



# 2022 History Essay Contest Homeschool 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Winner

## Following St. Paul to Greece

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Have you ever wondered what St. Paul felt in his missions throughout the world evangelizing hostile pagans, facing persecution and possibly death? Last summer, I read *St. Paul the Apostle* by Windeatt and thought a lot about St. Paul's courage, faith, and love. Visiting the places he visited would help me better understand what he experienced. Of the places St. Paul visited, Greece is the country I would most like to see because of its importance both historically and Biblically. St. Paul traveled through Greece during his second missionary journey from 49-51 AD, spreading the Gospel to many cities.

The Greek city I would first want to visit is Philippi. Located near the coast in today's northeastern Greece, the city's name was Krenides when it was founded around 360 BC. Threatened by a Thracian attack in 357 BC, Krenides sought help from Philip II of Macedon. Philip, eyeing the potential wealth of the gold mines in Krenides, sent troops to defeat the Thracians and then named the town after himself. In 168 BC the Romans conquered the Macedonians, making Philippi part of a Roman colony. Finally, the city gained fame in 42 BC when Mark Antony and Octavian avenged Julius Caesar's murder in a battle outside its walls.

Philippi was the first town in Europe to accept Christianity based on the teachings of St. Paul. It was here that Paul met Lydia, a prosperous businesswoman who sold purple cloth to the wealthy residents of the city. Lydia heard Paul speak about Jesus to a group of women and, unlike other merchants in town, immediately converted to Christianity and was baptized. She then invited Paul to stay at her house as long as he wanted. While Paul preached in Philippi, most of the wealthy noblemen took a disliking to him. Their hatred grew stronger when he healed a possessed girl in the street. Because the demon inside of her gave her foresight, the greedy men made a sizable profit charging peasants to know their future. Her healing enraged them, so they had the magistrate send Paul and his companion, Silas, to prison. Even though they were in a damp, filthy cell, they still sang psalms praising God until miraculously the walls crumbled and their chains fell loose. When the jailer saw that the prisoners could escape, he would have killed himself had Paul not stopped him. He told the distressed man that he need not take his own life. What fascinates me the most is that Paul chose to stay in the cell instead of running away. I know I would have bolted at the chance.

Travelers interested in St. Paul's mission to Philippi are able to visit ruins outside the modern town of Krenides and walk along a stone street like the one on which he healed the possessed woman. I love the story of Lydia and want to see where she was baptized and the nearby monument and amphitheater that commemorate her conversion. Paul changed her life, and to thank him, she helped him as much as she could. I also want to visit the ruins of the ancient Roman *agora*, or open town center, where Paul and Silas were beaten and the dungeon where they were kept for "disturbing the peace." I am amazed at the depth of their faith that they could continue singing under these circumstances so much so that they saved the jailer's life, physically and spiritually.

The second place I would like to visit is the capital of Greece: Athens. This city has a long and famous history, but before 1100 BC, it was merely a small town within the Mycenaean civilization. The city depended on trade for wheat and other crops. The famous Battle of Marathon, in which Athens defeated the Persians, occurred in 490 BC, but only ten years later, Athens was burned by invading Persians. It was rebuilt by Pericles from 495-429 BC and became one of the wealthiest cities in the area. Athens was defeated by Sparta during the Second Peloponnesian War, 413-404 BC. Famous Athenians include Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Democritus, and Euripides. As the city developed, it became the seat of philosophy, democracy, and culture, and its influence continues today.

When St. Paul visited Athens, he saw temples and altars to many Greek gods, especially Athena, patroness of the city. However, one in particular caught his eye. On this small altar was inscribed, "To an unknown God." Paul told the Athenians that this altar was dedicated to the true God of the Christians. In their wisdom, the Athenians had sensed that there was more than just their gods, something they could not name or really understand. Our Catechism teaches that humans can know through observation of the natural world that there is a Creator. The Athenians, realizing that their gods fought so much and behaved in silly ways, seem to have felt that they were not enough to have created this world. Paul stepped in with the truth about God.

While in Athens, I would most like to visit the Areopagus because that is where St. Paul spoke to the Athenians about the altar to an "unknown god." Areopagus means "Mars Hill." This huge rock was where the elders of the city would discuss important business and decide murder cases. It offers a great view of modern-day Athens, including the Acropolis and *agora*, which are both historically important. Tragically, I would not be able to see the Athenian altar to the unknown god because it has never been discovered, though a similar monument was found in Rome and is now in a museum in England.

I would love to retrace St. Paul's missionary journeys completely, but Athens and Philippi make a good start. These are places where my favorite stories from Acts took place, and I would leave with a small sense of Paul's experience. Finally, before returning home, I would certainly need to stop into a bakery and buy some baklava because after all, it's Greece.

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