



# Minutes With Messiah

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## ONE LITTLE WORD

Lawyers make a living on minutiae. Take as an example the 2017 case that hung on a single comma, or lack thereof. A group of dairy drivers sued for overtime pay, while the dairies argued that Maine labor law exempted them from paying overtime. The law read, at the time, that the following activities do not merit overtime pay:

“The canning, processing, preserving, freezing, drying, marketing, storing, packing for shipment or distribution of:

- (1) Agricultural produce;
- (2) Meat and fish products; and
- (3) Perishable foods.”

The dairies argued that the drivers were exempted because they were involved in distribution of the designated products. After all, distribution was the last item on the list of activities that were exempt from overtime. The drivers argued that the law did not mention what they did; rather, it exempted “packing for shipment or distribution,” and they did not pack for distribution. They were just involved in the distribution and not the packing. The judge admitted that his ruling in favor of the drivers hinged on a lack of a serial (also called Oxford) comma. The law was vague, and the dairies had to pay out millions of dollars in overtime until the law was changed. It was seen as a victory for some grammarians as well as the dairy drivers of Maine.

Sometimes it is just such a small thing that makes a big difference, even in the Bible. One word can change the whole meaning of a passage. Some healers blame a failure to heal on the individual’s lack of faith in Jesus. Many others will say that it is faith in Jesus that saves. Sometimes they go so far as to make that faith a work of the will. While it is true that faith in Jesus is important, the passages they sometimes quote to justify faith without the obedience of immersion, among other things, use a different word.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Gal 2:16)

Paul uses similar wording in Romans 3:22 and later in Galatians 3:22, both in reference to God holding both Jews and gentiles guilty. John uses it in Revelation 14:22. These passages do not talk about faith in Jesus, no matter how much some people would have it so. Instead Paul says we are justified by “the faith of Jesus.” This puts faith in a different place.

In this passage alone, Paul twice says that we that have put our trust in Jesus are justified by the faith that Jesus possessed. Saving faith resides in Jesus himself, and not in the Jesus-follower. What does this mean?

Jesus left glory to live as a man. As such he “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb 4:15) He had the free will to sin, and therefore lose his status as our perfect high priest. He had the choice to die for the sins of man, or to refuse to do so. This conflict can be seen in his prayer in Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed. But also can be seen the faith of Jesus. “Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.” (Lk 22:42) It was the faith of Jesus that took him to his death for us. It is that faith that justifies, that saves.

Obedience to that faith is vital. “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” (Rev 14:12) It is important to keep both: the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus. One can keep the commandments in a legalistic manner, and fail to keep the faith of Jesus. One can also have faith in Jesus without keeping the faith of Jesus, by failing to keep the commandments.

It may seem like splitting hairs. Yet that one difference between on and in may make all the difference.

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# ALONE IN A STRANGE CITY

What do you do when you are alone in a strange town? Some people stay in their hotel room, even if they are going to be in town several nights. Others find the nearest bar, although the inside of a bar is pretty much the same in Singapore or San Diego. Finding a restaurant is always good, but you can't stay there forever. I like to find a zoo or a museum, if there is one in town. Old Portuguese forts are fun to explore. But what I really like to do is walk. Early morning in San Francisco on the edge of Chinatown feels like early morning in Hong Kong. It has the smell of money being made. A single American wandering the streets of Yokosuka, Japan gets some strange looks. Walking in Singapore is like changing cultures or countries every four or five blocks. You get the feel of a city better on foot than in a car or even on a bicycle.

One time the apostle Paul found himself alone in Athens for the first time. He could have stayed in his lodgings until his friends came to town. Instead, apparently, he walked. And that walk ended up taking him to court.

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First Paul wandered the streets of Athens. The next thing Paul did was go to church.

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## Background

Paul had come to Macedonia as a result of a vision. (Acts 16:9-10) His first stop had been Philippi. While there he had preached the gospel to some women, who obeyed. But he also got in trouble by casting a spirit of divination out of a girl. This meant her masters would lose income, so they brought Paul and Silas to court and had them imprisoned. Events that night led to the chief jailer coming to belief in Jesus, along with his household. But it also made Paul *persona non grata* in Philippi.

Moving on, Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica, where things went well until some Jews got jealous of the popularity of his teaching. They started a riot. Paul didn't end up in court, but a believer named Jason did. The leaders of the city didn't seem too interested, and only fined Jason and another man and let them go. The believers in Thessalonica figured it was time for Paul to leave town, so they sent him to Berea.

Things went well in Berea at first. Then the Jews of Thessalonica found out where Paul was and came to stir

up that city as well. The Berean brethren hatched a plot to save Paul. They left his companions there and left as if to escort him to the nearest seaport. As soon as they were out of sight of the city, they diverted their path and took Paul to Athens. Paul sent word back to his companions to join him there, but for a while he was alone in a strange city.

## Alone in town

What did Paul do when he was alone in a strange town? First of all, being alone might have been strange enough to him. He had almost always had an entourage of one to several people with him, so even this was a new experience. Apparently one of the first things he did was wander the streets of Athens. In doing so he "saw the city wholly given to idolatry." (Acts 17:16)

The Greeks, and later the Romans, had multiple gods. There was a god for almost every activity or thing. There was even a hierarchy of the Gods, with Zeus at the top and various levels under him. There was a complex, and sometimes contradictory, mythos about the gods. Since the gods were even known to mate with humans, there even was a class of demigods, of which Herakles (Hercules) was probably the most famous. These gods had complicated dealings with people. Sometimes they might appear as people or animals. They exhibited many of the character traits of people, most especially jealousy. While most of the gods were immortal, some could even be killed. And because of the complicated nature of their dealings with man, Paul found temples and idols to a variety of gods on his wanderings about the city.

The next thing Paul did was go to church. Because of the idolatry that surrounded him, he quickly found the nearest synagogue of the Jews. Whenever there was a synagogue, he went there to teach about Jesus, but this was different. He went to synagogue because of the idolatry he saw. Then he disputed with the devout Jews. Alone in a strange town, surrounded by something he had been taught against all his life, Paul needed to be grounded. This is a lesson for all of us. When faced with challenges to our faith, we can turn to those who believe as we do. The church can serve as a haven. When I was alone in Hong Kong, I found the local congregation. The services were in Cantonese and Tagalog, but I sang the songs in English, and we shared a common faith. That is what Paul sought. Only then did he start teaching his faith to his Jewish brethren.

After knowing he had a safe haven, then he started conversing with those in the marketplace. The King James Version uses the word disputed, but the meaning is closer to a conversation or discussion. Why the marketplace? Because the *agora* was where the people would be. When

you live from day to day without refrigeration, a certain amount of time is spent each day in the market. It became the place where people shared the latest gossip and news. If you want to tell people about Jesus, you need to go where the people are. We cannot expect them to come to us in our assemblies. They won't, unless invited. And even then, most of the teaching is geared to believers. We must go into the marketplaces, whether actual or cyber.

Paul's discussions in the marketplaces brought him to the attention of the believers of certain philosophies. The Stoics and the Epicureans were about as opposite as you could get. Stoicism held that everything that happened was going to happen, and the best one could do would be to endure it. If there was good there would also be bad. Life goes on. The only sin was to take one's own life. The epicureans, on the other hand, believed that the highest good was enjoyment, and the highest enjoyment was doing everything in moderation. Happiness was the goal of life. There was no sin except excess. So when Paul came teaching about sin and forgiveness and a son of God, these people wanted to hear more. Some called him a babbler, but others agreed to give him a hearing. That is how he ended up in court.

## Areopagus

Areopagus had two meanings in Athens. It was the court, although not necessarily related to resolving crime. It was also the location of the court.

The legend was that the god Ares (Mars) had killed a son of Neptune for the attempted rape of his sister. Accordingly, by the order of Solon, the wise leader of Athens, he was brought to trial before twelve gods as judges. Ares was acquitted of murder. The trial was held on the hill next to the acropolis, which henceforth bore the name Areopagus (the place of Ares), or Mars Hill.

The Greeks wanted to know about Paul's new doctrine. It seems they sought to know about anything new.

Paul began simply, by acknowledging their own faith. He did not accuse or rail against idols, as some might have expected. Perhaps they were used to hearing such from the Jews. Instead, Paul said he noticed their devotion, based on the number of idols in the city. And he wanted to talk about one of those idols; one dedicated "to the unknown god." Perhaps this was a catch-all idol in case they had missed a god and didn't want to offend. Perhaps it was to a specific god that refused to identify himself. In any case, Paul preached about the one God based on this idol.

This God made all things. He wasn't confined to the sun or moon or anything else. In fact, he was so vast that he could not be worshiped in confining temples of men. He was the creator of all, and so did not need anything from man. Nevertheless, he made in mankind a will to seek God.

At this point Paul quotes the poet Aratus: "For we also are his offspring." This was part of a hymn to Zeus in the introduction to a work about astronomy. Aratus was a poet of Paul's home city of Tarsus and lived about 300 years before Paul. It may be that Paul knew of his work specifically because he was a hometown boy made good. By quoting Aratus, Paul accomplished several things. Since Aratus was not of Athens, but did write in Greek, Paul establishes his creds as a scholar; he was not just some backwoods Jew, as they might have thought. He is again taking them from where they were to a new place. He was causing them to rethink their own beliefs in a new way. And he was making the God of which he spoke equal to or greater than Zeus.

None of the preceding was really new to the Greeks. Creator gods were common. But now Paul

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introduced three new concepts, which were what they came to hear: repentance, reconciliation, and resurrection.

Idolatry was not something the Greeks thought of as needing repentance. In fact, pretty much nothing required repentance. Sacrifices were made to appease the anger of the gods or to gain their favor. Repentance had nothing to do with it. But Paul said God demanded all men to repent. Further, he said God would judge the world through one man. This Jesus that he had been preaching was to be judge and sacrifice for sin. Repentance was not enough; the price for sin must be paid. And that man through whom the world was to be judge had been certified through the resurrection of the dead.

Some people in recent years have tried to say that Christianity is just a synthesis of ancient myths. The problem with this is that every time Paul preached, people balked at this one idea: *anastasia*, resurrection. Some of his hearers mocked him. Others said they would hear more, which is often a polite way of saying they didn't believe him. A few, including one of the council of judges on the Areopagus, believed and followed Paul.

One wonders whether Paul's companions, after they arrived, asked him what he had done while waiting. Would they have wondered when he answered, "Oh, I just walked around, preached in synagogue and in the *agora*, and went to court?" Or would they have just considered that a normal week's work for Paul?

# *I BEAR THE MARKS*

When one has to undergo targeted radiation treatments for cancer, there are several things that happen. First, they lay you on a table and create a cast of your body so that you lie in the same position every time. Then they do a scan of the infected area to determine the exact location where the radiation needs to be targeted. Finally, they mark some x's on your body as reference points, again to make sure they irradiate the exact location. These marks have to stay through the entire treatment, in my case about three months. They renew the marks periodically, and may even put tape over them to prevent them being washed off. I even joked with my technician once that I might get the marks tattooed on my body after the course of treatment just as a reminder. Paul didn't go through modern radiation treatments, but he understood about marks.

From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. (Gal 6:17)

Paul may not have undergone radiation treatment for cancer, but he had received treatment for the greatest of all cancers—sin. He does not specify what marks he bears. He had not been crucified, so it could not be marks in the hands and feet. Perhaps he meant the things that he mentioned to the Corinthians.

In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils

in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Cor 11:23-28)

Even those things are not likely what he meant, however. This statement comes at the end of a letter urging gentile Christians not to be led into Jewish legalism. In particular, it is part of a section that Paul wrote in his own hand rather than through dictation. In this section he speaks of those who glory in the physical mark of circumcision. In contrast, he says he bears even greater marks. These are not physical marks of legalism. Rather they are marks that merit an even greater boasting. They may be the marks of the beatings and cold and hunger. But they may also include the less visible mark of immersion in order to die to sin. They are not marks of legalism but of submission.

I doubt that I will make permanent the marks I bear of treatment for cancer. There are many people who bear the marks of what they have endured, permanently inked in numbers on their arm while in the German camps. Those are marks that they often try to hide, not from shame but because it represents something very private and very real. Paul did not like to boast about his marks, either. But he would boast about them if it caused someone to listen to the gospel. He did bear the mark of circumcision, but he spoke of even greater marks. The marks of the seal of Jesus Christ, showing that he belonged to the Lord.

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