

Among the Philosophers

Read: Acts 17:15-34
Further Reading: Galatians 1:6-10

Key Verse:
“Although they
claimed to be
wise, they
became fools.”

Romans 1:22

Extra: If Paul was alive today, how do you think he would have told people about Jesus?

Level 5 lesson 25

Even today, thousands of tourists flock to the Greek capital Athens to admire the ancient ruins to be found there. I’ve even stood and marvelled at the architecture of the famous ‘Parthenon’ temple ruins on the Acropolis Hill myself! The ancient Greek builders were certainly incredibly skilful and intelligent people. How sad that despite their obvious intelligence, they could be so foolish as to worship ‘gods’ who don’t exist!

This thought clearly disturbed the Apostle Paul terribly, as he walked around the great city and observed the extent of idol worship at that time (v16). So, while he waited for Timothy and Silas to rejoin him, he began to debate with people and to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever he could. Paul’s bold message of Jesus Christ and how He had been raised from the dead soon attracted attention.

MAN’S IDEAS: He was approached by a group of Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans were like many today whose only ‘god’ is pleasure; “Let’s eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” was their motto. As for the Stoics, their motto was “Que sera, sera” - “Whatever will be, will be.” They were fatalists - people who believed that it was impossible for them to change or alter the destiny appointed for them. They accepted no responsibility in the matter and denied the existence of a personal God they must answer to for their conduct in life. They believed the physical body was intrinsically evil and must be ‘kept under’ control. So they lived a stern, hard life, trying to keep a “stiff upper lip” no matter what happened. We can plainly see both these sorts of belief in our world today!

This group of philosophers was intrigued by Paul’s preaching. They insisted he come and share it with all their group at the Areopagus (also known as ‘Mars Hill’), where they gathered regularly to discuss any new ideas and philosophies (v21). Naturally, Paul agreed! He began by commenting on their superstitious religion, to the extent that he had even seen an altar inscribed, “To an unknown God.” This ‘unknown God’ Paul would now explain to them.

GOD’S TRUTH: “God who made the world and everything in it, is the Lord of Heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands,” he began. “He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else!” Paul went on to tell how God has placed man in various parts of the earth, and desires that all might seek the Lord and find Him, because in reality He was “not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being.” Even one of their own philosophers had alluded to this when claiming that, “We are His offspring.”

Then Paul applied some sound reasoning. “If we humans are God’s ‘offspring’,” he argued, “how can God be like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man’s design or skill?” No creation is greater than its Creator: a man-made idol can never be the Creator of the person who made it! Just as we are individual persons, so God our Creator is a Person; a living being of unimaginable greatness.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY: However, having declared God’s character and being to them, Paul went on to explain that God calls people everywhere to repent of their idolatry. No longer would God overlook men’s ignorance as in past ages. There was a day of judgement approaching. The judge was already appointed. He was the Lord Jesus Christ, the Man whom He (God) had raised from the dead. They must now acknowledge and worship Him as God, cease from worshipping other ‘gods’ (idols), and seek forgiveness for sins (like idolatry), which is available through faith in Jesus Christ.

The day was appointed. The judge was appointed. What were they going to do about it? At this stage, Paul’s audience was split into three groups: The Mockers - those who didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Procrastinators - those who wanted to decide later. The Believers - those who believed Paul’s message and started following Jesus. I wonder, which group do YOU belong today? This question is just as relevant and important as it was then. We must all be very honest about our response!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What disturbed Paul so much when he visited Athens?	.....
2. What was the Epicurean’s view of life?	.....
3. Mention something Paul taught them about God’s character and being.	.....
4. Who will be the Judge in the “Judgement Day” to come?	.....
5. Since judgement is coming, what action is required?	.....

My Name is Age

The Gospel for All People

Key Verse:
“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

1 Corinthians 6:11

Level 5 Lesson 26

Extra: What did the beating of Sosthenes show about the crowd?

Read Acts 18:1-17 Further Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:20-25

When Paul left Athens, he “went to Corinth.” I have made this journey myself, but we can be sure that Paul did not have the luxury of a modern, comfortable train like I did! No! In all likelihood, he simply walked the several hundred kilometres between the two cities. We should not forget the huge physical effort Paul and his companions put into these missionary journeys; ‘serving the Lord’ can often be plain hard work and we should not forget that, nor be averse to it should it be required of us!

PAUL’S COMPANIONS: Paul’s first contacts in the wicked, immoral city of Corinth were a Christian couple, Aquila and his wife, Priscilla. They had left Rome to escape the terrible persecution of Christians there. They were tentmakers. As that was also Paul’s trade, it seems they offered him a job with them. So this great ‘man of God’ worked during the week to support himself, and on the Sabbath days, “he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.”

Later, when Silas and Timothy rejoined him, Paul was able to devote himself exclusively to preaching, “testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ” (i.e. their Messiah). You see, this was (and still is) the great question at issue! Who was Jesus of Nazareth? Was He the Christ as He had claimed, or was He an imposter as the Jews claimed? This is something of vital importance, which we all must decide for ourselves. Our answer will determine our eternal destiny!

Paul said Jesus WAS the Christ. He showed repeatedly how His birth, death, and resurrection were all foretold in the Jew’s own Scriptures. However, they refused to believe Paul or acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. Instead they abused Paul personally and opposed him in every way possible.

THE GENTILE’S PRIVILEGE: At this, Paul ‘shook the dust from his clothes’ at them. This was a Jewish custom meaning, “OK. From now on I leave you to God’s judgement!” Then he left them with these sobering words. “Your blood be on your own heads!

I am clear of my responsibility; from now on I will go to the Gentiles!” These words obviously had some effect, as several of the Jews, including Crispus, the chief ruler of the Synagogue and his household believed. What a huge decision on his part! In addition, many of the Gentile Corinthians, upon hearing Paul’s preaching, “Believed and were baptised.” I wonder: have YOU ‘heard’, ‘believed’ and ‘been baptised?’

GOD’S PROTECTION: Despite these wonderful conversions, Paul appears to have become a bit discouraged. There is no doubt the Jews ‘blindness’ to the truth of his message was a great sorrow to him, being Jewish himself. Graciously, the Lord appeared to him in a vision, encouraging him. “Do not be afraid!” He told Paul. “Keep on speaking. Do not be silent! For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”

With this wonderful assurance of the Lord’s care and provision for him, Paul continued on despite the Jews’ fierce opposition. Eventually, they dragged him forcibly before the city Magistrate (a man named Gallio) where they tried to bring serious charges against him. However, upon hearing the charges, Gallio was not interested in even hearing the case! The charges they brought, even if true, were not contrary to Roman law, and he had the whole crowd thrown out of the courtroom by the Roman guard! So the Lord protected Paul, just as He had promised!

Outside the courthouse, the mob turned on Sosthenes, the new chief ruler of the synagogue (Crispus had lost this position immediately he’d become a believer in Christ), and gave him a terrible beating. Gallio simply ignored the whole thing! However, their vindictive anger may have caused Sosthenes to review his thinking about Paul’s message; it appears he was saved shortly afterwards, for he is mentioned by Paul as “our brother” in 1 Corinthians 1:1. Paul continued on in Corinth, preaching the Gospel and writing many letters to encourage and instruct the new believers in the towns he had visited earlier. The first of these important letters, were 1 and 2 Thessalonians, which of course now form part of the New Testament.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. (a) What did Paul say about Jesus and how did he prove this? (b) How did the Jews show what they thought?	(a) (b)
2. Why did Paul turn to the Gentiles?	.....
3. What steps were taken by some Corinthians when the Gospel was preached to them?	.....
4. Why do you think God’s words encouraged Paul?	.....
5. Why didn’t Paul get ‘hurt’ at the Roman Court?	.....

Mighty in the Scriptures

Read Acts 18:18-28

Further Reading: Ephesians 5:15-21

Key Verse:

“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe.”

1 Corinthians 3:5

Level 5 Lesson 27

Extra: Try and help some of your friends to understand about Jesus.

In our study today, it is hard to comprehend the magnitude of the journey Paul undertook. In total he travelled about 2,500km: from Corinth to Cenchrea, across the sea to Ephesus, on to Caesarea, up to Jerusalem, then on to Antioch in Syria, and then back again to Ephesus where he'd promised to return to "if it is God's will" (v21). What a trip! And all of it completed largely on foot or by boat. Check it out on an atlas, (perhaps there's one in the back of your Bible) and you'll appreciate what an amazing trip it was!

Leaving their new friends at Corinth, Paul, along with Priscilla and Aquila, headed for Antioch in Syria, Paul's home base. Reaching the Grecian sea port of Cenchrea, Paul shaved his head because of a vow he had taken, before sailing for Ephesus. Scripture doesn't reveal what his vow was, although it may have had something to do with Paul's reply in verse 21, "I must by all means keep this feast in Jerusalem" (KJV).

Paul seemed keen to get to Jerusalem in time for the Passover feast, where great crowds of Jews gathered from all parts of the world. Although he had begun his great mission to the Gentiles, the Apostle's countrymen still held a special place in his heart!

Arriving at Ephesus, Paul again used every opportunity he had to reason with the Jews in their synagogue. Then, after a short stay in Ephesus, Paul parted company with Aquila and Priscilla, who felt they should remain there. Boarding a ship, he sailed to Caesarea. From there he went up to Jerusalem where he greeted the church (and probably discharged his vow), before leaving again for Antioch. There, he spent time with many old friends and helpers.

RIGHTEOUS INSTRUCTION: While in Antioch, Paul learnt of various difficulties and problems amongst the believers in Galatia and Phrygia, where he had been previously. The enemy (Satan) had been trying to destroy the Lord's work and weaken them by false teaching; and so Paul left Antioch (v23). He travelled north, then west, throughout these areas, encouraging the believers by correctly instructing them in the Truth.

While Paul was busily engaged in the good work, Aquila and Priscilla were also busily working in

Ephesus (see vv24-28). One day, a man named Apollos arrived in Ephesus, from Alexandria. He was well educated and a very good speaker; but best of all, he "had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." However, his knowledge of the Lord only went as far as the "baptism of John." He was not aware of the full significance of the death and resurrection of our Lord and the wonderful truths associated with them. It's possible he had not yet even heard of them.

WISE INSTRUCTION: We can learn some good lessons from what followed. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him speaking boldly in the synagogue, look how they responded to his obvious ignorance. Did they publicly argue and refute what he said, or try and take him 'down a peg'; make him look silly and humiliate him? Oh no! They invited him to their home, and there, in private, taught him the way of God more perfectly, explaining the fact of our Lord's crucifixion, death and resurrection and the blessing of forgiveness and justification through faith in His name.

Their loving and gracious treatment of him no doubt made it easier for Apollos to listen and humbly accept the instruction of his more mature brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a great example of how Christian truth, accompanied by Christian grace and humility, can achieve much and avoid so much potential conflict among believers, thereby bringing glory to God.

Later, when Apollos felt led of God to help the believers in Corinth (19:1), in the province of Achaia, the Ephesian believers were happy to commend him, giving him a letter in which they encouraged the believers to receive him, which they did. Apollos "was a great help to those who by grace had believed" (v27). He made good use of the increased understanding he had gained, for "he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures, that Jesus was the Christ." Now we can see how God's guidance in leading Aquila and Priscilla to remain in Ephesus bore fruit there and elsewhere.

Let us all be willing to listen and learn. None of us knows everything - not even the oldest of us! Study the Scriptures, listen to the Scriptures being taught, and as you get older you will become more knowledgeable in the Scriptures and be able to help and instruct others, just like Apollos did.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why was Paul keen to go to Jerusalem?

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2. What did Paul do in Galatia and Phrygia?

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3. What did Aquila and Priscilla teach Apollos?

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4. What was the effect on Apollos?

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5. How did Apollos use his increased knowledge?

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A Fire of Repentance

Key Verse:

“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine powers to demolish strongholds.”

2 Corinthians 10:4

Extra: Why was it a ‘big step’ for believers to leave the synagogue?

Level 5 Lesson 28

Read Acts 19:1-22

Further Reading: 2 Timothy 3

In God’s grace, Paul was enabled to return to Ephesus, as he had hoped to. And what a challenge greeted him on arrival! If ever there was a stronghold of Satan, it was Ephesus! The city was dominated in a physical sense by the magnificent Temple of Diana (or Artemis as she was also known), one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus was the centre of idol worship in the then known-world. Its people involved in all sorts of sinful, idolatrous rites and practices. Into this ‘cauldron of sin’, Paul arrived and commenced a work that would culminate in the public burning of previously cherished pagan writings and occult literature, worth 50,000 pieces of silver - a fortune at the time!

Of course, God’s Word (the Bible) has frequently been burned publicly by the enemies of God down through history. The devil has tried to eradicate it and prevent its life-giving message of salvation from being spread throughout the world. However, Jesus promised that “My words shall never perish” and so today, despite the devil’s opposition, the Bible remains the world’s “Number One” bestseller!

Arriving in Ephesus, Paul found the local believers to be in a similar position to Apollos, as far as knowledge of Jesus and the complete Gospel was concerned. Just as Aquila and Priscilla were able to lead Apollos further on in the truth, so Paul helped these twelve men into the full blessing of a living relationship with God, through the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit. This followed their acceptance of Paul’s further instruction concerning Jesus Christ and their public acknowledgement of Him as Saviour (v3-6).

A FAITHFUL WITNESS: Following this, Paul spent three months preaching and teaching the truth of the Gospel in the local synagogue. He provided sound arguments and reasoning “about the Kingdom of God.” Many people were convinced and believed in Christ, but others remained obstinately opposed, and spoke evil of ‘The Way,’ (as the new Christian faith was sometimes named). Finally, Paul and the new believers left the synagogue (a big step) and began meeting

together in a hall belonging to Tyrannus, an old school-master. For two years, Paul taught the Word of God from this centre and held daily discussions with the new believers, and any who would listen, until, “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia (Minor) heard the word of the Lord.”

AMAZING MIRACLES: God worked special miracles through Paul, and this naturally attracted huge interest and attention. This was done to vindicate Paul’s ‘new’ message of course - not simply to make a ‘name’ for Paul! However, the seven sons of an old scoundrel named Sceva, who claimed to be exorcists, saw an opportunity to make a name for themselves! They tried to imitate these miracles and use the name of the Lord Jesus to cast out evil spirits from a demon-possessed man.

This proved disastrous. The evil spirit, when commanded by these imposters to leave the man, replied, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” Then the man attacked the seven men and with demonic strength soon overpowered them and gave them a terrible beating. Finally, they managed to escape and “ran out of the house, naked, and bleeding” (v16).

CONFESSION AND TRUE REPENTANCE: This incident caused a great fear to fall upon the people of Ephesus and “the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour” throughout the city. We read in verse 18 that, “many who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.” Not only that, they demonstrated the sincerity of their confession. These people were finished with their idolatry and now wanted to follow Jesus Christ and His way whole-heartedly. In true repentance, they brought all their evil books of witchcraft and idol worship to the centre of the city and publicly burnt the whole lot!

By the way, if you have any literature which opposes the Bible, such as teachings from the Book of Mormon and other cults, or books about witchcraft and ‘magic,’ or even pornography, get rid of it all! Fill your mind and heart with good wholesome things, just like Paul encouraged the believers in Philippians 4:8. As a result of the people’s obedience and repentance, “The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” This was a great victory and triumph for God’s truth in Ephesus.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What kind of place was Ephesus?	.....
2. What was the result of Paul teaching the Gospel Truth for 3 months?	.....
3. How did the people show they had turned from idolatry and wickedness to follow Christ?	.....
4. How can the Word of God grow in such a place?
5. What blessing did you receive from this study?

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