

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] A verse we read before from Acts 17 and chapter, Acts 17 and verse 26, from one man he has made all nations that they should inhabit the whole earth and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

Have you wondered why you are here today or if you are watching at home, why you tuned in to this service again today?

Why are you not in some other place or doing some other thing? What sparked your interest to look or to seek out the ways of Jesus Christ?

Well, it's because God has a plan for your life as he has for mine and as he had for the Apostle Paul whom we're going to look at today or some part of his story.

And you really have to admire this man, the Apostle Paul. This zealous Pharisee, a Hebrew of the Hebrews who has had his whole life changed so dramatically when Jesus met with him on the road to Damascus.

[1 : 22] Such was the impact of that encounter resulting in his conversion that Acts retells the story three times in chapter 9, in chapters 22 and chapter 26.

From that day when Jesus met with Paul, he lived for Christ. And he would travel around all the Mediterranean countries.

There's a slide there, Ian. And you can maybe see it better than I can on the screen. He would travel around all the Mediterranean countries, traveling from country to country, preaching the gospel.

And today we'll consider this encounter we read about that he had in Athens, which was part of God's plan, because God wanted to reach out to the people of Athens as well.

1 Corinthians 9 says, Well, Paul was defending his rights as an apostle. He stated that though he was free, he was everyone's slave. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews.

[2 : 28] To those not having the law I became like one not having the law. To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some.

And I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I might share in his blessings. Yet along the way of Paul's life came much sacrifice.

Earlier this week in one of my daily readings, I read the comment, Obedience brings suffering because it demands denial of oneself.

The key phrase in the obedience of Jesus was, Not my will, but yours be done. And certainly the apostle Paul took on the same kind of mantle of sacrificing all for Christ.

On his second missionary journey, as you can see in the map here, he visited some 20 cities, starting at Acts 15, until he returned to Antioch in Acts chapter 18 and verse 22.

[3 : 39] The mission lasted almost three years, from the summer of AD 50. And many people, if you read the story, many people had come to faith along the way, before we join him in Athens at around 51 AD.

In chapter 16, if you read it, and many of you will know the story, Lydia, the seller of purple, had come to faith in Philippi. And there, he ended up in jail for preaching the gospel.

And he had to be in jail because, when we read the story, we see that the jailer was saved, and all his household. At Thessalonica, as was his custom, he preached in synagogues.

And three Sabbaths, he reasoned with them. 17 forces, and some of them were persuaded. And a great multitude of devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

But some Jews were not happy with Paul's teaching. And under protection, Paul had to escape to Berea. But some of the Thessalonian Jews followed Paul, and stirred up the crowds against him.

[4 : 55] And he escapes again, and he's brought this time to the city of Athens. Itching to get going and sharing the good news, he calls on Silas and Timothy to join him in that city.

Now, with time on his hands, Paul strolls around the city. And there's another slide there, I think, Ian. The city of Athens, and you see the Parthenon on top of the Acropolis.

And just down to the right is the Acropolis.

And with time on his hands, Paul strolls around the city, and he realizes in his heart that there is a great need in this city.

For people, in essence, were not following God, the God of creation, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, but they were enslaved by all the idols that they had set up in the city.

[6 : 08] It says in verse 16, While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. And while he waited for Timothy and Silas to join him, he walked around the city, and he was distressed at what he saw.

There was apparently 360 or more gods in Greek culture, and many of them on display in Athens.

There's another picture there. Oh, that's... That's not the one I was looking at. Next one again.

No, I didn't put it on. Sorry. Just leave that one on. I remember visiting Athens a number of years ago, and we visited the museum in Athens. It was very impressive, I thought, what we saw in the museum.

But we did get a bit fed up of the guide, because she spoke continually about the Greek gods, Zeus and Aris and Apollo and Artemis and Aphrodite and Athena and others, plus a whole lot of lesser gods, demigods.

[7 : 22] But we must ask ourselves, do we have gods in Aberdeen, or in any town or city, in our own land? Perhaps not in the same manner as they had there in Athens, in Paul's day.

Nevertheless, Scots, too, can have objects of worship other than the one through God.

But are you not glad here today to be a worshipper of the one true God, the creator of the world, the father of mercy, and the God of grace?

And that you have not bowed down, or that you certainly do not bow down now to the gods of this world, as it did in Greece, in Athens at that time.

In addition to the twelve Olympian gods, there was a thirteenth Olympian, which they knew as the unknown God. Now, the Greeks were smart in philosophy and science.

[8 : 31] They weren't daft. And in many ways, they were open-minded, because, as we read there, they discussed, Jews and Greeks among them, discussed different things in the world. So, they could have their minds persuaded to new ideas.

And Paul had come in with a new idea. Now, as we look around our own society today, what they call a woke society, we're told what we should believe.

And it's not what we believe in traditional Christian belief or standards. And if we believe in traditional Christianity, we're sometimes made out to be wrong and to be bigoted.

I wonder if Paul came into our land today, what would he make of what he sees in this country today? There were shrines devoted to the unknown God in both Greece and Rome.

And Paul saw this great opportunity to reveal the God that they had hitherto not known. Now, as he was going around Athens, he would have seen some wonderful architecture.

[9 : 54] And Athens is said to have been more beautiful than any other city in the world in that time. But Paul makes no mention of the city's buildings here. His mind and heart was on reaching the hearts of the people in Athens because they were ignorant of the God that he had come to know and loved through Jesus.

He wanted to come to them and fill that God-shaped void they had in their hearts. They had sought their satisfaction in worshipping idols but they were still not satisfied.

On our visits to Israel we see many beautiful buildings. Many of them erected many hundreds of years ago linking their site to the scriptures.

And one of those buildings is built over the house of Caiaphas the high priest. It's beautiful in itself a beautiful building. This is quite a modern building.

But many people can become very emotional in it when they go down into the pit of the cistern which is said to have held Christ before he was tried before he encountered his trials.

[11 : 16] It's no sin to admire the structures that man has built but they're not to become objects of worship.

And we see that Paul wasn't wasting any time here as he waited for Timothy and Silas. And as was his custom he entered the local synagogue where in verse 17 it says he reasoned with both Jews and God fearing Greeks.

So when they came to the synagogue it wasn't services like we have today. People were debating. Maybe like an open Bible study we would say today.

But he reasoned with both Jews and God fearing Greeks. And it says that he also met people in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

So obviously Paul was a guy who would talk to anyone. Now there used to be meeting places in every town and if you remember Woolies I'm sure most of you remember Woolies in different towns.

[12 : 24] people in places. And it was a meeting place for people. It certainly wasn't Stornoway where I often was. Now it's most likely coffee houses that we meet in.

And it is as it was good to meet with people. But I'm not sure if our conversations today will reach the depths or the levels that Paul reached here in Athens.

Verse 18 says a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked what is this babbler trying to say?

They were putting him down. Others remarked he seems to be advocating foreign gods, unknown gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

resurrection. This teaching was brand new to them. Now the Stoics and Epicureans were two schools of philosophy.

[13 : 29] One present day commentator summed them up, I'm not going into it in a big way, summed them up by saying whether you favour Stoicism or Epicureanism their philosophies remain startlingly relevant in the modern world where we are obsessed with wellness, happiness and living the good life.

So the apostle brought his argument of a better way of life to them and they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus where they said to him may we know what the new teaching is that you are presenting.

Now that's a slide of the Areopagus, that big stone there just below the Parthenon. Now the Areopagus was a court, a court in ancient Athens and it took its name from Aris Hill or Mars Hill on the northwest of the Acropolis and that's where the so-called Areopagus met.

Today all that remains is that massive rock, there's no buildings on it and it was there that Paul challenged the members of the Areopagus.

You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we are to know what they mean. All the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

[15 : 03] Paul was undaunted by the company of those Greek thinkers and there he proclaimed the faith, his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in their midst and what they heard was quite remarkable to their ears.

Now it seems to me that many of us who have been brought up with the gospel from our mother's knees shall we say are accustomed to the gospel. We've always heard it but there are others in this world who come and meet with the gospel for the first time and it's so refreshing to them and this was the case with some of the people that were encountering Paul here.

when we speak of our faith today do people sit up and think what's this they're talking about? Indeed I believe our faith in Jesus Christ is as strange today to some people as it was to the Stoics and the Epicureans back in Paul's yet we find that people we meet and people who know are looking for life's answers they were then they are now and Paul was now getting this tremendous opportunity to speak and like Jesus he uses what they know as the launching pad when Jesus would take illustrations from the countryside round about from farming or things like that and Paul says in verse 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the

Areopagus and said people of Athens I see that 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 what an opportunity and Paul is beginning with what he finds among the Athenians he wants a hearing and he states perhaps what was pleasing to their ears you are very religious aren't you and they would say oh yes we are it's like saying I've seen all your statues they're very impressive and you've won statue to the unknown God as well look I want to tell you what I know about this

God that is unknown to you for I know this God or would it be that we might be able to use that kind of illustration today when we meet with people who do not know God so Paul very respectfully gives an account of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ he's smart enough to understand the psyche of his audience he doesn't denounce their beliefs he says you're very religious in their own way and in a sense that has earned him the right to speak he explains who the God unknown to them actually is verse 24 he is the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by hands what Paul is doing here is he is in a sense opposing their opinions but indirectly he doesn't say you're wrong while there were many gods that they worship there is only one true

[19 : 16] God God Paul is in a sense putting a positive reflection on it he doesn't say that their gods don't matter because they matter to them but he is saying that the God they do not know is the creator of everything he is the one who is supreme then this God Paul speaks of is not part of creation he wasn't made by human hands he separated from the created order unlike other gods yet intimately involved with it because he made it he says in verse 25 and he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything rather he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else everything necessary to sustain life comes from him from this God that is unknown to you so far surely they will come to realize how dependent they are on this

God from one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth he marked out their appointed times and history and the boundaries of their lands from the time of Adam and Eve God had plans for the nations of the world and for mankind all the way back from the beginning it says here he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of the lands I asked at the beginning what are you doing here today why are you here why are you here at all why are you not in some other place years maybe you've pondered why you were born into a certain family at a particular point of history and in a particular land when you could have been born 300 years ago somewhere else 150 years ago and how come you've ended up in Aberdeen at this point in your life is that a mistake or is that a

God appointment actually God wants us to understand through the story that God is arranging points in our lives so that we might at first seek him and that he might be able to use us you are here today in the free church in Aberdeen or watching a free church service because God wants you to hear this message maybe for the first time or for the umpteenth time you see God's word is new every morning new every day God in Jesus wants to have a personal relationship with you Paul states in this message to the Greeks in verse 27 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 of us do you believe God is here today through his

Holy Spirit I'm sure you do maybe you've already sensed God speaking to you through the words we have here in the Acts of the Apostles God is here to speak to us and to speak to those who are listening online today God has created us in such a way that we have a natural craving for fulfillment which is ultimately found in him found in God Ecclesiastes 3 and 11 says he has made everything beautiful in his time he has also put eternity in their hearts except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end so mankind male and female man and woman they've got this void in their hearts until they find

God and what a difference this truth makes when we find him to realize that God loves us so much that he sent Jesus Christ his son into the world to save us by his grace Adam's sin has blinded us so that we cannot find God and yet our hearts are not at rest as the hymn writer says until we find rest in him this fact reminds us or explains why there are so many religions in the world as there was in Athens they were very religious human beings search for God but none can find God until God himself reveals himself to the seeker and that's where God's saving grace is made known there's a need in us to have an object of worship is God revealing himself to someone here this morning maybe you've got a maybe maybe you've got a clearer picture of who God is and what he means in your life than you did before and perhaps you find yourself in this position today that you're looking for a real meaning in your life perhaps you've been looking in the wrong direction and this morning God is saying to you

[25 : 51] I'm here listen to me come to me and I will give you rest you see the Greeks were looking for answers in their day that's why they had so many gods that's why they worshipped so many gods they were looking for a deeper satisfaction and Paul is showing them the path to true fulfillment in Christ Jesus for in him we live and move and have our being as some of your own poets have said we are his offspring assuming this to be true Paul is implying here that they should give some heed to their own poets and this is Paul's gist here in verse 29 we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by man's design or skill all these materials were made in making images of their gods it's absurd to think that the source of all life and intelligence is found in a lifeless block of wood or stone or precious stone or gold surely they are beginning to understand through the strength of

Paul's argument that these things will not save them there was a time he says when people were ignorant of the true God and worship gods made of metal wooden stone that was before God's salvation plan was understood and it says in verse 30 in the past God overlooked such ignorance and now he commands all people everywhere to repent why would he say that well the judgment day is coming life is neither progress to extinction as the epicureans thought or a Hindu type pathway to God as the Stoics imagined life is a journey where one day we will stand before the judge of all the earth for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has given proof of all this to all men by raising him from the dead now

Paul's purpose is clear he's not wanting to add another god to the pantheon rather he is looking for the Athenians to repent of a sinful worship of false gods saying now the gospel the good news of Jesus has been revealed to you God will no longer overlook this ignorance because you now know that there is a God to worship and the very same principle applies to us today Oswald J.

Smith and this quote has been attributed to many people but it's thought that Oswald J. Smith said it first of all no one has the right to hear the gospel twice while there remains someone who has not heard it once if you have heard the gospel once you know that there is just one true God God Acts Acts 14 16 says in the past he permitted all the nations to go their own ways but he has never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness for instance he sends you rain and good crops and give us you food and joyful hearts Paul has deferred the misunderstood subject of resurrection until the end of his speech here and he says in 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 at that

Paul left the council a few men became followers of Paul and believed among them was Dionysus a member of the Areopagus and also a woman named Amaris and a number of others so here as it always is the response to the preaching of the word of God and the preaching of Paul servant is mixed some mocked that amused by Paul's passionate plea to give up their gods and to look to the one true God some have put off the decision until a rainy day maybe maybe I'll be in more of a position tomorrow to think about these things but tomorrow may never come and some believed thank God for that only a fool will reject God's offer of salvation how do you respond today to

[31 : 42] God's ancient and ever new message of salvation as a message as relevant and as new this morning as it was to the Athenians on the day that Paul presented it I do pray that you have heard something of the voice of God working through the spirit into your spirit today and his calling upon your life if you have never yet made that step over to belief in the Lord Jesus Christ let's pray O gracious God we thank you again for leaving us with a story such as this because in our world there are also many gods but there is still only the one through God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and we thank you Lord that you sent your son into this world to save sinners such as we are and Father we thank you that you have provided a way back to happiness and to righteousness in Christ through whom who died and rose again and so Lord we pray for any among us today in the hearing who have to make that step of faith Lord give them the strength you gave to people in Paul's day that they may have a life fulfilled in and through the Lord Jesus Christ hear our prayers we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen Thank you.