



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 6 (A)
May 14, 2023

[RCL] Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Acts 17:22-31

In our first lesson this week, we are placed in the midst of the story as Paul, traveling from northern Greece (Thessalonica and Beroea) south to Corinth, stops for a few days in Athens. The city is depicted as a hotbed of intellectual and religious activity with Epicurean and Stoic philosophy thriving alongside the ancient deities of the Mediterranean. Notably, the local populace does not reject Paul out of hand but rather invites him to share this new teaching in a prominent location, the Areopagus.

And here we jump in, listening as Paul preaches the gospel to this group of skeptical, worldly Athenians. I find his approach to be fascinating—he begins with flattery, attesting to the city’s thoughtfulness and piety, before refuting the local gods/idols made of “gold or silver or stone.” It is only at the very end that Paul refers to Jesus and the urgency of the moment, calling for repentance because the Messiah will return again. With this image of Paul as a preacher in mind:

- Why might Paul emphasize God’s mystery—God “does not live in shrines made by human hands”—to such an extent while reaching out to the Athenians?
- Thinking about Paul’s description of Christ crucified as “foolishness to the gentiles,” what might this approach say about how Paul understood his audience?

Psalm 66:7-18

This section of the 66th psalm emphasizes God’s continuous presence in spite of the hardships that we might face. In fact, the psalmist seems to be confident that whatever has happened in his life, it has all, ultimately, led to God. The “snares” and “heavy burdens” and “fire and water” were all part of God’s plan to “[try] us just as silver is tried.” The psalm does not invalidate or ignore the hardships but reframes them as expressions of endurance, challenges that were ultimately overcome due to divine favor. However, I do find it notable that the psalm seems to be composed with the benefit of hindsight—the challenges have been borne and now we can enter the presence of God confident, ready to offer sacrifices in thanks.

- Does this understanding of constructive (even redemptive) suffering speak to you? Where might your life feel like it is following some sort of divine plan and where might that vision be harder to see?

1 Peter 3:13-22

There is a lot packed into this passage, but I find myself lingering on the first section and what it says about suffering. Peter does not seem to glorify suffering as an end unto itself—pain is not a reward. But Peter is also not naive about the reality of the world—good people with good intentions will still come to harm;

suffering is not avoidable. Instead, his message is deeply practical, a tidbit of well-earned pastoral wisdom: “But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.” Peter recognizes that the world is vast and complex, and most things are outside of our control. Sometimes we can do everything right and things still blow up in our faces. This does not mean that doing right is foolish, that those who act with “gentleness and reverence” are suckers. Ultimately, doing right is its own reward, “For it is better to suffer for doing good... than to suffer for doing evil.” All we can do is follow Jesus’ example and hope for the best.

- How might we embrace our suffering without becoming dour masochists or mopey martyrs?

John 14:15-21

This passage from John is a part of the extended final bit of teaching that Jesus shares with his disciples during the Last Supper. The extended sermon covers three full chapters of the Gospel of John and is chock full of iconic passages and imagery, none more important than Jesus’ final admonition to *love*. It is in this passage that we first hear about the coming of the Holy Spirit and how it will support the disciples and their ministry, but we cannot ignore the way in which love undergirds all of this—Jesus’ love for us and our love for Jesus. Jesus is the way through which we have come to see and know God and it is through our relationship with Jesus that we have the assurance of a relationship with God. It is by doing the work of Jesus that we show our love for Jesus and make ourselves fertile soil for the loving Spirit of God. It is a virtuous cycle, human love directed through word and action up to the divine, which in turn rebounds down as divine love, strengthening our commitments to the work of Christ. Love never diminishes or runs out but is an abundant, unlimited resource.

- How have you seen this cycle of love enacted in your life? How does love guide you to God and how does God’s love make itself known to you?
- What might it mean that the Spirit is referred to as an “Advocate”?

*This Bible study was written by **Tim Hamlin**, a seminarian at EDS at Union Theological Seminary.*