

Acts 17:16-34: You Were Made to Worship, But Which God?

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I. Introduction

What's the most important thing in your life, the thing that you live and breathe for, the thing you spend most of your time thinking about and doing, the thing that if it was taken from you, you would fall apart? Is it health? Success in your field? Beauty? Love? Family? Business? Art? Happiness? Christian Ministry? Whatever it is, if that thing that gives your life oxygen is anything other than God, your life will be filled with misery and frustration.

II. Acts 17:16-34: Can the Idols We Worship Deliver Us or Do They End Up Destroying Us?

17:16-21, having established churches in Thessalonica and Berea from the Jews and Gentiles who attended their synagogues but then having to flee those cities because of the Jews who responded with jealousy and hate to Paul's message about Messiah, Paul ends up in Athens. Athens was named after Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom and the arts. In 5th century B.C. Athens had been the intellectual center of the world. In Paul's day it was still the intellectual and cultural center of the Greco-Roman world. The ideas that came out of Athens were the ones culture and society followed.

As Paul is waiting for Timothy and Silas he notices that the city was completely steeped in idolatry. He's furious but it's an anger driven by deep concern for the Athenians. Being a Jew and knowing Israel's history with idolatry, he knew how devastating idolatry can be to a people. It's a slavery that promises favor with the gods in heaven, but only gives you hell on earth. As was his custom, Paul reached out first to the Jews (and Gentiles) who worshipped the God of Israel.

But his main focus was the pagan Gentiles who'd given themselves over to idolatry. There was a god for everything, love, art, business, war, agriculture, etc. And these gods were always fighting among themselves, fickle, overly sensitive and therefore always needing your sacrifice to keep them happy. There provided no real solution for life's problems, no forgiveness, no salvation, just endless sacrifices to a god who was distant and indifferent to your circumstances.

In order to deliver the people of Athens from idolatry, Paul had to step into the "marketplace." The marketplace of Athens was not just a place where you bought goods and services. It was the epicenter of everything. There were temples, law courts, state offices, public archives, libraries, shops, concert halls, galleries. There were artists, businessmen, heralds who gave you the daily news, officials and judges deliberating, and philosophers debating their ideas. It was a place where you shopped for everything: food, clothing, business, art, ideas, everything. And in the marketplace the two prevailing philosophies of the day were Epicureanism and Stoicism and that's who confronts Paul, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who begin by insulting him. They call him a babblers, a word that means "seed-picker." In their eyes Paul was like a bird that goes around picking up ideas from here and there and passing them off as his own but not very coherently. Their comments get more serious; they accuse him of preaching foreign divinities. This seems innocent enough. But it was a serious charge, one that got Socrates executed 450 years earlier (they forced him to drink a cup of poison hemlock). Additionally, Roman law prohibited the introduction of new religions. They likely thought Paul was preaching new gods because he mentioned Jesus and Anastasis, a feminine noun in Greek which means "resurrection." They thought he was talking about two new gods they'd never heard of before.

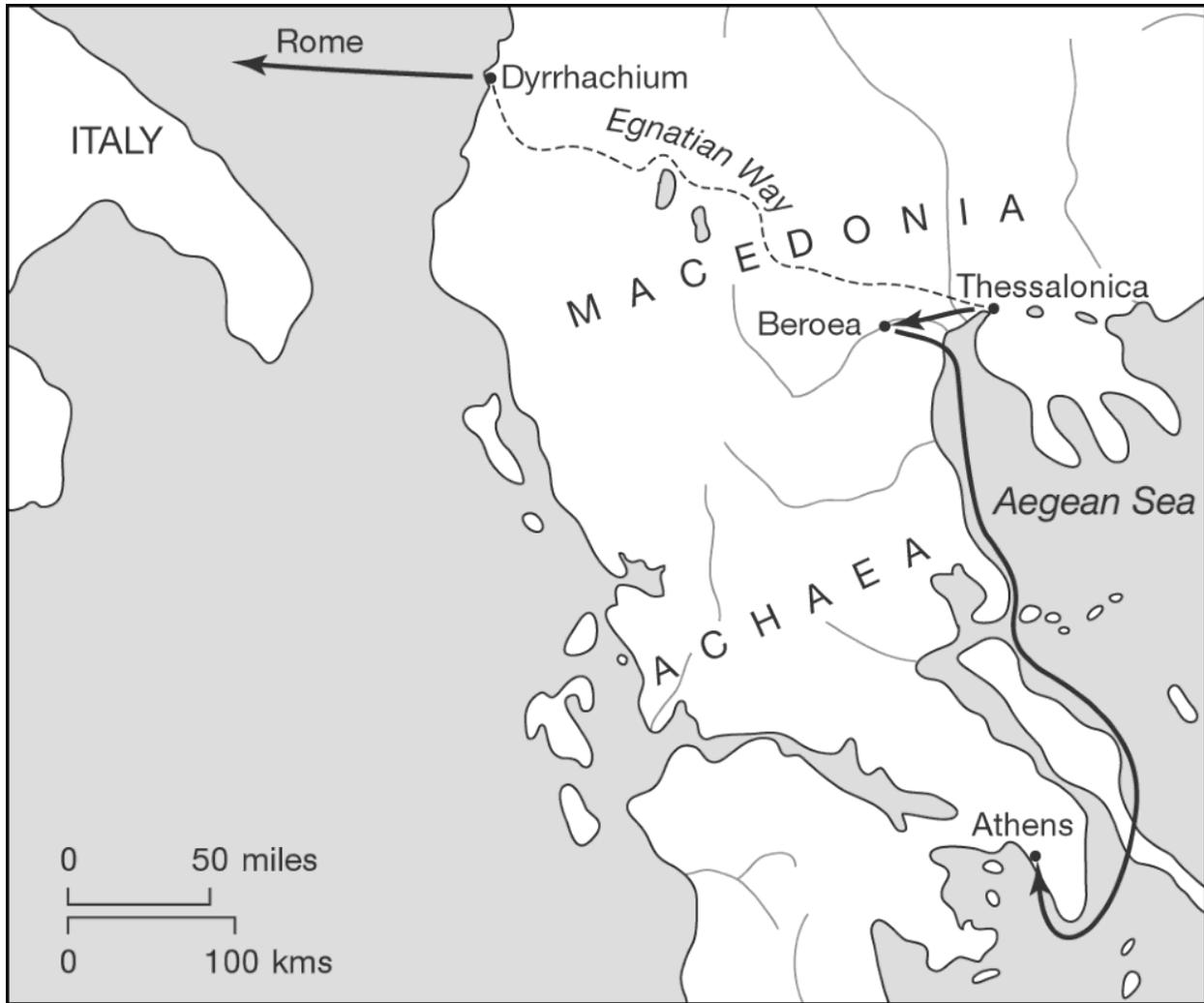
The Stoics followed the teaching of Zeno (332-260 BC) who taught that the highest virtue for mankind was to pursue knowledge and reason. Through reason you could become virtuous, courageous, and above all strong. You must accept your fate; life will deal to you what it will, but you mustn't let it get to you. Ignore every emotion, especially happiness and pain. You must harden yourself to all pain. There is no crying; there's only strength. The gods may or may not exist and if they do, you can't rely on them; you must rely on yourself. Epicureans followed Epicurus (342-270 BC) who taught that the main goal in life was to be happy. Trying to attain fulfillment by reason was hopeless. So, since you only live once, have as much fun as you can. Epicureans pursued anything and everything that brought them pleasure. They were selfish, materialistic and avoided fear and pain at all costs. They believed that the gods were far away and unconcerned. Both believed that death was the end; there was no afterlife. This life was all there was. So the people of Athens had these two choices as the gods looked on: "Live it up for tomorrow you die." Or, "Be strong and courageous for tomorrow you die."

These Stoics and Epicureans brought Paul to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the 377 ft. hill or court of the god Mars (or "Ares," his Greek name). But by Paul's day "The Areopagus" referred to the Council of Areopagus which was the governing body of Athens. It was made up of twelve Stoics and Epicureans who were considered the intellectual elites of Athens. They decided everything: religion, politics, economy, culture, everything. They were formed in a semi-circle before Paul as they asked their question aimed at discovering if Paul was starting a new cult with new deities, "May we know what this new doctrine is?"

17:22-34, Paul's response is brilliant. He uses an argument that both praises them and points out their glaring ignorance. He even used their own poets to prove his point, as he reveals their desperate need for the God of Israel—all the while destroying the philosophies of both Epicureanism and Stoicism. He begins by praising their highly religious tendencies and then uses one of their own altars to reveal the true God of the universe. They had an altar dedicated to "The Unknown God," so Paul proceeds to introduce them to this "Unknown God": He is the creator and Lord of the entire universe, therefore, a temple created by human hands cannot contain Him. Since He provides everything to mankind, including his breath, there's nothing He needs from man, including his sacrifices. God created all mankind from one individual (Adam) and not only did he determine every nation's borders, He was also in control of their history. The reason He did all this is so that mankind would grope for Him and find Him, which they would be able to do if they only acknowledged Him. After all, God was not far from any human being because He is where they all live, move, and have their existence. In fact, this is something their own poets have acknowledged (Epicurean poet Epimenides and Stoic poet Aratus among others).

Paul's argument destroyed all their philosophies: that life originated with a multitude of gods who were fickle and disinterested, that life was meaningless with a goal of either being happy or strong and then you died. Life was not meaningless at all and God was very much interested in mankind. He provided everything for mankind and longed to know him personally. And despite man's idolatrous rebellion, thinking that he could shape God out of gold or silver, God had up to now overlooked this ignorance. But now He commanded everyone to repent and turn to Him. Because one day He will judge all men by the individual He has chosen as Judge, the one He raised from the dead: Jesus Christ. At the mention of resurrection, some mocked Paul, some said they would give him another hearing, but some believed, including one of the twelve council members!

We become what we worship, whatever you worship, you become. And when your idol is deaf, dumb, and blind, unable to do anything, you become just like it and before you know it, it destroys you, Psalm 115:2-8. But if you worship Jesus, you become like Him (2 Corinthians 3:18), able to deal with every aspect of life successfully, including happiness, pain, and death.



III. Conclusion

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (p. 81). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.