

# Acts 17:16-34

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[ 0 : 00 ] And turn, if you will, to Acts chapter 17. I get up early on a Sunday morning and do the children's sheets.

! Thankfully what rarely happens, happened this morning, that you begin to look at your sermon and your sermon kind of falls apart before your very eyes. And so this is half of what you should be getting, but otherwise you'd be here until about one o'clock.

And so I don't know whether we'll get to the other half, but we'll see. And because of that I've done an outline, which I don't normally do, but you'll be able to follow the outline.

And many people consider Christianity to be a primitive idea. Churches like ours are often pigeonholed as those Christians who are intolerant, closed-minded.

And we're told, aren't we, sometimes that we have unevolved views of human sexuality. And back in AD 50, the Apostle Paul's missionary journey that we've been tracing led him to a Greco-Roman city that was the ancient equivalent, really, of a city like London.

[ 1 : 16 ] And that city was called Athens in Greece. Athens has been the foremost city in the world since the 5th century BC. And even after the Roman Empire swept through it, Athens is granted kind of special status in the Roman Empire.

Athens is a free city. It boasted a rich philosophical tradition. Wonderful literature. Wonderful art. Notable achievements in human freedom. F.F. Bruce has summarised the intellectual significance of Athens saying this. The sculpture, the literature, the oratory of Athens in the 4th and 5th century remain and surpassed.

In Philosophy 2, she took the leading place. Athens is the native city of Socrates and Plato. And it was still, in Paul's age, a leading centre of learning.

We describe it as a great university city. Just before we walk through Paul's time in Athens, we see in the first half of the chapter, in verses 1 to 9, he's been in Thessalonica.

[ 2 : 34 ] His mission team have gone to this city of Thessalonica. They've seen great fruit as they preach among the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. But that fruitfulness, people responding to the good news, is met with jealousy by other Jews.

They eventually end up driving him out of town. And so there's fruitfulness and opposition. Those same two things that go hand in hand. His team have driven out.

Verses 10 to 15, they spend their time in Berea. And they meet there, people who are eager to search the Bible. They want to see, is what Paul's saying true?

But then Jews come from Thessalonica and they stir up trouble once again. So Paul's got to move on. We read in verse 15, they escort him to the coast of Athens. But Silas and Timothy stay in Berea.

As he waits in Athens, Paul decides to go for a walk around the city. He's heard of Athens. Everyone's heard of Athens. And now Paul has got the chance to encounter this great city for himself.

[ 3 : 42 ] How did he respond? That's the question I want us to ask. How did Paul respond to this great city of learning? And seeing how he responds, we've got to ask ourselves, how do we respond to our great city?

The first thing we see is in verse 16. Can you see, Paul is distressed. That's the key word there. Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked. And distressed within him. As he saw that the city was full of culture, literature, art.

Now what does Paul see? He sees full of idols. And there's so much that Paul could have seen, isn't it? So much beauty in the culture. He could have visited stunning buildings like the Parthion, the Agorah, the cultural centre, the marketplace, the gathering place of ideas.

Where great works of art was painted. There was in little porches gatherings of people discussing philosophy. Teachers gathered their group of disciples to teach and exchange the latest ideas. It would have been of great interest to an intellect like Paul. He could have visited the various schools of philosophy. He could have stopped off at the galleries, admired the art, looked at the buildings, loved the literature.

[ 5 : 00 ] But they're not the primary things that struck the Apostle Paul. As he walked around the city, more than anything else, he was struck by the idolatry. And he saw it everywhere.

The city was buried under idols. Roman satirists of the time quipped, It's easier to find a god than a man in Athens. The Greeks had gods for absolutely everything.

Go home, Google Greek gods and see the list that comes up. And Paul, as he walked around Athens, saw these little shrines, little temples, little monuments, built to honour and attribute glory. Imagine, a monotheistic Jew, believing in one god who made the heavens and the earth, who's now at an encounter with Jesus Christ. And he's come to realise that this god, the Lord of heaven and earth, exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And this god has sent Jesus into the world to provide a way that you and I can worship him. And to enjoy him. And no one in Athens seems to know about it, or care about it.

[ 6 : 10 ] And Paul is majorly distressed by it. There's this compound going on in Paul's heart. He's got a passion for the name of the one true God, and he's got a burden for the blindness of these people.

And as that combination works, there's passion for the glory of God in the person of the Lord Jesus, and this profound sadness about the people of Athens.

It causes him to be deeply moved. And there's a great challenge, isn't there? Paul's faith shaped how he viewed this world.

Paul's faith shaped how he viewed this city. He would have seen the beautiful buildings, the art, the literature. But the problem was that the people of Athens were using all those God-given gifts to give glory to idols.

They were using their God-given gifts to serve everything apart from the one who gave them those gifts. All that intellectual ability.

[ 7 : 24 ] All those giftings given to them by God, but they refused to give that God glory. Does that remind you of anywhere? How do you see the city that we live in?

What do you see through the architecture? And through the intellect? And through all the culture that's here?

Through everything that's so impressive and sometimes so intimidating in London? There are idols everywhere in London. When we define an idol as anything which takes the place of God, an idol is anything which takes the central place in every human's life that only God should have, we suddenly see there are idols everywhere.

When we define an idol as anything that takes up God's place, we see, don't we, that there are many people in London. There are many people on our streets who we work with in our schools and God is not at the center of their affections and their love.

In fact, there are many, many things at the center of their affections. And as I've cycled around Ealing this week, the question I've been asked as I've studied Act 17 is this, is there any part of me that's distressed about it?

[ 8 : 47 ] And my own answer is this, nowhere nearly enough. That actually I've become accustomed and I sit way too easily with all the idolatry that's all around me.

And that shouldn't be the case, should it? That I should be more burdened for this borough, for this city. And so one of the applications of Act 17 is this, we must pray, Lord, give me eyes to see this city as you see this city.

And give me a burden for the idolatry that is all around me. So how does Paul respond to the impressive city of Athens? First, he's distressed, but the second key word is it moves him, that distress, to action.

And so we go to verses 17 to 21. Because of this distress, he goes to the local synagogue and he reasons with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. But as well as that, he goes not only to the synagogue, but he goes to the marketplace.

And day by day, distressed and motivated to action, he goes out and he speaks a simple message that is summarised for us in verse 18. Can you see it? It's a beautiful summary.

[10:06] He preaches the good news about Jesus, and the resurrection. Isn't that a lovely summary? We keep getting them, don't we, in the book of Acts. The good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

You cannot speak of the resurrection of Jesus unless you speak of the death of Jesus, can you? And the coming of Jesus. He speaks of all it accomplished and all it meant and we're told that he's doing this to a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

They begin to debate with him with mixed reactions. They're the two great schools of thought of the day, each with their own answers to the big questions of life.

The Epicureans believed in gods, but those gods are so remote that they would take no interest in you. And those gods had no influence on human affairs.

The world was random chance, no survival of death or judgment. So even though they believed in God, their God was so remote you could just get on and enjoy your life.

[11:17] Do you remember on the buses years ago, isn't it? There is probably no God so just enjoy your life the atheists put up. In many ways it's Epicurean. They criticised Athens they mocked these little temples that were there and people seeking to bring the needs of gods by bringing food to them.

And we'll see how Paul picks up on that in a little while. The Stoics, we still use that word today, don't we? They believed that the human race came from one origin and through kind of logic and discipline they believed you could live in harmony with this natural order.

But the world was governed by an impersonal force. they believed that God was like the soul of the world he pervaded everything to some degree and in a fatalistic way they believed humanity's job was basically to suck it up.

To roll with the punches To be stoical in how the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune affected you. It led to this kind of prized attribute of being self-sufficient.

You're self-sufficient as fate plays its way out in your life so you get the stoic mentality of today. I can do it myself. And Paul gets into debate with them about the good news of Jesus and the resurrection.

[12:41] They invite him to the Areopagus a kind of official city council that meets a court that sought the welfare of the city and in verse 20 they say you're bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we would like to know what they mean.

Verse 21 tells us that the people of Athens they love this kind of thing they love new ideas they love sitting around listening to the latest fad or philosophical proposition. So they hear Paul and they say we want to hear more of this.

They bring him to the council meeting it's an amazing opportunity for a guy who's just walking around the city originally as he waited for his friends to arrive. Paul distressed by what he saw was motivated to simply share the good news of Jesus and his resurrection and look at the door that's opened before him.

And so even though the people of this city they scorn and they ridicule us for holding to the Bible as God's word even though some may misrepresent us we are called simply to share that message the good news of Jesus and the resurrection with anyone who will listen.

What will be the results but we don't know what the results will be we leave the results to God don't we? But our job as a church is to simply and clearly tell the good news of Jesus and the resurrection. And Paul has now this amazing opportunity to deliver a sermon before some of the most influential people in Athens and so I want to move us to see what does he do with this speech?

[14:22] He is distressed by Athens he is moved to action but thirdly he is wise in how he speaks. He's wise in how he speaks.

Let's look at his context and let's look at his content and then we'll look at the response really briefly. Paul is really aware as he stands in this council in Athens of who he's speaking to.

When Paul is in a Jewish synagogue he argues from the Old Testament and they knew he would have read passages like Isaiah 53 and unpacked them. That he was led like a lamb to the slaughter like a sheep before his shearers is silent so he did not open his mouth he was marred beyond all human likeness and he would have done that with the Jewish people because the Jewish people knew their scriptures.

He would start with the Bible and he would unpack it to them but here in Athens he's dealing with people who don't know their Bibles. They don't know the Old Testament scriptures.

They wouldn't know Isaiah 53 and so he starts verse 22 can you look with me? Men of Athens I perceive in every way that you are very religious for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship I found also an altar with inscription to the unknown God what therefore you worship as unknown I proclaim to you.

[ 15 : 45 ] Paul is in one of those souvenir knick-knack shops you know like there are in central London in Athens he goes in there's little statues there's little kind of snow globes like there are and as he walks around he finds this little souvenir these little idols that are for sale and he picks it up and he sees there's an inscription on the bottom that says to the unknown God these Greeks in Athens so fearful of the gods there are so many gods they're paying homage to there might be one that they've missed out there might be one that they don't know about they haven't heard of and just in case they get on the wrong side of this god they've missed out through ignorance they've offered an altar saying this is to the unknown God just to cover their bases and Paul sees this and he starts to engage with it these people FF Bruce again says this this shows the value of finding a point of contact with your hearers insights from the world around us from general revelation Paul meets these people with language that is familiar to them he turns to their own poets for their own idolatry and he uses it so he can engage in a way that is relevant and appropriate with the good news of Jesus and the resurrection and so we must think we must think carefully about our context about our friends about our neighbours about our colleagues and something that's really helpful is to look for gospel analogies in our culture yesterday morning

I went to Park Run it was it was a pretty depressing morning on that front but why do people who go to Park Run love Park Run why do people who go to Park Run talk about it in a boring way what is it that they're looking for what is it about this culture that there is of a group of people who religiously go the same time every week who are desperate for community who share this joy with one another what are they looking for what is behind that in the films that you watch what is the story that is behind the films what are what is the why behind the TV programme that you and your colleagues talk about yesterday morning I was I had to do some work on the kind of hedge at the front of our house and my neighbour came across the road he'd been in Japan he was kind of mocking my work in the garden and he said

Japan is you know the amazing thing about Japan he says there's temples everywhere I couldn't believe it I absolutely fluffed the message I said why do you think what's behind that he said I don't know I said well people I thought I'd be Paul in Athens but what's the why behind that and we have to work hard at that don't we with our friends in our culture with the people what is the why behind what are they doing why do you do that we're so reluctant to ask that there are illustrations everywhere aren't there in our city in what we watch in what we read in the architecture and Paul says think carefully about it how can we engage where our friends and family are at notice not only the context but the content of the sermon there's five things number one he tells them God is your creator verse 24 the God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples made by man nor is he served by human hands to which the Epicureans would be saying our man the Epicureans they would say

God doesn't live in a little temple he's far off he would say this God is not interested in interacting with humans this one God who created everything but the idea that God didn't dwell in temples made by human hands would have led this group of Epicureans to prick up their ears it's so encouraging to you and I Herman Bavinck says this there is nothing in this universe that is atheistic that is a brilliant line there is nothing in this universe that is atheistic you get that if you get that that transforms how you speak to others God is your created and you cannot move you cannot move without being suffocated by the revelation of God you can deny it but that doesn't deny the reality of it the people who we live amongst the people who we work amongst they are surrounded by God's revelation it is inescapable

I think this is so encouraging because it is saying that we know something about the unbeliever that the unbeliever spends all his time denying upon himself God is a creator Paul doesn't just establish that God is the creator he presents him as the sustainer of all life look at verse 25 he's not served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything Paul starts by saying the God I'm speaking about is the Lord of heaven and earth the one who made the world and everything in it and he is the one that gives you life and

breath and he upholds this whole world in him you live and move and have our being as one of your own poets have said thirdly he says and God has got a purpose for creation verse 26 from one man and every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places that's an amazing verse isn't it the reason you are here this morning is why because God has allotted periods and the boundaries of your dwelling place the people that you live with the people that you live amongst he's put them where they are wide so that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him yet he's not far from each one of us for in him we live and move and have our being even as some of your own poets have said it's a stoic poet that he's quoting we are his offspring and so the epicureans they would have had their ears perked up before but suddenly the stoics are interested can you notice with me the point that the apostle is making he is saying that God the creator and sustainer his purpose is to bring his created people into some sort of right relationship with him he set up our lives in such a way that this life will cause us to be reaching out to something beyond ourselves look at how this is worded

[ 23 : 11 ] God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him to find God the language is boiled down isn't it to some extent but just that thought that our God is creating and sustaining and ordaining all things that people might reach out for him and find him that is extraordinarily encouraging in the things that your friends and your family and your neighbours devote themselves to what are they doing look behind the why what are they doing they are seeking Ecclesiastes tells us that God has set eternity on the hearts of every human being there's a homing device there's a calling device to God Paul then moves on from this purpose and creation to humanity that humanity has got a problem verse 28 and 29 what we've done is domesticated

God hasn't it we've sought we've not sought to take our lead from God but we've shaped and fashioned this God into something less than he is we've tried to make God in our image we've shaped and we've fashioned little idols that are such a poor echo of what deep down we know better than that we've not related rightly to this God and God is calling all humanity to repent the God who made everyone the God who is upholding everyone's life who is worthy of worship of everyone and yet everyone is not worshipping him and those who are not worshipping him and relating to him rightly that God is calling them to repentance to repent of that to turn away from that to take the idols down for Paul says

God has fixed a day to judge the world with justice and that's Paul's gentle and yet faithful way of introducing the problem of sin and then the fifth point of the content of this sermon is the solution to humanity's problem the man that God has appointed and around whom judgment will revolve the one who is authenticated by God by means of his resurrection from the dead and Paul probably said a lot more here didn't he think about it we can read this sermon in a minute or two but he probably said a lot more and what Luke has done is he summarised this account he summarised this account to the point where a reaction is provoked and so we know that if he's been speaking of resurrection he's obviously been speaking about the death of Christ too but what Luke does is he shows us the reaction that comes and when Paul comes to the work of Jesus

Christ there's a great reaction that's often the case isn't it I find when I speak with people who aren't Christians they're very very happy for me to talk about church I think it's a bit quirky but they quite like it they're willing for me to talk about God but until we stand fast on the uniqueness and the work of Jesus Christ that's where the reaction comes isn't it and so Paul has an awareness of his context and he covers the main points of the gospel in his content and then in verses 32 to 34 as we wrap up he gives us the response what should we expect verse 32 some sneered and they mocked Paul saying what a load of rubbish people who think we're crazy others show an interest we read in verse 32 we want to hear you again on this subject nearly always people who become Christians it is a slow process it is very unusual in my experience that people become Christians suddenly some sneer some mock some are interested but in verse 34 can you see it wonderfully some believe against all the odds they believe one of them is actually a member of the

Areopagus another is this woman Demaris and so all through this initial eyes open walk through the city the distress that Paul feels motivates him into gospel action he goes to the synagogue and he tells them about Jesus he goes to the marketplace and he tells them about Jesus and people laugh and some are interested but some believe how do we make disciples of the Lord Jesus in healing we see our culture through God's eyes that it is not honouring God the God who has made them the

God who sustains them the God who has given such gifts to people is not receiving the honour that he deserves and we ponder that and we pray about that until it moves us to distress and we trust that

[ 28 : 52 ] God still works powerfully through this message of Jesus and the resurrection because this little message is the power of God unto salvation and God still uses that simple gospel message to change lives to transform eternities as we've seen already this morning let's pray