

Talkin' 'Bout the Resurrection

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 0 0] is found on page number 1113, and it's Act chapter 17, verses 16 to 34.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say?

Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?

You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown God.

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by human hands, and he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole world. And he marked out their appointed times in history, and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him, and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject. At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed.

[3 : 1 0] Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. This is the word of the Lord. Brilliant. Thanks, Daniel. What a great passage. It'd be great help if you keep your Bibles open at Acts chapter 17. And let's join together in prayer and ask for God's help.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening. And we pray that the Holy Spirit would help us to listen well to all that you have to say. Would you inspire us? Would you challenge us?

Would you equip us to better serve the Lord Jesus? For we ask in his name. Amen. We'll try to imagine a conversation with a friend, a secular friend. You can try and think of the most secular friend you can think of. You know, someone who seems to have everything sorted, that seems to have a life together. Your most sophisticated, worldly, secular friend.

Now, what would it take? What would it take? Can you ever imagine them becoming a Christian? Can you imagine that? Your most secular friend becomes a Christian.

If so, what would it take? What would it take? What would it take for them to become a Christian? Now, maybe you're here and you're not a Christian. You wouldn't call yourself a Christian. You're just sort of curious about the Christian faith. Perhaps you're thinking, I don't need to imagine that secular friend. I am that person. I might not have everything in my life sorted just exactly the way I would want, but I'm getting on not too badly on my own. Thank you very much.

[5 : 13] What would it take for you to be convinced about Jesus? What would it take? We're in the book of Acts these past few weeks. We've been following the apostle Paul as he's been getting on with getting the gospel out there. And we've got a map to get our bearings. He's come all the way through modern Turkey and up into Greece. And for the very first time in history, the gospels come to Europe with churches planted in modern-day Greece. Well, this week, Paul's in Athens, surrounded by philosophers, surrounded by the cultural elite. And it's a hotbed of religious chat. That's what we're told in verse 21.

All the Athenians and the foreigners living there spent their time doing nothing but talking about the latest ideas. What's it going to take for them? What's Paul's approach going to be in Athens?

One man being asked to speak in a super scary intellectual place like that. How is he going to get the gospel to hit home in Athens? Well, maybe you can think of places you'd find intimidating to speak about Jesus in.

Maybe you'd feel like that if you went up to the art school or around the corner to the philosophy department at Glasgow University, surrounded by people honestly talking about Derrida, Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, whoever they're speaking about these days. How on earth do you share Jesus with people like that?

Maybe that's even how it feels in your own circle of friends and family and colleagues. What's it going to take to convince them about Jesus?

[7 : 10] What we're going to see in Acts chapter 17 is that we can have confidence in the gospel to prevail even in somewhere as learned and erudite as Athens.

And Acts 17 shows us that you have everything you need to share the gospel with those around you. So what's it going to take? Well, first, it's going to take the right kind of attitude.

This is to do with our hearts, as Amy has just been praying for. And in verse 16, we see Paul's attitude. Our focus is drawn to the fact that Paul is distressed greatly to see that the city was full of idols.

So as Paul's wandering around this magnificent city, waiting for his buddies to arrive, he's not overawed by its architecture and cultural impressiveness.

He's not overwhelmed by its scholarly learning. He's distressed that it's full of idolatry. So why is he distressed?

[8 : 16] I think there's probably a vertical and a horizontal dimension to this. And vertically, Paul knows that God hates idols. Anything that sets itself up as a rival to God.

Anything that competes with Jesus for our worship. And in Deuteronomy 32, we see God is provoked by idols. They made God jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols.

They sacrificed to false gods, gods they had not known. So for God's sake, Paul is distressed as he surveys the idols in the city around him.

Or as another translation puts it, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. That's the vertical part. The horizontal part is this.

Paul's distressed that the city, people all over this city, all these people, and they're lost. These people are lost. He sees their longing, he sees their searching, he sees their search for meaning.

[9 : 18] And he's distressed that for all their religion and philosophy and apparent knowledge, they're actually ignorant about the most important thing. They're barking up the wrong tree, spiritually speaking.

And speaking of barking up the wrong tree, on Friday night, under the spotlight of the world's media, we took a battering. We got absolutely hammered in the opening game of the Euros, an absolute drubbing.

But earlier on in the day, while there was at least still a glimmer of hope for the more optimistic of Scottish fans, a scene unfolded in Marionplatz in Munich that gives us an insight into our own culture in ways that are really quite revealing.

So reports started coming in earlier on in the day. Scotland fans had drunk Munich dry. Munich, famed for its Oktoberfest beer festival, had run out of beer.

And instead of Oktoberfest, Scottoberfest ran the headings. It wasn't just Marionplatz, it's everywhere they went. Glasgow Airport ran out of tenants.

[10 : 34] Aberdeen Airport had to change its kegs at five in the morning. And like a plague of liquid locusts, the Tartan army hoovered up every last drop of beer in their sights.

And fans reacted to this news on social media. One posted, Never been prouder to be Scottish. Another commented, That's some achievement.

Unbelievable. Well, we might smile at that. But what would Paul's attitude be? Don't you think he'd be distressed to see our cities full of people worshipping at the altar of drunkenness and debauchery?

Another thing from Marionplatz on Friday afternoon. And I heard on the radio on the way home on Friday an interview with a Scotland fan. She was asked, What would it mean to you if Scotland won?

She replied, Absolutely everything. Of course, she was exaggerating. But that's quite revealing, isn't it? An idol is a good thing.

[11 : 43] Like a refreshing pint of beer or Scottish football team. It's a good thing that's become an ultimate thing. To put it another way, it's a good thing that's become a God thing.

Anything that substitutes God in our lives as an object of worship. And to paraphrase a popular poet of our own time, You've got to serve somebody.

It may be an idol, or it may be the Lord. But you're going to have to serve somebody. Well, our city is full of idolatry here in Glasgow. Lost people searching for fulfillment in all the wrong places.

Do we have Paul's heart for God's honor and for the lost around us? Do we feel his distress? Are we grieved at idolatry? Or have we become desensitized to it?

Should we be more distressed than we often are? Because that's what it's going to take to motivate us, secondly, To get the gospel out there.

[12 : 45] So this is Paul's message. Paul's distress leads them to get in amongst them And get the message of the gospel to them. The next verse tells us he reasoned in the synagogue With both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, As well as in the marketplace, Day by day with those who happen to be there.

Paul is proactive. He's taking the initiative to set up opportunities for dialogue, To have conversations with people about Jesus. And the first thing for us to note here is that he's not really doing anything different Here in Athens than he was doing before.

He's doing what he usually does. So if you remember, last week, Paul got to Thessalonica. And so if you cast your eye across to chapter 17, verse 2.

Chapter 17, verse 2 says, As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue And he reasoned with them from the scriptures. Same as he did in Athens.

And if you flick back a couple of pages to chapter 14, Beginning of chapter 14, They've just arrived in Iconium. Chapter 14, verse 1.

[13 : 58] At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went, as usual, Into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively That a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

So it's business as usual in Athens. Paul's not really doing anything here. It's the same message, Whether he's speaking to Jews or secular people, Whether it's in the synagogue or in the marketplace.

Even when he's speaking to some of Athens' finest philosophers. In verse 18. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers Began to debate with them.

Some of them, And you can picture the kind of condescending Stephen Fry types here. Some of them asked, What is this babbler trying to say?

Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. So the Stoics and the Epicureans Represented different poles On a spectrum of ancient Greek philosophy.

[15 : 05] The stiff upper-lipped Stoics, Well, they wouldn't allow their minds to be conquered by their emotions. And the Epicureans, On the other hand, Embraced that sort of thing.

Opposite ends of the religious spectrum. It really doesn't matter, Because the message remains the same. The gospel that Paul preaches doesn't change.

It's a message about a person and an event. End of verse 18. Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus. Jesus, that's the person. And the resurrection, That's the event.

It's not complicated. It's a message about the person of Jesus And the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Any new Christian can grasp that and take hold of it And share that message with those around them.

It's not complicated. But it is profound. It gets right to the heart of people's deepest needs And desires. It's a message that meets even our deepest longings.

[16 : 13] Well, in Athens, they've got Stoics and Epicureans. We've got isms. We live in an age of isms. What do I mean by that?

Well, back when everything was simpler and less confused, We had modernism. And then things got complicated. And along came post-modernism. And everything exploded.

A pantheon of intellectual currents emerged. So we have essentialism, existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, Russian constructivism, deconstructionism, rationalism, neorationalism, abstract expressionism, To name but a few.

An age of isms. And what are we supposed to do with that? Everybody's got their own thoughts about how the world works. It leaves you with your head spinning a kaleidoscope of colliding worldviews.

You can be left wondering, what on earth do I do in that situation? What do I say into that world that we live in? If you're at a party and you end up chatting to somebody who's a neo-atheist, who's into Christopher Hitchens, or a new stoicist who's into Joe Rogan, you think, how on earth am I going to start speaking to Jesus with this one?

[17 : 30] We fear losing their good opinion of us. We fear losing our street cred. It can be scary. But if we want our secular friends and family to be saved, what it's going to take is for us to get in there amongst them, and like Paul, to open our mouths and speak to them about Jesus, to start talking about Jesus and the resurrection.

And so for some of us here this evening, we need to resolve to get through that pain barrier and to love those around us enough to get through that pain barrier and start talking about Jesus and the resurrection.

Some will sneer. That's granted. But for some, it will stir their interest, like the philosophers who invite Paul to speak at the Areopagus.

And this leads us on to our next section. I was speaking to someone I met at a wedding this week. I found out that he goes to church in another city, so I asked him, how did he become a Christian?

He tells me that he used to work as a barista back when he was studying, and there was a girl who also worked there. They get chatting about life and philosophy, she starts speaking to him about Jesus.

[19 : 00] Now, up to this point in his life, he basically dismissed Christianity as an irrelevance. But as she spoke about Jesus to him, he found that he started to want to hear more and more.

And so that was the start of his journey to faith in the Lord Jesus. A secular person, thoroughly secular, who came to faith. Well, Paul's brought to the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens because they want to hear more.

So he's given this very public platform to speak. If you can imagine an invitation to the Royal Society, Oxford University Union debating chamber, rolled into one sort of thing. It's the same message that Paul gives.

It's a message about the person of Jesus. It's a message about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And of course, he expands on these themes, but it's basically the same message.

But what Paul does with it on the Areopagus is really neat. And he basically does three things. So we can learn from these three things.

[20 : 09] Firstly, he exposes their idolatry as hollow and ultimately not fulfilling. He exposes their idolatry. Secondly, he shows how the gospel fulfills.

So what they've been searching for, this is fulfilled in Jesus. And thirdly, he shows how the gospel subverts. So they have to find in Jesus that he fulfills what they're longing, but they also have to repent and turn away from the idols that they've been worshiping.

And what he does is clever, but what we'll see as we get into it is that it's not complicated. He simply pays attention to who he's speaking to, what they're interested in, kind of popular poets of his day and that kind of thing.

And he puts all these things together in a talk about the gospel, personalizing the message for them. And he's not doing anything that any of us can't do for Christians.

So he exposes their idolatry firstly. Read along with me from verse 23. As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

[21 : 27] So Paul's on to something here in Athens that sums the city up. And it's quite shocking. Really, this is a city that prides itself on its knowledge and intellectual stimulation.

Yet here, Paul finds the most profound ignorance. Ignorance. Very religious Athens doesn't actually know God.

So you are ignorant. Sorry. You are ignorant of the very thing you worship. And this is what I'm going to come to proclaim to you.

So Paul's verdict on Athens, they are searching people, but they still haven't found what they're looking for.

Paul's solution. Let me tell you about Jesus. We'll come on to that in a minute. But at this point, you might be thinking, you might be thinking, well, that's all very well for the apostle Paul, but I could never do that, what he's done here.

[22 : 33] If we're not careful, we can start thinking that we need to become experts in the culture around us before we even begin to do evangelism.

Well, that's wrong. We're not to go on a wild goose chase to find the unknown God or whatever the cultural equivalent might be in Glasgow. You're already the experts.

You're already the experts on your family and friends. You know their interests. You know what they're into, what they watch, their music, what they get up to on the weekends. You're the experts on them.

So rather than thinking that you need to have some kind of deep understanding of the culture around you, you need to just be ready to open up about Jesus. Think of ways that you can speak into their lives and connect the gospel to what they're into.

So if you've got the gospel, you can get going and show them how it meets their needs and desires. So that's exactly what Paul goes on to do in Athens.

[23 : 37] He shows them how the gospel fulfills their longings. So they're looking for this unknown God. Paul shows them Jesus is the creator God they've been searching for.

So verse 24. 24. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. In other words, you don't create a place for God to live.

He's created a place for you to live. And we don't have time to go into these in detail, but every step, Paul shows them that your idolatry is hollow.

Your culture isn't giving you what you're looking for. So verse 25. Basically, God's not dependent on us. We're dependent on him for life and breath and everything else.

Verses 26 and 27. God's not lost. We are. He's determined the exact times and places we live so that we would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.

[24 : 45] Verses 28 and 29. We're God's offspring. He's not our offspring as if our idols could ever replace him.

And so to make his point, he's quoting from a couple of popular poets of his day, Epimenides and Aratus. And that just grounds the gospel in things that they can relate to.

It's basically like what Jamie did last week incorporating Taylor Swift into his sermon. So Jesus is the creator God you've been searching for.

Jesus is also the risen judge you can't ignore. So verse 30. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance.

But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, namely Jesus.

[25 : 47] He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof that the judgment day is coming.

Jesus is both just judge and saviour lord. And so Paul doesn't shy away from talking about judgment. He doesn't shy away from calling people to repent.

These are sophisticated erudite Athenians. What's it going to take for them to turn around and come to Jesus?

Well, Paul appeals to them with the gospel. Plain and simple. And when we do appeal to people to repent, then, like Paul, we can expect a mixed response.

So much more briefly, in conclusion, the people's response. When we talk to people about Jesus and the resurrection, we can't control what others will think.

[26 : 56] God has to open their hearts. Our job is to open our mouths. And for some, perhaps even most, it's going to be outright rejection.

Verse 32. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered. So don't be surprised. Don't be caught off guard. Try not to take it to heart when others laugh at you.

There's always going to be scoffers. But for some, as you tell them about the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for their lives, their interest will be stirred.

Others said, we want to hear you again on the subject. And so we should be ready for that. Some of your friends might surprise you with their interest and want to talk further.

So why not have a think about who you might ask this week to meet up for a coffee and a chat, to open up the Bible with them, to offer to start reading our gospel with them.

[28 : 07] You could be praying about that. Who might you ask? And then, amazingly, the last group, by the grace of God, for still others, genuine faith will result, verse 34.

Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

So the church of Athens is birthed. And what I love about this is, if you remember back to the beginning, I asked you to think of your most secular friend.

Your most secular friend. The most secular friend you can think of. Well, this is him, Dionysius. He's about as secular as you can get.

A member of the Areopagus becomes a founding member of the Athenian church. This is like a member of the British Humanist Society becoming a Christian, like Stephen Fry or Richard Dawkins.

[29 : 09] your most secular friend becoming a Christian. Isn't that amazing? So what's it going to take? What's it going to take for your most secular friend to turn to Jesus?

Acts 17 tells us, if we can have confidence in the power of the gospel, even in somewhere as secular and as erudite and learned as ancient Athens, we can certainly have confidence in the gospel in contemporary Glasgow, to have an impact.

You don't need to be the apostle Paul. You don't need to be anyone other than a Christian. You don't need to have anything with you other than a gospel, the gospel, and a willingness to risk rejection.

We simply need to have hearts burdened for the honor of the Lord and for those lost around us. And we need to have a willingness to open our mouths and speak to them about the risen Lord Jesus.

And then it's all up to God. So let's pray to him to that end. Heavenly Father, you know, you know, we often feel afraid to speak to people.

[30 : 29] So help us to have the confidence in the gospel and the willingness to open our minds. That no matter who it is we're speaking to, we wouldn't be afraid of them or ashamed of the gospel.

Would you give us a heart for the lost? Would you give us opportunities to share with those around us the hope we have in our resurrected Savior?

Help us then to be ready to speak to anybody. Help us to make good arguments for the good news about Jesus. In his name we pray.

Amen. I'm going to hand back to Johnny. He's going to lead us in singing again. Please stand if you're able.