

# “Turning the World Upside Down”

- Acts 17 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson  
at JF Believers Church  
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*1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and [saying], "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. 5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 "Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. 10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily [to find out] whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. 13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed. 16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. 17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the [Gentile] worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. 18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine [is] of which you speak? 20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 "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: 24 "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. 25 "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 26 "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, 27 "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; 28 "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.' 29 "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this [matter]." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.*

The Book of Acts tells the story of a handful of men and women who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, did not leave their world the same way they found it. They were ordinary people whom God enabled to do extraordinary things, and they were determined in God's might to do them. It was the beginning of a movement that continues to this very day. The great explorer David Livingstone once said, "I am prepared to go anywhere, as long as it is forward." And he really echoed the sentiments of Paul the apostle.

Herein we read of how Paul's missions trip continued onward after the "divine intervention" in Philippi in chapter 16. I think few would fault Paul if he had felt that after all he had been through that it was time for a vacation. Maybe on a tropical island somewhere with some of those drinks with little umbrellas in them. But the journey had just begun for this disciple it seems! Furthermore, it seems the events such as those in Philippi not only did not deter Paul, but apparently they just made him stronger and bolder.

Despite what could be seen as the wholesale Jewish rejection of his message, Paul did not stop his evangelizing. He seemed to clearly understand that God was ultimately in control of the stage, and that *he* needed only to be obedient.

When Paul arrived in a new city, his regular "M.O." was to go first to the synagogue and attempt to win the hearts of those in attendance. Paul was consistent on this matter, and in Thessalonica there was finally some fruit from his efforts and it came from within the local synagogue. And yet the persecution also...kept coming, along with the victories! Paul however was determined to not let the opposition keep him from his calling. For the reality *was* and *is* that there is going to be opposition! In John 15:20 Jesus Himself said "*Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*" For Paul, it was almost a badge of honor. For even in the persecution lay the desire to be like his redeemer.

Notice that his method was to "*reason with them from the scriptures.*" It is so easy to get caught up in extra-biblical philosophies and pointless arguments with the unredeemed. It is the same for us today, as it was no doubt for Paul who was a very intelligent individual in and unto himself. The truth is, it is an easy slide out of the Word and into psychology, religion, and social issues. Forgetting that the answers to all the questions of life lay in those scriptures and the Spirit that dwells within them. No one changes the world for Christ through worldly debate and human effort alone.

Individuals and churches today however are falling away in droves into these things, all in an effort to make church and faith palatable to a consumer conscious public. The people are hungry and we attempt to satisfy them with spiritual "cotton candy." A generation of spiritual children with "rotting teeth!"

In verse 5, Paul must have been feeling a bit of déjà vu, as once again the people rose up against him and his message. Satan makes up for his lack creativity with a diligent consistency. Paul had apparently been staying in the house of Jason, which was now besieged by angry non-converted Jews. Why? Essentially because *they were jealous*. Jealousy is a powerful emotion, and it can drive a lot of animosity between two churches, two faiths, or two individuals.

Not finding Paul, the protesters take Jason instead. Apparently, guilt by association was enough to indict him. Those that attacked Jason went on to speak those famous words that Paul would be able to use as a testimonial on his resume from that day forward: "*these guys are 'turning the world upside down.'*" Oh, to have the same said about us! The historical account bears witness of the fact that Paul rarely did anything quietly. When he went to a town to minister, he did so like a storm! People seemed to always hear that Paul was in town and he didn't need facebook to do it! Its funny how today we have decided that a pastor should be all meek and genteel, when the servants of God in scripture were consistently anything but!

Now, let me say, such an 'accusation' is truly amazing. It's amazing that any man or woman could be individuals who so affect the world, that people could say they're turning it upside down. That's a rare title indeed. I mean there are people, you know, who live their whole life, and the world doesn't even know they're alive. There are Christians who have absolutely no effect on anything. Somebody said one time, "There are – there are people who watch things happen, and there are people who make things happen, and there are people who don't know what's happening." These were men who made things happen. Every time they took a step, the world shook. They had an effect; they mattered.

The world has plenty of people who just go along. Those who simply float through their lives. The wind blows them here and there. Then there are people who make life count. Lives that matter. People who make waves in this world. Those who upset the system. These folks are rare. But these folks change the world. They lives lives that are remembered. Paul was a guy who every time he put his foot down, something rattled. In Acts, he didn't just go into a town and gently leave an impression; he turned towns into chaos whenever he ministered there. Paul and Silas were those kind of people. You know, God's always had those kind of people. God's always had people who made waves. God's always had people who upset Satan's apple cart; who took a placid, sinful situation and threw it into chaos. And how did they do that? Superior talent and knowledge? Or was it just that they refused to stop. They refused to quit. **That** is passion. That is the act of love that stems from a real understanding of Christ and His love for them. You see, it's not just *what* a man does, but moreover *why he does it*.

Paul was a man of courage. His attitude was "I'm going to finish the ministry God gave me to do if it kills me." And it did.

In verses 7 and 8, the other shoe drops! Like clockwork the loyal Roman supporters come out of the woodwork to wreak havoc! Apparently it was a common and useful tool to accuse one's enemy of insurrection against the occupying Roman government. These men accused Jason (and Paul *in absentia*) of working to place one "Jesus" in the chair of King Caesar.

17:9

Once again God intervened on behalf of his servants. God does not need an unbeliever's permission to see His will come to pass. He uses *who* He wishes, and this time He even used the authorities there in Thessalonica. The cops were apparently given a level head on this matter by God and failed to move to the way that the accusers had hoped. Jason was forced to put up a security bond in case there were future issues that might require financial compensation and was then let go.

17:10

Those who supported Paul evidently believed that discretion was the better part of valor and shuffled him out of town before he got stoned again. But Paul was bound and determined to keep going, for as soon as they arrive in Berea, Paul is back in the synagogue once again.

In verse 11 of our text, we have an important caveat that has become the standard of those who are bound to the call of God. The Bereans forever gained themselves a slice of history by checking Paul's instruction against the Word of God. Oh, if such a practice were still in widespread use today! We all *say* we believe and stand on the Word, right up unto the moment that we are pressed against the wall to obey in a matter that ruffles our feathers! Please note that these folks were not a bunch of debaters, nor were they puffed up in their pride to "prove they knew more than Paul!" For the text tells us that having checked on his accuracy, they received the Word that Paul taught *with all readiness*.

17:12

Verse 12 tells us that *many* of them believed. What was different here than in Thessalonica? Why were more converted here in Berea? Not because the message of Paul and Silas was any different this time, but because these people were receptive to the truth! That would seem to be a given, but oddly enough, it is not always the case. We live in a world where truth is now subjective, arbitrary and situational. Truth is "in the eyes of the beholder" in our day. That's why the world is lost in a sea of doubt and ever shifting sands. But along comes Christianity, with claims of a truth that is *the same yesterday, today, and forever*.

17:13-15

Even in a world without cell phones and CNN, it seemed that the news of this teaching and those who were *turning the world upside down* was spreading fast. As was often the case, the believers were more concerned

about the safety of their “pastor” than Paul was for himself. How different is our day when so often pastors are “guilty until proven innocent.” It is just so much easier in our culture to believe the negative than the positive!

Timothy and Silas stay put in town, while Paul is again swept out of town for his own safety. Once Paul does find a place to land, he sends for Silas and Timothy who move quickly to catch up with him in Athens. Now Athens was in that day a center of culture, education, and fine arts. It was also therefore naturally a bastion of liberal ideology and the wholesale pursuit of pleasure. It was the “Berkley of the east,” and it existed comfortably in its own smug self-indulgence.

Despite the wholesale surrender to the flesh and the world, like now, the hunger for God still remained. No matter how much self-confidence, education, financial standing, and culture one might attain, it is inevitable that he or she will still attempt to reach out to some deity, real or imagined. It’s built in to us...the search for God. We manifest such by the number and extent of the gods that we place on the pedestal of our lives. We fancy ourselves as far more knowledgeable and “savvy” than our predecessors, but false gods are false gods in any era.

Paul found Athens pretty much as he would find any major US city if he were to take a drive today. The plethora of these gods greatly concerned Paul. His “*spirit was provoked*” as he witnessed a city “*given over to idols.*” Ancient writers estimated that there was at least one idol for every person in Athens. That is a lot of seeking! Having spent a lot of time in India, I have seen such a world up close.

Verse 17 tells us that Paul “went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.” How the world would like to rid themselves of both the unrelenting evangelists as well as the perceived ‘smucks’ who gravitate toward God and the Bible. Paul recognized the need, *and moreover the ‘want,’* and was consumed with the same compassion that Jesus Himself feels for those who are seeking and yet lost. Paul “reasoned” with these people wherever he found them...in the church or on the street.

17:18

The Epicureans and Stoics, the “university professors” of ancient Athens, came across Paul as he was teaching and began to ridicule him. Why not? What you can’t beat intellectually, just lob insults at, right? It appears that method has been utilized for a few hundred years!

*“Epicureans pursued pleasure as the chief purpose in life, and valued most of all the pleasure of a peaceful life, free from pain, disturbing passions and superstitious fears (including the fear of death). They did not deny the existence of gods, but believed that they had nothing to do with man.”*

*“The Stoics were pantheists who put great emphasis on moral sincerity and a high sense of duty. They cultivated a spirit of proud dignity, and believed that suicide was better than a life lived with less dignity. Stoics believed that everything was god, and god was in everything. So they believed that all things, good or evil, were from god and so nothing should be resisted, and they believed there was no particular direction or destiny for mankind.” (Guzik)*

17:19-21

The Areopagus, or *Mars Hill*, was the coffeehouse of their day. This was the place where the great ideas of the first century were debated: politics, religion, philosophy, morality, and pleasure. Everything was open for discussion, not necessarily to seek an ultimate truth, but simply for the joy of the exchange. Like a big chocolate bar, eaten for the pleasure of its taste and not for nourishment!

17:22-23

Paul could readily see that the residents of Athens were quite a religious bunch. It is a long way away from a born again relationship with Christ, but religion just the same. He acknowledged the innumerable number of idols throughout Athens, and remarked specifically about one he found labeled “*To the unknown God.*”

17:24-31

Paul begins to give these intellectuals the “banter” they desired. He tells them of this “unknown God” that they had unknowingly acknowledged. In vivid and picturesque language, he presents man on the journey of life’s search to find the God that is, in truth, right beside each of us. He starts “at the beginning,” at creation. He speaks of God’s nature and purpose of our being, the “predestination” of our time upon this earth, as well as the “built-in” limits of our days here. He emphasizes that “repentance” is crucial, a “turning away” from our life of sin. Paul’s understanding of a real and living relationship with Jesus Christ is fully manifested in his words, “...for in Him we live and move and have our being.”

17:32

The concept of resurrection, something supernatural that was beyond their grasp of understanding or control, was however simply too much for these men. After all, they were realists! Much like so many folks today, they were unwilling to place their faith in anything that they could not touch, see, and explain.

*“Professing themselves to be wise they were made fools...”* Romans 1:22

17:33-34

The listeners that day simply *delayed*. Just as now, they put off making a decision as to the message that they had been given. They were not ready to surrender their living for pleasure or the dependence upon “number one.” For so long they had depended upon themselves for the answers to life. How could they now turn themselves over to this carpenter’s Son from Nazareth? So Paul left them there on that hill, but not without a couple of converts. A couple of daring individuals who wanted more from life than circular debate and self-perpetuating search.

There are always a few who really want the *truth*.

Are you one of them?