

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] Well, ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to come this way for the walking tour of the city of Athens, thank you for waiting patiently with me for this.

But if you'd like to come this way and let's start here on the Acropolis. The Acropolis, as you can see, has a wonderful view over the sea.

We are 500 feet above sea level. And as we gaze around the Acropolis, this high hill here in Athens, you will see a whole variety of glorious buildings, wonderful architecture, most of which have been built within the last 400 years.

And of course, what dominates our view here is the wonderful temple, what we know as the Parthenon. It is the temple to the goddess Athena.

And if you look, you will see that there are 46 outer Doric columns, and there are 23 inner columns supporting this glorious, beautiful temple.

[1 : 01] And then if you actually just gaze above the top of the Parthenon, just look above the columns there, you will see that there is a glorious marble frieze recounting something of our glorious Greek history.

And you can see scenes wonderfully displayed throughout that frieze. You know, there is this sort of saying that if ever this frieze should depart from the land of Athens, that we would know great economic distress.

But that could never possibly happen. For example, this temple, the Parthenon, is a temple to the goddess Athena, and here she is, dominating the scene by the temple.

She is 40 foot high. She is covered in over 600 kilograms of gold. We are a wealthy land, and we are looked after by the goddess Athena.

And of course, as you gaze around, it's not just this temple to Athena that is here in Athens, but we have many other temples to many of the other gods. We have temples to Apollo and Bacchus and Diana, and Jupiter and Mercury and Neptune and Venus.

[2 : 08] And not only that, in addition to these great gods, there are temples and shrines to over 30,000 other deities. Why, there's a chap who was recently here.

His name was Petronius, and Petronius said that there are more gods in Athens than there are men. Now, if you just follow me in this direction, over here, we have the Agora, the marketplace here on the top.

And of course, as you will know, it's on the Agora, the marketplace, that most business is transacted. But here in Athens, our Agora has a very special place, because it was in the Agora, the meeting place, that our great philosophers would gather, the greatest minds that the world has ever known.

And so men like Sophocles and Aristotle and Plato and Epimenides and Sophocles, they were there. If I said Sophocles twice, Socrates should have been one of them.

But these great philosophers, they were here also, and they were able to discuss some of the greatest questions that have ever faced the human mind. Ladies and gentlemen, this city of Athens truly is a wonderful city, with these glorious buildings and our glorious heritage.

[3 : 25] And I can tell that you are all very impressed by what you see, except you, sir. You actually look to be quite unhappy. Maybe it was something you ate.

Well, let me just say that what was troubling the Apostle Paul wasn't what he ate. In the passage that we read, the NIV translates his condition as Paul was greatly distressed, as he saw all these things.

In fact, from the Greek, it's the word from which we get paroxysm. It means a fit or a seizure. What Paul was going through, as he viewed all of these things, was terrible.

Paul, of course, may have been a man of great learning. Paul was a man who held degrees from Tarsus and Jerusalem. Jerusalem. He was someone you would have thought would have been reveling in the opportunities that were presented to him there in Athens to visit this city and to see the glorious things that were within it, but not so.

For the Apostle Paul, something else gripped his mind. Something else stirred his emotions. We read this, chapter 17, verse 16. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed, paroxysm, to see that the city was full of idols.

[4 : 49] Literally in the Greek, it means this, the city was smothered by idols. The city was swamped by idols. Do you know in that city of Athens, there were even altars that had been erected centuries before a plague was affecting the city, and so they got a flock of sheep and they released the flock of sheep to try and bring an end to the plague in their superstitious way.

And wherever they went and then found one of these sheep, they would slaughter the sheep there in honour of the nearest deity. They would see, you know, what shrine is nearby, what temple is nearby. But if a sheep was found where there was no deity nearby, they actually would have, they constructed an altar and they named it to the unknown God.

So you can see how superstitious these people were. In fact, this word that's used here in the Bible to describe how Paul felt, it's actually also found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the septuagint.

And this word, this paroxysm word, this word of deep feeling, of deep emotion, is found to describe how God himself is reported to have responded to how the Israelites, when they made idols, when they worshipped them.

It's the same word. And in the septuagint, they translated as God being provoked. God was provoked. Why was God provoked? Because God is jealous for his honour. Isaiah 42, verse 8, I am the Lord, that is my name.

[6 : 26] I will not give my glory to another, or my praise to idols. And you see, what we see in Paul, as he is there in the city of Athens, was his passionate concern for God's glory.

It consumed him. It literally pained him when God was being robbed in this way. When there were others who, people were declaring, these are the gods, and these give you wealth and health and strength and give you good crops and give you good health.

And Paul was pained that the living God was being robbed of his honour and glory. And my friends, can I say this?

If we're to be people of passion, that passion must supremely be about the glory of our wonderful Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Creator, the Redeemer, the one who holds the highest place, the one who merits the highest praise, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the crucified substitute, the risen conqueror, the darling of heaven, the eternal Father's, eternal Son, the Lord Jesus.

He is the one who should consume our view and ignite our passion. Yes, of course, we should be moved by the emptiness of those who follow other gods.

[7 : 44] We should be moved by the thought of their eternal fate. We should be moved by wickedness. But above all, what should move and motivate us is what moved and motivated Paul.

He was passionately concerned for the glory of God. It should pain us that Jesus Christ does not now receive the honour that is due to him, that he doesn't receive the praise that is his, that he doesn't receive the love and wonder that he deserves.

And my friends, could I suggest that the idolatry that Paul confronted as he looked upon statue after statue and altar after altar is not so different, actually, from the idolatry that dominates our society today.

How do you think Paul would have responded if we'd taken him away from the scene in Athens and plonked him in 21st century Britain amongst our shameless celebrity culture, amongst our society that glorifies pleasure, amongst our society in which there is a preoccupation with self, where there is a fanatical commitment to sporting events, where there is that brain-numbing, lust-provoking TV programming, where there are time-killing computer games, would he not have been provoked by the things that we consider to be normal?

You see, an idol doesn't just have to be made out of wood or stone. An idol is anything that takes the praise and worship and energy and passion that God deserves above all others.

[9 : 29] However we dress it up, just as the Athenians dress it up, it usually all comes down to the basic issues of sex, money, food, power, or fame.

Now, some of these are quite legitimate in themselves, but when they take first place, then God is being robbed of what he deserves and Christ is being devalued. The great missionary Henry Martin said this, I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were to be always dishonoured. And as you look upon our community and nation, as you look at your colleagues and friends, let me ask you, do you feel pained that God is not being honoured for who he really is? Are you moved that his awesome beauty and majesty, his wonderful grace and love, his towering wisdom and patience, his matchless purity and perfection are not being adored for what they express? [10:32] are you jealous for him? Because Paul was. But the story doesn't end in Athens with Paul's emotions.

That's just the beginning of the story. Because of what is rightly stirred within himself, Paul proclaims the only message that can deliver and rescue idolaters. He proclaims Jesus. Not morality, not religion, but Jesus. Acts 17 verses 16 to 17. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. What follows? So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. So he did that as a result of the emotion he felt. My friends, could I say this? Evangelism is not a program. Evangelism is not a guilt trip. [11:40] It's not one of those unspoken rules or regulations that litter church life. You know, you must do evangelism. You must go out on the streets. You must give out literature. No, no, no, no. Evangelism is the natural overflowing response of loving and being loved by such a wonderful saviour.

Paul saw these things. He saw that God was being robbed of the honour that is his by right. He felt the pain and emotion so he did something about it. And I want us to see how Paul naturally goes about communicating Jesus in this story before us. The first thing I notice is this. He contextualises insightfully. He contextualises insightfully. What I mean by that is that his method of presenting the gospel, of telling the good news of Jesus, was governed by those that he was addressing.

We read this at the first part of verse 17. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. And we know from previous incidents that Luke's already described in the book of Acts that this involved the use of scripture.

[12:55] When Paul went into the synagogues probably wearing his rabbinical clothing, he proved that Jesus was the fulfilment of all the messianic prophecies. He was speaking to people who knew the Old Testament.

That was their scriptures. And so he goes in there and he reasons. And he says, look at this, work it out. He, you see, used an approach that was absolutely relevant to his Jewish congregation. But it doesn't stop there. Do you notice it carries on in verse 17, as well as in the marketplace, the agora, day by day with those who happen to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.

Now, this is a different category of people. This isn't the Jews. These are ordinary pagans and thinkers. And so what does Paul do there? He engages in dialogue with them. It's a rigorous style of debate with questions and answers.

It was something actually these people were well used to because it was championed by Socrates. The great philosopher was the guy who started this way of learning. And so what does Paul do?

[14:00] You see, in the synagogue he says, please open your Bible too. And he goes into the marketplace to pagans and he doesn't say, please open your Bible because they wouldn't understand it. But he says, let's operate according to Socratic principles of dialogue and debate.

And then in verse 19 we're told 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.

And this is another category. Okay, he's had the Jews in the synagogues, he's had the pagan thinkers there in the Agora, but now these are the intelligentsia, these are the academics, these are the professional thinkers and philosophers.

So what we find Paul doing here is a verbal thesis, an academic presentation. And in the same way, we must be careful that we don't limit our gospel presentation to just one way.

Different people require different approaches. And we must be sensitive to who they are, we must be sensitive to where they're coming from. And the technical word for this is contextualising.

[15 : 11] You see, there is great value in preaching the gospel in church. Indeed, when someone preaches from the scriptures, how could it be otherwise? And in this context of declaring the big story through God's authoritative revelation, the Bible, men and women are confronted and challenged.

But can I say it is so few who come within the doors of church anyway? 92% of the population will never darken a church door. So we need to meet them in their context.

It's all very well saying, come on, you must come and be on our terms and sit in these rows and listen to someone's talking head from the front. That's fine, but what about the 8% that you might cover, what about 92%?

We need to meet them in their context, whether that is the street, the home, the workplace, or the social gathering. And as the gospel is shared, as opportunity allows, there will be questions. questions. And there will be the need for immediate answers for which we must be prepared. And then there will be the place for detailed apologetics, just as Paul had opportunity to present a reasoned and measured defence to the Areopagus, so there will be those who can operate on that level as well.

[16 : 24] And we're grateful for academics and those who are skilled in apologetics who are able to operate at that level. But you see, the overriding principle here is that our approach must be shaped by those we are sharing the good news with.

So we see that he contextualises insightfully, but secondly, he connects wisely. He connects wisely. See, just as Paul would have established common ground in the synagogue, going to a synagogue, he was speaking as a Jew to Jews, do you notice when he came to address the Areopagus, he also immediately made contact with them.

He established some sort of common ground. Verses 22 to 23. Men 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.

Now what you worship is something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you. So do you see what Paul did? He didn't go in blasting, condemning his listeners, you know, going new vile pagan idolaties.

No. Rather he courteously acknowledged that they were religious. In fact, the Greek literally means they were God-fearers. He greets them as God-fearers.

[17 : 46] And he used as his starting text, not Genesis or Exodus or something like that, no, he used the inscription found on an altar he came across, to an unknown God.

So immediately you see he has started from where his hearers are and he has bridged over into speaking about the one true living God. Could I say there is great wisdom in such an approach? We need to identify with those that we are sharing the good news with. Where are they coming from? What are the questions they are asking? What are the problems they are facing?

Where are the situations where when I'm talking to someone I can say, you know, I know exactly how you feel? Or, I had the same questions myself once.

Or, I've experienced those same troubles that you're going through. My friends, don't start from a distance and throw stones. That's what so many do.

[18 : 46] You know, you terrible idolaters, you terrible sinners, you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that, and we do it in the safety of our church and we're not communicating the gospel to anyone. No, we need to listen hard and we need to build bridges.

He connects wisely. But I also notice that he communicates effectively. He communicates effectively. You see, these philosophers in the Areopagus wouldn't have known the Hebrew scriptures, but they knew their own poets.

So what does Paul do? He quotes from their poets. Verse 28, for in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring.

In fact, these are two quotes. The first one, for in him we live and move and have our being, comes from Epimenides, a 6th century BC poet from Crete. In fact, Paul quotes him also in his letter to Titus.

And the second quote, we are his offspring, comes from Aratus, a 3rd century BC poet from Silesia. So Paul was using their own poets against them.

[19 : 55] He was using some of their arguments about the human condition to prove his point. And could I suggest we should seek to do the same as we share the good news with people who are ignorant of the Bible?

See, what is the use of biblical analogies if our hearers have no ideas of where they come from?

What's the point of going to someone, have you been washed in the blood of the land?

Now, that's a very precious thing to us. We understand what that means. But to them, they're going, nutter, washed in the blood of the land. Or maybe this is a time that you should put out a fleece like Gideon.

Nutter. They don't understand a fleece like Gideon. You may not understand a fleece like Gideon.

These biblical analogies, and we used to speak in biblical analogies. No, that's not what Paul did.

You see, the reality is there are many people today who sense their emptiness. They know their lives are meaningless, and so they actually express it.

[20 : 59] They sing about these things. They write about these things. And maybe some of the best ways that we can communicate to men and women the essential truths about the gospel may well come from well-known songs, or ideas from widely watched teleprograms, or themes from well-read books, so that we can illustrate gospel truths.

It comes back to the scriptures, understand that. I'm not saying it's a different gospel. I'm just saying to illustrate, to make the point. We are building on the emptiness, the rebellion, the rejection that many feel, and we're saying we have an answer.

So, brothers and sisters, try and express what we are doing and illustrate what you are wanting to convey in ways which are culturally appropriate for those that you're talking to, for some people.

If you're slightly older, maybe you'll use people like Hemingway or Sartre or Beckett or Dylan Thomas, or if you're slightly younger, you might use Ed Sheeran or Coldplay or Big Brother or The Apprentice to make the points, to illustrate the points that you are talking about.

He communicates effectively. He illustrated with their own poets. But then, fourthly, he counters boldly. He counters boldly. You see, the gospel will upset.

[22 : 16] It won't sit easily with idolaters. There's no way that Christian communicators are going to win popularity prizes. Just look at the way that Paul confronted the assumptions of the leading minds in Athens.

Here he was, before the Areopagus, this great learned council. And though he starts in a very persuasive and friendly way, your God fear is just, when you actually start getting underneath the surface of what he said, you realise how direct he is.

He says, look, you guys, you don't know it all. He says in verse 23, now what you worship is something unknown. I'm going to proclaim to you, you say it's unknown, guys, think about it.

You don't know it all. Secondly, he says, God is bigger than you imagine. So in verse 24 and then verse 29, 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 hands.

We should not think that the divine image is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill. That is a devastating argument there in Athens. They're surrounded by all these temples and shrines.

[23 : 21] The temple to the statue of the great goddess Athena, probably towering over them. And Paul is saying, guys, guys, God is bigger than you. Imagine if you think that's it.

That's not it. They probably knew men who at that time were working, making statues of gods and goddesses. And he's saying, no, guys, think about it. God is bigger than you imagine.

And he goes on to say in verse 25, he doesn't need us, but we need him. Verse 25, and he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

You see, in Athens, you had to go and sort of feed the God and keep the God happy and look after the God if you wanted to have favourable results. And Paul is going, think about it. Think about it.

He doesn't need us.

He's not served by human hands. You're the great custodians of all these temples and statues and idols here in Athens, but the living God doesn't need you.

[24 : 19] We need him. And then fourthly, in verse 26, he goes on to say God's the God of all nations, not just you. Verse 26, from one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should

live.

You, in Athens, think you are the centre of everything. The living God is not limited to Athens or Greece. Verse 27, the fifth point he makes is this.

God's not far away. He's near you now. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

The God that you're sort of striving after, hoping that somehow you're going to connect with, Paul is saying, this is a God who communicates. This is a God who gives revelation. And then he goes on to say, sixthly, God's the judge, not you.

It's there in verses 30 to 31, 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.

[25 : 25] You see, he is standing before the Areopagus. They are a court, as it were, they're almost trying him, sitting in judgment. And Paul says, guys, I want you to understand, you are not the judges. Ultimately, it is the living God who is the judgeable.

And then he goes on in verse 31 and argues that Jesus clearly rose from the dead. He's the victor. Second part of verse 31, he has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

There is proof. You want to know proof? You want to know something powerful and effective?

There is someone who died and has risen to life. And there are many witnesses to the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Bold declarations, wise declarations that Paul makes there at the Areopagus. So what's the outcome of all of this? Here's an apostle preaching. He's the preeminent missionary.

He's the inspired writer of scripture. Surely it's revival time now here in Athens. Please just sort of form an orderly cue for the blessing. Paul's preached the gospel wisely, winsomely in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[26 : 37] Guys, just form up now. There is nothing of the sort. Understand this. There are no guarantees that any particular man or method will produce results.

results. It's all down to the wisdom and grace of our sovereign God. And rather than the blessings that he's seen in Philippi or Berea, previous places that Paul had visited, where great crowds were converted, and came to saving faith in Jesus Christ, instead, Paul is faced with three responses. First of all, as he's there in Athens, there's contempt. He's actually already faced it from the amateur philosophers in the Agora.

We read this at the beginning of verse 18. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? And in fact, that Greek word for babbler in Greek is spermologos.

It literally means a seed picker. It's a bird that scavenges for scraps. In other words, it was a slang way of saying that Paul was a plagiarist, someone who picked up the second-hand ideas of others and just sort of put them together in some sort of ragbag collection.

[27 : 55] In other words, it was an incredibly arrogant put-down. They are saying to Paul, what an idiot you are, what a fool. And which is exactly the reaction that Paul faced amongst the professionals in the Areopagus.

There in verse 32, we read this. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered. Friends, that's what you're going to get at times.

When you preach and declare and live the gospel, there's going to be contempt. What is this? We don't want to be told about the Lord Jesus Christ. We're not going to face up to the facts. Ha!

Someone who rose from the dead, someone who died for our sins, ha!

Contempt and ridicule. There's contempt. But secondly, there's curiosity. Look at verse 32. 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.

Oh, this is quite interesting. This is quite entertaining. This stimulates our grace-held somewhat. Curiosity that it seems Paul certainly didn't pander to. And then, thirdly, there's conversion.

[29 : 01] Verse 34. A few men 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.

See, humanly speaking, the mission to Athens was a failure. There were few converts. There are no later references in the New Testament to a strong or thriving church there.

But the point is this, some were saved. See, Paul knew that ultimately the work wasn't down to him. It was God's work.

It is God's work to seek and to save the lost. And as you minister in this community, you do so with all your might and passion and energy because you are paying to see that people are not giving the glory to Jesus, but you do it in his strength, you do it in his wisdom, you do it in his way.

And though it has often been said, this does remain true, it is not success that God calls us to, because only he can give that, but to faithfulness.

[30 : 16] And therefore I want to ask you, will you be faithful? Will you persevere whatever they might say? Will you persevere however they might sneer? will you grasp the opportunities of tomorrow in the expectation that God will save those he is calling to himself?

And will you so fall in love with Jesus all over again that it's the most natural thing to do? Here we are on a Sunday, I suppose the majority, vast majority of us here are believers, but what about tomorrow?

What's going to happen tomorrow in your home, in the workplace, when you do your studies? We are to be those who just so love Jesus that we just are going to naturally share him.

And it's going to overflow from us, it's going to shape what we say and the responses we have to different questions that are going to emerge as people talk about different subjects. As Christians, we're going to have something to say and there's a particular way we're going to act and it's not because we're goody goody people, but because we love Jesus and we just want to be like him and we want to bring him the honour.

And in that way, there will come up opportunities. In the conversations you have with others, you're going to have opportunities to speak about the Lord Jesus Christ. Brothers, sisters, we must be ready.

[31 : 33] And ready to respond in ways which are winsome and right and appropriate and helpful and encouraging and stimulating. And expecting that God, will do the work to save souls, but it is his work.

Therefore, we will be men and women of prayer, men and women who wait upon the Lord, men and women who just say, Lord, I can't do this, but you can. I'm just going to live a life which is for your glory and honour.

I'm going to live a life in which I want to take every opportunity you give me to just share Jesus and to show Jesus. But Lord, please, it's your work to seek and to save the lost.

And my prayer for you here in Whitby is you use all the opportunities that God greatly gives you, that Jesus will so use your responses that there will be more and more men and women who come to know and love the Saviour just as you do.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for that wonderful illustration of how Paul responded to the opportunities that he saw there in Athens. We thank you for the way that he really felt about what he saw in that culture and society.

[32 : 43] Thank you, Father, for his tender heart that was pain that Jesus was not getting the glory. And Father, help us to have tender hearts as we work and operate in this particular society. Lord, may it grieve us, may it pain us that men and women don't love Jesus, don't know Jesus, that they're chasing after all the wrong things.

Father, please, give us tender hearts. Save us from being grumbly old people. Grant, Father, that we would be those who are just passionate after Jesus and help us to respond wisely and carefully. Lord, we thank you that you call each one of us to use the opportunities that are going to come our way. May our lives generate those opportunities, Lord, as we live for your praise and honour and help us to be ready with an answer for the hope that we have within us.

Lord, use us, use us, even us, in whatever context we find ourselves, Lord, whether it's the college, the school, the workplace, whether it's in the neighbourhood, in the club or the pub.

Father, have mercy upon us that we may live for your praise and honour. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Close our time, shall we, by saying the words of the grace to the Lord and to one another.

[34 : 01] So may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.