

Acts 17B

- At the end of chapter 17, Paul has filled his time waiting for Timothy and Silas to join him by street preaching to the pagan Greek city
 - On one day he caught the attention of two leading schools of philosophy, the Epicureans and the Stoics
 - Consequently, they invite Paul to join an elite group of privileged thinkers and debaters who met on Mars Hill and passed their time challenging each others' ideas
 - Into this setting where the blind lead the blind, Paul steps in with the truth..

[Acts 17:19](#) And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"

[Acts 17:20](#) "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."

[Acts 17:21](#) (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

[Acts 17:22](#) So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

[Acts 17:23](#) "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

- Paul is at his best in this moment as he rises to the occasion and preaches the Gospel
 - Luke probably recorded this scene in part because it shows such fine example of how this short, Jewish Pharisee could adapt his approach to reach any audience
 - We could spend some time analyzing Paul's approach to presenting the Gospel, but for today we'll just hit the highlights
 - Before looking at Paul's statements in detail, we see a difference already from what we've seen Paul do in the past
 - Remember to the Jews in Thessalonica, Paul reasoned with the Jews and offered proof that Jesus was the Messiah
 - We said proof was Scripture from the Old Testament
 - In this scene, Paul never references Scripture at all

- Considering his audience, this makes perfect sense, right?
 - They didn't know the Jewish Scriptures and wouldn't have cared if Paul quoted them
- So Paul takes an entirely different, culturally appropriate approach
- Paul opens his statement with a wonderful comment that has two meanings simultaneously
 - Paul walks a fine line between flattery, which is a dishonest compliment, and criticism
 - He says they are "very religious" in all respects
 - The Greek word is deisidaimon, which has two meanings in Greek
 - It can mean religious as in pious or as in superstitious
 - By using this word, Paul gave his audience the chance to hear it as a compliment (i.e., pious)
 - While Paul himself meant it more as a statement of fact, though with a negative connotation (they were superstitious)
 - Undoubtedly, his opening gained their attention since Paul was clearly not from around these parts
 - As a visitor invited to join this elite group, Paul understood the need to be polite and respectful of his audience
 - Paul also appreciated that this group appreciated oratory skill
 - So he elevated his game, so to speak, to meet their expectations
- Next, Paul does something that every good preacher worth his keep will do when visiting a new audience
 - He looks for a "hook"
 - A hook is any device or prop taken from the culture or setting useful for giving the speaker an opportunity to place his message in a familiar context

- In Paul's case, the hook was the statue to an unnamed god
 - Greek documents often referred to altars to unknown gods, erected to appease the god whose name was unknown to men
 - Paul knew he needed a way to introduce the true God to a people who believed they had already accounted for all gods in their pantheon
 - Furthermore, Paul risked being charged with preaching a new religion, which would have been proselytizing, a violation of Roman law
- So Paul says I saw your altar to an unnamed god
 - And I know the name of that god
 - What a wonderful hook
 - Instantly, they are interested and feel no reason to be threatened by his message
 - It would be like someone saying they have discovered the name of the soldier in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
- This hook gives Paul the chance to make a sharp turn to the Gospel without leaving his audience behind
 - Before we look at what follows, let's consider what Paul's approach means for us
 - Paul knows that men are fickle and what they say they want to hear can change in an instant
 - He could have launched directly into the Gospel, but perhaps he would have been shouted down or ignored
 - Instead, he eases his audience into the truth hoping to hold on to as many as he can
 - I think of Paul pulling a wagon with his audience sitting inside
 - If he yanks the wagon ahead too quickly, everyone falls out the back
 - Instead, he moves steadily but slowly hoping not to lose anyone

- We might ask what about God's sovereignty in salvation?
 - Can't Paul preach anyway he wants without concern since God brings faith to the heart?
 - The answer is no
 - Yes, God brings faith, but in His wisdom He works through our efforts,
 - When our efforts lack care or effort, He commonly withholds His grace in that moment
 - No fewer people will be saved in the end, but our efforts go unrewarded in the moment
 - Paul worked hard to preach the Gospel and his methods were carefully tailored to his audience
 - Paul famously said he became all things to all people so that he might win a few
 - And Paul also said that he planted while others watered, but it was God who caused the growth
 - He understood both God's sovereignty over outcomes and man's responsibility to give God our best efforts

[Acts 17:24](#) "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;

[Acts 17:25](#) nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

[Acts 17:26](#) and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,

[Acts 17:27](#) that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

[Acts 17:28](#) for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'

- We're going to review Paul's remarkable presentation of the Gospel to these men, but first notice that Jesus name is never even mentioned
 - This preaching should challenge all our preconceived notions concerning evangelism

- Paul does not use any of the classic “Christian-ese” for presenting the Gospel
- Can someone be saved with the words Paul uses?
 - If you think not, then you’re placing too much emphasis on your words to save someone
 - Just as someone who assumes that God’s sovereignty doesn’t require they make any effort at all is placing too little emphasis on their own actions
- Let’s look at what says and why it meets the requirements of the Gospel presentation
- Paul begins by describing the one true God, Who might be known by His work in Creation
 - God made all things and is Lord of Heaven and Earth
 - In the language Paul chooses, he directly contradicts certain Greek concepts
 - In v.24, Paul is addressing the Stoics, who believed that all matter was eternal and had no beginning
 - But Paul says there is a God Who made everything
 - Greeks believed different gods ruled over different aspects of creation
 - The Paul adds that this God continues to rule over all that He has created
 - And therefore He doesn’t dwell in temples built by human hands
 - He is not one of the nearly 3,000 different temple gods found in the Greek pantheon
 - In v.25, Paul moves to the Epicureans
 - God is self-supplying
 - There is nothing men can offer God that will impress or please Him

- This was directed at the Epicureans who assumed that God viewed pleasure in the same way they did
 - God wanted them to please Him through sacrifice and other rituals
- Paul says this God is the source of all life and everything depends on Him
 - This directly contradicted both camps who felt the gods were far removed from the everyday lives of men
- In v.26 Paul moves to God's role in making humanity
 - All men came from one man, Adam
 - We have a common ancestor who was himself the creation of God
 - The Greeks had fanciful ideas for the origin of men just as today we have many who believe men evolved from animals
 - In a very real sense, we face a similarly situation when we preach that God created us from Adam
 - Today's audience would react little differently from this ancient Greek audience
 - Next Paul begins to hit at the center of Greek national pride
 - Paul says that this God was the One Who set the boundaries for every nation and appointed men to their respective nations
 - Greece wasn't great by virtue of better people, Paul says
 - It was determined by God
 - The boundaries for the nations were created in language
 - When God scattered the people at the tower of Babel, he scrambled language
 - The language differences became the barriers that led to the separation of nations
- In v.27 Paul says that God set men in nations with the language barriers so that they would seek Him

- Remember, the people were scattered from Babel because they were no longer seeking God
 - They had made themselves so powerful as a united people that they sought their own god at the tower
 - So God scattered them
- Now Paul clarifies that the scattering was intended to create a need that couldn't be filled in human power
 - A need to know the Creator and seek Him
 - Of course, the depraved human heart will never find a holy God in its own power
 - Paul acknowledges this reality when he says "if perhaps they might grope for Him"
 - Grope implies looking in the dark, the kind of blind reaching that men with darkened hearts do before the Lord reveals the truth
 - But then Paul adds that God is not far from any of us
 - Imagine you're standing with someone in a room, and they're blindfolded
 - They're trying to find you by exploring around in the room, but they grope without a way to find you
 - Meanwhile, you stand a short distance away, watching them
 - Until you want them to find you, their desperate groping will never succeed
 - But when you're ready, you can walk into their path and they stumble into you
 - This is the way Paul is describing finding the true God
 - They world is groping to find a God Who is nearby but can't be found unless He first reveals Himself to us

[Ezek. 38:23](#) "I will magnify Myself, sanctify Myself, and **make** Myself **known** in the sight of many nations; and they will know that I am the LORD."

- Finally, Paul says in Him we live, move and have our very existence, just as your own poets have said
 - Paul cleverly uses Greek literature to his own advantage
 - The Greek poet Cleanthes wrote a poem to Zeus saying “we are your offspring”
 - And Epimenides wrote concerning Zeus, “You live and abide forever, for in you we live, and move, and have our being.”
 - Paul moves those accolades away from the false god Zeus to the true God
 - But by using these quotes to serve his own argument, Paul kept the audience engaged and somewhat agreeing with his comments
- But so far, no mention of Jesus or the cross or belief in this “gospel”
 - Paul simply argues for God’s existence and sovereignty
 - But through this argument, he implies men have an obligation
 - If there is one God responsible for everything and to Whom we are obliged for life and existence, then we ultimately must answer to this God
 - Paul is working to create the awareness of need
 - Remember, the preaching of the Gospel is two parts: repent and believe
 - Too often we run to a presentation of the solution before explaining why someone needs it
 - We could continue to study Paul’s technique all night
 - The way in which he picked away at the cultural weaknesses while playing to the cultural expectations
 - But we needs to move on to the conclusion

[Acts 17:29](#) "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.

[Acts 17:30](#) "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,

[Acts 17:31](#) because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

- So, now Paul moves to the solution to the dilemma
 - If we are calling ourselves children of God, then what does it say about us when we call a hunk of wood or stone our god?
 - It's an obvious contradiction
 - Greeks valued men above inanimate objects, certainly
 - But then they agree that they are the children of idols, inanimate objections fashioned by men?
 - Instead, Paul calls upon them to acknowledge they are product of a divine nature
 - A life that lives such a contradiction is a life of ignorance
- And Paul says that God has overlooked the times of ignorance
 - This was the time before Christ was revealed
 - Specifically, all history from the time of Adam until Christ's Judgment of men
 - The world's sin is "overlooked" during this time in the sense that the world is permitted to continue on
 - Obviously, individuals face their judgment upon their death
 - But the world as a whole is experiencing a period while God withholds judgment
 - But now during this time, God is giving opportunity for men to leave their godless ways
 - And more specifically, He has for the first time opened a window of opportunity for the Gentiles
 - Because a day of judgment is coming soon

- And on that future day, God has appointed a Man to conduct the judgment
 - And God offered proof of this truth by raising this Man from the dead
- Though you may not have realized it, Paul just preached the Gospel
 - Everything needed for God to bring saving faith was delivered to this audience
 - Remember Paul's words in Romans

[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God **raised Him from the dead**, you will be saved;

- The essential elements of the Gospel are a belief and confession that Jesus is the Lord, the only true God
- And a belief that He was resurrected from the dead
- In this presentation, Paul made a clear argument that there is only One true God above all
 - Paul never named the Lord by His earthly name
 - But a man convinced by Paul's testimony would only have to ask what was this God's name, and Paul would have gladly provided it
 - In other words, the lack of a name wouldn't by itself preclude saving faith, assuming they accepted everything else Paul spoke
- Secondly, Paul testified that this Man was resurrected
 - This becomes the sticking point, as it always does

[Acts 17:32](#) ¶ Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."

[Acts 17:33](#) So Paul went out of their midst.

[Acts 17:34](#) But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

- At the moment Paul mentions the defining proof of the Gospel, the resurrection of our Lord, some began to sneer at the idea of resurrection

- All the wisdom in the world couldn't come to grips with the prospect of a man returning from the dead
 - Truly this is the one demonstration of God's power that men stumble over
 - Remember the story Jesus taught of the rich man in Hades with Abraham, begging that a sign be sent to his brothers?

[Luke 16:31](#) "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

- Resurrection is proof for those brought to faith, but it is the stumbling block for the unbeliever
 - And Paul has made the essential presentation of the Gospel and it has had its intended effect
- A handful of the Greeks believed, which was a true miracle in itself
 - Consider nothing that Paul said was particularly forceful or convincing
 - It was simply a matter-of-fact (though carefully worded) presentation
 - But when the truth of the Gospel is joined with the work of the Spirit, it becomes the power of God to change a heart

[1Cor. 1:18](#) ¶ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power of God**.

- The ones who sneered at Paul say they will hear more of this later
 - It was a polite way of saying they had heard enough and the conversation was over
 - Isn't interesting that they could find ways to spend days on end discussing whatever ideas they could propose
 - But when Paul mentions a God Who proved Himself by resurrection, the conversation must immediately end
 - And they are done altogether with the matter
 - Why are they so suddenly put off in discussing such an intriguing subject like life after death?

- The word of the cross is instinctively offensive to the depraved man

[1Cor. 2:14](#) But a **natural** man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

[1Pet. 2:7](#) This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve,

“THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED,
THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,”

[1Pet. 2:8](#) and,

“A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”;

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

- Paul knows what’s happened, and he leaves at this point content with whom God has given him
 - Remember, he initiated this contact with the wise men of Athens out of pity having seen their depraved culture
 - And the opportunity came in a moment while he was waiting for his companions
 - He wasn’t in Athens primarily for ministry, and Paul seemed to know that from the beginning
 - This is merely a preaching of opportunity
- In the end, Paul doesn’t found a church in Athens and he never again returns to this city
 - It was a hardened Greek bastion of pagan belief that worshipped wisdom even more than the gods they pretended to follow
- The entire experience brings together several elements we should remember
 - First, we are workers in God’s field, and we owe our Master the best work we can give
 - Paul was waiting in Athens and yet still thought he could make an impact there
 - And his technique for delivering the message showed great deft and appreciation for the culture

- Secondly, no matter how much Paul played with the presentation or approach, he didn't change the heart of the Gospel message
 - The call to repent and accept the true God who raised His Son from the dead is the universal call of the Gospel
 - Men must understand that our message demands they walk away from their current belief system, whatever it may be
 - And in its place is a belief in the One true God Who raised His Son from the dead
- Finally, Paul never forgot that it requires the Spirit to make his message effective
 - When his speech produced but a handful of believers, he left satisfied
 - And he accepted that God never intended to establish something in that city beyond the handful mentioned
 - Paul never visited that city again or even wrote to it
 - In fact, according to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he spent the rest of his time in Athens worrying about the church in Thessalonica
- We need to be ready to witness to Christ, even when waiting
 - We get our best effort, trying to find the most effective way to deliver the message
 - But we don't change the heart of the message: we preach Christ, and Him crucified and resurrected
 - Finally, we accept the fruit we may receive, and we move on