

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to finish off Act 17. And it's going to be good to be in this chapter for a number of weeks. And really this morning I just want to tie up a couple of loose ends.

Two things. I want us to see, first of all, the relevance of Paul's preaching. And then I want us to see the response to Paul's preaching. The relevance of Paul's preaching.

If you want to sell something in the marketplace, then you need to advertise it, don't you, in as few words as possible. If you're going to sell something on eBay, like some of you do, one of the key things in the description is the brevity, isn't it?

You don't want to write on eBay a really kind of long description. People don't have time, do they, to read all the blurbs. So if you want to catch people's attention and you need to do so quickly, you need a brief phrase, you need a catchphrase.

You need a couple of appropriate words to catch people's attention, to claim people's attention. And that's not only good salesmanship, that's good preaching.

[1 : 1 0] Any preacher worth his salts should be able to summarize his sermons in a few words. I do the children's sheets, so you children have got the sheets.

And what I often find is that as I seek to summarize the sermon, my sermon often unravels when I'm doing the children's sheets. And as I try to contract the sermon and think this is what I'm trying to say, what I often find is my sermon isn't logical at all.

And it's good for preachers. If you've got to just reduce the sermon to ten words, what would those ten words be? And you can't do that with lots of preachers, but you can do it with the apostle Paul. And that's exactly what Luke does with Paul. Luke is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, and he sums up Paul's preaching in Athens in two words. You can see them in verse 18.

Paul preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. There it is. Paul's preaching in a nutshell. That short hand, if you like. Two words. Jesus.

[2 : 1 3] Resurrection. There's quite a bit of confusion about that. They didn't quite understand that at first. They didn't know what he was talking about. Look at verse 18. They think, Paul, are you trying to introduce a couple of new gods to their overcrowded pantheon?

Foreign deities. And they were interested in that. There's an element of confusion here. But be that as it may be, and they got the message. They got the distinct impression in Paul's preaching.

And you wouldn't get it, I think, from a lot of preaching today. They got the distinct impression from Paul's preaching that he was setting up Jesus as God. At least they understood that much.

In all their confusion, they understood this much, that whatever else Paul was saying about Jesus, he was saying that Jesus was God. There can be no doubt, Paul preached Jesus as the God-man. We've seen him in Acts 17 that he preached about God, and he preached about man, but he also preached that God became man. That this great God who doesn't dwell in buildings made with hands, this God who is the creator and the sustainer of the universe, the one who has made us, but this God became a man and lived amongst us.

[3 : 3 6] He dwelt in our midst, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is the focus of Paul's preaching. That is the focal point. He preached about God, he preached about man, and he focused on Jesus, the God-man.

And he particularly focused on Jesus and the resurrection. He focused on the person and work of Jesus. So there are some people that come to Acts 17, and they say, well, Paul didn't preach the cross.

That's nonsense. Because the resurrection includes the cross. You can't have a resurrection, can you, unless someone has died. You can't preach the resurrection without speaking about the death of Christ and the meaning of his death.

And so this is the focus of Paul's preaching in Athens. He preached Jesus and the resurrection. He preached the person and the work of Christ. And Jesus and the resurrection always go together in apostolic preaching.

As far as the early Christians were concerned, the resurrection was the supreme evidence that Christianity was true. It was a sign that they pointed to.

[4 : 45] It was a sign that Jesus pointed to when he refused any other sign. So in the days of his flesh, they kept coming to him, didn't they? And they say, if you are the Messiah, if you are who you say you are, if you are the Son of God, show us a sign.

Do something in the heavens. Do some kind of conjuring trick with the stars, and then we'll believe you. Do some kind of miracle. And Jesus refused to do that. In fact, the only sign that Jesus pointed to was the sign of his resurrection.

And so he says, doesn't he, just as Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.

He said to them on another occasion, do you remember? I will destroy this temple, and in three days I will rise it up again. And John tells us, doesn't he, that the body that Jesus was talking about was his own body.

The only sign that Jesus pointed to was the resurrection. Sometimes people say to us, don't they, if you could produce some non-Christian witnesses to the resurrection, I believe.

[6 : 04] There aren't any. Of course there aren't any. Why? Because the resurrection makes people Christians. Of course, there aren't any non-Christian witnesses to the resurrection.

The resurrection is the sign. It is the evidence that Christianity is true. And the apostles preached that. They weren't ashamed of it. They didn't preach it in the way that we do.

And so, very often, when people talk about the resurrection, well, they may say this. They say, you ask me how I know he lives.

He lives within my heart. You know that hymn? You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. Sounds very spiritual, doesn't it? Jesus lives on in the human heart.

That's not what the apostles preached at all. The apostles didn't preach their subjective experience of the resurrection. They preached the objective reality of it in space and time in human history.

[7 : 07] That God raised a man from the dead called Jesus of Nazareth. And that's the very heart of the gospel that Paul preached. The apostolic gospel.

The resurrection vindicates Jesus. It is. Doesn't it? Do you remember how Peter preached it earlier on in Acts? He comes to the very town where Jesus was crucified and he says to the people, you crucified him, God raised him.

You've got a problem, haven't you? You've got a problem because you thought that he was worth nothing. You wrote him off. You thought, we're finished with him now. He was an imposter. You wrote him off.

But what did God do? God raised him from the dead. And your opinion of Jesus is diametrically opposed to what God thinks of Jesus.

And you thought that he was worth nothing, but God has raised him. And the resurrection vindicates Jesus. And it doesn't only vindicate Jesus, it sets him apart and it singles him out from all other men.

[8 : 14] from every single figure, from every central figure of world religions. And that's what Paul says to the Athenians.

This is the man, quite literally. The man whom God has appointed to deal with the sin question. And he's given us assurance of that, he says in verse 31, by raising him from the dead.

He hasn't raised Buddha from the dead. Mohammed lies a-mouldering in the grave. You go and you visit the tombs of these people.

Their shrines are there to go to, but Jesus is alive. And he's been raised from the dead and the resurrection singles out Jesus and it sets him apart from every other great name in world history.

That this is the man whom God has appointed to deal with the sin question one way or another.

This is the one whom God has set apart to deal with the greatest problem that you and I have.

[9 : 18] The problem of sin. And Jesus Christ will deal with that great problem in one of two places. Either in his death upon a cross or upon the judgment day when he comes back.

Because he is the man that God has appointed to deal with the problem of human sin. You see, we are not going to meet an unknown God. On the day of judgment it will be Jesus who we will meet.

The man whom God has appointed and God has chosen to reveal himself and to reconcile himself to sinful men and women and boys and girls. And God has chosen Jesus for that purpose and the resurrection sets him apart in the most powerful way.

Is God saying in the most emphatic and the most eloquent way possible, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.

Hear him. It is God's guarantee, isn't it? It is God's guarantee that it is not written on a scrap of paper. You buy a washing machine and you get a guarantee, don't you?

[10:32] And it is written down on paper. It is stuck in an email attachment. Something goes wrong and you can't find it but God has given a guarantee and he has written it in human history and he has written it in time and space.

And it is there for people to examine. God has given us assurance of this very thing by raising Jesus from the dead. He is underwritten if I can put it like that, the whole mission of Jesus by the resurrection.

Let's say you get an insurance policy and you have an insurance policy and in the small print it says this policy is underwritten by Lloyds of London. And you are given assurance, aren't you?

Because you think, well, if Lloyds of London underwrite it, it surely must be valid. But verse 31 of Acts 17 is telling you that God has underwritten the claims of Jesus.

This man. Why this one man? Why Jesus of Nazareth?

[11:40] Why does everyone, all people, everywhere, need to come to this one man, to Jesus of Nazareth? Can't people have their own Jesus?

Well, because Jesus is the man whom God has appointed. He is the universal man. He is the inescapable man. He is the man with whom you have to do.

And God has appointed him to deal with your greatest problem, your problem of sin once and for all in one way or another. either in salvation at the cross or in judgment on the day of judgment.

And this is the man with whom you and I have to do and God has underwritten that. And God has given assurance to you of that by raising him from the dead. And God is saying to you this morning, in effect, you can trust him with your soul and with your life.

He's saying to you, you can believe everything that he's said about himself, everything he's claimed, everything he's said about his person, every claim that he's made about his work, you can rely on him. Says God, this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

[12:55] And the resurrection sets him apart. The resurrection vindicates him and the resurrection universalizes him. Just think for a moment.

If only I'd been there when Jesus was alive. You hear that, isn't it? It's awful in Bibles. If only I'd been living when that man was lowered through the roof and met Jesus.

Well, let's think about that. How would you have got to meet Jesus in the first century? How easy was it to meet Jesus in the first century? How would you have got to meet him?

Well, with great difficulty, if you were living here, that would have been particularly difficult, isn't it? You couldn't have gone to Heathrow. COVID restrictions wouldn't let you fly anyway, but you wouldn't have been able to get there.

But let's say you, let's say you could get on board a plane and you could have got to Palestine in the first century. You would have had great difficulty locating Jesus. And then you'd have queued up with all the other crowds.

[14:01] You see, the point of the resurrection and the ascension is that Jesus is alive and it universalizes him. It universalizes his availability and his accessibility.

He is now at the right hand of the majesty on high. Let me use the Puritan illustration. You think of the illustration of the sun. So when you get up early in the morning and you see the sun in the distance rising, you see the sun in this big ball on the horizon and you see it coming up and it's cold in the morning and you see the sun but you don't feel the heat of the sun yet.

And it seems so near to you but you don't get any advantage of it. But then as the sun rises so that it's up in the sky at midday, you can't even gaze on the sun because when it's at its highest, you can't dare look into the sun but you feel the heat of it.

You feel the heat of it at its most, at its highest level. That's when it's at its most effective. That's when it's nearest to you.

When you feel the heat and the strength of it more than any other time. And so the Lord Jesus is no longer here upon earth but the Bible says that he has been raised and he is exalted to the right

hand of the majesty on high.

[15 : 40] He is in the highest place that heaven affords. It is his by sovereign right. So this morning he is raised and exalted and glorified and seated at the right hand of the majesty on high.

And that makes him universally accessible. More accessible. It universalizes his availability and so this morning there are men and women and boys and girls that can call upon him instantly from every corner of the earth.

In every language of the world right now. Because God has raised him from the dead. He is the man for all seasons. He is the man for the whole world. He is the man whom God has ordained to deal with the question of your sin and guilt.

And so what I want to say to you is what could be more relevant than that this morning? You see being relevant is not about telling people what they want to hear is it?

It's telling people about what they need to hear. What does the world need to hear?

[16 : 57] At the moment what does the world need to hear? It needs to hear doesn't it? The message of Jesus Christ. That he is Lord that there is hope in the midst of life and death.

There is hope in the midst of this virus. there have been lots of people who when they heard that Paul was going to preach in Athens they would tell him listen if you're going to preach in the Areopagus it's a great opportunity.

It's a really really great opportunity. You know it's the intellectual capital of the world. Leave out the resurrection. They'll only laugh at you. And whatever you do Paul please don't preach about judgment because nobody really believes in judgment anymore.

And remember you're talking to the sophisticated intellectuals of the day. Don't tell them to repent of their sins. These are decent civilized people I'm sure. And there would be lots of people wouldn't there?

They would come and give to Paul all sorts of advice. Paul it's the opportunity of a lifetime. Do you realize how privileged you are to get to speak at the Areopagus? Make sure you don't talk about this and don't talk about that. But being relevant is not telling people about what they want to hear.

[18 : 07] It's telling people about what they need to hear. And isn't it very strange? Very often the very truths that men and women and boys and girls do not want to hear are the very truths they need to hear.

And so here is Athens in the first century with the vast heritage of human learning. The institutions they possessed, they celebrated names among their leading thinkers but did they know God? because for all their learning and all their religion did they know God? Have they by their wisdom found God? No. And so Paul says right at the very center at the heart of Athens there is an altar to the unknown God.

You are ignorant. And if ever there was a cry from the heart of the city that is it isn't it? An altar to the unknown God.

And Augustine tells us that there is a God shaped void. There is a God shaped blank in every human heart that only Christ can fill.

[19 : 22] Isn't that ridiculous? Isn't it? Extreme sang a love song when I was a teenager. There is a hole in my heart that can only be filled by you. It is ridiculous. Isn't it? It is true of God.

The Athenians didn't see it like that but that was the reality. So what can be more relevant for those in Athens than for Paul to come and talk to them about Christ? They didn't see it like that. They thought that this gap, this void, this unknown God, they thought it was just a gap in their knowledge. But in fact it was a fatal flaw in their thinking. And Paul comes along and he preaches Jesus. He doesn't talk more about philosophy and more about science to them.

He talks about Jesus. That's what he focuses on. And he talks about Jesus of Nazareth who is the man whom God has ordained to deal with the problem of sin. Nothing could be more relevant than that.

And that's demonstrated, isn't it, today again and again and again. Here we are, we've got far more than the Athenians had, haven't we? we not only have wisdom, we have science.

[20 : 30] And science says, lockdown. Science says, COVID tears. And science says, lockdown. And science says, do this, and science says, do that. And we put our trust in science.

And so we have a great explosion in human knowledge, but is the world a better place to live in? Is the world a safer place to live in? Are you really any happier than your grandparents were?

You've much fuller homes, you have much fuller lives, but just like Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, in much knowledge, much wisdom, so much grief. He who increases knowledge, increases sorrow, isn't that true?

There's never been a generation that's had more, and yet there's never been a generation that struggles with mental health, with issues like we're facing today.

Ecclesiastes goes on, it says, what is crooked cannot be made straight. You cannot make things together, come together, can you? You can't strengthen things out, and that is the human problem. There's no human answer, Ecclesiastes tells you.

[21 : 47] Let me tell you of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the finest poets of his time, but there's a back story. There's a personal tragedy with Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

He was an opium addict, he was a junkie, he was a druggie. And Samuel Taylor Coleridge wanted to be free of it, so you know what he did? Coleridge hired a man to watch him day and night so that he'd kick the habit.

It's a really wise thing to do, isn't it? Got accountability, good thinking. So he hired this man to live in his house and to watch him and to be with him day and night so that he would break the drug habit that had taken hold of his life and was spoiling his life.

It's good thinking, it's very wise, but it didn't work. It didn't work. What happened? Well, Coleridge started to make plans to deceive the very man he was paying to set him free.

Isn't that a perfect illustration of our moral problem? So the problems in your life and my life can't be touched by just getting more education or more science or more technology because actually when we're really honest we know that those things don't even touch the problems that we have.

[23 : 11] Resolutions, they don't touch the problems that we have. It's a moral problem. There's a moral kink in our nature. And so Paul says in Act 7 the good I want to do, I don't do.

The evil that I hate to do, I find myself doing it, that's true to life. You see the right thing, you know it's the right thing, you want to do it, but you can't do it.

You don't do it. And the thing that you don't want to do, you know it's wrong, you know it will spoil your life, but you can't stop yourself from doing it. And that's the problem.

So what can touch a problem like that? The answer is nothing but Jesus and the resurrection.

That's what Paul discovered in it. That was his testimony.

He tried everything else. He tried religion, he tried knowledge, he was a university professor, he was a religious man, a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, he tried knowledge, he tried religion, he tried all sorts of things, but he said actually to know him to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection.

[24 : 17] It was nothing less than the power of a raised Jesus from the dead was able to deal with the sin in his life and in my life. And you need Jesus. And you need his atoning death on Calvary's cross to wash away the guilt of your sin from before the face of a holy God.

The hold that sin has upon you. You need Jesus to break the power of cancelled sin. And there's nothing more relevant than that, than this message that Paul had to preach.

Oh, that I may know him, says Paul. So Paul had a relevant message to preach in the last five minutes. I just want us to see the response of the people to Paul's preaching. The response of the people to his preaching.

What was the response of the people to his preaching? Well, the immediate response looks disappointing, doesn't it? You look at the verses from verse 32 to the end, and it almost seems to deny everything I've said this morning about the relevance of Paul's message.

We're told in verse 32, Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We'd like to hear you again on this. So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Demorius, and others paraphrases it like this.

[25 : 41] Having apparently made little impression, Paul went on to Corinth. Having apparently made little impression. It's funny isn't it?

You never hear that said about missions today, do you? Having apparently made little impression. I took a university mission in Belfast a couple of years ago.

It was enormous amounts of work, morning, noon, and night. Absurd amounts of talks, and lots and lots of people came. As far as I know, there was one man who professed faith, and it's going on

with the Lord.

But it was a pretty hard week, and pretty discouraging. And then, a couple of months did I got the prayer letter from Queen's University Belfast giving the report of the mission. Well, it was like I was Billy Graham.

History had been rewritten about the amazing impact that the speaker had made on the university. It bore no resemblance to how I felt or what happened. And by modern standards, that mission was a bit of a flop.

[26 : 46] And Paul's mission, it would seem, wouldn't it, was a bit of a flop at Athens, was it? I'm not so sure. Let's just look at the results. I think if I got verses 32 to 34 this morning, I'd be very, very happy.

If I knew that every Sunday when I got up to preach, the thing that happened here in Athens was to happen in Ealing, I'd be very, very happy. So let's look at what happened. Three things. First of all, they mocked.

And I think that's hit the target. What we get is apathy. And so people come, they shrug their shoulders and they say, well, there's nothing in it. That's what I face. But if we had people coming out of this building mocking, that would be a step forward.

And so let's not be afraid of the world mocking. We're terrified of it. Absolutely terrified of it. But it is an authentic response to the gospel.

Verse 32, some people say, well, we want to hear you again on this matter. And that might have been an excuse like Felix, that's 24, you know, people say, oh, you must come round sometime, but they never give you a date.

[27 : 55] We must have a talk about this. It may have been an excuse, but I don't think so. I think it could genuinely have been an expression of interest. It's a tremendous thing, isn't it? If people leave the preaching of God's words and thinking, I really want to know more about this.

A genuine interest, we want to take this further. And then you notice in verses 34, we're given the names of these prominent people, Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Demaris. It's interesting, Luke is probably writing about 10 years after this event, and here are two people, a man and a woman, who are well known in the church. And Paul mentions their name, and everybody knows who he's talking about.

Ah, that's when Demaris became a Christian, was it? And they all knew it, not only in the local church, but in the wider church as well, in the presbytery. And I'd be very encouraged if there were people converted here today who 10 years down the track are still standing.

There's no flash in the pan. No trumped up statistics. But people who stood and became prominent in the work of the gospel. And in fact, we're told, aren't we, some men joined them and believed.

[29 : 14] Church was formed in Athens, we don't know much about it for the first hundred years. Dionysius apparently became the first bishop, the first minister of the church. We don't know much about it in the first century, but in the first half of the second century, we do know that the church in Athens was a flourishing church.

That's not a failure, is it? That's a great success, isn't it? That's nothing to be disappointed about. And I don't think Paul was disappointed in his preaching in Athens.

Some mocked. Some expressed a genuine interest to know more. Others were told believed and the church was formed. But what about the rest of them? Paul warned Timothy, he said there will be those who will be, they'll listen to anybody but they'll never arrive at a conclusion.

They'll never arrive at a knowledge of truth. Some people are like that. There are people that come Sunday by Sunday and they treat church like, or Christian truth, they treat it like chewing gum.

They chew it over for hours but they never swallow it. So how do you relate to the message of Jesus and the resurrection? How do you regard it?

[30 : 31] Something to mock? Something out of date? Or a novelty to chew over? Something to throw away? Or something to believe and stick your eternity on?

Let's pray. Let's pray.