used for civic and family functions, guilds etc

## Acts 18:2-3

In Corinth Paul found a Jew named **Aquila**, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife **Priscilla**, because the Emperor **Claudius** had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were **tentmakers**. (see Acts 20:34)

When Paul arrives, he meets a Jewish couple who have recently come from Rome. The scant information we have points to the year 49 as the date of the expulsion. It may have involved only a synagogue in which disputes over Christ were causing a public nuisance. As will be explained later Paul arrived in Corinth before the winter of 50AD. He shares their workshop.

## Acts 18:4-6

Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’

Silas and Timothy arrive, as he had requested (see Acts 17:15). Timothy’s arrival is mentioned by Paul in a letter which he wrote from Corinth to Thessalonica (see 1 Thessalonians 3:6). Paul begins his mission, as was his custom, in the synagogue, ‘testifying that the Messiah was Jesus’ (see Acts 9:22; 13:32-33; 17:3). He is rejected (compare Acts 13:45-46) and announces that he will ‘go to the Gentiles’ (see Acts 13:46).

## Acts 18:7-11

Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus [1 Corinthians 1:14], the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household (compare Acts 10:24, 48); and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptised. One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision [see Acts 9:3], ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.’ He stayed there a year and six months [autumn 50 to spring 52], teaching the word of God among them.

During his stay in Corinth (late 50 to early 52) Paul wrote

1&2 Thessalonians

## Acts 18:12-18

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia [51-52AD], the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. They said, 'This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.' Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters.' And he dismissed them from the tribunal. Then all of them seized Sosthenes [1Corinthians 1:1], the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things. After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria (Spring 52AD), accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow. [Nazarite?]

c. 4BC Paul's birth

Education in Tarsus. Pharisee Training in Jerusalem

33 Jesus' crucifixion

34 Paul's enlightenment and preaching in and around Damascus

(Acts 9:1-22; Galatians 1:17)

37 Paul escapes from Damascus and visits Jerusalem

(Acts 9:23-29; Galatians 1:18-20, 2 Corinthians 11:32-33)

37-45 Paul preaches in and around Tarsus in Cilicia

(Acts 9:30; 11:25-29; Galatians 1:21-24)

45 Paul is invited by Barnabas to work in Antioch

(Acts 11:25-26)

46 Paul visits Jerusalem with Barnabas and has an important meeting with Peter, John and James

(Acts 11:30; Galatians 2:1-10)



47-48 Missionary Journey to Cyprus and Southern Galatia

(Acts 13:1 -14:28; Galatians 4:13-14; 2Timothy 3:11)

49 The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:1-29)

49 spring-summer Journey through Syria-Cilicia and Galatia, to Troas

(Acts 15:35 - 16:10)

49-50 autumn--winter Paul is in Philippi with Silas and Timothy

(Acts 16:11-40; 1Thessalonians 2:2; 2Corinthians 11:9)

50 spring-summer The missionaries are in Thessalonica and Beroea

(Acts 17:1-14; 1Thessalonians 2:1-2; Philippians 4:15-16)

50 autumn Paul arrives in Corinth via Athens

Athens (Acts 17:15-34; 1Thessalonians 3:1)

Corinth (Acts 18:1-18; 1Thessalonians 3:6)

52 spring Paul leaves Corinth for Jerusalem [Gallio leaves Corinth]