

ACTS: Athens, A New Opportunity

Acts 17:16-21

Athens

- In Paul's day Athens' population was only around 10,000 people, having been dwindle due to Roman domination starting in 146 B.C.
 - However, it was still considered the cultural & intellectual center of the Roman Empire
- Athens was world renowned for its magnificent art & architecture
 - However, the art portrayed the various gods & goddesses of the Greek pantheon
 - And most of the impressive buildings were temples to these pagan gods
 - This is still true today

A Different Approach (v. 16-17)

- While Paul was waiting for Silas & Timothy to join him in Athens, he toured the great, historical city
 - He saw what we would see today, but in all their glory and many more temples
- His response was righteous anger
 - He saw the glory and worship due only to the Lord being given to countless others
- This was probably the reaction of some of the Jews that had opposed Paul's preaching about Christ
 - And even Paul/Saul's early reaction to the Apostles' preaching (see Acts 8:1; 9:1-2)
- However, rather than provoking Paul to violence, he responded differently
 - Response vs. reaction
- First, he brought the Gospel to the Jews & God-fearing Gentiles
 - And he may have used the idolatry and concern for the Lord's glory as common ground to speak with them
 - Perhaps quelling the fears that preaching Jesus had been to other Jewish audiences
- Then, he began speaking directly to Gentiles in the Agora, the marketplace for both goods and ideas
 - He directed his mission on those who he saw most in need

A New Audience (v. 18)

- Paul's willingness to go to where the people gathered gave him a new audience, philosophers
- Epicureans: Materialists who believe that all human existence only came from particles of matter
 - To them, human existence ended with death
 - Resurrection was ludicrous
 - The gods exist as disinterested spectators to human life
 - The greatest good in life is to seek modest pleasures to attain a state of tranquility, freedom from fear and absence from bodily pain
- Stoics: Materialistic pantheists, believing that the divine was to be found in all of nature, including human beings
 - Strong sense of fate

- Belief that there were periodic world ending events after which history repeated itself
 - Though they believed in the soul's immortality, they could not conceive of resurrection
- Humans realized their fullest potential when they lived by reason, or *logos*, the divine principle which held everything together
- Paul's talk of Jesus hit both groups oddly
 - With some accusing him of 'seed-picking' philosophical ideas in a haphazard way
 - And others mistaking his speech as talking about strange gods named Jesus & Anastasia ('*resurrection*')

A New Opportunity (v. 19-21)

- As much as the philosophers questioned Paul's message, they wanted to hear more
- So, they brought him the Areopagus
 - Mars' Hill, named for the god of war
 - Used as a court and a place for public discourse
- Paul is given opportunity to preach Christ before the elite of the city
 - Luke's comment about the curiosity of the Athenian people (v. 21) means that this crowd would be an audience willing to listen to what Paul had to say

So What?

- Paul's response to the sinfulness of the society around him led him to see their need for Jesus and preach the Gospel to them
 - Do we do the same?
- His engagement gave him opportunity to share Jesus in new and greater ways?
 - Are we willing to engage with others too?

Meditation Verse: *Colossians 4:5*