

# Empowered

The Amazing Church of Jesus Christ

Week 8

Christianity Spreads from  
Macedonia to Achaia

**Acts 17:1 – 18:22**

Teacher Notes

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*Bible versions used throughout the Empowered teacher notes are  
NASB, ESV, NLT, and CEB.*

## ✂ Introduction to Week Eight

- In Acts 16 we saw different people, Lydia and the jailer, with different backgrounds and experiences come to faith and be changed by the grace of God.
- **NOTE:** How very different Lydia was to the unnamed jailer ... someone seeking God to someone seemingly disinterested (even hostile) to him. YET, Paul was able to share the gospel in such a way that both came to a saving faith.

**ILLUSTRATION:** We all have seen photographs of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge. It is magnificent in its design, function, and aesthetics. However, a builder would not use the same architectural approach for the Chattahoochee River in Atlanta, Georgia.

▶ What is the purpose of a bridge?

- ◇ *Built to span a specific, physical obstacle.*
- ◇ *Constructed to provide a passage over the obstacle.*
- ◇ *Different designs depending upon the terrain, different materials (approach).*

- Paul understood that the lost needed a bridge to cross over to Jesus:
  1. He understood the central obstacle to overcome—*the acknowledgement of sin.*
  2. He recognized the terrain to overcome would differ—*from religious legalism to paganism to atheism.*
  3. He approached the spiritual obstacles and terrain in a way the Good News could be communicated and understood.

**TEACHING TIP:** What is communication? It is talking and listening that leads to understanding.

## Study One:

### **Acts 17:1-9      The Gospel in Thessalonica**

- Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi and headed to Thessalonica.
  - ~ One of the wealthiest and most influential cities in Macedonia, inhabited by Greeks, Romans, and Jews.
  - ~ An important seaport ... a hub connecting several major trade routes ... in that time it connected Europe with Asia.
- As was his general policy, Paul first visited in the synagogue—there he found an audience of Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and a number of leading women.

### **Paul's Approach (Building a Bridge) – Acts 17:1-4**

- He met with them for three Sabbaths. This was not a one-shot approach!

- In those three days—
  - (1) He reasoned with them from the Scriptures. (v2)
    - ~ The idea here is that there was time for Q&A.
    - ~ He established a dialogue with the people ... using different passages from the Word to discuss.
  - (2) He explained the scriptures. (v3)
    - ~ Explaining literally means “opening” ... the idea is to unfold.
    - ~ He opened up the scriptures with simple clarity.

**QUOTE:** R. Kent Hughes, *ACTS The Church Afire*—  
*“Simplicity can make all the difference between communication and confusion.”*

⇒ **Paul, who was a well-educated man, used words that his hearers could understand—to provide the bridge to those seeking the truth.**

- (3) He gave evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again. (v3)
  - ~ He used Scripture to explain Scripture –the very best commentary to prove his case regarding Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.
  - ~ No doubt in those three weeks he took them to many scriptures.
- (4) He proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, resurrected from the dead. (v3)

**TEACHING TIP:** Can’t you hear Paul gently saying, *“Have you considered the words in Psalm 22? Do you see Jesus?”*

- There were two responses to Paul’s preaching: (Acts 17:4-9)
  1. First – belief. As result of Paul’s effective ‘bridge building’ in his communication.
    - ~ Some of the Jews who listened to Paul were persuaded and publicly joined Paul and Silas.
    - ~ Quite a few prominent women believed. They were probably wives of community leaders.

→ **NOTE:** Through using scriptures that the Jews knew, faith came, and they embraced Jesus as their Messiah. Through reasoning with these Greeks using God’s Word, obstacles toward Jesus were torn down.

⇒ **These converts laid the foundation of a Gospel church in Thessalonica.**

2. Second—opposition through the Jews who rejected the gospel message.
  - ~ They were jealous of Paul’s increasing popularity.
  - ~ Their influence was being negatively impacted.

**TEACHING TIP:** Note that the Jewish leaders did not try to refute the theology being presented by Paul and Silas.

- A mob formed and assaulted the house of Jason with whom Paul and Silas had been staying.

~ Their intention was to drag Paul and Silas out, expose them to the fury of this angry crowd, and perhaps hoping they would be beaten or stoned.

- In the absence of Paul, they settled on dragging Jason and some other believers to the rulers of the city.
- What was the accusation? Look at Acts 17:6-7

✠ Acts 17:6-7 "*These **men who have upset the world** have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and **they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar**, saying that there is another king, Jesus.*"

**TEACHING TIP:** We don't know much about Jason, except that he was hosting the missionaries and that he had the courage to take the 'heat' for the so-called problems they had caused.

**TEACHING TIP:** How had they "upset the world"? Social, ethnic, religious barriers had been broken down. Prison doors had been opened. People were caring for each other—in a diverse community. **The Good News of Jesus Christ was transforming lives!**

- The Romans would not have cared a bit about a theological debate between these Jews and the preachers that had come to town, so the opposition falsely accused Paul and Silas of treason against Caesar, stating that their allegiance was to King Jesus instead.
  - ~ The city authorities listened then had Jason essentially post bail.
  - ~ They had no desire to persecute Jason, rather they wanted to tamp down the chaos.
- In Thessalonica, some believed, but there was strong resistance and rejection of the Word by the unbelieving Jews who ran the men out of town.
- The missionary team headed to Berea.

## Study Two:

### **Acts 17:10-21      The Gospel in Berea and Athens**

#### **Berea**

- Context to this town:
  - ~ A small city and Roman province, about fifty miles southwest of Thessalonica.
  - ~ One commentator noted that Berea was 'on the byway' instead of the highway, but it was where God wanted the missionaries to go.
- Paul headed straight for the Jewish synagogue.
- We immediately learn something about this audience – they were *more noble or noble-minded than the Jews in Thessalonica*.

**TEACHING TIP:** This reference to being more 'noble' was not speaking about their birth or lineage; it referred to their minds.

- Because of the Bereans' mindset, Paul used a different approach to communicate the gospel—

(1) He simply shared the Word. Why?

- a. They were ready to receive the Word with great eagerness.

→ **NOTE:** Eagerness connotes a 'running toward.' The Bereans were enthusiastic listeners.

- b. They examined the scriptures daily, comparing what they heard to the Word itself.

→ **NOTE:** The Bereans were also cautious listeners. They used the plumbline of God's Word to discern the message they were hearing.

**QUOTE:** R. Kent Hughes, *ACTS The Church Afire*—  
*"Acceptance of teachings without discernment is not a Christian virtue."*

❖ **APPLICATION:** How do you evaluate sermons and teachings? Do you search the Scripture to verify the truth of a message that you have heard? A preacher or teacher who gives God's true message will *never* contradict or explain away anything that is found in God's Word.

⇒ **Always compare what you hear to what the Word says.**

- Many of the Jews believed, as well as a number of prominent Greek men and women.

⇒ **These converts laid the foundation of the church in Berea.**

- There was also opposition, but not from the people in Berea; it came from Thessalonica.
  - ~ These men entered the town and stirred up trouble using the common people.

→ **NOTE:** "Stirred up" implies to agitate or excite, much like the waves of the sea are agitated by the wind. These men caused trouble to crash upon the town.

**TEACHING TIP:** The truth is Satan hates the simple preaching of God's Word.

- The believers in Berea were quick to protect Paul. They understood his life was in danger and were determined to keep him safe.
  - ~ Paul was taken to the seacoast, not far from Berea, and from there went by sea to Athens.
  - ~ Silas and Timothy remained in Berea to encourage and strengthen the new converts.
- In Thessalonica, there had been active opposition and rejection of the Gospel message. In Berea, Paul experienced many eager to hear, study, and receive the Good News of Jesus Christ.

### Athens

- Paul was now alone in Athens.

- Context to this town:
  - ~ Most celebrated city of Greece.
  - ~ No city of the ancient world was so distinguished for philosophy, learning, and the arts.
  - ~ Most celebrated models of architecture and statuary were there.
- The spiritual terrain in Athens laid in stark contrast to Berea.
- ✚ Acts 17:16 *“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.”*

⇒ **This was an environment of “cultured” paganism (idolatry, philosophy, novelty)**

**TEACHING TIP:** Pausanias, a Greek geographer of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, stated that *“it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main street of Athens than to meet a man.”*

⇒ **Statistically this was a factual statement. Historians state that the population was about ten thousand, but there were thirty thousand statues of gods!**

- Paul’s *“spirit was provoked”*—the Greek literally means *this caused a physical spasm within him*. He was angry at the lethal lie being set forth in this city.
- ⇒ **Athens was a city that was spiritual empty—totally ignorant about the one true God and their desperate need of Him.**
- Staying true to his habit, he went first to the synagogue.
- In Athens, Paul tried to communicate the gospel to three types of ‘hearers:’
  1. **The religious:** Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (who he reasoned with in the synagogue).
  2. **Marketplace pagans:** a variety of pagan hearers (who he conversed with in the ‘shopping mall’).
  3. **Intellectual philosophers:** The Epicureans and Stoics represented the competing philosophies of the day. Together they instantly labeled Paul as an ‘idle babbling’.

→ **NOTE:** ‘Babbler’ was a term that denoted one who ‘peddled’ another person’s idea as their own, a plagiarist who chirped out borrowed ideas or scraps of knowledge.

**TEACHING TIP:** They believed he was introducing ‘strange’ deities to the people.

- Paul created quite a stir in Athens—he was the new, hot topic. He became such a hot topic that he was finally taken to the Areopagus.
- ✚ Acts 17:19-21 *“And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.’ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)”*

**APPLICATION:** Weren't Paul's accusers the actual 'babblers?' Weren't they just looking for the latest and greatest 'new' truth.

⇒ **THINK:** Can truth be 'new?' **NO!** Truth is just that—truth, unchanging. Jesus is the truth.

## Study Three:

### Acts 17:22-34 Paul's Sermon at Mars Hill

- The Areopagus was Athens' official court. It was also called Mars Hill, a low hill near the Acropolis.
  - ~ This court had considerable power.
  - ~ BUT Paul was not being personally tried before this court, a court that had condemned Socrates several centuries earlier. Paul was informally required to give an account of his teaching.

**TEACHING TIP:** It helps to visualize this scene. As Paul stood to speak, his back was to the city. His audience looked down upon the city and could see the many idols representing the gods Paul knew were worthless. And in this setting, his message would be clear—there is only one true God.

- Paul, once again, demonstrated the importance of good communication—understanding the audience. (Act 17:22)
  - (1) **He met them where they were—religious pagans in need of the truth.** He addressed them as being highly “religious.” (v22)
    - ~ He didn't begin with the Old Testament, sharing Jewish history and traditions.
    - ~ He understood that Greeks would not care about that—they sought knowledge.
  - (2) **He acknowledged their many objects of worship and then pointed out one altar.** (v23)
- † Acts 17:23 *“For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”*
- **NOTE:** Paul continued building a case for the one true God by using an example these people understood, a familiar VISUAL!!
  - ~ He did not attack the people ... he did not talk down to them as being 'clueless.'
  - ~ He used their own words as the 'bridge' to bring knowledge into their ignorance.
- (3) **He said he would explain WHO God is—He proclaimed the KNOWN God.**

**TEACHING TIP:** The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god out of fear of missing blessings or receiving punishment. The word “unknown” means “ignorance.”

**A. God (Jesus) was the Creator of all things. As the Creator— (vv24-25)**

- ◆ He could not be created (by human hands) or contained in an idol or temple.
- ◆ He was not dependent on man because He was the source and the sustainer of life.

⇒ **Paul's point: The one true God was all-sufficient and stood in need of nothing.**

**B. God (Jesus) was the RULER, sovereign, over all things (vv26-29)**

- ◆ He appointed the boundaries of nations.
- ◆ He sought to make men seek and find Him.

**TEACHING TIP:** In a very simplistic overview, the Epicureans believed God was far off and that all of life was based on 'chance'—they espoused pursuing pleasure, then die. The Stoics believed God was in everything and that life was a series of 'fate'—whatever happened was a person's destiny.

⇒ **Paul's Point: It was not chance or fate that they were there; it was because of the one true God. (This was a divine appointment to hear truth!)**

- Maintaining the use of what the Athenians understood, Paul quoted their own Greek poets (v28) to show that they even agreed with this divine truth—God is the sustainer of life.

~ *"In him we live and move and have our being ..."*

~ *"For we are indeed his offspring ..."*

⇒ **Paul's Point: If we are God's offspring, created by Him and in His image, then wasn't it degrading to reduce so great of God to a graven idol?**

**C. God (Jesus) was the SAVIOR (v30)**

- ◆ Their little 'g' gods could not save them.
- ◆ God had now commanded people to repent of their sins and turn to Him.

**D. God (Jesus) was the JUDGE (v31)**

- ◆ God had appointed a day of 'reckoning.'
- ◆ Judgment was coming.
- ◆ Mankind was moving toward that day of judgment.

⇒ **Paul's Point: If we trust Christ today, He will save us; if we reject Him, He will judge us.**

**TEACHING TIP:** Paul addressed their Greek culture as "times of ignorance." Remember, they have the altar to their "unknown" (in ignorance) "g"od. Don't forget the backdrop behind Paul as he called them to repent. From what? Idolatry!

**TEACHING TIP:** Mankind was not moving toward extinction as the Epicureans taught nor being absorbed into the cosmos as the Stoics claimed.

**TEACHING TIP:** Paul's approach with the Athenians was straight-forward, not argumentative. He laid out a logical case before these big thinkers. Having communicated the truth, he left them with a call to action.



- There were three responses to Paul’s sermon. (Acts 17:32-34)

1. **Mockery:** Some of the Greek philosophers openly ridiculed his words. Their posture seemed to indicate that Paul’s assertions were so absurd that they would not even entertain debating him.
2. **Delay:** Others wanted a little more information to make perhaps an ‘educated’ decision. Yet there is no indication that they spoke with him again; and there was no church in Athens.

**TEACHING TIP:** Do you think that they had a coherent response to Paul’s words?

**TEACHING TIP:** This was a lethal procrastination. This could be characterized as a ‘polite’ rejection.

▲ **QUOTE:** G. K. Chesterton in his book *The Ball and the Cross* makes this point – “A culture that prides itself on its detached approach to the central issues of life and regards those who approach them otherwise as uncivilized or insane is itself under delusion.”

3. **Belief:** Some men and women (did not appear to be a big response) believed and joined Paul.

⇒ **These men and women would plant seeds in an environment that really did not want to know the truth—just acted as if they did.**

**TEACHING TIP:** Let’s be careful not to minimize the courage that Paul needed to go and stand firm for Jesus—courage to be openly mocked/challenged. It is so easy for us to view Paul as a ‘superhero without a cape.’

⇒ **Paul shared the truth of Jesus Christ, of their need to repent and believe. They heard and, for the most part, they rejected it. Sadly, the people of Athens chose to live in their self-delusion, desiring novelty over the truth.**

- Paul left Athens and headed to Corinth.

**APPLICATION:** As we see Paul in these three cities, sharing in a manner that was appropriate to the audience, we also understand that Paul did not force or try to coerce anyone to believe in Jesus. We share ... God saves. Paul is such a good example of this. How can we relate to others in a way that they can hear?

## Study Four:

### Acts 18:1-11 Paul in Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila

**ILLUSTRATION:** Let's briefly revisit the Golden Gate Bridge. Construction began in 1933. The workers had to contend with strong tides, storms, and fog. But the biggest challenge was the building that took place underwater—divers had to work in water that was dark, murky, and cold plus deal with the strong currents. A diver's life depended on the continuous pumping of air through a long hose originating from the surface—this was their lifeline. They depended on that hose not to crimp but provide fresh air with no issues.

Think about the courage and perseverance it took to dive into that perilous unknown again and again not losing sight of finishing their goal to erect the bridge.

⇒ **Paul exemplified perseverance. In the face of a dark, murky, anti-Jesus cultures, he kept on serving Jesus. From Athens he walked alone to Corinth.**

**TEACHING TIP:** Put yourself in Paul's shoes: he walked alone for about fifty miles. Time to think about all that he had experienced –

- ~ Suffered a beating and imprisonment in Philippi.
- ~ Civil riots broke out to run him out of town in both Thessalonica and Berea.
- ~ Indifference and apathy met him in Athens.

Could he possibly have felt a bit dejected as he entered Corinth?

### Corinth

- Context to this town:
  - ~ It was one of the most populous and wealthy cities of Greece.
  - ~ It was, also, one of the most deprived and immoral cities at that time.
  - ~ No city of ancient times was more decadent.
- Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth.
  - ~ They had moved their business to Corinth after an anti-Semitic stir in Rome.
  - ~ Aquila had been a Jew. At some point, both he and his wife had come to Christ.
  - ~ Their friendship made a difference in Paul's life.
  - ~ They shared the same trade as Paul, tent-making. Most importantly, they shared a love for Jesus.
  - ~ They opened their hearts and their home to Paul.

**QUOTE:** C.S. Lewis— *"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us."*

~ They would become not only encouragers but fellow co-laborers in his ministry as he wrote in Romans 16.

→ **NOTE:** During this period (before Silas and Timothy joined him) Paul worked to support himself, as he continued to reason in the synagogue every sabbath. (Acts 18:4)

▪ When Silas and Timothy finally joined Paul, they brought a missionary offering, enabling Paul to return to full-time ministry.

✠ Acts 18:5b “...Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.”

▪ Once again Paul “read” his audience and approached them in a way he hoped they would hear.

(1) The depraved, immoral environment moved him to preach frequently and fervently.

(2) He plainly testified that Jesus was the Christ.

◆ He produced more testimonies out of the writings of Moses and the prophets—to prove who Jesus was.

**TEACHING TIP:** Paul was filled with sorrow over these Jews who had chosen unbelief and were not repentant. He felt compelled to preach with urgency and passion.

▪ The response in the synagogue to Paul’s preaching was harsh. (Acts 18:6)

~ They resisted and blasphemed.

→ **NOTE:** The word “resisted” used here literally means “to arrange in battle array.” They organized themselves to fight against Paul’s teaching, even to the point of blaspheming the name of Christ.

**TEACHING TIP:** As fervent as Paul was in sharing, these men seemed as fervent in opposing the truth. They rallied against the doctrine he taught.

▪ Paul’s answer to their resistance was not only verbal, but visual.

✠ Acts 18:6 “*But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’*”

~ Shook out his garments = a Jewish gesture as a testimony against them, a rejection

~ A shocking statement ... *your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean.*

**TEACHING TIP:** Paul responded by telling them that they (not Paul) would be the authors or the cause of their own ruin and destruction. He would not take on any guilt in their rejection of Jesus.

⇒ **He would no longer preach the Gospel to them. He would not return to their synagogue.**

~ He went to the house of Titius Justus (a God-fearing Gentile, most likely a Roman).

~ This house was next door to the synagogue, and here Paul met with the Gentiles.

- The text shares that there were two other groups that responded to Paul’s preaching.
  - ~ The most astounding response involved Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his household who believed the Gospel message!
  - ~ Many of the Corinthians heard the gospel and believed.

**TEACHING TIP:** Imagine the shock waves that hit the Jewish community with the news of Crispus.

⇒ **This was the beginning of the church of Corinth!**

**TEACHING TIP:** Such spiritual success! But great opposition and spiritual warfare would ensue.

- ~ Paul understood people, so he knew that the Jews who had aggressively opposed the Gospel in the synagogue would not sit idly by after the conversion of Crispus, their leader.
- ~ Paul knew that these opposers were ‘dressed for battle.’
- ~ This had to weigh heavily upon him, knowing a fight was around the corner.

- The Lord visited Paul and spoke to him in a vision. His message—persevere!
- ✚ Acts 18:9-10 *“And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’”*
  1. Do not be afraid ... indicating the Lord recognized his fear.
  2. Preach freely and boldly the Gospel of Jesus Christ—without fear of men.
  3. I [God] am with you and will protect you.

*“...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*  
(Matthew 28:20)

**TEACHING TIP:** Consider God’s message to Paul:

- ~ I have many people in this city who need to hear the Gospel message—men, women, and children who need to be set free from their bondage in this depraved city.
- ~ I am calling you, Paul, to continue in MY good work here.

**ILLUSTRATION:** In the 1993 Olympics in Barcelona, Derek Redmond, Great Britain’s runner, was competing in the four-hundred meter. His hamstring snapped during the race, but he was determined to finish. He got back up on his feet and tried to run but could only hop on the one good leg toward the finish line. Pain was etched on his face. As he approached the finish line, tears flowed down his cheeks, and it did not look like the young runner would make it to the end. And then ... Derek was joined by his father, Jim, who had been sitting in the stands watching his son—he put his arms around Derek and helped his son finish his race.

⇒ **God came alongside Paul and made His presence, His power, and His love known to this tired runner.**

- Paul settled in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching the Word of God among the people.

## Study Five:

### **Acts 18:12-22      Gallio's Uprising**

- The opposition did not stop for Paul. God had not promised that it would.
  - ~ They tried a new approach—politicize Paul's work as illegal in Rome.
  - ~ The case was thrown out.

**APPLICATION:** Do you understand that our God is near? He does not sit in the stands as a spectator in our lives—but He is a Father, our Father, ready to meet us at our point of need.

- Paul finally set out to sea headed for Syria. Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him. When they arrived in Ephesus, he left them there and moved on.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### ✦ **What can we apply to our lives from Chapters 17 and 18?**

#### **1. Paul was intentional about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.**

- \* We need to be intentional bridge builders.

#### **2. Paul was impactful because he 'read' his audience before he spoke.**

- \* What could be the bridge that you could use in communicating the Gospel?
- \* We need to be effective bridge builders, realizing the terrain will not be the same in each hearer's heart.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Did you know that at age 15 C.S. Lewis rejected the idea of God and became a devout atheist? He moved on to becoming a theist.

How in the world did he come to Christ and write such incredible God glorifying books? Through a men's group—a circle of friends equally learned men whom he respected as deep thinkers and who were authors of books he had read. They discussed (and probably debated) topics. In that group was J.R.R. Tolkien and other believers; these men essentially built a bridge to Jesus through Lewis' own love for writing and literature and open, respectful discussion!!

#### **3. Paul fully accepted the challenges that came in sharing Jesus. He not only accepted them, he anticipated them.**

- \* We need to be persevering, courageous bridge builders, recognizing and anticipating the strong currents of opposition to Jesus.

- ✦ Paul's heartbeat as he traveled into Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth was to determine the best way to build a bridge of communication that would help people understand the Gospel and draw men and women to Jesus Christ. He did this with bold perseverance, **EMPOWERED** by the Holy Spirit.

**QUOTE:** C. S. Lewis— *“The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ.”*