

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Dr. George O. Wood

We're in the second missionary journey. The actual stopping point last week was Acts 16:34. I called this time last Sunday night "Great Lessons From the Second Missionary Journey." It's a struggle to title this subject. Sometimes, you can come with the teaching and you have a specific target you're going to go for. You talk about forgiveness or, like I did this morning, the development of confidence in yourself and other people. You can talk about bitterness or you can talk about a doctrinal theme. However, when we're covering a large segment of Scripture—and especially when it's narrative Scripture, like in the Book of Acts—we sort of have to take what comes and it doesn't always fit together around one unifying theme. As a result, as a communicator of God's Word, a teacher of God's Word, I feel a little bit at a loss to put some sizzle in the heading to make everybody whet their appetite. You are unusual people. You want to come and hear great lessons from the Second Missionary Journey. If I had a title that said "How to Make a Million in the Next Twelve Months," we'd probably have more quickened interest in that subject. But not this crowd. This crowd is definitely more interested in spiritual things than money. So that's one of the good things that flows out of a body like this.

However, while what we do when we take a segment of Scripture that may not, from a thematic or topical point of view, be the most electric, at the same time it is probably the most sound for our spiritual development. Because when we take considerable portions of God's Word and just sort of poke our way through them, ultimately, you get the idea of the totality of what it is the Lord wants to communicate. You can trust by going through that whoever is teaching the Word—or when you're studying the Word on your own—is not just picking the things that you

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

want to emphasize. You're not developing quirks of doctrine, kind of special nuances of treating God's Word. But you're taking all of the Bible and letting it speak to you, and some portions of it will speak with clear relevance for life at this moment. Others will kind of be information filed away that we sort of tuck in our heart and use in our Christian life at times. I have personally found Acts to be such a tremendous book of personal spiritual growth. You can't summarize it all in one word or one phrase. There are so many wonderful lessons of God's redemptive dealings with His people.

We looked at the front-end of the second missionary journey last week, how it began with an argument. How it was followed up by Paul's consummation of the church that was founded on the first missionary journey. There's a need to do follow-up in the kingdom of God. Then sometimes we really don't know what God wants us to do, where He wants us to go. We simply walk along and hear God saying to us, "No, I don't want you to go there." But if you don't go past it, when you don't know what to do—don't stop. If you don't know God's will for sure, don't get in a passive mode. Don't lock yourself in a room somewhere and trust that there's going to be some voice box that's going to speak to you out of heaven.

I had a friend one time make a very critical mistake in his Christian life by locking himself up in a room and setting a certain time aside for God to speak to him about what he was to do with his life. That time came and went and God never spoke to him. He went passive and really never did anything for God following that time. Paul just puts one foot after another and he keeps walking, 400 miles, until he comes to Troas. At Troas, he has this mystical vision, "Come over to Macedonia" (Acts 16:9). He goes over there, comes to the city of Philippi in northern Greece. It's the first time the gospel, as far as we know, is on European soil. It may well have been that the church had already been started in Rome through agencies that we're never told of in the

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Book of Acts, through Christians that had gone there. But in terms of intentional missionary activity, this is the first time the gospel's in Europe.

It's not the man of Macedonia that meets Paul. It's a woman, Lydia. She opens her heart to the gospel, her home to the apostolic party. Paul has faith as he goes into Philippi. He has a full-time staff of people, including himself, and not a single Christian. Why? He knows that there's going to be converts and he's going to deploy these people magnificently to conserve the work that God's called him to.

We know that that missionary journey reaches its lowest point at Philippi, after all these hundreds of miles of walking, this mystical vision, this boat ride across the Aegean sea—then for all of his efforts, he winds up being imprisoned after having had a tremendous beating. It's in that context that he reaches out and still praises God. It's like the Lord says, "That's my boy! You praise me in the night. I'm now going to really turn this thing around." From then on, the second missionary journey, in terms of responsiveness, really takes off. Churches are planted at Philippi and at Thessalonica and Berea, at Athens and at Corinth. We find major churches coming into existence. Whereas, before that moment, before the Philippi jail experience, not a single church had really been planted or flowered.

As we pick up this thread, we want to look at seven principles tonight to kind of wrap up the second missionary journey. I'll try to take principles and then make them relevant to our own everyday life.

I. One of them, the last principle we want to get out of Philippi, is to take full advantage of your citizenship.

Paul happens to be a Roman citizen and so does Silas. Now we understand a little bit, by the way, of why it was in the will of God for John Mark not go on that trip. John Mark was not a

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Roman citizen. That particular trip would have the vantage point of these two serving as citizens. It was illegal to, in any way, jail or batter a Roman citizen without a trial. So the lynch mob against Paul and Silas, which had catapulted them into the jail at Philippi, had been an illegal act. Somehow in the whole sound and fury of the noise and the mob, Paul hadn't evidently been able to persuade anybody that he was a Roman citizen. Maybe his words were blown away in the shouting. But now that things are calm and cool and they're ready to release him, rather than being a milk-toast Christian and simply walk away and not say a word, he chooses to stand on his legal rights.

I think it's very important, as we live in a day where we see a great deal of Christian activism, to realize that it is not simply the biblical thing that we always are passive in regard to our responsibilities as citizens. I know that Christians are sometimes defrauded by other people and they're reluctant to prosecute them. They think, "I'm a Christian. I shouldn't take so-and-so to court." The Bible says that God gave the government to punish the wrongdoer. If there is a wrongdoer, then how are they going to know the judgment of God except through the agency of the government? Part of our responsibility, as a citizen, is to participate in the criminal process and to take our stand for righteousness, against injustice, so that the one who did the wrong, if he will not come to direct repentance on his own, may be instructed by the government to be imprisoned. The government exists to punish the wrongdoer.

Paul, at this particular point, pleads his citizenship because he knows that it is crucial for the well-being of Christianity in Philippi, as well as in the Roman world. The issue of the status of Christianity in the Roman world, at this particular moment, had not yet been decided.

Christianity as a religious faith was being treated much the same as Judaism, which had a protected status. We know that within a few short years, from 64 A.D. on, that the Roman

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Empire would turn against the Christians with Nero. But they're still enjoying some measure of freedom. Paul realizes that his case at Philippi is critical for how he and all Christians are going to be treated in that town and other towns that hear the report. So he takes his stand as a Christian, as a Roman citizen and says, "You cannot treat a Roman citizen that way and if you do, you must pay the consequence for it" (Acts 22:25). That, in turn, brings a measure of security to the church that is established at Philippi. That means people can't break the door down and simply violate Christians at will.

What is our responsibility as citizens living in this country? We have a lot more privileges than Paul ever did as a Roman citizen. I really feel it's incumbent upon us as Christians to take advantage of every single opportunity we get to express ourselves as Christians and as American citizens. I really believe it's a sin if you don't register and vote. I don't know what the penalty for that is. I don't know how God is going to punish you, but I know He is. It's out of His will! (And if you want to know who to vote for, I'd be glad to tell you that on a personal level.) We need to be participating in the political process. We need, as individual Christians, to be participating when we're called to jury duty. We need to stand for the issues that matter in our society today. These are areas where Christ does not call us simply to roll over and play dead. It's been good to see the gathering of Christians this week in Washington DC. Just to see that statement of solidarity. I really wish it was possible, at one point, for maybe two or three million Christians to march in Washington DC, not as a demonstration of power, but as a demonstration of commitment, concern and love.

Paul says it's ok to rely on the privileges of citizenship.

II. The second thing that comes out of this missionary journey, from the segment we're at tonight, is that Christian growth and church growth are most often intentional.

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

What do I mean by that? As Southern Californians, we tend to be spontaneous. Sometimes that thinking carries over into our personal spiritual growth. It carries over into church growth. We think, “I’m going to grow as a Christian if I just hang around the right people and go to church services. Maybe someday lightning will strike me and I’ll be more spiritual.” But if we’re truly to develop spiritually, then we must set as a goal both the inward and the outward disciplines of life. There are inward disciplines we have as a Christian, like studying God’s Word and prayer, among them. And there are outward disciplines, like stewardship of time and finances and witness. Those kinds of things never happen unless we decide that they’re going to happen. Therefore, real personal growth doesn’t occur unless, at some point, we make a decision that this is what we’re going to do. We have tried to do this in prayer. One of the things we’ve said, in regard to this time of transition in the church, in a time like this, we all say to everybody, “We ought to be praying.” But the problem is, if we don’t intend to do it, if we don’t create time in our schedule, we don’t get around to it.

As you look at the unfolding of the second missionary journey, and that’s true as well for the other missionary journeys, you’ll find that those decisions of the apostle Paul and those accompanying him to found new churches were not sort of blowing-in-the-wind kind of decisions. They purposed to establish a church in places where the church had not been. And they made every effort to make that venture a success.

If that’s true of personal spiritual growth, it’s also true of church planting and church growth. One of the responsibilities that I’ll be stepping into is to work with leadership to reach a goal, by the year 2000, of planting two hundred new churches in Southern California. We have four hundred and twenty now, approximately, from Fresno to the Mexican border. Maybe a year and a half ago, when I first heard that goal, I admit I was shocked completely. That’s such an

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

outlandish goal! It's taken us sixty-five years to get four hundred. We're going to, in the next ten years, get two hundred? Impossible. Who's going to do that?" One day, the Holy Spirit got a hold of me and said, "With an attitude like that, of course it isn't ever going to happen. You better get with the program!" It's people that have faith and set some targets that see God work. If you don't have any intentionality in your life or in the church, then things aren't going to happen. If you have faith, all things are possible, just believe it.

I want to encourage you, in your own personal life and as we look at what God has for this particular church, to look at what is before us with some intention and some purpose and some direction. And to realize that goal-setting is appropriate and proper. And reaching for those goals is appropriate and proper. Paul intended to plant the church of Jesus Christ. Nothing in the kingdom of God just happens automatically. In fact, when we look at the people we live next to sometimes, I've gotten too much in the laissez-faire attitude, "I know that there are people around me that don't know the Lord. Some way, somehow, they're going to be reached. At just the right moment, in the critical moment of their life, they're going to turn on Christian television and they're going to get just the right speaker. That night, there's not going to be a heretic on or some floozy doctor. They're going to get just the right thing and they're going to come to faith in Jesus Christ." So we sort of leave that all up to chance—leave witnessing up to chance. How different it is if we establish a goal and say, "This year, with my neighbor, I'm going to take concrete steps to be a Christian witness, beginning with taking them a cake or inviting them to dinner or establishing some kind of friendship moment with them. I've got to get some intentionality to my witness in life." Someone has said, "If you don't know where you're going you'll probably get there."

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

III. The third principle that arises out of the second section of the second missionary journey is that seasoned and team leadership are critical ingredients to the overall growth in the body of Christ.

I realize that particular statement probably doesn't have a lot of personal relevance for where you are, so I'm not going to dwell on it at length. I just want to note it, because it has meaning for me, since one of the things I'm going to be deeply involved in is church growth and church planting. I grew up in an atmosphere that the people that started churches were, by and large, cutting their eyeteeth in ministry. They were young enough to go out and handle the pressures. If I understand New Testament church growth, the New Testament church sent its most seasoned and capable people out to do the church planting and let the rookies either follow along with them or get into situations that were already ongoing. But the tough road of breaking new ground was left up to people who had experience and training and anointing to deal with it.

I wonder if the reason why the growth of the Early Church was far more dynamic than growth we see in the contemporary church is because of just this factor alone: both seasoned leadership and the idea of it. There is no room for Lone Ranger kind of leadership. What we need to do, we need to do together. Paul, for example, in this second half of the second missionary journey, never is by himself, except on one occasion at Athens. When he's by himself, he refuses to stay there because he won't engage in anything where he is alone. He needs the support of other people working alongside of him.

IV. The fourth thing that I simply mention as a principle flowing out of God's Word is that the need does not always constitute a call.

I say that to bring balance to a couple weeks ago, when I talked about the will of God.

Sometimes we know the will of God by a need that we see. I've used the story of our field

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

secretary for Africa. I once asked him how he got his calling to be a missionary. He said he never was called. He just saw a need and he figured that Jesus was still taking volunteers, so he volunteered. Sometimes the need does constitute a call, but not always.

How do we get that out of this particular segment? If you look at Acts 17:1, you find the phrase, “They passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia.” These were two towns in between Philippi, to the north, and Thessalonica, to the southwest. They passed through them. They did not stay. Were there not needy people in those towns? Certainly there were. Was there not a need for a church to be established in those places? Certainly there was. But Paul passed through. Why did he pass through? It was not because he wanted to neglect a need, but it was a strategic reason that he knew that the more important population centers needed a church. And if he could get a church started in the hub urban centers, then the influence of the gospel would radiate out like spokes of a wheel. These outlining districts, the smaller towns, would also get a gospel witness, but through people coming out of the Philippi church or out of the Thessalonica church. They could be bypassed by him.

Sometimes the Lord has us do that in life. We simply cannot take every opportunity for Christian ministry that opens to us. You cannot possibly do every ministry opportunity that is afforded you in this church. We have many different ministries; I think thirty-one are in the booklet.

Obviously, any one person probably could only effectively do two or three or four lay ministries. Then we have to let someone else do the rest. Just because there’s a need does not constitute a call by itself. Sometimes it might.

V. The fifth thing that I want to note is that the ripest people for evangelism should be identified and reached first.

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

That's a strategic principle of Christian growth and church growth that comes out of this section of Acts and all of Paul's missionary activities. The ripest people for evangelism need to be identified and reached first. How do we get that principle? We get it out of the fact that, wherever Paul went, if he could link up first with a synagogue, that is where he went. Why? Because there he identified the ripest people for evangelism. There were two kinds of people in the synagogue. There were Jewish people, who had great familiarity with both the Scriptures and Jewish traditions, which had taught them about the Lord. And yet there was also an emptiness in many of their lives, because the Messiah had not come and the fulfillment, the personalization of Scripture, had not occurred. But there was also in these synagogues God-fearers, the non-Jewish people who were very attracted to the monotheism and ethical ideals of Judaism, who were sitting in the balcony or the back rows. They had not yet "bar-mitzvah'ed." They had not yet become circumcised. They had not yet kept kosher and other kinds of Jewish traditions. But they were very attracted to the sermon and the synagogue service itself. These people were very hungry for God.

So whenever Paul goes into a town, he does it, he tries it at Philippi, but there is no synagogue because there are not ten Jewish males to constitute a congregation. So he goes down to the river, where there are a few Jews meeting, and God-fearers, mainly women. When he goes to Thessalonica, he goes to the synagogue. When he goes to Berea, he goes to the synagogue. When he goes to Athens, he first goes to the synagogue, even though his major ministry will take place on Mars Hill. When he goes to Corinth, he goes first to the synagogue. And when he's kicked out of the synagogue, he goes to the house next door. But he starts with the people who are most ready and ripe to be picked for the kingdom of God.

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

One of the things that in our church setting and in our witness we need to look at is: Who is on the verge of coming into the kingdom of God? Who are the people that are easiest to reach?

Don't start with the most difficult people to reach. Sometimes we think that the real key to evangelism is starting some kind of beach ministry or whatever. In God's will, that can be it. But the Early Church looked at reaching, first of all, those people who are most ready to receive and who are most ripe.

VI. The sixth thing flowing out of this missionary journey—and where I'll take a little bit of time—is that intellectual communities pose a unique challenge to the church of Jesus Christ.

University towns. We are brought in Acts 17 to the university town of Athens. What a magnificent place that was. I've been on Mars Hill, I've climbed up on the rock which has a fabulous view of the Parthenon, on the one hand, and down below, on the other side, is the Greek market place. It was a place where the Athenian philosophers, the court of Athens, sat and pondered philosophical questions as well as civil matters. It was a highly educated town. It was four hundred years past its golden age, by the time Paul gets there. But it is still a magnificent place and very much an intellectual center.

How does the church of Jesus Christ relate to and interact with an intellectual society and community? One of the things that we have done in the Assemblies of God over the years has been, in some cases, a bad mistake. We have had churches that were culturally misplaced in university towns. I can recall a church in the Midwest that was in a great university town, where every single Sunday there was an attack on anybody that had any education.

I'm reminded of the great story that comes out of John Wesley's life, where a woman came up to him one time and said—because John Wesley was a very learned person, fluent in Greek and

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Latin and a number of other contemporary languages of his day, and a writer of many books—she looked to him and said, “Mr. Wesley, God doesn’t need your learning.” He said, very quietly, “You’re right. God does not need my learning. Neither does He need your ignorance.”

As a representative intellectual community, Athens shows us some of the dynamic paradoxes of such a community. On the one hand, for example, it’s very educated. Yet on the other hand, it’s very superstitious. There are idols scattered all through the town. An early Greek traveler said that Athens had more idols than it had people.

I’ve been around the university community enough to see that that’s the case. On the one hand, you have high degrees of rationality and intelligence. But then, all of a sudden, you flip into a kind of mysticism that is baffling. Where do the cults get their head start? On university campuses. Where are we having the greatest trouble with dope and with radical political movements of the day, that don’t seem at times to tie in with a modicum of rationality? It’s in the university setting.

Athens is like that. On the one hand, it is tremendously intellectual. On the other hand, it seems at times to have slipped into a never-never-mental land.

Another thing that certainly characterizes a university community is that it was, on the one hand, devoted to learning. But on the other hand, it was unable to arrive at truth. The very name “university” come from two Latin words—*uni* meaning “one” and *versity* meaning “truth.” “One truth.” The former president of the University of California once made the comment that the only thing that now connects the schools in a university is no longer a “university,” because no one buys into one truth anymore. There are multitudes of truths in this world and every department is doing their own thing. There are inter-departmental rivalries within every department. What does engineering have to do with philosophy and what does humanities have to do with biological

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

sciences? University? You've got to be kidding! Nobody believes in one truth anymore as a unifying thing in a secular setting. He says that the only thing that now links the intellectual university community is the plumbing. That's what holds everything together!

In the midst of this quest for truth, you have an Athens, a divided opinion of what constitutes truth. Among the people Paul is going to be speaking to, are the Epicureans and the Stoics, whose philosophies, by the way, live on in contemporary culture. Their philosophies were already about four hundred years of age as well, by the time Paul got there. The Epicureans were practicing atheists. They said that man basically has two things to fear in life—the gods and death. They said that we must remove those fears by saying that the gods don't exist, and if they do exist, they're having a good time. And secondly, death marks the end and cessation of human existence, so therefore, since we don't have the gods to fear and since we don't have death to fear, let's eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die! The forerunners of the existentialists. "Live now."

Stoics were the opposite. They were pantheists. God is in all and is all and they said that God basically, since He is in all, has appointed everything, and we need to go through life with a kind of equanimity, and life is not to be lived for pleasure. Life is to be lived for the lesson. That's how we get to the phrase, "He put up with it stoically." In fact, the stoics went on to say that bedbugs even had a unique purpose in their pantheistic view of life; the bedbugs were appointed for making sure that we do not sleep too long. So we need to take all the negatives of life and see that they're producing some practical good. Their views were opposite from the Epicureans'. Paul found this in the academic community.

The apostle Paul to the academic community comes on Mars Hill. He speaks the language of this community. If you want to have an interesting Bible study, compare the sermon he preaches in

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Acts 17 with what he preaches in Acts 13. Acts 13 is a representative sampling of Paul's sermon in a synagogue setting. There's only one such sermon in Acts which reflects Paul's content of preaching in a synagogue. When he's in a synagogue, his text is the Scripture. And on and on he pounds on the Scripture, because that's what they have. What's his text in Athens? He never quotes one Bible verse. He quotes Greek poets. His text is the statue to an unknown God. Athens had all the gods and there was one that they didn't know. He was unknown. "The unknown God." So he cites this text from a statue and from pagan poets and never refers to the Scripture. By the way, there are many people who say that here's where he made his bad mistake. That by not preaching from the Scripture, he didn't have good results in Athens. But that, it seems to me, begs the question. He would have had the same results, maybe even fewer results, had he taken his synagogue sermon. He had to connect with where the listening wave of people was.

We've seen the tendency, all through Acts, of the church picking up on its culture. Just as at Antioch, when the gospel began coming to non-Jewish people, the key was that there were people who came to those individuals and spoke their language. Now Paul is speaking in the language of the academic community. He does some powerful things in this address. I might just want to point out what a landmark message this was to laying to rest and putting in the grave some of the opposing philosophies through Christianity. He deals with them, one by one. Some, we can say, have ancient names. Others have more modern names. Just look for a moment at these terms: agnosticism.

Paul hits it head-on when he says, "What you worship as an unknown God, I am now going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). In his sermon he's saying, "There's an end to agnosticism. You can know God." "To the atheists who do not believe: There's a God," he says specifically, "the God who made the world." To the pantheists, who say that God is in all and is not distinguished

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

as a separate entity outside of creation, that He does not exist outside of time and space, he says, “The 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. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24–25, NIV). He distinguishes Christianity from pantheism. He distinguishes Christianity from the popular philosophy of the day of Gnosticism, which says that if there was a God who created, He created through intermediaries, and the only way to really get to know Him is to get all this secret knowledge and work yourself up in some kind of ascending chain of knowingness, until you finally ultimately get to God. He says, “Not at all did this occur. God created directly. Not through intermediaries. But God made the world and everything that is in it. ” And he goes on to say that we can know him (Acts 17:27). He strikes a blow against racism, the view that one group is superior to another, when he says, in verse 26, “From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (NIV). We’re all of one bloodline, regardless of the color of our skin.

He takes aim at what, in the modern parlance, is a continuum, which is the view that God is beyond knowing, beyond our experience, when in verse 27 he says, “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (NIV). In other words, God is knowable and you can experience and find Him in your own life. Verse 28 he gives the response to humanism, which basically says that man is capable of self-fulfillment and ethical conduct without resorting to supernatural revelation. He says, instead, “For in him we live and move and have our being” (NIV). In other words, it’s not just something we’re going through on our own. It’s lived within the context of our relationship with

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

God. He takes aim at neoism, which says existence is senseless and useless. He says, “Not at all. We live and move and have our being because of God, and we’re his offspring.” He takes aim at idolatry, in verse 29, in fact so effectively that Christianity destroyed pagan idolatry. By the third century, the idols had disappeared from the Roman world except as pieces of art. By the way, there was a French theologian of the nineteenth century who said that Paul had a mistaken view of aesthetics, that he abused Greek art by calling statues “idols.” But anyone who has lived in a culture, as I had the opportunity to do, where there are idols that are literally worshipped, knows that these are not idle things.

I can recall my mom sharing an experience out of her early missionary career, where she and her sister, Ruth, were going to language school. They had a choice between two rooms. One was infested with bedbugs and the other had two rather large idols in it. They decided to take the room with idols, because it was an upstairs room and they thought, “The idols can’t bite us, but bedbugs can be very uncomfortable.” So they just went in, prayed a prayer of blessing on the room. Their cots were between the idols. In the middle of the night, my mother recounted how her bed was levitating off the floor, the demonic power in that room was so strong. She said, “My mouth was stuffed with cotton. I could hardly get out the name of Jesus, but I finally did and the bed settled down on the floor. We decided to get out of that room.” She said, “We went to the room with the bedbugs and we prayed that there wouldn’t be any and we stayed there the whole summer and did not get bit one time.”

In regard to idolatry, Paul says, “Since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill” (Acts 17:29, NIV). He takes aim at universalism, the viewpoint that ultimately everything’s going to be alright and God’s going to save everyone. He says “In the past God overlooked such ignorance,

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:30–31, NIV). The word there is only one “judge,” only one Lord, and that is Jesus. He takes aim at deism, the religion of Thomas Jefferson and the religion of many in the western world, which holds that no revelation is necessary. One can know God or experience life simply by virtue of human reason. He says, instead, that God is commanding everyone to repent. He’s given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. That is, we have our source of knowledge in a revelation that God has made to us historically of Jesus. He also lays to rest hedonism, which is the view that pleasure is the principle good and proper goal of human behavior. So he says we must take into account the fact that one day we’re going to stand and be judged.

This mighty sermon preached on Mars Hill brings a limited result. There are a few converts there. A few men become followers. But notice the basic reaction in verse 18, “What is this babbler trying to say?” (NIV). Then, in verse 32, when he was done, some of them sneered. Others said “We want to hear you again on this subject” (Acts 17:32, NIV). “Babbler,” by the way, is a term meaning “seed picker,” and it was used in the university community to describe a person who was eclectic in their philosophy—a little bit here, a little bit there, put it all together. Paul came along preaching Jesus and the resurrection. “What does this ‘seed-picker’ say?” When he’s done, they do the typical things of a university community. They either ridicule or say, “We’d like to talk more about this.” But some do believe.

Notice at Athens there was no persecution. Contrast that with Thessalonica. Contrast it with Berea, where they searched the Word, and the Thessalonians tried to stir them up. There was persecution in almost every place, but not in Athens. Why? Because university people pride themselves in their tolerance. “We can take other views being expressed.” How do you dismiss

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

somebody's views you don't agree with? You laugh at them. You ridicule them. You say, "No thinking person would believe that." You've dispensed with it and you don't have to persecute them. So the reaction of the Athenian intellectual community is very comparable to what we see goes on in university communities today. But wherever Christ is faithfully proclaimed, there will be results, maybe the churches in university communities will not always be the largest of churches, but they will certainly be strong. We need to take the gospel to the universities. That burden has been on my heart for a number of years. It seems to me that the university students from all over the world within 45 minutes of this church provide one of the most fertile mission fields of all the world. If we could get a handful of university students from other countries thoroughly converted and baptized in the Spirit and called to the ministry every single year—students that are studying here in the Orange County area—and send them back to their countries saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, we would probably have as effective a missionary ministry flowing out of this church as maybe anything else we could do. I believe that there may be people in this audience that have a heart for university missions, and especially ministering to third world country persons who are here studying in a great university and need to be somehow tapped into and reached with the gospel. I challenge you to think about reaching the university community and the persons that are there.

VII. The last principle that I'll simply note is that the greatest results, numerically, will often come among those who have the greatest sense of felt need.

The Athenian intellectuals didn't really feel a need for God. They were more interested in being a debating society. But the people who really had a felt need were the people over in Corinth, where Paul goes after he leaves Athens. While Corinth was an incredible place, it was one of the most commercially important centers of the biblical world because it was located at an isthmus

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

and, by a boat unloading on one side of the Aegean and its goods being carted across the four-mile stretch to the Adriatic, it cut down days and days off of sailing around the cape, Cape Melea. In fact, there was a Greek proverb that said, “Let whoever sails around Cape Melea first make his will.” It had very shifting winds and the sailors, of course, loved disembarking at Corinth because, as slaves were toting the goods across land and being loaded on a new ship, the sailors had a few days to play around in Corinth.

Corinth was a kind of San Diego town, although it was far worse. In fact, if you’re in Corinth today, the dominating feature of the Corinth landscape is the huge hill that rises about 1,500 feet, straight out of Corinth. On top was a huge temple which was staffed with a minimum of a thousand priestess prostitutes engaging in a Greek form of mystery religion that said intercourse with another person is equivalent to having union with the gods. So the religion was practiced fastidiously. In that, of course, it was a flesh-city. In fact, in Greek plays, whenever the Greeks wanted to portray a drunk, they inevitably let a Corinthian fill the role. The word “Corinth” the noun, was even made into a verb in the Greek language—“to corinthianize”—which meant “to thoroughly corrupt one’s morals.” Paul comes into that town and tells us the kind of people who make up the charter members for the Christian Center at Corinth. People like the sexually immoral, the greedy, idolaters, slanderers, drunkards, swindlers, or to use the list in 1 Corinthians 6:9, “Sexually immoral, fornicators, idolaters, adulterers. Male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers.” Can you imagine being a member of that congregation? Can you imagine the fear of just leaving your umbrella at the door? Can you imagine the trauma of being in a small group and not knowing if the person there is a heterosexual or a homosexual, what his or her sexual preference is and whether they’re going

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

to try to make a move on you before the night is out? It was a wild kind of social context. Yet Paul says, “Such were some of you.”

The church of Jesus Christ will always have its most fertile impact upon those whose hearts have been racked the deepest by the pain of this world’s fleshly sins. Because it is they who know firsthand that sin in the flesh does not satisfy, that there is no future in alcoholism. There is no future in immorality. There is no future in simply trying to get by with cheating other people for a living. It is those very people who reach out in great hunger and become the church of God at Corinth.

Sometimes people are really hard on the church at Corinth because, of all the churches that Paul founds, it apparently has the most problems. But when you’re working with people that have had that kind of background, it’s a wonder they had as few problems as they did. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not going to make us problem-free. We often bring our pre-Christian experiences with us and we need to undergo continual redemption. It’s a credit to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that He, when He is proclaimed and lifted up, can thoroughly change people who have deep layers of need. We need to see, in the contemporary church, the same kind of thing happening. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see God, in the midst of this whole AIDS crisis, reach down and radically use His Body to minister to the homosexual community? Not to embrace what homosexual activity involves, but to embrace the person and say to that person, “There is a way out of the trap that you’re in.”

It’s that kind of church that is needed in this hour. I want to challenge you, and myself, to be a part of that kind of church, that has a dynamic witness to those who are most captive to bondage in life. There the church will always flourish...when it gets on the cutting edge of human need.

Closing Prayer

GREAT LESSONS FROM THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 17

Our Lord, these principles only become curiosities and are filed away in our notes, unless the Holy Spirit lives them in our heart. It seems that around us we see all the kinds of indicators we've looked at in the Scriptures this evening. We live in an area of the world where education is highly prized and learning is much sought after. We also live in an area of the world where people are very much entrapped by sin of every kind and enslaved to it. Lord, you're concerned about these people. You're concerned about all the people that are outside the church. Sometimes we who are in the church become too comfortable with our circle of friends and we forget about your heartbeat for the world, for the lost. We pray that You would work on us, that we could not be content by simply going on with life lived as normal. We pray that, into every one of our lives, there would come some intentional evangelism. Not evangelism that simply takes it for granted that someday someone is going to say the right word and someone we know is going to get saved. But that you would lay it upon our heart to be an intentional witness. And to be used by you in that capacity. Lord, greater than a desire to see these buildings filled with people who are saved and reclaimed by You, we have a desire to see this whole city turn to You. In these days, Lord, when as a church we're praying about future leadership, let us not have any small vision. Let us believe that in this coming transition You're going to put the gifts in place which are going to propel this body into its greatest years of expansion. We have only seen a small little bit of what You intend to do. We ask that You would visit this community with a powerful move of Your Spirit and that we would do our part to lend our hearts and our efforts and our support to see that occur. Make us effective servants of Yours. We ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.