No. 189.

St. Paul at Athens.

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Apostle xvii, 16. “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idleness.”

Scarcely does a situation occur in Scripture history more interesting than that of St. Paul in the city of Athens. This passage is selected. And it may be no unprofitable employment of our thoughts to reflect on this situation, and on the manner in which it was met by the eminent apostle. It requires some effort of recollection and attention to realize the peculiarities of the circumstances in which he was placed. Our thoughts must leave the present, and travel back to the spirit of the times; we must make ourselves familiar with the age of the scene, if we would estimate fairly the character of the occasion, and the wisdom of address displayed by the apostle.

The city of Athens, then, in which the course of Paul’s travels had brought him, we must remember, was on many accounts the most famous city of all
antiquity... The brilliant past, what it looked in the improvements, & in the great events of the world, has reared an imperishable monument to its glory, to the eyes of the wise, good of all succeeding ages have been turned with admiration & gratitude. It was the native seat of genius, of learning, of wisdom; the place, where facts were, & philosophers reasoned, & orators essayed by their minds, working eloquence, the hearts of a people. It was the dwelling place of science, the home of great intellects. For that small spot were gathered the master minds of the world; it furnished men, whose are, or who have been, the instructors of mankind, & who have poured their lights down the long track of time to guide & stimulate other great minds in every age. Here the arts of elegance of refinement were carried on. The arts of improvement, which has been the work of the study of modern times. The ruins of their temples & great works are still visited. & the wasting & decay of ages, together with the ravages of barbarous enemies, have not yet obliterated all the monuments of their glory. All the associations of great achievements, of high enterprise, & striving around this place, seem for the moment to carry us back to the original splendor of this country.
ed hand... But amidst all the wisdom, profoundness, and fame of this great people, there was one point in which they are to be viewed, that presents a humbling reminder. I mean in regard to religion. For over this, as well as other parts of the heathen world, were gathered the darkness of the errors of idolatry. A few distinguished minds among them speculated with great acuteness. To be sure, a thought not by religious subjects, but the great body of the people were abandoned to the corrupting effects of degenerating views of the most holy and sacred principles. They made gods of their own ^heroes, and in their splendid temples, worthy from their magnificence of a purer worship. Sages were performed to deities, who had all the passions of weakness of their votaries. The natural progress of refinement of luxury, aided by the demoralizing effects of gross vices of every religious subject, introduced a licentiousness of manners, of a relaxed tone of public morals, which were but the too sure omen of decline. If any signs that its strength was sapped, of that the march of decay was going on, long before it was gathered to the dust, to which empires, as well as individuals, seem fated to descend...
Such was the city in which we meet St. Paul, the apostle of eloquent preachers of the religion of the humble Jesus. With what feelings must he have looked on the scene before him! What a thought of wonder and amazement must have come over his mind, when he contemplated this splendid, yet corrupt city! The historian tells us, that his spirit was stirred within him, when he saw the city falsely given to idolatry. Yes, doubtless his spirit was stirred with compassion, when he saw before him so much greatness and so much weakness, so much to move admiration and so much to excite pity, when he saw this abode of offenders, of beauty and refinement, yet indulged the sad reflection, that there was not seen the living soul of a pure and holy religion to animate this outward loveliness; one might imagine him weeping at the sight of the lofty temples and altars, that these glorious structures should be polluted by so unworthy a consecration, that so beautiful a temple should be the dwelling of so foul the deity, that so sumptuous an apparatus of worship should be provided for the worthless fictions of the worshipper's imagination. Doubtless too his spirit was stirred with
indignation at the errors, the abuses, of the licentiousness of the polished, luxurious city: at the impor-
tation of sophistry of philosophers, the artifices of dema-
gogues, of the degradation of public morality. With
the solemn sense of the vast importance of sublime
simplicity of life on his mind, he must have
looked in that wisdom of the world, here so prevalent,
and he felt full well to be foolishness in the sight
of God, and shed forth a confused light, that served
to bewilders, rather than to guide. And must not his
spirit have been stirred within him by the desire
to impart to this renowned people that bastions's wis-
dom, even that wisdom from above, to sanctify
the splendor of glory of the scene before him, by breath-
ing upon it the spirit of that religion. The proclaim-
ark he lived, suffered? Was not his soul set
to go forth: plant the cross on the citadel of this
world, deluded community, to make the school of the
philosophers echo with the offers of salvation of the in-
structing of divine truth, instead of the confused, con-
tradictory speculations of erring man, to avoid the
marble stones from the hands of idle stumblers
to the service of the true and living God. — How different must have been the feelings with which St. Paul entered Athens, from those of the common travellers, who visited it from curiosity or for amusement! — And how different too the state of the Apostle’s mind from that of the Athenian philosophers: They full of the pride of barren and unsatisfying speculations, in which the more they reasoned, the more they doubted: with a heart thoroughly consecrated by a deep and entire feeling of the vast importance and awful majesty of the heavenly religion of Jesus, earnestly devoted to the mighty purpose of carrying abroad the light of the blessings of that religion to the highest, the lowest, the learned, the ignorant, the happy and the wretched, the bond of the free, to every rank and every region.

It was not to be expected, that the restless curiosity of the Athenians, ever desirous, as we are informed, to tell or to hear some new thing, would suffer the Apostle to remain among them long, without enquiry or opposition. Accordingly we are told, he was soon encountered by certain philosophers of the Epicureans and Stoics. These were two of the most
famous sects among the Greeks; if it may be necessary, for the purpose of illustration, to speak briefly of their opinions. The Epicureans did not ascribe even the creation of the world to the Deity; they supposed the gods far too happy & exalted to take any part in human affairs. They represented them as dwelling at ease in their celestial abode, far removed from all the cares of governing the world, indolent & unconcerned spectatris without interest in the real course of man. They believed that the soul died with the death, was scattered, or dissipated; & that of course man had nothing to hope or fear after this life. Their great maxim was that pleasure was the chief good; that virtue itself was to be chosen, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the happiness which it confers. From these leading features of the system, it is easy to see, that it would become the source of some of the worst abuses in the subject of religion. It is supposed that Epicurus, the founder of the sect, taught & explained these doctrines in such a way, as to obviate any bad moral effects that might flow from them; especially that when he insisted on pleasure's being the chief good, he meant
pure and rational, not sensual, pleasure; that virtue in fact was the chief good, because nothing would afford as great a quantity of refined pleasure, as virtue. Explained in this way, one would scarcely find any objection to make to the doctrine. Epicurus himself seems to have led a life of purity; he had been modest, temperate, amiable, unblemished in his character. But it is easy to see, that doctrines like his, so loosely stated, would immediately become liable to the grossest abuse in the hands of those, who received them without restriction or qualification. And such was the fact. The system was turned to the defence of vice, as even more extreme for sensuality and intemperate indulgence. The Stoics were a sect of a mere storm of severe cast of sentiments. They regarded the divinity, as diffused through all the parts of nature. They acknowledged a god, as the creator of the world, but believed every thing to be under the dominion of an irresistible, fatal necessity, and the Deity himself to be subject to fate. They differed in their views with regard to the soul after death, some believing all souls to be immortal, others believing the souls of the wise good only to be so, & others.
again supposing that the spirits of men, when the body dies, return to the Deity; or absorbed in the original fountain of spiritual existence... They taught, that there was no evil, that the wise man was equal to the best, the first of the gods... I thought much of the virtue of the arts and sciences, of rigour, of mystic art, of painful truths, perhaps useless, or of rigid austeritys of the Deity... I thought of the Deity... It is evident that such a system must have a paralyzing effect upon true piety, the best affections of the heart. It was not suited to the nature of events of man, as a rational moral being. Like the winter, sere, it might enlighten, but did not warm... Such briefly were the leading views of the philosophers, who encountered St. Paul... for their notions were as uncongenial with his, as the wisdom of man is below the wisdom of God... Some of them, as we are told, said: what will this babble, this... other some, he seemed to be acting forth of strange gods, because he preached unto them faith of the resurrection... Thus they mocked, thus they expressed their idle surprise. They had never heard such teaching as this before: they had never seen...
him in their schools: they knew he had not learned of their teachers: therefore they despised him, if they knew not that he had been in a better school and learned of a higher and holier teacher; than were taken from in their boasted seat of wisdom. It is supposed by some, that the understood the original word signifies resurrection, to be a proper name; this supposed that Jesus of the Resurrection were two new gods, which Paul wished to introduce to their notice, a thing that would not excite much astonishment at Athens, where every man could imagine to set up what deities he pleased, at least by public opinion, if not by civil authority. But they were not satisfied with this transient interview with the apostle; they were disposed to know more of his doctrines. To question him more at length. They therefore brought him to Areopagus, and requested him to explain the new things which he had brought to their ears. The Areopagus was a hill conspicuously situated in the city, of an important place on many accounts. It served as a place of public conference, enquiry; of there for citizens, travellers, senators, statesmen, philosophers
phers congregated, to see and to hear something new.

But it is far better known in history on another ac-
count. It was the place, where the court of Aesca-
gus held its sessions. This was the most venerable
and solemn judicial assembly in the state. The name
of this court was taken from the hill, on which the
first of the members were called the Aeschagutes.

It is supposed to have been founded in very remote
antiquity, by its long standing, and the impartially
integrity of its decisions, had gathered to itself the high-
est authority and influence. Its members were select-
for their age, gravity, wisdom, and unblemished purity
of character. They were the inspectors, guardians of the
public security and welfare. Every man was obliged to
render an account to them of his employment, the
means, by which he expected himself, and of the
found were punished by them as crimes. They had the
inspection of the youth of the city, and their power was
more minute and extensive than any similar institu-
tion we have ever known. They held their sessions in
the open air, day in the night, that they might not be
liable to have their judgment biased by anything that
might be seen around them. Various kinds of crimes were


tried before them; among other things, they had a praetor's dictum over religious concerns. Blasphemy, contempt of the sacred mysteries, the consecration of new gods, altars, temples were referred to their judgment; of the powers of their decisions over the whole community was almost irresistible.

It was to Areopagus then, a place famous on so many accounts, that St. Paul was brought. Some suppose that he was taken by force of arms, there as a criminal to be tried on the charge of setting forth strange gods without permission. Of this, however, there seems to be not very good evidence. There is no appearance of a trial, no accusation, no charge, no examination, no decision, in the whole affair. It is probable, St. Paul was taken to the Areopagus merely because it was a place of public concourse, where his doctrines and explanations might be heard by multitudes, and the philosophers might have the pleasure of confuting or putting him down, as a sort of public triumph. If, however, we adopt the other position, I conceive him to have been on trial before the court of Areopagus, it was a situation which must strike one who reflects upon it, as remarkable and interesting. He was probably the only follower of the new Jews in all
this splendid city... stood alone before the most venemous tribunal of the nation, surrounded by philosophers, prepared to mock him to listen to his doctrines merely for the gratification of an idle and diseased curiosity. Among the wise men who gathered about him, he was the only one who had the true wisdom of a heavenly religion. His heart, the only heart, that had been sanctified and purified by holy influences. Many had been arraigned at their courts before for introducing new gods; but never before stood at their best one like St. Paul. It was this court, who tried and condemned that great man, Socrates, a man who seemed to have thrown flashes of light across the darkness of heathenism, whose name reflects honor upon the power of human reason. He was brought to this dreaded tribunal on the charge of despising the gods of the city, of the immortal gods of Athens. Such a man was condemned to die by poison. He had ventured to be wiser than his countrymen to have more pure and elevated views of this was a crime to be forgiven. Who has not mourned over the poverty of man, while he read the history of the trial and condemnation of that great moralist? It is only another evidence that mankind are slow in acknowledging our...
warding their best benefactors, their wisest teachers. The Roman Apostle met the same uncertain fate as the heathen moralists; but proceeding on the supposition that the Apostle was really tried at Areopagus, there is something striking to one's imagination in conceiving Socrates and St. Paul brought before the same tribunal, accused of not dissimilar crimes. But as was the former, he dwindles into comparative insignificance by the side of the latter; though, in regard to acuteness of reasoning and natural powers of mind, he might have been his superior. But the Jew had that which the Grecian wanted; he had the light of revelation; of this was vastly more than a counterbalance for all the differences in the gifts of mind.

How different must have been the situation of feelings of these men before the Athenian court! The one, the philosopher, as some of his views were, must have felt all that fluctuation and uncertainty which clings to all the speculations; the heart of the other was fastened in confidence in his God, if not a cloud of doubt enveloped the fount of his belief, for it rested on that foundation other than which no man can lay: the Grecian might be animated by the consciousness that behind
been teaching important truths, yet it must have been
too cold to communicate. Supporting energy -
but to the few there had once come a voice from heaven
saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" of that
voice had awakened him to a new life, a life that de-
scribed weakness. Fainting, of fear. Socrates, one must
suppose, notwithstanding the calmness with which he
received the sentence, with which he died, must that
painful uncertainty respecting a future life, which
the cold consideration ever philoso phic leaves to her fol-
lowers, wish makes the closing of the portal of the grave
the too much like the shutting out of hope. - but
St. Paul, had he been brought to the same crisis, could
have said, as he said on another occasion in the tri-
v triumph of unswerving faith: "I have fought a good
right: I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.
Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of rightewn-
ess, with the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at
that day."

From this view, with which we have thus far taken of St. Paul
at Athens, some reflections seem naturally to occur
the mind...
it was without human friends or human power, persecuted by the powerful, despised by the great of the wise... Its advocates were but a handful of illiterate men, wherever they went, the world was against them. Their situation was that of the solitary defenders of the truth of God. When St. Paul came to Athens, he stood up alone in that city of wisdom to head the cause of this Master's religion... Now how different is the scene. It is the religion of the refined, powerful, cultivated nations of the earth. It has spread its triumphs far and wide. It ranks princes and the mighty ones of the earth among its followers. Its influence has penetrated through all the forms of social and public life. It has incorporated itself into the laws of custom of the civilized world; it is felt in governments that dwell at our firesides; talents, learning, weight of character are on its side; those who proclaim its truths, find willing bearers of believing hearts. Who is not ready to thank God for this glorious success of truth, this wide dominion of the greatest blessing man has ever known?

2. How familiar has thy made the noblest, most important truths to the humblest minds!... Doctrines, oh were unknown, as but discursively conjectured, by the sage
of antiquity, are ours the common property of the high, the low, the rich, the poor, the learned and the ignorant. She il\-
\literate peasant in his humble cottage at the present day, may know, as usually does know, more of the sublime truths of real religion, than did the promi-
\nsst philosophers of Athens; or the worshippers in a village church offer a far more acceptable service to God, and their devotion, with far nobler views of feelings, than did the refined notaries who thronged the splendid temples of that idolatrous city. How poor does all the glory of the arts of exquisitely culture of intellect appear, when compared with that heavenly treasure of truths, which has the same comfort of hope for the unlearned, as for the wise; which consoles the sorrows of each alike, g points each to the same bright hope, the same prize of glory.

We have thus far followed the narration of St. Paul's visit to Athens. His admirable speech at the Areopagus remains yet to be considered. It will furnish matter for another dis-
scussion. Let us thank God for wondrous religion, which makes clear to its treasures. I say, write you that many prophets twice and have desired to see things which I have not seen them; to hear the things which I have not heard them.

April, 1823.

At Rome, April 20th, 1823—forenoon.

At Hingham (Mr. Brodey) Feb. 11th, 1824—forenoon.