

Around A.D. 49, the Apostle Paul was on his second missionary journey of approximately 2.5 years (Acts 15:26-18:22). In Athens, *“his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16).”* Paul *“reasoned (Acts 17:17)”* with local people, Jewish and Gentile, including some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. These were, in fact, the two major philosophical schools of the Greek world at that time. *What did the Epicureans and Stoics believe?*

Epicureans

Epicurus (c. 341-270 B.C.) was a materialist. The body, and even the soul, are material and will dissolve into the atmosphere at death. Whilst he allowed for gods, he did not believe that there were as many gods as people commonly believed there were, and they did not interfere with our world. He rejected superstition, as well as any belief in a God who was over all.

True living was found in seeking pleasure, tempered by prudence. In this way, bread and water could sometimes give more pleasure than the finest foods. They taught that we should enjoy this life among good friends and not yearn for anything beyond this life. In *Principal Doctrines*, Epicurean philosophers taught that, *“Death is nothing to us, because a body that has been dispersed into elements experiences no sensations, and the absence of sensation is nothing to us.”*

One modern-day Epicurean has said that, *“We are animals living in a material, non-providential Universe.”* Like animals, we tend to *“avoid pain and seek pleasure by nature.”* Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, professed to be an epicurean.

Stoics

The Stoics received their name from a place called the Painted Porch (stoa) in Athens. There Zeno of Citium began to teach around 300 B.C. Stoicism appealed to a wide cross-section of society and had a great influence upon Greek society. The Emperor Nero's tutor, Seneca, was a well-known Stoic. Stoicism taught that 'God' – or a divine *logos* (word) - was in everything. To some Stoics *“God is one and the same with*

Reason, Fate and Zeus."

The most famous Stoic was the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) who wrote *Meditations* (literally, "to himself"). These were his personal journals and show that he did not wish to set his hopes too high, nor allow his fears to overwhelm him. The mind as the place of reason was most important. Emotion showed an unbalanced mind: "You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength." The way to right living was by correct teaching and self-discipline. It truly was the philosophy of mind over matter!

Scriptures

In Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31) he addressed some issues of Epicurean and Stoic thinking;

Acts 17:22-23

Paul begins his sermon by observing that the people of Athens were very religious in every way. Earlier, he had seen that Athens was full of idols, and this had provoked his spirit within him (Acts 17:16). To the Stoics, the many idols of Athens were natural – after all, they believed that the divine Logos was in everything. In contrast, the Epicureans may have agreed with Paul that all these idols were folly. Whatever the case, Paul's first concern is to tell them that the True and Living God can be known by us;

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Acts 17:24-25

To the Epicureans, there was no beginning to the world – and no Creator. Yet against this, Paul begins where Genesis begins, with God making everything. He then shows that, against the Stoics, that God is over all and it is folly to think that He lives in temples. God does not need our service, but rather, He has graciously given us all that we need – something the Epicureans would have rejected.

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

Acts 17:27-28

To the Epicureans, the gods were uninvolved, aloof and indifferent to the world. Yet, Paul wanted them to know that God is, in fact, close to each of us. Then, amazingly, Paul quotes from the Stoics poet Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.), as a point of connection with the Stoics and an acknowledgement that Aratus knew something of God.

“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

*“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;
as even some of your own poets have said,*

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

Acts 17:30

For the Stoics, true life was found through *reason*, and so they were concerned with the mind and controlling the emotions. For the Epicureans, true life was found in pleasure, so long as it didn't lead to negative consequences. Yet, for Paul having set out that God made us – *we are His offspring* – true life is found through repentance. This involves more than our minds and senses – it means turning to Him with the whole of our lives. Whilst reason and prudent living may be good, only God can give life.

“Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent...”

Acts 17:32

The final part of Paul's sermon is about the judgment to come, which is guaranteed because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The resurrection is the lynch pin of Christian doctrine and future hope. Both Epicurean and Stoic would have scoffed at this – *and did scoff at this* (Acts 17:32). Epicureans thought that life beyond death was folly – and to Greek thinking generally, a *physical* resurrection was repugnant.

"because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Cure

Paul's sermon is a model of how to bring God's truth to people with a different worldview to our own. He was bold enough to connect with them at certain points, trusting that God had been preparing them to hear his message, yet without falling into syncretism.

Ultimately, to the Stoic, Paul says that they were too shallow in their living. As C.S. Lewis said, *"if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."* Stoic thinking may make good monks – *controlled and unemotional* - but that doesn't make good Christians with sanctified emotions.

The Epicureans sought a peaceful life of pleasure, moderated by prudence. One Epicurean poem, written c. 200 A.D. said;

Nothing to fear in God; Nothing to feel in Death;

Good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] can be endured.

Yet, Paul's message to them was that they too missed all that we were meant to be. He offered them a future beyond death, where we will know God. God is to be feared as He is judge, and that makes this life meaningful beyond pleasure. True life is found in surrender to Him.

June prayer points

Q. 100. What does the preface of the Lord's Prayer teach us?

The preface of the Lord's Prayer (which is, Our Father in heaven) teaches us firstly to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence as children to a father able and ready to help us; and secondly, that we should pray with and for others.

Q. 101. What do we pray for in the first request?

In the first request (which is, Hallowed be your name) we pray that God may enable us and others to glorify him in all in which he makes himself known;[a] and that he would overrule all things for his own glory.

To hallow God's name means to honour and praise God and his word and works. In praying in this way we are praying for eyes to see and hearts to appreciate his glory – for ourselves and others. In true prayer we are following out the chief purpose for which man is made – to glorify God.

- Westminster Shorter Catechism, questions 100-101

Some things to pray for this month;

1. Prayer for China: *"Pray for the "left-behind children" in remote ethnic minority areas in China. Sometimes both parents leave home to work in large cities..."* Also, *"In the past two years, many people from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have emigrated to Japan, forming many new Chinese communities... Our prayer is that they will find the true light during their search in this ever mobile and changing time."*
2. Please pray for the following two believers in Pakistan: Farzaana sometimes has the opportunity to read the Scriptures with women, mostly Muslim, that she meets in her work at a hospital. Yaqoob looks after a small Christian bookshop in a slum area of Quetta.
3. Prov. 6:16-19 says, *"There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:*

*haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies,
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community."*

