

The Prologue

Upside Down

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This morning, it might be somewhat surprising that I invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 17. Now those of you that are guests and visitors, you may not understand why that might be surprising except for this fact, that we have spent several months walking through the book of Acts with one very strategic goal and that was to get to verse 6 of chapter 17. In spite of those early believers who prayed through that first week and saw the Holy Spirit fall, in spite of the fact that through persecution and martyrdom those early believers held fast the faith, in spite of the fact that the mercenary known as Saul of Tarsus would become probably the greatest missionary in time, we saw in chapter 17, verse 6, that there came a point where it said, "These are they that have turned the whole world upside down."

For several months we've looked at what are the attributes, what are the things that need to be a part of our life to see that that happens in our respective homes, businesses, communities, etc. In fact, last week was supposed to be the last chapter, so to speak, but it kind of reminds me of one of the great Christian literary works, at least in the modern era, famed author C. S. Lewis in the midst of what we know as World War II, 1942, the world around him was burning particularly in Europe, he wrote a book entitled, "The Screwtape Letters." If you're not familiar with this work, it is a dialogue between Screwtape who is this seasoned demon and Wormwood, his apprentice nephew, and the dialogue goes because the entirety of the story is how can this young apprentice learn how to deceive this soul, in their words, out of the grasp of the Enemy which is technically the Lord himself. When the book ends, the soul is saved and the demons have lost. It's a great conclusion to kind of this tumultuous story, not knowing which way this character was going to go.

That was in 1942. Seventeen years later, C. S. Lewis wrote an additional chapter. It's entitled "Wormwood Proposes a Toast." This once apprentice who failed at his assignment has now become the chief of the demonic, and looking back over time and history of what he has learned, he begins to propose that the greatest enemy that humanity has is we actually begin to believe our own philosophies and methodologies. He says no longer do we need to tempt them with the vileness of the pits of hell but just let them believe that what they've conjured up in their minds is actually valid and true.

So today in light of the great work known as "The Screwtape Letters" I want to make a proposal as well. Yes, verse 6 of chapter 17 says they turned the whole world upside down, but it doesn't take long, we turn the corner in verse 16 and we see humanity doing that which C. S. Lewis did not observe for the very first time but unfortunately is a pattern with humanity. Beginning in verse 16 it says,

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. 17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. 18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. 19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? 20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. 21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. 23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: 28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. 29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. 30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Interesting that it's been declared that these early believers have turned the world upside down and you don't get half a chapter down the road and you have people worshipping an

"Unknown God" just in case we've missed one. What's happened here in what we know as Mars' Hill is actually being replayed in each and every one of our lives every single day of our lives.

Allow me to illustrate. Let's begin with the "when." When did this happen? Now notice it says in verse 16 that when he was in Athens. Now back it up to verse 15. I purposely did not read it. We're on Paul's second missionary journey. You can imagine after all they've been through, the persecution, the presentations, that they need a little R&R. So Silas and others go one way. Paul says, "I'll meet you in Athens." To put it in our vernacular, he just wanted a little R&R. He just wanted a break. He just wanted the noise to stop. He just wanted the cycle to push pause. He just wanted to breathe.

You know, it reminds me a lot of in 1 Kings 18, the great prophet Elijah has been summoned to a great battle. The Baal worshipers are challenging him, whose God or gods, in their case, is really the true deity. So they decide to have a contest up there on the mount. They will prepare a sacrifice. It hasn't rained for over three years and they're going to say whose God can actually bring the rain. That morning, the Baal worshiping priests, hundreds of them, they begin to sing, they begin to chant, they begin to call upon their gods to no avail. By afternoon, they really get delusional and desperate, they actually start cutting themselves thinking the spilling of blood will surely summon their gods. Finally, Elijah says, "Gentlemen, take a step back. I got this." Remember it hasn't rained in three years. He said, "Take all the water reserves and pour it over the sacrifice. Fill the moat that is around it. Let the water flow over." Remember when he calls upon God, not only is the entire sacrifice consumed but in the distance they can start hearing thunder. God is about to bring the rain they've needed for over three years.

It's one of the great stories in all of the Bible. Have you read chapter 19? In fact, chapter 19, you would think that this great prophet who has just had the battle of a lifetime could get a weekend off. You would think that he could get a little break. You would think he could just kind of kick back and relax but word has gotten back to Ahab the king and his wife Jezebel, it never goes good when that name is utilized, Jezebel wants to end his life. Verse 10 of chapter 19, you're 10 verses into the next chapter and he literally says, "God, am I the only one? Am I the only one willing to fight?" Remember what the Lord says? "Oh no, no, there are 7,000 others."

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, in your world today, have you ever had that emotion, "God, am I the only one? Am I the only one that sees it this way? Am I the only one who can see truth in the midst of it? Am I the only one?" You do realize here in verse 16, Paul was the only one in Athens. He's the only one. Silas and the guys, they're somewhere else. He is all alone just like Elijah, and what is it that gets him so upset? What is it that causes him to come out of his hotel room? What is it that causes him to say, "Man, I am weak. I am weary. I am tired. There's nobody around me to help but I cannot help but go to the battle." Look in verse 16, He says, "his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." In other words, he could not stay away from the battle when he saw idolatry present.

Now you and I in the Western world when we hear the word "idolatry," we think of incense and bowing to inanimate objects, we think of pieces of artifacts that people pay homage to. Can I define for you biblically what an idol is? An idol is anything – did you hear me – anything that takes the place that God rightfully should have in your life. That's what an idol is. In other words, there are millions of types of idols in our life but there's only one definition, that entity, that item, whatever it may be that replaces the Lord in your life. And probably the most classic example is found in the book of Exodus. Remember the Israelites? They come across what we know as the Red Sea. They find themselves soon to be in that hopeful Promised Land but had to detour into the wilderness for a means. And as they're there, Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to gather not only attention with the Lord but what we know as the 10 Commandments. Do you remember what they're doing at the bottom of the hill? Aaron and the Israelites create an idol, do they not? They created a golden calf that would replace the one true God. Now think about it, this golden calf didn't just show up. They took the earrings off. They took the jewelry. They formed it. They fashioned it. It took time. It didn't happen overnight but eventually over the course of about a month, they had completely replaced the one true God with something that had no power at all.

We read those stories and we think, "Those foolish Israelites." We see those images of animism and inanimate objects being incensed, being burned unto and we say, "Who would do such a thing as that?" You know, the only problem is you and I are more like Acts 17 than those. What had these Athenians done? They had created their own idols, had they not? Their own philosophies, their own means, and allow me just this morning, I'm not going to go through dozens of them but can I just as an observer speak to a few idols that our culture has allowed to replace God?

Let me begin with the one that's going to maybe hurt the most: sports. Some of y'all are saying, "He went there, didn't he?" Hey, I'm a sports fan. In the last four days, I've been to two football games and I've watched countless ones. I like sports. I enjoy sports. In fact, all throughout your Bible sports terminology is used. When Paul says that for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, he's using a sports term that you've missed the mark or you've missed the target. He talks about running a race. He talks about wrestling with the devil. Trust me, sports are in your Bible in its rightful place. But what have we done? We've become a culture that takes our time, our energy, our resources, takes the one true God and says, "We don't need you. We have a winning season. We have a big contract. We have this, we have that." In fact, out of the wisdom of even one of our own church members who was much more successful in the game of sports than I ever thought about being. I love this statement. He said one of the great tragedies of our world today is we're actually communicating to young people that professional sports is a viable career option. Let that settle in for just a moment. It's become a god, has it not? I'm all for it, the Bible uses illustrations, but when you take a game and you take God off his pedestal and you put the game there, it has become idolatrous.

How about our own education, success, well-being, and financial means? We make every excuse in the world to remove God off his proper place and put the career ladder in his

place. And because it's mentioned here when he speaks about Mars' Hill, notice what it says beginning back in verse 24. It talks about God makes this and God makes that, God sustains this and God sustains that. It hasn't just occurred in the last two years, it's been happening for decades. Can I share with you one of the idols, one of the gods of our culture is our health. We spend trillions of dollars to get one more day, one more week, one more month, thinking somehow, someway, my lifespan is in my hands. What did Paul preach on Mars' Hill? He said God is the one who gives us the breath, God is the one who can take it. In fact, you go back to the book of Job, in several places it says that your breath in your lungs is controlled by God and God alone.

So what do we do? We take an extra day, an extra month, an extra year, and we place it where God should rightfully be and so we have an entire culture that's really no different than Athens. They had their philosophers, they had their beliefs, they had this, they had that, but we have our sports, our careers and our health. It's the same problem just couched a little different way.

So how did he respond? I love what happens here in verse 16, it says the spirit was stirred up in him. Can I speak in Southernese? He got riled up. That's what he did. In fact, you go to verse 17, it says, "Therefore he disputed in the synagogues with them." It says, "He conversed with them every day." Why is this important to the story? Because the same culture that worships at the altar of sports, success and health tells you as a Bible-believing Christian, "Just take what you think and believe and sit in the corner and don't share it with anybody." We're being told. "Oh, don't speak contrary to. Don't speak up. Just go to the outskirts and just be quiet. Do your thing at church. That's okay, we don't care about that. But don't bring it into the rest of the world." So guess what he did? He went right down into Main Street and he said, "Gentlemen, you and I need to have a conversation." He disputed with them. He talked with them.

Now you think about this. There's a history of this whether it was Moses and the Israelites in the Old Testament, John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan, or Jesus in the temple, every one of those stories idolatry was present. The Israelites with the golden calf. The Pharisees with their legalism and their laws. And in the temple, all those things that were so distracting to the worshipers, what did Jesus Christ himself say? He said, "You've made my Father's house a den of thieves." Overturning tables. By the way, John the Baptist didn't overturn a table, he didn't crack out the whips, but he did call them vipers and snakes and say, "Why are you not bringing fruit unto repentance?" It was not the most cordial of conversation.

And maybe it's just me and I don't want to fall into the Elijah trap, but what we're being told as believers today is if it doesn't make others feel good, just keep your mouth quiet. Well, I'm sorry, sometimes truth doesn't make you feel good. But the Athenians needed to hear it. You and I, our culture needs to hear it. We need to hear that we've got a sin problem. We need to hear, as Paul said, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and that the one who deserves to be on the altar of our lives is the one true God, not all those other things.

Why do we need to speak? Why do they need to hear? Fast forward to verse 30. We're not going to get into all the speech on Mars' Hill or I'd keep you through supertime and we've got multiple other services. Here we go. Verse 30, it says, "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." In times past God winked. Why? Because humanity has a perpetual problem. The garden of Eden, "Oh, let's eat the fruit. Surely, surely it won't kill us." Abraham, "Oh, let's have a child with Hagar. Surely that can't turn out bad." David, "Oh, it's just one night with Bathsheba. What can cause or what can come from that?" Or the Israelites, "Oh, sure, they're knocking at the door but God's protected us in the past, he'll do it again in the future." I could go on and on and on but think about Pharaoh. Think about Pharaoh in the Old Testament when Moses came to him and said, "Just let them go worship for three days." He said, "Sure you can do that." He changed his mind over and over and over. Finally, on the sixth time it says God changed his heart. In other words, he didn't have a chance anymore. Think about Esau in Hebrews 12. Hebrews 12, it says Esau who sold his birthright to his brother, it says he pleaded and he begged God, "Please, give me my birthright back." God said, "I'm sorry. What's done has been done."

Why do I share all those illustrations? Because it says here in verse 30, there was a time where God winked but judgment is coming. Our culture is foolish to think they won't pay the price for their sins. Our culture is foolish to think God will not eventually ask for the payment of their rebellion against him. Judgment is at the front door. And so what do they tell you to do? "Shhh, you're hurting our feelings. I don't feel like you empathize with me." What does Paul say? Jesus Christ rose from the dead so that you don't have to have an idol. Jesus Christ rose from the dead so you don't have to fall into the trap. Jesus Christ rose from the dead so you no longer have to go to bed at night wondering or hoping what lies on the other side of eternity.

Can I make a proposal today? When the world says, "Shhh, just leave it alone, it's not that big a deal," may we be as Paul, may we get stirred up in the spirit and say, "I'm sorry but I must tell you that Jesus Christ is the only one who can solve and fix this mess. There is nobody else."