

WHEN PAUL MADE UP HIS MIND!

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(Acts 17:22-23; 1 Cor. 2:1-2)

Athens is one of the most attractive and fascinating cities in the world. There, in the shadow of the great Acropolis, a dreamer can see again the grandeur of ancient Greece. If Rome symbolized military might, Athens was famous for its intellectual excellence. Within the city were many schools, colleges and academies where some of the greatest scholars shared their knowledge with eager students. Dr. Frederic W. Farrar wrote: "It was full of professors, rhetors, tutors, arguers, discourcers, lecturers, grammarians, pedagogues, and gymnasts of every kind; and among all these. . . there was not one who displayed the least particle of originality or force. Conforming sceptics lived in hypocritical union with atheistic priests, and there was not even sufficient earnestness to arouse any antagonism between the empty negations of a verbal philosophy, and the hollow professions of a dead religion" (The Life and Work of St. Paul, page 303, published by Cassell and Company, London, 1897).

Athens, the center of philosophical brilliance, attracted scholars from many countries, and these people spent most of their time on Mars' Hill, just beneath the Acropolis. When I first visited this historic place, a wooden stairway had been built by the city, and it was easy to climb to the top of the small hill where ancient thinkers held their daily discussions. Unfortunately the weather and time destroyed that construction, and today tourists must climb the side of the hill. Nearly two thousand years ago, Paul carefully ascended those same steps and joined the scholars who apparently had nothing better to do than wait for a new speaker to expound his doctrine.

The apostle had just been in the nearby metropolis and was remembering its many altars. He knew the city was completely dominated by religion, and he had seen on street corners, in specially made alcoves, and upon every civic building, idols which eloquently testified to the faith of the Athenian people. He had been intrigued by one altar upon which was the inscription "To the Unknown God. Paul recognized the uncertainty of the people who had erected that idol. Evidently, they feared

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they had forgotten one deity, and to avert his possible wrath, they made an altar to inform him of their good intentions. Paul smiled and proceeded to address his illustrious audience.

What happened that day can never be forgotten. The listeners were pagans with little if any knowledge of Christianity. The apostle probably believed they would be incapable of understanding how death could lead to life; how the precious blood of Jesus was the only means by which sin could be forgiven. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul explained that the preaching of the cross was "unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). Convinced that his usual approach would be ineffective, he proceeded to use the strange inscription as a means by which to reveal the "unknown god." Many teachers applaud his effort as evidence of psychological genius, but their opinion may be misleading.

His Great Discourse. . . How Striking

When Luke recorded the events of that memorable day, he condensed Paul's speech into ten verses which can be read in two minutes. It is evident that Paul said much more than was written by his friend. Even the short but difficult climb demanded a greater effort than is apparent from the record in the scripture. Perhaps Luke only wrote that which he considered

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worth remembering!

Paul spoke about the Creator, the nations of the world, the uselessness of man-made idols, and the fact of being judged in eternity. Exponents of any pagan religion could have supplied more information. Concluding his speech, Paul spoke of the resurrection, but he never mentioned the redeeming death of the Son of God. Luke said: "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter?" (Acts 17:32). That resolve was never fulfilled, for when the arguments began Paul departed.

A few people were impressed either by what was said or by the appearance and eloquence of the speaker. As far as is known, they were the only signs of success attending Paul's efforts. He never established a church in Athens, and no letter was ever sent by him to saints residing within the city. Eventually the

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apostle wrote nine letters to churches, but unfortunately Athens was not on his list. If the establishing of an assembly be considered evidence of victory, then at Athens Paul failed in his mission.

His message appealed to the intellects of his hearers, but failed to stir their souls. He had preached of a Christ without His cross, and told of a day of judgment without explaining how a sinner might be justified. This was an admirable oration, but it was unimpressive—he had left the mainspring out of his watch! (See the author's book Bible Treasures, pgs. 131-132, published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan.)

His Great Discovery... How Startling

"After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth" (Acts 18:1). "There were two ways by which he could have traveled. Corinth was approximately forty miles from Athens, and it would have taken him two days to reach his objective. If, as has been conjectured, the apostle was not in good health, he might have decided to go by sea. In that case, the voyage would have taken five hours or more, according to weather conditions. The overland route would have led him into the city; the journey by sea would have taken him into a small port from which he would have walked a few miles to reach his destination. At that moment, not even Paul could have known the importance of his visit; he was about to face the greatest challenge of his life" (quoted from the author's commentary on The Amazing Acts, page 308, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI).

Whichever way he traveled, Paul had time for reflection. His memories of the visit to Athens could not have been pleasant; he was disappointed. The Greek metropolis was one of the few cities in which he never established a church. All pastors and evangelists have been despondent after preaching in a disappointing service. Then, sleep becomes elusive, and regret overwhelms the soul. It is significant that all the prophets were acquainted with that experience. As Paul either walked or sailed toward Corinth, he remembered his preaching before the Greek philosophers. He had quoted from the writings of their poets,

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but had said little about the words of his Lord. He produced arguments, but no conviction. His message had been woefully inadequate; its reasoning might have appeared attractive, but sermons which never mentioned the death of the Redeemer could not save souls nor establish assemblies.

This fact needs to be emphasized in our modern world. Some

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institutions, which unfortunately are called churches, teach that Jesus was the victim of a Jewish mob; that He was a good man who, regretfully, was crucified. Others are content to teach that the death of Jesus merely provided an excellent example for sufferers; He accepted what happened, and refused to strike His persecutors. They assert that if nations followed His example, wars would be unknown. The early Christians believed and taught that Christ died for the ungodly; that He bore the sins of many; that through His redeeming death eternal redemption was made possible for guilty sinners. That was the message which overcame empires, provided peace for convicted souls, and salvation for men and women. It remains an indisputable fact that each time revival brought new life to the church and renewal to decadent generations, that same Gospel was the message used and blessed by God. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians saying: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

His Great Determination... How Suggestive

Athens was famous for its educational advantages and the- torical persuasiveness; Corinth was infamous for its immorality. The Athenians had plenty of time to listen to visiting speakers; the citizens of Corinth had no time except to increase their wealth and exploit their sexual capabilities. The apostle knew he was about to confront a different type of audience, but as he approached the city, a great resolve filled his soul. It is signifi- cant that long afterward, when writing to the Corinthian church, he said: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing

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among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2). The apostle never repeated the mistake made on Mars' Hill. The statement: "For I determined not to know anything among you" as supplied by the Amplified New Testament, is interest- ing. "For I resolved to know nothing to be acquainted with (nothing), to make a display of the knowledge of (nothing), and to be conscious of (nothing) among you except Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and Him crucified." The apostle was so disgusted with himself that even his self-criticism helped formulate the resolve that henceforth he would only preach the gospel. Great speakers of later generations shared his conviction.

Dr. F. M. Barton tells the story of a young minister who had spoken before a very old pastor. After the service he asked the older man: "What did you think of my sermon?" The answer was quickly forthcoming: "It was a very poor sermon - there was no Christ in it." The young man replied: "Well, Christ was not in the text; we are not to be preaching Christ always; we must preach what is in the text." The old saint responded: "Don't you know, young man, that from every town, village and hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London. And from each text in the Scripture, there is a way that leads to the great metropolis of the Bible - Christ. My dear young brother, whenever you get a text, your business is to say: 'Now, how does that lead to Christ?' and then preach a sermon which leads to the great metropolis - Christ. I have not yet found a text that hasn't a road to the Savior in it. If I should, I would make one. I would go over hedge and ditch, but I would get to my Master for a sermon cannot do any good unless Christ is in it" (quoted from One Hundred Great Texts, and

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Their Treatment, F. M. Barton, 1914, published by Richard R. Smith, Inc., New You, 1930).

His Great Delight. . . How Sublime

"After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth. . . And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. . . and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. . . And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and

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many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18:4-8). The conversion of that important Jewish citizen had far reaching repercussions. Eighteen months later, when another chief ruler had been appointed, Paul was brought before the judgment seat where Gallio, the judge, interrupted the trial by saying: "If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you, But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it for I will be no judge of such matters. And he drave them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. And Gallio cared for none of those things" (Acts 18:14-17). Every citizen in Corinth knew Sosthenes, but few sympathized with him.

It is interesting to discover that later in his ministry, the apostle mentioned this man Writing to the Christians in Corinth, the apostle said: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother" (I Cor. 1:1). It is impossible to state all the details of the man's conversion to Christianity, but evidently someone had explained the gospel to him and probably Paul was that preacher.

After his beating by the mob, Sosthenes was a sick man, but one day the man whom he had persecuted called to see his accuser, and the visit led to great things. Sosthenes not only became a Christian Å he became a fellow worker, and was with Paul when the Corinthian letter was written in Philippi. Two very important men who held high office in Corinth were won for Christ, and when Paul left the city, a thriving church had been established. Afterward, Paul said: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

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