**A Tale of Three Cities**

(Acts 17:10-21)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

We’re going to be talking about three Bible cities in this lesson, but that reminded me of something I heard recently on the internet. I heard that in New York City, a man is mugged every thirty seconds. I also heard he’s getting pretty tired of it.

But speaking of cities, here in Acts 17 the Apostle Paul has just survived an attempt on his life in the city of Thessalonica, and he’s about to *leave* Thessalonica for a *second* city, the city of Berea. After that, we’ll see him travel to a *third* city, the city of Athens in Greece. The story begins in Acts 17:10, where we read:

**“And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews” (Acts 17:10).**

As you can see, after those unsaved Jews in Thessalonica tried to *kill* Paul, his new brethren in Thessalonica sent him and Silas to Berea, which was about 40 miles west. And there, Paul continued to do what God told him to do. He went to the Jews in the synagogue *first—*even though that nearly got him *killed* in Thessalonica!

If the city of *Berea* sounds familiar, it’s because *Berean Bible Society* was named after the believers in Berea. As we read on, we find out why our founder, Pastor C. R. Stam, chose this name back in 1940. In verse 12, we read of the Jews in Berea,

**“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11).**

Now that’s the kind of attitude we should *always* have whenever we hear a preacher preach a message from the Scriptures. First, they received the word with all readiness of mind. We would say they kept an *open* mind, a mind that was ready to receive what Paul taught—*if they found it to be true.* And the way they determined if it was true was by *searching the Scriptures.*

And they searched them *daily!* If more Christians did that, there’d be a whole lot fewer *mixed-up* Christians, and a whole fewer goofy preachers getting rich off of those mixed-up Christians!

Did you know that even the prophets who *wrote* the Scriptures searched the Scriptures? After Peter talked to his readers about salvation, he wrote:

**“Of which salvation the prophets have enquired *and searched* diligently*...Searching* what*...*the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (I Peter 1:10,11).**

The Spirit of Christ that was in the prophets when they wrote the Scriptures testified that Israel’s Christ would have to suffer and die, and the prophets wrote out what He testified. But when they put down their pens afterward, the prophets sat back and wondered about the *significance* of what they had just written. They wondered what the Spirit was trying to *signify* when He guided them to write those words—what He *meant* by those words.

That was because they couldn’t understand how any *“glory”* could follow the death of their Christ. But now that we have a completed Bible, we know all about the glory of how Christ died for our sins, and all the other glories that come of the cross, including many yet to come.

But the point is, if even the prophets who *rote* the Scriptures searched the Scriptures, do you think maybe you should too? Of course!

Do you know who *else* searched the Scriptures? Angels! At least that’s what Peter goes on to intimate in verse 12 when he wrote of their salvation,

**“...which things *the angels* desire to look into.”**

In the context of what Peter just said about the prophets searching the Scriptures, I think it is a safe extrapolation to say that angels do too. I don’t know if they meet together for Bible studies, but we know they attend *our* Bible studies, for Paul wrote of them,

**“...now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known *by the church* the manifold wisdom of God” (Ephesians 3:10).**

Hey, if angels and archangels and principalities and powers search the Scriptures, don’t let *your* Bible get dusty during the week!

Now there’s a reason why Luke (the guy who wrote the Book of Acts) calls the Bereans “noble” for searching the Scriptures. The word *noble* refers to kings and other kinds of noblemen. When Paul was on trial before the Roman governor Felix in Acts 24:3, he called him

**“...most *noble* Felix...”**

And Luke wrote the Book of Acts to *another* nobleman. In Acts 1:1, he prefaced the book by saying,

**“The former treatise have I made, *O Theophilus*...”**

The “former treatise” that he was talking about was the former book of the Bible he wrote to Theophilus, the Book of Luke, the first book he addressed to Theophilus. And we know that Theophilus was a nobleman, because in Luke 1:3, Luke addresses him as

**“...*most excellent* Theophilus...”**

The title “most excellent” is another title of nobility, as we see when Acts 23:26 calls Felix:

**“...*the most excellent* governor Felix...”**

We just saw Felix called *noble* in Acts 24:3, and here he’s called *most excellent.*

My point is, when Luke called *the Bereans* noble, I think that was his way of reminding Theophilus: “You may be a nobleman in the eyes of *men,* but if you want to be noble in the eyes of *God,* you need to Search the Scriptures like these noble Bereans. We have evidence that Theophilus had already made some progress in that area, for you’ll notice that Luke didn’t bother to address him using his title in his second treatise to the man. But Luke knew that men of noble birth sometimes needed reminding of what *true* nobility was all about.

Pastor Stam used to describe the Bereans as “the true spiritual aristocracy of their day, and you can be a part of the true spiritual aristocracy of our own day if you’ll just follow in the footsteps of these noble Bereans and search *your* Scriptures daily.

Do you know what the greatest nobleman this world has ever seen said in Proverbs 25:1,2?

**“These are also proverbs of Solomon....It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of *kings* is *to search out a matter”***

Solomon was the greatest nobleman this world has ever seen, and he said that when you search for things that God concealed, that makes you a spiritual *king.*

And it just so happens that Paul preached something that God concealed *from Satan himself.* For 4,000 years, God concealed *the mystery* that He later revealed to Paul, as we see when Paul wrote,

**“...we speak the wisdom of God *in a mystery,* even the *hidden* wisdom”**

The mystery that God concealed from the devil was the message Paul preached among the Gentiles. It was *the glory of God* that He could conceal it from even *the devil himself.*

Of course, Paul’s mystery wasn’t hid *in Scripture.* It was hid *in the mind and heart of God Himself,* as Paul says in Ephesians 3:9, where he wrote,

**“...the mystery...from the beginning of the world hath been hid *in God...”***

You could search the Old Testament Scriptures for Paul’s mystery all you wanted, but you wouldn’t find it, because it’s not there. But now that Paul has written 13 epistles *about* the mystery, it’s our honor to search it out *in those epistles.*

Look what Solomon said in the *next* verses in Proverbs 25:

**“...the honour of kings is to search out a matter. *The heaven for height, and the earth for depth...”* (Proverbs 25:2,3).**

Doesn’t that remind you of what Paul said about the mystery in Ephesians 3:1-18?

**“...Jesus Christ...made known unto me the mystery....For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father....that ye...may be able to comprehend...*what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height...”***

Paul *prayed* that you’d search his epistles to find the breadth, and length, and depth and height *of the mystery!* And that’s what we teach at *Berean Bible Society.*

But we know that Solomon wasn’t talking about the mystery in Proverbs 25, because there’s not even a *hint* of the mystery in the Old Testament. But look how Proverbs 25:3 ends:

**“The heaven for height, and the earth for depth, *and the heart of kings is unsearchable.”***

In the Old Testament, the mystery was concealed in the heart of *the king of kings,* and His heart was *unsearchable.*

So Solomon couldn’t have been talking about the mystery that was hid in God. But you can tell God was *thinking* about the mystery when He inspired Solomon to write those words. At least it seems that way to me, looking *back* at that passage with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

But all of this prompts a question that I’m often asked. If the mystery can’t be found in the Old Testament Scriptures, how did the Bereans search those Old Testament Scriptures to see if what Paul was saying was so? And there’s a couple of answers to that question.

First, when Paul preached the mystery, he probably preached it like we preach it. We say to people, “There’s nothing in the Old Testament about 2,000 years of grace for Gentiles. If you don’t believe me, *search the Scriptures for yourself* and see if it’s not so.” When they do, they find that it *is* so. And when the Bereans did, *they too* found that it was so. Paul’s mystery *wasn’t* in the Old Testament.

Do you know what *else* the Bereans found when they searched the Scriptures looking for the mystery? They found the same thing that James found when he first heard about the mystery from Paul at the Jerusalem Council. Hearing it, he said:

**“...to this *agree* the words of the prophets...”**

The mystery is not in the Old Testament, but everything Paul says in the mystery *agrees* with the Old Testament Scriptures. If it didn’t, James would have known it wasn’t so, because he knew God never contradicts Himself. But the idea of salvation going to the Gentiles *did* agree with the Old Testament Scriptures, for that’s what God said He’d do all along. So James knew the mystery *was* so.

And when the Bereans searched the Scriptures, *they too* found that Paul’s message agreed with the Old Testament, so they too knew it was so.

Next, let me *prove* to you that only good things can come from being a Berean. Verse 12 of our text says,

**“Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few” (Acts 17:12).**

When the Berean Jews searched the Scriptures, it led to *the salvation of their souls.* They found what Paul was saying was so, so they believed him when he told them that Christ died for their sins, and that they could be saved by simple faith in His sacrificial death on their behalf.

And because these Berean Jews were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica, more of them got saved than did in Thessalonica. You’ll notice that Acts 17:4 says that in Thessalonica “some” of the Jews were saved, but here “many” were saved—all as a result of searching the Scriptures daily.

All of this reminds me of an email I received years ago from a troublemaking grace pastor, who informed us that grace ministries like ours *shouldn’t* name ourselves after the Bereans because the Bereans were *unsaved Jews* when they searched the Scriptures. But I told Terry that if even *unbelievers* had the sense to search the Scriptures, that maybe he should too! As I mentioned, only good things can come of it!

Next, verse 13 of our text says,

**“But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people” (Acts 17:13).**

I can’t help but think that when it says that those unsaved Jews “had knowledge” that Paul was preaching in Berea, instead of saying that they just happened to hear about it, that this is an indication that they already had an extensive network of intelligence agents who were keeping them abreast of Paul’s whereabouts and doings.

But either way, rather than wait for those stirred up people to make an attempt on Paul’s life, the brethren in Berea did what he brethren in Thessalonica did, and sent Paul away in the nick of time. Verse 14 of our text reads:

**“And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still” (Acts 17:14).**

Do you see those words “as it were” there? Those words mean that the brethren made it *look* like they were sending Paul away by sea, when they were *really* sending him away *by land.*

You know, a good quarterback turns his head towards the receivers on his *left* when his eyes are actually looking at the receivers on his *right.* That way, when the defense thinks he’s looking left, they *move* to the left, and leave the right unguarded.

And these brethren did the same thing. They made it look like Paul was going one way, when he was actually going another. Satan doesn’t have *all* the sneaky people of the world. God’s adult sons can be *just as shifty* when they have to be!

Now I’m sure it was just as dangerous for Silas and Timotheus in Berea as it was for Paul, but somebody had to stay behind and get those new believers grounded in the Word, so those two spiritual leaders volunteered to do that. But the brethren sent Paul away to protect him, because he was the future of the franchise, as football teams often say of their quarterback.

So where did Paul choose to go after the brethren sent him away? We find out in verse 15, where it says,

**“And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed” (Acts 17:15).**

Paul elected to travel *300 miles* to the Greek city of Athens, no doubt because Athens was such an influential city in that day.

When it says that some men “conducted” him there, it’s interesting to note how that word is used in Scripture. One of the dictionary definitions of “conduct” is to *guide,* as when a conductor *guides* an orchestra, but the Bible seems to use it to describe *guards* more than *guides.* We read of King David,

**“...Judah came to Gilgal...*to conduct the king over Jordan”* (II Samuel 19:15).**

**“Barzillai...went over Jordan with the king, *to conduct him over Jordan”* (II Samuel 19:31).**

**“...*and all the people of Judah* conducted the king,and also *half the people of Israel”* (II Samuel 19:40).**

King David surely knew his way back to Jerusalem, and didn’t need any *guides.* Those people were serving as his *guards.* They were serving as what we’d call his *honor guard.* And with an honor guard that big, there wasn’t anyone who was going to get anywhere near him to harm him.

Now the Apostle Paul was no king, but he *was* spiritual nobility, for *he too* searched the Scriptures. We know because he quotes them often in his writings! And that’s why those men who conducted him had the honor of guarding *the apostle of the Gentiles.*

And Timothy must *also* have been a searcher of the Scriptures, for in speaking of him, Paul told the Corinthians,

**“if Timotheus come, see that he may be with you without fear: for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do. Let no man therefore despise him: *but conduct him forth in peace,* that he may come unto me” (I Corinthians 16:10,11).**

The Corinthians had been bullying Timothy, so Paul told them to knock it off. Then he told them, “He serves the Lord like I do, so you treat him like I get treated. Give him an honor guard to come see me.”

But once Paul got to Athens, he immediately began to miss the fellowship of Silas and Timothy, so verse 15 says he *commanded* them to come join him in Athens. And that’s not usually how Paul treated his helpers. He ordinarily *asked* them to do things as opposed to *ordering* them. But Paul knew the importance of Christian fellowship—unlike a lot of Christians today who say they don’t have to go to church because they can watch preachers on TV.

Well, sound television preachers are great for Christians who don’t have a sound local church, but they can’t give you the *fellowship* that even the Apostle Paul knew he had to have *to keep on going.* And if the great Apostle Paul needed fellowship to keep going, you probably do too.

Now as I’m sure you learned in school, Athens is the home of the *Parthenon,* the temple the Greeks built to the false goddess *Athena.* The city of Athens is named after Athena, and her magnificent temple sits on top of the *Acropolis,* the highest hill in the city. So if you ask people who visited Athens what they remember about it, they’ll usually tell you how *stirring* it was to see the Parthenon.

But that’s not what got *Paul* stirred up! Verse 16 of our text says,

**“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16).**

Now I’m sure Paul saw the Parthenon as well, for it was built over 400 years before his arrival. But the thing that *stirred his spirit* was all the *idolatry* he saw in Athens. If you’ve studied Greek mythology, you know they had *oodles* of gods. They had a god of *war,* and a god of *peace.* They had a god of *the sun,* and another of *the moon.* They probably even had a god of naval lint, a god of toe jam, and a god of halitosis.

And Athens was *filled* with carved idols that were dedicated to all of those gods! An ancient Greek historian by the name of Petronius said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man.

And you know what? History says there were *30,000 idols* in Athens, and only *10,000* people. Had Jan and Dean been alive back then, they perhaps would have been moved to write a song called “Three Idols For Every Man,” instead of “Two Girls For Every Boy.”

But evidently, Petronius was right. If those statistic are accurate, it *was* easier to find a god in Athens than a man.

So you *know* that when Paul saw all those idols that he was just *itching* to find some idolaters to witness to. And eventually he did. But that’s not who he talked to *first,* as we see as our text goes on to say,

**“Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him” (Acts 17:17).**

Paul’s spirit was stirred when he saw all that idolatry, but he didn’t let it keep him from doing what God sent him to do. And God had sent him to go to *the Jews first.*

And no matter what gets *you* all stirred up when you look around your city, or your world, don’t let it keep you form doing what God sent *you* to do.

I say that because just this past week I had an animated email discussion with a man who was trying to convince me that the earth is flat. We emailed back and forth about it a few times, sharing what we thought the Scriptures teach about the matter. But finally I advised him that even if the world *is* flat, that he shouldn’t let *talking about it* keep him from doing what God sent *him* to do in preaching the gospel of the grace of God, and making known Paul’s mystery. Let me tell you, Satan is happy as a clam if all you ever talk about is sports, or politics, or what’s in the news this week, or *anything* other than the gospel and the mystery.

But after Paul finished with the Jews in verse 17, he headed for the market place. And in the market in Athens, they traded more than just sheep and olive oil, and all the other commodities of the day. With all that idolatry, I’d imagine they also trafficked in silver shrines of their idols, like the ones we read about in Acts 19. I can’t prove that, of course, but I do know that the market was where you were likely to run into some Greek *philosophers.*

In school, we all learned about Socrates, and Plato, and all the rest of those rascals who got famous by plagiarizing the Bible books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Do you know what Bible teachers call those books? They’re often referred to as “the wisdom literature” of the Bible. And all of those “wise” Greek philosophers read them and acted like *they* came up with those great thoughts, in addition to all the bogus philosophies of their own that they *did* dream up.

And it didn’t take Paul long to bump into some of those philosophers, as we see in the next verse in Acts 17:

**“Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).**

Now the Epicureans believed that man’s chief goal in life was to get all the pleasure he could, in food and sex and other sensual pleasures of the flesh. When I was a teen, I taught a Sunday School class of children, and one weekday I drove one of the more faithful boys across the Chicagoland area to Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, because I’d heard they had a Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlor there. I’d been introduced to this chain in Phoenix a few years earlier, and thought it would be a way we could bond.

Once we arrived, I ordered something on the menu called The Epicurean’s Delight, because I knew my Bible well enough to know what that probably meant. I wasn’t disappointed, for they brought out a tray of ice cream that was more than even a teen like me could safely digest. By the way, I should add that we *did* bond that day, and many days after, and then *years* after, he attended the church that I pastored, and even served on our board of directors as our treasurer until he went to be with the Lord.

If the “Stoicks” sound familiar, it’s because the word *stoic* has worked its way into our vocabulary even more so than the word Epicurean. The word *stoic* means to accept whatever the *lack* of pleasure brings you in life without so much as batting an eye.

I see a good example of stoicism when I watch Chicago White Sox pitcher Dylan Cease pitch. He’s very stoic on the mound. He pitches without expression. You can’t tell by looking at him if he’s up by ten runs or down by ten runs. When he’s down by ten, and being denied the pleasure of winning, you certainly can’t tell it by his stoic expression.

The reason Paul bumped into *both* of these kinds of philosophers in the market is that they were *opposite* philosophies, and Paul probably found them in the same place because they’d met and were butting heads with each other.

It’s kind of like how the Corinthians and Galatians were opposites in the Bible. The Corinthians were guilty of pleasurable sins like fornication and drunkenness, the kind of sins that the book of Hebrews refers to as “the pleasures of sin for a season.” But the Galatians were guilty of *legalism.* Under legalism, you not only lose the pleasures fornication and drunkenness, you also lose the *good* kind of pleasures, like the pleasure of *giving.* Paul had to remonstrate with them because he knew they’d lost the joy and blessedness of giving they showed when they were willing to offer him their eyes before they were entangled with the law.

All the sins that Christians can commit fall into one of those two categories, more or less, and all the philosophies of the world fall into either Epicureanism or Stoicism. Allow me to prove that to you.

Before you got saved, you were like the Ephesians and wallowed in one or the other of those two philosophies. Paul told those dear saints,

**“...we *all* had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires *of the flesh and of the mind;* and were by nature the children of wrath...” (Ephesians 2:3).**

The grace of God can save a sinner from both the lusts of the Epicurean flesh, as well as the lusts of the Stoic mind, lusts that we used to *live* in before we got saved. And after you’re saved, God’s grace can save you from Corinthianism and Galatianism as well.

But now, when they called Paul a “babbler,” that word *babble* means to utter words *imperfectly* or *indistinctly,* like a child who’s just learning to speak—or, like someone we read about in Proverbs 23:

**“Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? *who hath babbling?* who hath wounds without cause? who hath red-ness of eyes? *They that tarry long at the wine...”* (Proverbs 23:29,30).**

Do drunks have a hard time speaking words distinctly?

Do you know what those snobby Greeks called anyone who *wasn’t* a Greek? Paul wrote,

**“I am debtor both to the Greeks, *and to the Barbarians...”* (Romans 1:14).**

The ancient Greeks called anyone who didn’t speak Greek a *barbarian,* because when they talked, it sounded to Greeks like they were saying *bar bar.* Think of that the next time you hear the Beach Boys sing, “Bar, bar bar, bar-Barbara Ann.”

Now listen, the Apostle Paul was a *learned* man. And we know he spoke Greek *fluently,* because he wrote *13 epistles* in Greek. But because he wasn’t Greek by nature, those philosophers looked down their snobby noses at hm and called him a *babbler—*a babbler who seemed to be setting forth some strange gods, because he preached to them “Jesus and the resurrection.”

It sounds strange to us to think, as they were evidently thinking, that Paul was preaching two gods, Jesus and the resurrection. But here it helps to remember that the Greeks had gods of abstract things like war, and peace, harmony, democracy, even a god of justice. So thinking that Paul was talking about two gods seemed natural to them. We know they knew what resurrection from the dead was, for later in this passage they openly mock it.

But this verse is important, for it shows how Paul chose to deal with idolatry. He didn’t feel he had to take the time to learn about their idols so he’d know how to talk to the idolaters who worshipped them. He just preached *Christ crucified and risen from the dead.*

I point this out because these days you hear well-meaning Christians say that if you want to witness to a Muslim that you have to study Islam in order to know how to share the gospel with them. They say the same about trying to share Christ with a Mormon, etc.

But the Bible says otherwise. In speaking of the heathen in the land of Canaan, God told the Jews,

**“Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them...*enquire not after their gods,* saying, *How did these nations serve their gods?* even sowill I do likewise”(Deuteronomy 12:30).**

God knows that if you *study* a false religion, you’re likely to end up *falling* for a false religion. I know you don’t think that could happen to you, but that verse says you could. Plenty of other Christians have. That’s why Paul passed on this advice to the Romans:

**“I would have you wise unto that which is good, *and simple concerning evil”* (Romans 16:19).**

If you think it through, 30,000 gods were *way* too many false religions for Paul to research, and to this day there are still way too many false religions to try to learn well enough to be adept at approaching their adherents on their own terms. Why give them home field advantage? Just do what Paul did and preach Jesus and the resurrection.

Well, after those philosophers encountered Paul, it says in verses 19,20:

**“And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?**

**“For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean” (Acts 17:19,20).**

The Areopagus was named after *Ares,* the Greek God of war. He was renamed *Mars* by the Romans. And the suffix “pagus” means *hill.* Put them together, and it makes it easier to understand why, after they arrived at the Areopagus, verse 22 of this passage says that Paul stood in the midst of “Mars’ Hill.”

Mars Hill was where philosophers got together to talk philosophy, and Paul was bringing them a new one, one they just couldn’t *wait* to hear because, as it says in the last verse of our text,

**“(For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)” (Acts 17:21).**

In closing, I called this message *A Tale of Three Cities* because those cities illustrate the extremes of mankind. The Thessalonians were too close-minded. Those Jews refused to open their mind to receive the new truth about their God that Paul was longing to share with them. But the Athenians were too *open-*minded. They opened their minds to anything and *everything,* and Pastor Stam used to say that an open mind was like an open mouth in that not everything should be put in it.

In the middle of these two extremes stood the Bereans, who received the truth with an open mind, and found it to *be* the truth because they searched the Scriptures daily. You’ll always find the truth about *anything* if you will too.