

Paul in Athens, Part 2

Act 17:22-34

3/8/2015

Randy Lovelace

Turn with me to Acts chapter seventeen, if you have your Bibles. We'll be looking at verses twenty-two to thirty-four as we continue to look at this sermon, one of the most famous in all of Scripture, of Paul's declaration of Christ before the Greek philosophers in Athens. Acts 17:22-34.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 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, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

"In him we live and move and have our being';

as even some of your own poets have said,

"For we are indeed his offspring.'

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about 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 Damaris and others with them.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Now, O Lord, enable us to see the Lord Jesus Christ and him exalted as the One who is the source of life, the One who is the goal of life, the One who is life. Lord, we pray that you would expose our idols, our false knowledge, and draw us by your truth to yourself by your powerful Holy Spirit. We thank you and praise you in the Name that is above every name, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

So the reality is, if you were to look at the various ways in which this sermon of Paul's has been interpreted, one of the ways that it is commonly understood is that Paul's interaction with them was one of Paul attempting to translate the gospel into their language or a way that they could understand. But in fact, that is not what Paul does. Some see that as a positive. Others see it as Paul simply trying to build a bridge between Christianity and Greek philosophy, thereby confusing it and diluting it. Others see what

Paul is trying to do is, in giving his evangelical defense of the faith, using Christian doctrine through philosophical language. That's certainly a part of what's going on here.

But one of the inescapable realities of what Paul is doing is he is exposing the falsehood of their philosophy. While he does so in a respectable way, I need to tell you just a brief back story of what took place in this very area. You see, Socrates was brought to this very same kind of group – not these same men, but much earlier on. Because Socrates had been accused of preaching of many gods, therefore, false gods. Socrates lost his life because of what he taught and because of what he had to defend before this group of leading philosophers, because you see, this was the marketplace. But more than just the marketplace for ideas, this particular group were the ones who work like the DMV of philosophy. They're the ones you had to go to, to receive a license and permission to teach what you were teaching in and around Athens, much less in this place.

And so what is just before verse twenty-two, which we read many weeks ago, is this: Paul, in the Greek, wasn't just – hey, Paul, please come with us to the Areopagus. No, the Greek language there in its boldest and most direct translation into English was he was dragged to this place, forcibly, painfully. And so it wasn't like, you know, Paul was just hanging out in Athens and thought – hey, I'll just go up and talk to these guys. He knew who they were. And it was because Paul had already begun to teach, it was causing conflict, it was causing definitely a disheveling of beliefs. And there was conversion taking place and new disciples following Jesus. This was problematic. So they dragged him before this group of people, and they are essentially saying – how dare you teach such things? We know this was their stance, because of what we learned last time. They said that he was a babbler. Meaning that they were using the language of what they would refer to as a bird who goes around to eat various kinds of seeds to make a meal. They're saying that Paul was a philosophical babbler who was simply teaching disparate beliefs from different areas, trying to cobble them together into a philosophical meal that he was now calling the gospel.

So they were accusing him, they were assaulting him, and now they were dragging him before this group of people. And I assure you that Paul knew precisely what had happened to Socrates and that what was getting ready to happen was not a calm coffee talk. He was proclaiming Christ, recognizing that at the end, what he may receive is a death sentence. So this was not calm. It was direct. It was precise. It was full of tension. Yes, Paul respected – in other words, he recognized and understood what they believed – but do not fall into the trap of believing that what Paul was doing is simply trying to translate the gospel into Greek philosophy. So let's look at that together.

And first, you'll see there, Athens versus Jerusalem. Paul is coming from Jerusalem. Paul is, though he's now preaching Christ, a Jew, coming from Jerusalem. And so Paul is bringing these things. You knew, as we looked at last time, as was his practice, he would first go to the synagogue. That's getting ready to come to an end when we look at the passage next week in chapter eighteen. Now he will go exclusively to the Gentiles. But here in Athens he's going to the synagogues. They knew what he was teaching. They simply saw him as a Jewish representative. And so their beliefs primarily made up of Stoics and Epicureans. I referred last time, but let's go to philosophy class just briefly, oh so briefly, because I'll fall asleep and so will you. So let's look at this together.

First, the Epicureans. Now, there's something about the Epicureans we need to know. They were not – let me say this very clearly – they were not Hedonists. So many people try to give the short definition of Epicureanism as being some sort of Hedonism. But, in fact, Epicurus – who taught some two hundred, almost three hundred, years before this date – did not in any way teach Hedonism. Here's why.

They did believe that the world was a closed system, meaning there was no divine interaction between humanity and the gods. What they realized was in life, there is a great deal of unpredictability. There are things in life that we cannot plan for, and it is full of suffering and brokenness. And one needs to learn how to navigate life in this very materialistic world. They were materialist, for sure. And there was great value to material things.

So Epicurus believed that the person who was able to truly live, if you will, an intelligent, philosophical, and balanced life, is the person who recognized that we live in a closed world. We're born into it, but when it's over, it's over. Death is inescapable. Pain is inescapable. So the best way to do this is first to seek in any way possible to reduce the amount of suffering in one's life. So one ought to seek pleasure, food, philosophy, and drink. Here's where people believe it corresponds to Hedonism. But Epicurus was absolutely clear that you do not pursue alcohol or food, or for that matter any pursuit in life, to such a degree that it causes you to experience suffering. Therefore, rampant sexuality and rampant use of food and alcohol without boundaries does cause pain. It causes brokenness. So for him, he would say no, you need to be moderate. So as one writer says, it was "a melioration of pain through the moderate use of the created order." This is what Epicurus taught. He taught of various ways that one ought to discipline yourself and to keep your emotions in check, thereby reducing suffering.

Stoics, on the other hand, who were also very popular during this time, were a little bit different. They definitely did not agree with the Epicureans. The Stoics did not believe that the world was a closed system at all. In fact, they did believe that the soul was made up of the finest atoms in all of the world. And as such, yes, while death is certain and unavoidable, there was a relationship to be had with the gods. There was some sort of divine relationship, but it was very vague. This is why Paul says, you say you are worshipping something that you say you know, Stoics. You have a logic and a reason and an intelligence, yet you have a statue that says "to the unknown god."

So Paul, in this first setup, in interacting with them, is doing a play on the word knowledge. He is one way calling them out, saying you are a people of knowledge and yet you are giving yourself to something you say you have no knowledge of. He's trying to show them that their philosophy is, in its own way, an empty suit. But now, the Stoics also believe that death is coming and unavoidable, and that our souls will go off in their fantastic dustiness into the cosmos. Sometimes this is confused with Pantheism, that the whole world is shot through – all of created matter, all of it is divine. Like the Epicureans, they believed that material things were good, because they pulsed with a divine energy. But most of all, the human soul. But the Stoics taught this – that what you must do is learn how to avoid suffering through being able to avoid high emotion – that is anxiety and tension and overwrought passion – but also to avoid the lowest of lows. You avoid the highest and the lowest. You live in the middle. You've heard someone say, he's very stoic. What they mean is, that person doesn't show very much emotion to the left or to the right or up or down, regardless of the circumstances. That's where it comes from. And so the idea was you discipline yourself in being able to walk through life keeping your emotions in check.

So into this, Paul brings the gospel. Whether you know it or not, he has already – in a philosophical way – confronted them and insulted them. He's fighting for the life of Christ as well as his own. And so he says, I have something to proclaim to you. And so he gives them four points. And though this is not in your outline, he then drops on them a nuclear bomb – a new reality. Let's look at the four points together.

First, he states verse twenty-four: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man." God, point number one, is Creator. Now, if we take a Christian view of the Bible and see it as a grand, unfolding drama from Genesis to Revelation, I

want you to hold that in the back of your mind as I go through these four points and then to the fifth – and that is this: Paul moves from creation all the way to restoration. From creation to resurrection. He begins with the creation, and he says, God has made everything. As such, implying every human being owes their lives to this heavenly Creator. And he doesn't call him by Zeus or Apollo. He says, this is one God. So he calls him God as Creator.

The second thing he says is, God is completely other. Second point. Here's what he says: "He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." What he's establishing is that God is completely other. This is what theologians have called God's aseity, or God's simplicity. Let me give you a quick definition. The word "aseity" comes from the Latin word *a* and *se*, meaning from or by oneself. In theological literature, the term designates a divine attribute by which God is whatever he is by his own self and of his own self. Since God is by himself, of himself, not of anything else, he does not owe his existence to anything or anyone outside of himself, nor does he need anything beyond himself to maintain his existence. He is not like the idols that depend for their existence on select materials and skilled craftsman.

God is from the very beginning, as Creator. We as human beings, regardless of where we are on the religious spectrum – Paul is establishing that God has created all things. But guess what? He did it not because he needed it. He's created us not because he needed us, but because he creates. He is God, and he is the Father, and he gives all mankind life and breath. He's beginning to build the argument – because God is completely other, and he gives us life and breath, far be it from us that we believe that God needs our breath to do anything. So God is completely other.

Thirdly, God is sovereign. When he says these words in verse twenty-six: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him." This is the language, the very language, that Paul would address to the Romans in the first chapter of that letter – that God is sovereign and all-powerful. And not only has he created all things, he never steps away from his creation. He is both sovereign and imminent. He upholds all things by the word of his mouth and the might of his hands. Without the word of his mouth and the might of his hands upholding all things, you and I would never be able to live.

Do you know what it's like to lose your traction control system when you hit ice? Right? We've all learned that over the last few weeks. I know I did. I almost hit a police officer. I missed him by about two feet. That was a few weeks ago when we had to cancel church. I missed him by a few feet. Bless his heart, he was looking at me like – oh no. I'm like looking at him, going – I know, I'm supposed to stop. You know what that's like, losing control, right? If that's how I feel losing control of a four-wheel car that has anti-tread or whatever it has – it's supposed to keep me on the road. It wasn't working. Why? Because of a less than a millimeter thick sheet of ice. In that moment, you realize, with all the technology, with all the experience, with all that we have, I could fall and fall susceptible to so simple. It makes me feel so utterly small.

Paul means to say that we are small not because we are not good in reflecting his created goodness – it's that we're small because he is so big and upholds all things. He has created the world and the boundaries of the continents, the boundaries of rivers and oceans, the heights of mountains. He discerns why it is that you and I can't go set up a three-bedroom house and a two-and-a-half bath place on the top of Mount Everest. It doesn't work. We can climb there only with added oxygen. Why? Because

that's what he designed. That's what he put there. I can't wish to live in the middle of the Mississippi River unless on a boat. Why? Because that's what he designed.

God is sovereign, but he is also imminent. This would have been so foreign to everyone who heard it. God may be sovereign and existent, but why would he care personally for me? God might be personal, as in a personal idol, but he's not able to uphold the entire universe? No Greek would have believed that. So Paul says, yes, but look at your idols in comparison to my God. He is both in control and he is close to each of us.

The fourth point is that God is Father. When he says this: "Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man." What he is establishing there is this – he's actually pointing to the poetry of the culture. And he's not bringing God to fit their definitions. What he's implying is all truth is God's truth. These poets have pointed out something which they in their heart of hearts and their minds know to be true, yet they cannot grasp it. So Paul is saying, do you know what you're talking about? They're talking about the Lord, who is Father. And we are his children. And as a father has love for his children, he desires to be in relationship with us, and he calls us into relationship with him.

The issue that Paul is pointing out, as one commentator said, is that the fault of the Greek philosophy was an error of direction. Meaning this: we are made in God's image, not God being made in ours. For when we look to something other than God for our salvation, for our hope, to relieve stress and anxiety, to bring success, to bring hope – anything outside of the living God is itself an idol. It doesn't have to be a statuette that we form out of clay or gold or silver, but it is most certainly those things. And when they form them, and when we have those things in our minds and hearts that we run to, we are saying, I want God but I want him that will appeal to my desires and my understanding.

I had to come face to face with this, this past week when I arose on Thursday morning and the snow was coming down. I spent a good portion of my adult life looking at snow and seeing it as incredibly inconvenient for my life. I would feel the inner wrestling. I would be mad, because I didn't get to do what I really wanted to do. It would put me even in a bad mood. I would speak about what I would want arrogantly before our Heavenly Father. I've been reading, in parallel with what we were just reading earlier, the Book of Job, where God says – Randy, who are you? Do you hold snow in the clouds? Do you make it rain?

Do you know, if God allowed the moisture that we experienced over the last few days to drop in one solitary drop all at once, it would go off like multiple nuclear bombs. It would be uninhabitable. Yet God, in his goodness, being our Father, said, I have set the course of things in the world, and I direct the world. I bring winter and spring and summer and fall. Because they reflect his glorious goodness. That snow was not created by me. It was created by my Heavenly Father. And if it was created by him – he's saying to me on Thursday morning – then it's a gift. And so is the sound of birds and seventy-two degrees and summer and spring. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking – well actually, can we go like seventy-eight?

But you get my point. I want God, I want life in my image, right? Paul says, no, we have been made in his, and we are his children. All of life is a gift. He has given it – every breath, every day. This is the day that the Lord has made, and I will rejoice and be glad in it. This is what he invites us to, and this is what he's pronouncing in his own way to the philosophers in Athens.

But then he drops on them the nuclear bomb that really causes all the problem – the new reality. Here is what he says: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness." Now, if you were to stop there, some of that would not have been completely foreign to Greek religion – that the gods might be angry with us? Sure, they'd believe that. That we might be at war with the gods? Yes, they would have believed that – not all, but some. But then he goes on. He says: "In righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

So Paul calls all of his hearers, as I do to my own heart and to you, to call us to repentance for in any way that we are seeking salvation outside of God by trying to make God in our own image. But as well, in any way, shape, or form that we have said, I do not need you. I will direct my own path, my own desires. He calls us to repentance for our rebellion from our heavenly, good, in-control Father. Though he does not need us, he loves us. And he sent a man, Jesus Christ, in righteousness. And then he says, he raised him from the dead.

Notice the argument of Paul. He chooses words very carefully. He calls us to repentance, not ignoring ignorance, "because a day is coming on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man." Why? Because he raised Jesus from the dead. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then God is not coming again. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then God cannot call anyone to repentance, because Jesus would have just been another in a long line of martyrs who died for what they believe. But because God raised Jesus from the dead in the middle of history, that comes into direct conflict with every Jewish philosopher, every Greek philosopher, and every human heart. Why? Well I can't say it any better than this writer, Lesslie Newbigin, who says this: "To accept the resurrection is to accept the fact that history has a meaning that cannot be found by a study of the regularities and the recurrences of the past." Because the resurrection – there is nothing before it like it, and there will be nothing like it since. It cannot be studied through science. God brought the dead back to life. He continues.

It means that the whole existing order of nature and history is confronted by a new reality that gives it a new meaning. It means a radical contradiction of this world as it is. But the affirmation that this is so can be made only by a community of believers engaged in that contradiction, that though the world cannot explain the resurrection by facts, we believe it to be fact. And that fact calls us into ridicule. That fact gives us assurance of the future of the return of Christ, the future of the restoration of all things, that things are not as they seem, but God is behind it all, upholding it, bringing it to a consummation and a restoring point. To believe this is to call into question every one of our hearts, and our addiction to material things, and our idol-making capacities. It is to call into question every structure of humanity that says, "This is it. Make the best of your life."

God has said, "Not 'this is it.' *He* is it. And I have brought him that you might have life, and I invite you to come to him." And he calls them to repentance. And that point of resurrection was so controversial to them. Some were converted on the spot and wanted to hear more. Others completely rejected it, said it was just babble, and left him alone. And so it was a very divided crowd. Very few actually believed and became a part of this new community, the body of Christ.

So I ask you: was Paul a success in Athens? Not by any human standard. Did Paul's arguments win over the Areopagus? It most certainly did not. Did Paul come to the point very close to death? Absolutely. And oh, I don't know, let's look at it with ruthless efficiency. What did he get out of it? So

Paul went out from their midst, but some joined him and believed. Among them were just a couple of people given names. Was it worth it? What difference does it make that a poor and faulty preacher of Paul, giving this solo sermon for this vast group, not really gaining a whole lot of traction? What did it accomplish? God was at work that day. It wasn't Paul feeding on seeds of philosophy to make up a new thought. What he was preaching were the seeds of the gospel. And the seeds of the gospel would go to root. So I ask you again: was it worth it?

Could you put up the picture? This is Robbie and me just a week and a half ago. The man standing in the center is a Greek-speaking pastor who planted a church right in the heart of Athens. That church has grown to four hundred people. They are now in the mist of planting eight different congregations throughout Athens, some specifically to Muslims and immigrant communities, where they are seeing a lot of conversions, because the ISIS threat is actually opening doors for the gospel of truth and grace. They're planting churches in communities where people do not have the means to provide an income fully for their families, and they are homeless, and they are sick, and they are poor. They're planting a church in a community vastly made up of university students. They are planning to make not just a statement of one church. They're wanting to do a movement of churches. And he shared with me, because that Sunday he was going to be preaching from this very same text. And he's preached this text countless time. And when he has, and he stands before his Greek congregation, he looks to them and he says: was it worth it? And he says: look to the left, and look to the right, and see what our God has done.

The Lord was planting seeds through Paul in Athens. And by any human measure, it was a failure. But because God and the Spirit were directing it, in his sovereign power he has birthed countless churches, of which we are, many people removed, recipients of this ministry. Was it worth it? Is it worth it to preach the gospel at Upward/Elevate? Is it worth it to preach the gospel on Sunday mornings? Will the world be changed? Praise be to God, that is not up to me. It is not up to these coaches. It's not up to you. It's in the Lord's hands. And who knows what seeds he is planting today, and the vast harvest of fruit he will bring well beyond and long after we are gone. May that be so, for Christ and his glory and for the building up of his church. This is our God. Let's pray.

Father, give us a vision for what you are doing through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As you've confronted our sin and called us to repentance, Lord, hear our prayers. As you're calling us to be faithful witnesses of the gospel individually and as a body, Lord, hear our prayers and open up doors for the gospel. May you do this and build your kingdom. In Jesus' name. Amen.