

Paul in Athens: The Gospel to the Pagans

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to God's Word, so if you'd like to turn with me to Acts chapter 17, which is on page 926. Acts chapter 17, I'm going to read from verse 16 through to the end of the chapter.

Several weeks ago, just at the very end of last year, we were looking at the first bit of Acts chapter 17, when Paul was in Thessalonica.

And we saw there that the gospel was powerful to persuade some people, but it also brought opposition. And we saw Paul was hounded out of town, out of Thessalonica by the Jews, and he fled to Berea.

And the Jews followed him there, and he had to flee from Berea too. So we'll pick it up as he leaves Berea in verse 14. I'll read from verse 14 of Acts 17.

Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

[1 : 18] Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, what does this Babylon wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears.

We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

[2 : 31] 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.

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.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined a lot of periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God in the hope that they might 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 indeed are his offspring.

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.

[3 : 52] But now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, We will hear you again about this.

So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Amen. Do please be turning to Acts chapter 17.

Do have that open in front of us, as we consider Paul's time in Athens. I gave the title of Paul in Athens to our sermon this evening, and somebody rather wittily came up to me this morning, ahead of my preaching tonight, and they thought I was going to be sharing some snaps from a holiday in Athens, but if that's what you're expecting, I'm sorry to disappoint.

[5 : 36] Maybe another time. Amen. Amen. I wonder, do you ever feel shy or fearful of sharing the gospel with secular friends or family?

Do you ever think to yourself that the gospel just won't make an impact in our culture with its pagan worldview? Are you unmoved by the fact that many thousands in our city are worshipping false gods?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, then tonight's passage has much to say to us. Here, in the second half of Acts 17, Luke has recorded for us Paul's time in Athens, a city steeped in pagan idolatry, an intellectual powerhouse with centuries of the best godless thinking in the world behind it.

But right in the centre of this magnificent city, Paul proclaims the gospel with confidence to the pagans that were there.

So let's jump in. We are following Paul on his rather eventful second mission trip. A few weeks ago, we found ourselves in Thessalonica, where Paul was hounded out of town by opposition from the resident Jews.

[7 : 00] From there, he went to Berea, where again, he was forced out of town. He had to flee. If you look down with me at verse 13. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea. But Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens.

And after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. So Paul, perhaps to his surprise, finds himself here 300 miles south in Athens.

This is an Athens past its best. A few centuries before, it was able to boast of the greats of Plato and Aristotle. But by the time of Paul's arrival, its best days were behind it.

But it still remained an intellectual powerhouse. It had several noted universities. And as a place where people from around the world would come to learn. As I read verse 21, we can sense something of Luke's mockery here.

[8 : 18] As he notes all the foreigners that were living there in Athens. Verse 21. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

But all this learning and discussion and new ideas doesn't seem to have got them all that far. Look just a couple of verses down to where we see Paul talking about the altar to the unknown gods. Amongst all their many objects of worship, there was this altar to the unknown gods. Athens was a pagan city full of the worship of numerous gods and idols, but not the true living gods of the Bible. Certain parallels chime with our Western culture, don't they? We live in a nation, perhaps with its best years behind us, a culture which loves new ideas but really fails to supply satisfactory answers to the life's biggest questions.

Let me give you just an example. You may have heard of something called TED. It stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. It's a not-for-profit organization and it is devoted to ideas worth spreading.

[9 : 40] They hold two major conferences each year, one across in California and the other one is just across the border in Edinburgh. They claim to bring together the world's greatest thinkers and challenge them to give the talk of their lives.

The talks can only be 15 minutes long and if you look out TED online, you can see all the talks and you can watch them. And it's worth tapping into because it gives us an idea of what the thinkers in our culture are thinking about and the ideas that are around.

It's a love of new ideas, but it's failing to get to the real root of the reality of who God is. So this is the city that Paul arrives into, the intellectual metropolis of Athens.

He is waiting there for his traveling companions, Silas and Timothy. What does Paul do in this city of intellectual might and love of ideas? Well, as we shall see, he brings the very same message, the message he has brought everywhere else, of Jesus Christ and the resurrection.

Look down with me at verse 18, the second half of verse 18. He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Look down a bit further to verse 31.

[11:11] And of this, he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. It's the same message, it's Jesus and the resurrection.

The message that Paul proclaimed in the synagogue with those familiar with the scriptures is the same message he proclaims to those well-read intellectual pagans.

However, the way in which Paul goes about proclaiming the message is different. And we'll hopefully draw some lessons from that as we go through. We're going to take this passage in three scenes, three stages.

Firstly, we'll look at verses 16 to 21. And then we'll look at Paul's sermon as he speaks in the Areopagus from verses 22 to 31. And then we'll note at the end the responses to the gospel proclamation in verses 32 and 34.

So firstly, our first scene, 16 to 21, we see that gospel servants will be provoked to share the gospel with the pagan world.

[12:22] Gospel servants will be provoked to share the gospel with the pagan world. While Paul waits in Athens, he looks around. No doubt he would have taken in the beautiful architecture and the culture, but he notices things.

For him, this slight deviation to his planned trip was not time wasted on sightseeing. As he observed the city around him, a city full of pagan worship, his spirit was provoked within him.

Verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

He was provoked. Paul reacted strongly against all that he saw around him. This wasn't some nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. All these idols, a bit of a shame.

And then move on to something else. Not at all. He is provoked. He is deeply disturbed. Why? Because the city was full of idols.

[13:29] It begs the question, are we deeply disturbed by the idols of the world around us? I know for myself that I've become so accustomed to the idols that we see around us that I'm no longer moved.

How might Paul respond if he was to walk around Glasgow tonight and take in the cathedrals of Buchanan Galleries, Cineworld, and the Apple Store? What would he conclude about the people of Glasgow and the gods that they worship?

We live in a city that worships anything but the Lord of all creation. I guess we're not often deeply moved by that, by the fact that God is not honoured.

Many friends, neighbours, colleagues are worshipping idols that lead nowhere. They may live for pleasure and tranquility like the Epicureans.

They may live with a belief like the Stoics that nothing lies beyond death. But looking back to Paul, he could see that these Athenians had no clue as to the reality of the Lord of all the universe.

[14:38] They failed to see things as they really are. Paul's concern here is for the honour of the Lord. They were not worshipping him. What is Paul provoked to do? He is provoked to speak.

He speaks about what he's always spoken about. Jesus and the resurrection. Verse 18b, as we've already pointed out. Firstly, Paul speaks in the synagogue.

Verse 17, so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons. As we looked at last time when Paul was in Thessalonica, it was his custom to go to the synagogue to reason and to persuade.

We also read that Paul also went to the marketplace every day. If we read on in verse 17. And in the marketplace every day were those who happened to be there.

Now this isn't a marketplace as we might think of today. The marketplace in Athens was a social hub. A place where ideas as well as goods were exchanged.

[15:44] People would come there every day to talk, share ideas. We're given helpful insights into the sorts of people and ideas that Paul encountered there. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were amongst those who Paul addressed.

These were folk with a radically different world view to that of Paul's. I'll give you a very quick summary of what these two different world views were.

And we'll notice that not many things have changed 2,000 years later. So firstly we see Paul engaging with the Epicureans. Epicureans. Now this has nothing to do with the rather upmarket

cafe restaurant in Heinlein of the same name.

Epicures of Heinlein does an excellent breakfast by the way. The Epicureans took their name from the 4th century BC Epicurus. Who presented pleasure, an absence of pain and a presence of tranquility as the chief aim of life.

Pleasure was what life was all about. And that the gods, they were rather distant. Having nothing to do with life here on earth. That's what the Epicureans believed.

[16:57] And we see a lot of that today, don't we? What about the Stoics? They believed that God was in everything. They believed in a sort of pantheism.

And they prized reason and logic as ways to restrain passions. They didn't believe in life after death. And again, we know something of that today, don't we?

So you can see that Paul had his work cut out in the midst of these vastly different worldviews. But Paul does not flinch in the center of this intellectually prestigious city to take the gospel to all.

Remember Paul's words in Romans 1.16.

Paul is undeterred by the pagan intellectuals and brings them the same message of Jesus and the resurrection.

[18:09] The very same message that he has brought everywhere else. Now those who listen to Paul in the marketplace don't quite get him and they mock him. Look down with me at verse 18.

What does this babbling wish to say? Others say he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. They mock Paul, but they're intrigued.

They want to hear more and they drag him. They literally lay hold of him and take him to the Areopagus in verses 19 and 20. So he's seen Paul arriving into Athens.

He's been deeply moved to proclaim the gospel by the idols that he's seen in the city. He's spoken of Jesus in the synagogue and in the marketplace. He has now been taken to the Areopagus to speak further.

Let's move on to the second act in our passage tonight. We're looking at verses 22 to 31. And we see here that gospel servants share the biblical gospel with the pagan world.

[19:17] Gospel servants share the biblical gospel with the pagan world. It's at this point, as we step into the Areopagus, that the narrative slows right down.

Did you notice that as I read it before? It's good to sit up and take notice whenever we come across this in scripture. When the pace of the narrative slows, the writer is drawing our attention to what is being said.

And this is one of the few sermons of Paul that we get in any real detail. And it's worth taking note of. The action here takes place at the Areopagus.

This was the hill of Ares where the court of the Areopagus met in Athens. It was a body with civil and religious authority in Athens. Now we don't have a real equivalent now.

But something like TED, as I mentioned earlier, or the Royal Society, or perhaps our universities, might convey something similar as to what the Areopagus was all about.

[20:24] It was the best and brightest in the city in one place discussing. So how does Paul go about speaking to these intellectual pagans? How does he approach his task?

Well, we'll look at his method and his message. What was Paul's method? Paul's starting point is the Athenians' own assumptions and understanding.

He describes their situation, and by doing so, he is identifying with them. But he is very quick to point out where they have gone wrong. Look down at me in verses 22 and 23.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, 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 gods.

What therefore you worship as unknown, This I proclaim to you. Their starting point is the unknown gods.

[21:33] Paul in the opening lines here shows that he's understood something of the Athenian culture. They worship the unknown gods. Paul always begins where his hearers are, Understanding their worldview.

David Jackman put it this way, Paul didn't parachute in from planet gospel. He went on to their ground and begun where they were at.

Paul saw their idolatry. He saw their worship of the unknown god, And he was moved to help them make sense of the world around them. He starts with their own assumptions, But then moves on to

proclaim the truth.

What therefore you worship as unknown, This I proclaim to you. Paul takes their idolatry head on. What you guys think is unknown, I proclaim to you as known.

This would have sent something of a shockwave around the Areopagus. Paul is beginning to expose their ignorance of God. He's correcting them.

[22 : 36] Do we understand where our culture, Our friends, Our colleagues are at? It's good to try and think what beliefs and assumptions they have.

Understand where they might be ignorant of the living gods. We, when we share the gospel with those who are utterly unfamiliar with the Bible, We need to begin where they are at.

But we're not to remain at that point. We are to share the gospel with them. We're to correct their misunderstandings. And we can do so confidently, As Paul does, As we'll now consider.

So we'll look now at Paul's message. What does Paul go on to say? He's really tackling their false worldview, As he addresses them here.

The Athenians have sought to maximize themselves, And minimize God. They've turned the creator God, Into something created. Their worldview is utterly wrong.

[23 : 38] And Paul, in a sermon, Sets about dismantling their worldview. Let's run through Paul's argument here, As he takes on the Areopagus. As he takes them from creator God, To the resurrection.

So, verses 24 and 25, God is creator. God is creator. If you look down with me, At verse 24, 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. Paul, as he begins to persuade his listeners, Tackles their real blind spot.

They've reduced God to a created being, Who lives in man-made temples. Surely, says Paul, With the great Parthenon in the background, Surely, if God is God, Then he doesn't need a home made by us.

He doesn't need to be served by us. He has made you, Not the other way around. Not only is God not restricted to man-made temples, He doesn't need anything from us.

[24 : 55] He is Lord of heaven and earth. And he has created all mankind. And he is not found in man-made temples. Paul is beginning to dismantle their worldview.

Moving on to verses 26 to 28. God is knowable and to be known. God is knowable and to be known.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind To live on all the face of the earth, Having determined a lot of 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.

Paul moves on in his argument To say that God is knowable And that we are to seek him. That's our purpose. He's taking on their idea that God is somehow unknown, Captured neatly in that altar that he found As he walked around the city.

[26 : 07] God has made himself known. He's revealed himself. And that's the only way that we can know God. If God is there, He has to reveal himself to us.

We don't create him. We can't just conjure up a God. Paul argues that God, having created us, Determines where and when we live.

He determines the boundaries for our lives So that we should seek God. Paul even quotes with approval Some of the poets, The Athenians would have known well.

Down there in verse 28. He quotes two of their poets. And these poets have sensed something Of the truth of God, says Paul. Paul's argument builds here.

And he's tackling their idea That God is somehow unknown. Paul says no, that's not the case. God is known. And is knowable. And then verse 29.

[27 : 14] God is not creators. 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.

Since we're God's offspring, We're not to turn around and make the mistake Of thinking God as an image Formed by the imagination of man. Not at all.

We are made in his image. Not he in ours. We are created beings, says Paul. The God who has made us is knowable.

He's not some creation of man That we can control. Quite the opposite is Paul's argument. And then as we move to verses 30 and 31, We get to the real sharp end of Paul's sermon here.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, But now he commands all people everywhere to repent, Because he has fixed a day On which he will judge the world in righteousness, By a man whom he has appointed.

[28 : 15] And of this he has given assurance To all by raising him from the dead. This is the sharp end of Paul's sermon. This is where, Having dismantled the pagan worldview, Showing that they are wrong in all counts, That he accuses them Of culpable ignorance.

They are culpable in all these areas. They are responsible. And it is inexcusable. Hence what follows here. The Lord of all creation commands all people to repent.

Why the need for repentance? Well, as Paul goes on to say, It's because he has fixed a day On which the world will be judged in righteousness. These Athenians are culpable.

This is where the rubber hits the roads. One day the Lord of all creation is going to judge all the world. And this isn't just a message for the Athenians.

This is for all people everywhere. In all places at all times. We need to hear this today in Glasgow. One day we will face Jesus as judge.

[29 : 29] That's who Paul is referring to as the man appointed. Every word, every thought and deed from our lives Will be brought out in the open. And we'll be judged according to the perfect righteousness of God.

It doesn't take us long to recall all the things we've done, Said or thought that fall short of God's own standards. Let alone our own standards. How can we know that this is true?

How can we know this to be true? How can we be sure that there is a judgment day? Perhaps you, like the Stoics, think that life ends at death. There's nothing beyond. This is no big deal, you think.

But the proof Paul gives That one day we'll face judgment Is that the man appointed, Jesus Christ, Was raised from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is proof.

It's proof that the death of Jesus is not the end. There is life beyond death. And it involves judgment before Jesus. His resurrection is proof Of a future resurrection for all people.

[30 : 41] If judgment before the creator God is the future for all people, Then what hope have we got? Our hope rests in repentance, says Paul. Repent and know forgiveness.

This Jesus, who is judge, Is also saviour For those who trust in him. He lived a perfect life That we simply couldn't live.

And he died the death we deserve to die. So when we face the Lord on judgment day, He sees Christ's perfect life Instead of ours.

And we get the thumbs up. Now before we move into the third and final act In our Athenian drama, Let us note The confidence that Paul has In the gospel.

Here in the midst Of a sea of very high IQs, He is speaking the gospel. Those he is speaking to Hold a radically different world view To his own, But they are utterly pagan.

[31 : 45] But Paul holds nothing back. He takes on their ignorance And is confident To proclaim the gospel. He doesn't leave the hard stuff out.

Just look at how Paul finishes off his sermon. Judgment, Resurrection, Repentance. It's the same gospel he has proclaimed Everywhere else.

Let's not be ashamed Of the gospel, Regardless of who we're speaking to. As we'll see, Paul gets the same sorts of responses He's had everywhere else.

Pagan intellectuals In first century Athens And pagan intellectuals today, They don't need A dumbed down gospel. They need the whole gospel. And that is what Paul gives here.

Not a dumbed down gospel, But the whole gospel. So that's something of Paul's message. And then as we move to the final act In this passage, Verses 32 to 34, We see that the gospel servants Can expect mixed responses From a pagan world.

[32 : 53] Gospel servants expect Mixed responses from a pagan world. Verses 30 and 31 Is the sharp end of Paul's sermon.

And it is the fact Of Christ's resurrection That sparks a range of responses. Let's briefly note What the responses are. They're sneering. Now when they heard Of the resurrection of the dead, Some mocked.

They sneer. They mocked Paul. Secondly, There's intrigue. Others said, We will hear you again about this. And some accept, Verse 34, But some men joined him And believed, Among whom also A Dionysus the Areopagite, And a woman named Damaris.

These are authentic responses To Paul's preaching. And they are the responses That we still get today. Some will mock. Some will genuinely Want to find out more.

Some will believe And join. But why was there sneering? Remember who Paul Is speaking to.

These were people Whose worldview Had no space For the resurrection Of the dead.

[34 : 11] Resurrection was off the map. Not even a possibility. How ridiculous They must have thought. They mocked him. And we know something Of that in our culture too.

We've moved on. We know more. We know that people Can't be brought back to life. The resurrection Is impossible. Yet it is upon the fact Of Christ's resurrection That Christianity Stands or falls.

It comes down To the historical fact Of Christ's resurrection. And it is to this That Paul returns Again and again and again. And it is what we must return to Again and again and again.

But it wasn't all mockery. Some wanted to hear a bit more. Some believed. Let's not write Paul off here.

His sermon has not failed. He's met with the same reaction That he's faced Everywhere else he's been. Just glance back To the first half Of chapter 17 To Thessalonica And Berea 17 verse 5 But the Jews were jealous And taking some wicked men Of the rabble They formed a mob And then further on In Berea We see the same sort of thing The Jews Hounded Paul out of town This is the sort of reaction That Paul has had Wherever he's been And these are the same reactions That we can face As we bring the gospel To those around us.

[35 : 42] Yes, some will mock us. So let's be ready for that. Some will be intrigued And want to hear more. Let's make every effort To answer their questions And draw them closer to Christ.

And some will believe And join. We rejoice When that happens. But let's not Let's remember That the way people Respond to the gospel Is not the yardstick By which we measure success In gospel work.

Success is faithfully Proclaiming the gospel. Let's not be deterred By people's responses. How people respond Is not our responsibility.

That is not our concern. God will be at work In people's hearts. Our job is to faithfully Proclaim the gospel. So we have here In Acts 17 Luke's account Of Paul's time in Athens.

We have a detailed account Of how Paul Brings the gospel To the pagans. We've seen something Of Paul's method. He's not speaking To Jews here In the Areopagus.

[36 : 48] So he cannot begin From the same starting point As he would do In the synagogue. Paul begins From where the Athenians are. He has understood Something Of their idolatrous Worldview.

The fact that they are Very religious And yet Ignorant When it comes to Knowing about the Living creator God. We need to make Every effort To understand The worldview Of those around us.

We need to engage We need to understand So that we can Bring the gospel To them. We've considered Paul's message. Paul tackles In uncompromising terms The ignorance Of the Athenians.

He seeks to correct The points at which The Athenians Have got it wrong. We can take heart In the confidence Paul has In the midst Of this intellectual Powerhouse.

We can take confidence In his confidence In the gospel. The gospel Of the Lord Jesus Christ Is for all Even the brightest Pagans In our culture today.

[37 : 53] So we've seen Paul's method His message And as we finish I want to return To where we started And consider Paul's motivation. It was Paul's motivation That drove him To proclaim the gospel.

Why was Paul Motivated? Why? Because the Jesus That he had lived His life Hating and persecuting Had flawed him On the Damascus road.

But instead of Judging him He opened his eyes To the truth Loved him Forgave his Terrible crimes And called him To be his servant.

He had learned That this His God Had bled And died for him For his sins His God Had served him A creature To see this Lord Scorned And ignored And worshipped To see this Lord Scorned And ignored For idols That were grotesque Paul was deeply Moved And hence He spoke He proclaimed The gospel We have The same God We have The same Gospel We know The same Grace That

Paul Knew We have A similar Ignorance In our Culture Of gods We have A gospel That is For all
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