

Who was Damaris in the Bible?

A woman named Damaris is mentioned only once in the Bible, and we know hardly anything about her. Damaris, whose name means “calf” or “heifer,” was likely a prominent woman in Athens, Greece, in the first century. She is one of a small group of people who responded in faith to the gospel.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, records that Paul was in Athens, daily preaching the gospel in the public square (Acts 17:16) as he awaited the arrival of Silas and Timothy (verse 15). Some Greek philosophers heard what they considered Paul’s “strange ideas” and brought him to Mars Hill, an important meeting place in the city (verses 19-20). Addressing his audience of Athenian thinkers, Paul appealed to their obvious religious interest by remarking upon their numerous idolatrous shrines. He especially called their attention to an altar dedicated to an “unknown God” (verse 23) and proclaimed Jesus Christ as the God they were missing. When Paul proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, however, many of the philosophers became dismissive of him (verse 32), and his sermon was cut short.

Acts 17:34 says, “Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” We are not told whether Damaris was present on Mars Hill or if she heard Paul elsewhere in Athens. What we are told is that God worked a miracle in her heart, and she responded in faith to Paul’s gospel message. The fact that Damaris is mentioned by name may indicate that she was prominent in Athens or that she was somehow known to Luke’s original readers in the early church. Some commentators assert that Damaris was the wife of Dionysius, mentioned in the same verse, but that is pure conjecture.

It seems that the church at Athens never flourished as did many of the churches Paul planted. He wrote epistles to Corinth and Thessalonica and other cities with churches, but he never wrote an epistle to the Athenians. Also, Paul only visited Athens once, on his second missionary journey, and never again, as far as we know. Athens was not fertile ground for the spread of the gospel, and very few Athenians believed. Damaris was one of the few. The mention of Damaris by name may have been a way of honoring one of the small group of Athenian believers. Whatever reason Luke had for recording Damaris's name is lost to us today but was most likely significant to the first readers of his account.