

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] Hi there, I'm Robbie, I'm one of the trainees here. I'm so glad you've joined us tonight, wherever you are. I don't know about you, but the longer this whole shenanigans goes on, the more I'm in dire need of a holiday. I love going away to somewhere warm, maybe a nice city, maybe somewhere like Athens, like Paul is in today. I love going around doing the touristy things, seeing the massive temples. Maybe you're like me, maybe when you go to that kind of place you get struck by the history of the place. Whenever I'm in that kind of place, I visit Rome and I remember just thinking, for thousands of years people have wandered these streets and thinking, what happened here thousands of years ago? I find it fascinating. Or maybe you love architecture, you'd walk up and you'd just be in awe of the size and the beauty of the building that's still standing. Or maybe you are more like, you're looking for the bus to find the beach and you want to stay beside the beach for the whole 10 days. None of this city nonsense. Give me a beach and the sea and the sun. That's all you need. I think it's fair to say that not many of us would go to these kind of places and feel distressed like Paul does. That's exactly how Paul responds.

So tonight we are looking at the second half of Acts 17. Paul's on his second missionary trip and he's taking a bit of a tour of five cities and he's just got on in Athens. Tonight we're learning about one of Paul's great speeches but the thing that's new about tonight's speech is that it's the first one he makes to a non-Jewish audience. In fact he's speaking to the Greek philosophers in Athens. These are the smartest men around. Athens was one of the wisest cities of its time and the people he speaks to in this speech are the wisest of the wise. So we're going to look at three things about this speech. We're going to look at what drives Paul's message, what shapes Paul's message, and then we're going to look at what is Paul's message. But before we get to all that let me pray. Father please be with us tonight. Speak to us through your words and may your Holy Spirit teach us more about you and more about your son. Give us the energy to stay focused on you this evening. In Jesus name, amen. So tonight we catch up with Paul. He's been separated from his friends and he's waiting for Timothy and Silas in Athens. That's a pretty ideal place to have to wait. You know you think oh Paul's separated he's got to wait. Maybe he's going to take a nice holiday, he'll wander in the city. You can just picture him in his Hawaiian shirt or Hawaiian robes maybe back then, enjoying the sights, wandering. Maybe he's visited the Parthenon, that great temple in Athens. You know he's, Paul's an educated man. He definitely knows all about that city and what it's known for. He'd be able to go and enjoy the culture, the speaking to people and enjoying what they have to teach him. He's in the birthplace of philosophy, the birthplace of democracy. He's walking the same streets as those greats, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. He's finally seeing these streets. Maybe he'd stop in a wee local taverna, have some Greek souvlaki for dinner and he just enjoys rest. But verse 16 shows us that it's not the history that he cares about, it's not the people or the foods, but he's struck by the idolatry. Verse 16 says, when Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. He's slapped in the face by everywhere he looks, he's being pressed upon by idolatry. The Greeks worshipped a pantheon of gods. There were more than I could name off the top of my head. There were so many. A Roman scholar once wrote that when you went to Athens, it was easier to find a god than it was a man. And that is the scene that Paul finds himself in. But why is he greatly distressed by it? What about this idolatry is it that almost angers him? Well, it's because he knows that every single one of these gods that he sees is taking the place and the worship that is due of the one true creator, God.

[4 : 24] The Greeks are worshipping statues of Zeus built by man instead of loving the God who created man. Paul is so driven by this inward distress he feels at the idolatry that he goes straight to the synagogue to preach and reason with the people there about Jesus. Now this is Paul's normal routine, but in this case we see that happens as a direct result of what he feels. He looks around

him, sees the idolatry and feels distressed and so he goes to reason with everyone about Jesus. So he starts in the synagogue preaching to the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks and then he takes it away from them, goes to the marketplace day by day telling anyone who will listen to him. And what is it exactly that he's telling them? Well, verse 18, the second half tells us he's telling them all about the good news and the resurrection of Jesus. He's telling Athens that Jesus came, died and rose again to free us from the idolatry and slavery to these false gods. And it is this preaching that brings Paul to the attention of the Epicureans and the Stoics. These are two groups of Greek philosophers. Why do they come to Paul? Well, they think what he's preaching is something new. They think he's preaching and talking about some new foreign gods. Some of them call him a babbling in verse 18, which certainly isn't a compliment, but I guess it gives us an image of how intensely Paul was trying to talk to people. So these people come and he leads Paul to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is the home of philosophy. It is the place that Socrates used to teach at. It's where Plato and Aristotle, they learned and focused what they taught. You may not know what they teach, but I'm sure you recognize the names at least. I'm not a philosopher, but they're those big names that you hear all about. And the Areopagus is where they taught.

The Areopagus was where the city of Athens was run. It's where the council met and made decisions that led to the running of the whole place. It's where the smartest men in the smartest city came together to discuss ideas. And that's what Luke tells us they love to do in verse 21.

[6 : 48] But what does Paul do? He gets taken there and he shows no intimidation, no fear that he's about to preach towards these wise, smart men. He just stands straight up and preaches to them. The sheer boldness Paul has there. He doesn't care where he is. If he's in a synagogue, if he's in the marketplace, or if he's in the Areopagus, he's going to talk about Jesus. He's driven solely by his desire to preach the truth about Jesus. He's seen what is wrong in Athens. He's seen the idolatry and he wants to free them from it. And he wants Christ and the Father to get the glory they deserve.

We thought very, very early on about how we feel when we visit physical idols, the temples, the shrines you might go to on holiday. They're easy to notice. It's so easy to spot where people are worshipping false gods. But when we look around at the city of Glasgow, are we hit in the face by the idols that people are worshipping? Just because they don't worship at the feet of Zeus or Poseidon doesn't mean we are free from idolatry today. An idol is anything that we put in the place of God.

It's anything that drives our lives. So what drives the people around us? What do they live for? Some of my old friends live for the weekends. They live for pleasure and going out on Fridays and Saturdays having a few too many drinks and just having a good time. Everything they then do in their lives drives just towards those weekends. That's all they work for. Or maybe it's not pleasure, maybe it's fame. Maybe it's just being liked and accepted. That's such a huge idol that we don't even realize is an idol anymore. People spend their entire lives just trying to be accepted and everything they do is focused towards that. When we look around and see people living their lives for idols, are we driven to the same level of distress and pain and anger that Paul was?

Or are we even able to see the idolatry in our own lives? Whether you're a Christian or not, something is driving you. Is it God and what he wants for us or is it some other desire?

When it comes to sharing the gospel, we will never have the sheer brazenness that Paul does in Athens if we don't feel what he feels. We're never going to feel that level of distress that he feels if we don't open our eyes and see the idolatry around us. Paul looks, sees, feels, and so speaks.

[9 : 41] We have to open our eyes and do the same. So now we've seen what drives Paul to speak so passionately, let's think about what shapes his message. And I want to say right at the beginning, the one thing, the biggest thing that shapes his message is the gospel.

It is the good news about Jesus. But in this speech, he hasn't just copied and pasted something he said to groups he's spoken to before. It looks very different to the speech he gave in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, for example, which was to a Jewish audience in a synagogue, but it's still the same gospel message. So what drives Paul message first off is the gospel itself.

But what we are reading tonight is a speech to people who have no familiarity with scripture. So how does Paul reach them? Well, Paul is clearly a thoughtful and observant man.

Verse 32 shows us in the limited time he's been in the city, he's gotten to know the city and its practices. As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship. It's these

observations that he's made that drives the speech he gives. At Pisidian Antioch, he opens by quoting scripture and connecting Jesus to what those Jewish people know already. But he can't do that here. The Greeks don't believe the scriptures. They don't know them. They would just dismiss him out of hand as some foreign god that those Jewish people worship down at the synagogue. But again, that doesn't mean this speech is not biblical. It is steeped in scriptural truth. He just never directly quotes from it. But so Paul uses a new angle here. What he does is he meets the Greeks where they are. He makes contact with what they believe. Look, you are very religious. That's a good thing. But look, you're so religious, you worship even an unknown god. He points them to an altar they have and that they worship at.

So Paul takes that idea and uses it. He uses it that the Greeks don't know or they can't know every god. They're ignorant of who they worship, as Paul puts it in verse 23. Paul's plan then is to introduce the Greeks to this god they do not know. Paul sees that the Greeks are way back on their understanding of the one true god. So he comes back with them and takes them along to show them Jesus. He needs to be able to give them that grounding to get to the message of Jesus. He doesn't continue on with his usual style. He wants them to fully understand what he's saying. If you're speaking to a small child, you're not going to speak in the same way you'd speak to an adult. You're going to simplify the words you use. You're going to explain things that you wouldn't have to explain to an older person or a teenager. If it's a five-year-old, you're going to have to be much more clearer and simpler with the way you speak. We adapt how we speak according to who we are speaking to. Paul's goal is to make Jesus known. So he's willing to go as far back as he needs to help those listening to him to understand.

[12:54] Now using the unknown god isn't the only way Paul connects to these Greek philosophers. In fact, verses 24 to 28 are filled with other ways that he introduces the one true god to these two groups of philosophers. I mentioned the Stoics and the Epicureans are the ones who it brought him to the Areopagus and it seems like this description is tailor-made for these two groups. Everything he says relates to something they believe and either connects to it or corrects it.

But Paul doesn't just speak to the philosophers. He doesn't just speak into their view, but he speaks from them. In verse 28, Paul quotes from two Greek poets to back up his case.

For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Paul's defense is not just made up of his own words, but he adapts from the people that the Greeks trust and listen to themselves. Paul knows exactly where he is and he knows, and he reads the culture of it and so he adjusts his message, his methods to get his message across accordingly.

It's the same for us today. As we look to engage the world around us, it's good if we can meet them where they are. We can't expect everyone to have a great understanding of the Bible.

The society we're in now is the most biblically illiterate, it probably has been for hundreds of years. What we need to do is meet these people where they're at and connect with and confront the beliefs of their culture.

[14:36] We have to know what they think and what their poets say, and I can already hear some of you having PTSD flashbacks to studying poetry and higher English. But knowing the poets of today doesn't mean we're all going to have to quote Carol Ann Duffy.

Today, any media can speak about the culture we are in. Paul wanted the Greek philosophers to understand what he was saying and he wanted to understand them, so he went to Greek poetry. Today, you can use any form of media to get into the mindset of those making it or listening to it. If you want to get in the mindset of the current generation of teenagers, you can watch Bo Burnham's movie, Eighth Grade.

It shines a light on what it's like to live in this world with social media and we're being liked. It's the most important thing. I'd highly recommend that movie.

It's eye-opening. Maybe you want to understand the culture that has led to the protests in America. Well, then you're going to turn and listen to their music, watch their movies.

[15:39] You'd listen to rappers like Kendrick Lamar or Run the Jewels. You'd watch movies made by people like Spike Lee. If you want to understand the culture, you're going to have to understand their poets.

Often, as Christians, we can instinctively retreat into our Christian bubble. We can avoid the music or the movies or the TV shows that people around us are watching because it's not very Christian.

But if we really want to engage those around us, we need to engage with the media they are watching. It's a good thing to do.

It will show us what they believe and what they live for. Paul shows us that while we present the same gospel truths, we have to be aware of who we are speaking to so we can connect the gospel with what they believe and so we can use the gospel to confront the things that are wrong.

So now we need to actually go on and think about what is the core of Paul's message. Paul connects this final part of his speech back to what he says at the beginning in verse 23. And verse 30 is the key verse here.

[16:51] In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Acts shows us the gospel going out to all nations.

It's not just for the Jewish people anymore, but with the gospel comes the need for repentance, which is what verse 30 says. They have to turn away from the idols they are worshipping and turn to Jesus.

That is what Paul is calling for. He's telling the Greeks, you've now heard who the unknown God is. Don't continue pretending that you don't. So why should they not keep pretending and just keep on life as it is?

Well, because Paul tells them that God is coming to judge them. As Paul speaks to them, I imagine they are very aware of where they are. Then the Areopagus overlooks the whole city.

It's called Mars Hill. It's up nice and high. The Areopagus was where ancient judgments were made. It was essentially a court for the city. And now Paul is standing there declaring the final judgments.

[17:57] When all is said and done, there will be no opportunities, no more chances. You can't plead ignorance anymore. So what is Paul's proof of this judgment that is coming?

It's the resurrection. In every speech that we read of Paul, the resurrection is key. Here he uses it to point out that if God can raise a man back to life, then he certainly has the power and authority to judge everyone.

The cross of Jesus Christ is central to our message today, as it should be. But at the same time, it's amazing how often in Acts, Paul uses the resurrection.

That's what he proclaims. It's physical proof that what Jesus said is true. No matter who Paul is speaking to, the message is the same. Jesus rose again.

He is the Lord who will judge us, so we have to turn back to him. And it's that message that seems to be the final straw for some of Paul's listeners.

[19:01] They turn their nose, they sneer at him, and that's it. They walk away. Paul ends with the resurrection, but for some of those listening, that's just the beginning of the conversation.

They want to hear more. It goes straight back to what Luke's already said. It's classic Aetherians, always wanting to talk and discuss the new ideas. Paul ends with the resurrection. But that's the beginning of new life.

For Dionysius and Damaris and others, they hear the truth. They trust in Jesus. They believe the evidence Paul has put forth. Maybe you're here for the first time tonight.

Maybe you're tuning in for the first time. Maybe you think that you have no idea who this Jesus is or what he spoke about or what he taught. Maybe you think Christianity is just for weirdos who need a crutch.

Maybe you're only watching because it's a Sunday evening and what else are you going to do?

Well, what Luke is showing us here, that the gospel that is preached throughout Acts is not just for one group of people.

[20:09] It's not just for the Jews anymore. It's not just for the lower classes. Here we see the great philosophers. We see the Greek people coming to believe in the evidence that Paul puts forth.

Even the smartest men in Athens and the punters in the marketplace can all hear and understand what Paul is telling them. Maybe you've never heard this message of Jesus.

Let me encourage you to go and find out what it is. Read it for yourself and see what Jesus did and said. Paul proclaims the resurrection as the proof of what Jesus said.

So if you don't know what that is, go and find out more. See if that resurrection really is proof of something more. There's a great warning for all of us in this passage.

The time for ignorance is gone. Judgment is coming. So do something about it. The story of Dionysius and Damaris, who are clearly two intelligent people in Athens because they're a part of this council, it gives us confidence that the gospel is worth being taken seriously.

[21 : 19] Even if people seem millions of miles away when they first hear it, Paul shows us that the gospel can connect and confront those people.

It can confront anyone's beliefs. So as we go into this week, let's remember Paul's distress. Let's keep our eyes open and look out for the idols around us and the idols in our own hearts.

If we see where Jesus is being pushed out by idols, let that distress drive us to tell people about him. Let's remember Paul's method.

Can we step into the culture of the people around us? Can we find out what they believe, what drives them, what is their goal in life? And let's think about how the gospel can connect and confront those beliefs.

And finally, let's remember Paul's message. Jesus died and rose again. One day he's going to come back and judge the world with perfect justice.

[22 : 23] When that happens, we cannot plead ignorance. We cannot pretend we are worshipping an unknown God because he's been made known. Only repentance is the way out and repentance only happens when we hear of Jesus.

Let me pray. Father, we ask that you would instill in our hearts a sense of distress at the idolatry around us. Father, open our eyes so we can see the idols in our culture.

Help us identify where your gospel, where the message of your son, can connect and confront those cultures. Father, we pray that you'd move our city to repentance and that they would see the evidence of Jesus' life and resurrection and turn to you.

Father, may you be glorified in all that we do. Amen.