

*Chapter 17: **Turning the World Upside Down***

Three Cities, One Gospel, Unstoppable Grace



When?

Paul, Silas, and Timothy's preaching journey—Paul's second missionary journey—most likely took place between 49 and 52 A.D.

Where?

After crossing over into Macedonia (modern-day Greece) in Acts 16, the travelers laid the groundwork for a church in Philippi with the conversion of a wealthy businesswoman, the exorcism of a demon-possessed slave girl and the dramatic response of a "shaken jailer." The action in Acts 17 now shifts to events in Thessalonica, Berea and Athens.

Who?

Leaving Luke behind in Philippi, the mission continues with:

- Paul (formerly Saul), the apostle who was converted in a face-to-face encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).
- Silas, a leader, teacher and prophet from the church in Jerusalem (Acts 16:22, 32).
- Timothy, a young disciple who was likely converted to the faith during Paul's first visit to Lystra (Acts 14:8-23).

Thessalonica: Reasoning That Riles the City (17:1-9)

Key verse: "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (17:3)

1. Paul's pattern in the synagogue (17:1-3)
    - Three verbs that describe biblical proclamation: he "reasoned," "explained," and "proved" from the Scriptures.
    - The logic of his argument: it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise (see Luke 24:25-27, 44-47). The cross was not a divine accident; it was the eternal plan (Acts 2:23).
    - The climax is personal, not just propositional: "This Jesus ... is the Christ." Doctrine drives the hearer to a Person.

2. Mixed response: God's sovereignty on display (17:4)
    - "Some of them were persuaded ... a great many devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. … But the Jews were jealous." The same sermon, two responses. The difference is not the preacher's skill but God's work in the hearer (cf. Acts 16:14; 13:48).

3. Opposition born of jealousy (17:5-9)
    - The mob drags Jason before the city officials: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (17:6).
    - Note the irony: the accusation against the church is actually the church's mission. The world's "right side up" is upside down; the gospel reverses it.
    - Jason posts bond; Paul and Silas are sent away. Persecution redirects but never stops the mission (cf. Acts 8:1-4).

Retrospective: Not long after his visit, Paul writes 1 Thessalonians to this young church: "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). The riot in Acts 17 became a beacon in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8). His second letter, written soon after, offered encouragement and addressed a false belief that the sequence of events leading to Christ's return had already begun.

1 Thessalonians		
When written	**Where**	**Why**
Around AD 50–52	Corinth	Encouraging believers to stay true to the Gospel and answer questions from the congregation.
2 Thessalonians		
Early to mid-50s	On Paul's second missionary journey.	To address persecution, correct false beliefs about Christ's return, and reprimand idleness.

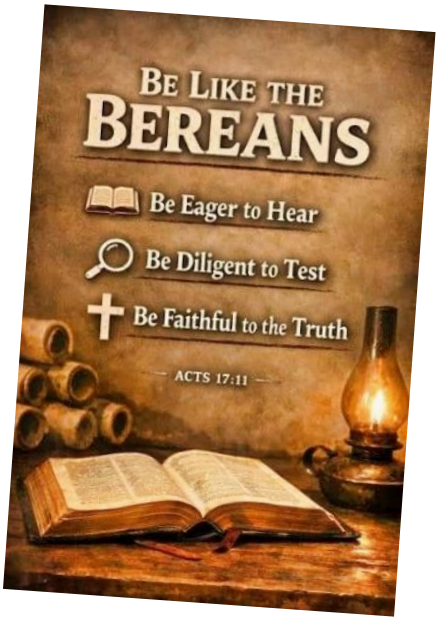
Berea: Nobility That Examines the Scriptures (17:10-15)

Key verse: "They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (17:11)

1. A model congregation (17:10-12)
    - Two marks of nobility: eager reception and daily examination. They received the messenger's word *not instead of* Scripture, but *through* Scripture.
    - Application for us: honor the preaching, but verify the teaching.

2. Opposition follows the gospel (17:13-15)
    - The Thessalonian agitators travel 45 miles to fight the gospel again. Opposition to Christ is persistent, but so is the Word.
    - Paul is escorted to Athens while Silas and Timothy remain. God's providence in geography: the gospel now moves to the intellectual capital of the world.

A Reasonable Faith



In Acts 17, Luke contrasts the response of some Jews in Thessalonica with those in Berea. In fact, all three episodes in Acts 17 show that Paul presented the gospel rationally and reasonably.

Some accept that rational message (Berea), while others act disorderly to oppose Paul's message (Thessalonica). While some in Athens scoff at Paul's message, others respect him, as shown by those who hear it on the Areopagus (Mars Hill).

Paul engages in rhetoric in the synagogue at Thessalonica and Berea, and in a public philosophical discussion in Athens. Luke describes him as persuading people with positive arguments for the truth of the gospel, supported by evidence from Scripture and reason.

Christianity is not at all like a mystery cult that hides the "real doctrine" from outsiders. Nor is Paul a performer, a teacher who convinces a crowd through personal charisma. Christianity is a "reasonable faith" that intelligent, rational people can accept when presented with a clear argument.

Athens: The Gospel Meets the Philosophers (17:16-34)

Key verse: "In him we live and move and have our being" (17:28)

1. A spirit provoked by idolatry (17:16)
    - "His spirit was provoked within him." The Greek word suggests sharp distress, even irritation. Paul grieves over idolatry before he argues against it. Love for God's glory precedes love for the souls of men.

2. Preaching in every arena (17:17-21)
    - Synagogue on the Sabbath, marketplace every day. Paul meets Jews, Epicureans and Stoics.
    - The Athenians' endless appetite for novelty: "spend[ing] their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." The gospel is not just another novelty; it is the eternal truth breaking into time.

3. The Areopagus address (17:22-31)
    - The bridge: "To the unknown god" (17:22-23). Paul does not flatter idolatry; he uses their confession of ignorance as his point of contact.
    - The Creator and Lord (17:24-25): God made the world, does not live in temples, and is not served by human hands. He is the Giver, not the receiver. This dismantles both Epicurean deism (gods distant and detached) and Stoic pantheism (god dissolved into the creation).
    - The Sovereign of nations (17:26-27): God determines times and boundaries "that they should seek God." Providence and missions belong together; history is the arena where sinners seek answers.
    - The command to repent (17:30-31): "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Not an invitation to consider, a command from the King.
    - The proof: "by raising him from the dead" (17:31). The resurrection is God's public verification of Christ's lordship and the assurance of coming judgment.

4. Three responses (17:32-34)
    - **Mockery** ("when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked"), **delay** ("we will hear you again"), and **belief** ("some men joined him and believed"), including Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris.
    - The pattern holds: the same seed, different soils, and God gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Epicureans vs. Stoics at a Glance

Epicureans and Stoics (Acts 17:18) were the two dominant worldviews of the Greco-Roman world — and, in many ways, still are today.

Belief	Epicureans	Stoics
God	Gods exist — immortal, blessed beings living in the spaces between worlds — but are remote and uninvolved; no providence, no judgment	God is the rational soul of the universe itself (pantheism); immanent but not transcendent
Reality	Strict materialism: only atoms and void; no immaterial soul, no afterlife	Also materialist, but everything is permeated by divine reason (logos)
Death	"Death is nothing to us," Epicurus wrote, "since when we are, death has not come, and when death has come, we are not."	The soul survives briefly, then dissolves into the cosmic fire; endless cycles
The good life	Pleasure rightly understood: tranquility (ataraxia) and freedom from pain — simple food, close friends, quiet	Virtue alone is good; everything else (wealth, health, reputation) is an "indifferent"
Emotions	Avoid disturbance by limiting desire and fear, especially fear of gods and death	Apatheia: not numbness, but freedom from being ruled by passion — reason governs feeling
History	No purpose, no plan — a random concourse of atoms	Providence (*logos*) governs all, but in repeating cosmic cycles; no linear story, no final day

Where the Gospel Confronts Both

Neither school knows a Creator who stands over creation, a God who acts in history, or a Savior who rose from the dead. The Epicureans lack a God who cares; the Stoics lack a God who is other than the world.

Paul preaches both: transcendent Lord and present Father. Their cosmology has no place for a day "fixed" for judgment (17:31); their universe either ends in nothing or repeats forever. And no philosophy can raise the dead; only the gospel can.

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM ACTS 17

1. **The gospel is reasoned from Scripture** — explanation, proof, and proclamation all center on the suffering and risen Christ (17:2-3).
2. **The response to the gospel is God's sovereign work** — the same preaching persuades some and enrages others (17:4-5).
3. **Faithful witness turns the world upside down** — the world calls the church's work disorder; God calls it salvation (17:6).
4. **Noble faith is eager and examining** — receive the word gladly and test it daily against the Scriptures (17:11).
5. **God commands all people everywhere to repent** — and he has given assurance by raising Jesus from the dead (17:30-31).

☐ Next: In **Acts 18,** Paul begins a year-and-a-half stint in Corinth, partnering with Aquila and Priscilla in tent-making while he teaches in the synagogue and shares the gospel.