

“... he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols”
(ACTS 17:16, NIV).

Bible Study 70

Religion Can Be a Bad Thing!

BY BOB UTLEY

Read Acts 17:16-34.

What motivated Paul to preach and teach in Athens? (v. 16) _____

At what three places in Athens did Paul preach? _____

Where were Paul's missionary partners, Silas and Timothy, while he was in Athens? _____

What was the result of Paul's mission work in Athens?

Athens, like America, was a religious place. After being run out of Thessalonica and Berea, Paul found himself in Athens, the intellectual capital of the ancient Mediterranean world. Two ancient writers characterized Athens by the following:

- There were 30,000 statues to different gods. (Pliny)
- “It is easier to find a god in Athens than a man.” (Petronius)

Religion was big business in Athens in Paul's day, but the people did not know the one true God! Paul was deeply moved by this (v. 16).

The awesome responsibility of the gospel weighed on Paul. He also suffered from some chronic physical problem (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-10) that interfered with normal things of daily life. And it would have been so easy for him to make excuses why he could not share, teach or preach the gospel. But Paul allowed God to overcome every shortcoming and fear.

In Athens, Paul preached in the local synagogue (v. 17) and in the marketplace (v. 17), and he reasoned on the Areopagus (v. 19).

What is a synagogue and what audience would Paul have found there? _____

Who probably heard Paul preach in the marketplaces? _____

What is an “Areopagus”? (For a description, refer to a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.) _____

What kind of people heard his message there? _____

Only on mission Christians can know the fullness of joy that comes to those who are available to be used by the Spirit as a channel of the gospel to others.

Let's examine Paul's message to the different groups to whom he spoke. In the synagogue, he spoke to Jews and "God-fearing Greeks" who knew the Old Testament. From other sermons to Jews, we know Paul preached using Old Testament prophecies to prove that Jesus was the Messiah and that the Messiah would suffer.

We are not told how he spoke to those in the marketplace. However, we are given an account of how he approached the philosophers on Mars' Hill (vv. 19-31). He noted their religiosity. He noted their reverence for the gods. He then found an altar inscribed to an "Unknown God" (v. 23) and used it as an opening to tell them about YHWH and His Son.

Was Paul well received in Athens? Yes No

Did many believe (v. 34) and want to hear more? (v. 32) Yes No

Athenians rejected and even mocked Paul and his message. I cannot promise you that someone will trust Jesus every time you share your faith or that you will not be laughed at. I can promise that the Lord Jesus will be with you (*Matthew 28:20*) and that internal joy and peace in life is only experienced by those who are *on mission*. Only *on mission* Christians can know the fullness of joy that comes to those who are available to be used by the Spirit as a channel of the gospel to others.

Name those in Athens who received Paul's message. _____

Although you can only list two names, God wrote the names of all the others in the Lamb's Book of Life (*Revelation 21:27, Philippians 4:3*). When you share the gospel, you may not be aware of all those who believe and respond, but God knows.

Notice that Paul had not gone to Athens on a planned campaign to win the city or plant churches. He was simply waiting there for his partners to catch up with him (v. 16). But he saw needs and created opportunities to preach the gospel.

Much of our lives are spent waiting—waiting to grow up, to graduate, to get a job, to get a better job, to get married, to have children, to retire.

What do you see now that "greatly distresses" you? _____

What is the synagogue, marketplace or Areopagus where you can share Christ? _____

Who are the people who need to hear your message? _____