

We've been following Paul and Silas in Paul's second missionary journey. Paul relayed the Jerusalem council's decision that salvation was by faith alone to the churches of Galatia. The Gentile converts didn't need to keep the laws of Moses (Acts 15:28-29<sup>i</sup>). Then the team was divinely directed to go to Macedonia. There the church of Philippi was started with people from every walk of life through a miraculous though painful prison experience. Then they went on to Thessalonica and Berea where more people came to faith and churches were planted. But in almost every city, persecution of one kind or another was stirred up and they had to keep moving. Paul fled from persecution in Berea, leaving behind Silas and Timothy. Upon arriving in Athens, he sent a message for them to come to him as soon as they could. It is not good for us to work alone. We need the fellowship and support of others.

*<sup>16</sup> Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.* Acts 17:16 Paul was looking around at all the idolatry and his spirit was stirred up or exasperated. He had seen idolatry in his home town and throughout his journeys, but Athens was filled with temples and altars. The word used here literally means "under idols," as if submerged in them. Temples dominated the landscape. It pained him to see so many misrepresentations of God.

Deception should grieve us. When we hear someone proclaiming a lie while trying to convince others to follow them, it should stir our spirit. I was sitting in one of our local restaurants and happened to see two elderly ladies pass a wad of cash to a self-proclaimed guru. We have shop after shop in our town offering spiritual help for a price. The truth of our loving Savior who gave His life for all who come to Him by faith is free (Matthew 10:8<sup>ii</sup>)! He paid it all. What did Paul do about this stirring in his spirit?

*<sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.* Acts 17:17 Paul engaged everyone, from Jew to God-fearing Gentiles, to idol worshipers in the marketplace. He used what we saw him use in Thessalonica, reason (Acts 17:2<sup>iii</sup>). That word also means to dialog. We see a great example of his reasoning with the philosophers in the rest of the passage. From that and the earlier examples we can see that Paul met people where they were at. If they were familiar with Scripture, he pointed to the prophecies of the Messiah and showed how they were fulfilled by Jesus. He will use the philosophers own quotes to make a connection with them. He surely spoke to those in the marketplace in a way that they could comprehend the wonder of the gospel message (1 Corinthians 9:22<sup>iv</sup>).

I think it is very revealing that the New Testament was written in a form of Greek that the common person spoke. There were other forms of speaking for debate or philosophy or the educated, but Paul didn't use these to try and sound elitist. That may be why they called him a "babbling" in the next verse. He didn't use enticing words of men's wisdom but a demonstration of the Spirit and power. **Paul did not want people to put their faith in the wisdom of men but rather in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:4-**

5<sup>v</sup>). We share the gospel in ways that communicate to the heart of the listener relying on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. The use of commonly spoken Greek reminds us that the gospel is for everyone and that God's love goes out to all.

*18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.* Acts 17:18 Epicureans believed in living in accord with nature. It was a disciplined lifestyle that they expected would bring them the truest pleasure. They were essentially materialists from the upper class of society. Their numbers were few. Stoics focused on moral earnestness. They believed we die and become part of the universe. Neither philosophy would have been very open to a righteousness that comes from the love and grace of God (Romans 1:17<sup>vi</sup>). They felt goodness came from their own efforts.

The philosophers heard Paul preaching Jesus and the resurrection. That is the main thing we preach. He is everything to us. He is our hope. We recognize we are helpless without Him. His resurrection says that His sacrifice for our sin debt was accepted by God. It tells us that the same power that raised Him will raise us who place our faith in Him at His coming (1 Corinthians 6:14<sup>vii</sup>).

*19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"<sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."* Acts 17:19-20 What an opportunity that God set before Paul! He had an official invitation to share the gospel with these groups that gathered to discuss philosophy. They had never heard of Jesus or the claims of the resurrection that Paul had been sharing in the marketplace.

*21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.* Acts 17:21 This could either be seen as a sign of spiritual hunger, or just fascination with new ideas. One Greek historian wrote that the Athenians were the best people at being deceived by some new teaching.<sup>viii</sup>

*22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.* Acts 17:22 Paul begins by pointing out their desire to understand and appease the gods. The term "religious" in Greek is a compound word that means to fear demons, or you could translate it "respect the gods." Paul began respectfully and with great tact. Remember, he is exasperated at the idolatry of the city, but he doesn't blast them. He reasoned with them in a way they could understand, which was quite different from the way he reasoned with Jews (Acts 17:3<sup>ix</sup>).

*23 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.* Acts 17:23 Paul is going to address their claim that he was teaching of foreign divinities. He used something he had witnessed earlier. He saw an altar to an unknown god. Realities of daily life said there had to be something more. The presence of that altar could imply that they knew their gods were lacking and didn't

explain all phenomenon they observed. That was the connection Paul used to present the good news of Jesus. He was tactfully employing a something they acknowledged. When we share with people, look for common ground from which to begin. Do they believe in heaven? Did they watch a movie about Jesus? Do they believe in God? Questions are a good way to find that common ground.

*<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,* Acts 17:24 Paul's proclamation begins with a scriptural point on the greatness of God the Creator who is bigger than His creation. Every point Paul makes is a prominent Hebrew thought from the Old Testament. Man cannot build something big enough or glorious enough to house God (Acts 7:47-50<sup>x</sup>). Remember that Athens has some amazing temples. The Parthenon was 23,000 square feet. The columns were thirty-four-foot-high with bases that were six feet in diameter. They supported richly ornamented slabs of marble with depictions of various scenes. The statue of Athena was thirty-nine feet tall. But Paul is saying that is nothing! God is way too big for such a puny building. He made the world and everything in it. How can the Lord of the universe fit in one of man's little boxes?

Paul was well aware of the Jewish temple, but he also knew it didn't contain God. In the Jewish history, God graciously gave them a manifestation of His presence, but He was certainly not confined to that temple. In fact, when Solomon built the temple he declared that creation could not contain the Creator (1 Kings 8:27<sup>xi</sup>).

*<sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.* Acts 17:25 Next, Paul touches on the all-sufficiency of God and provision of God. We can't give God something He needs for all that we can give came from Him. He is the One who is constantly serving us by providing everything for us: our very life, each breath, and every other thing we need (1 Timothy 5:17<sup>xii</sup>). Think of the wonder of nature and how it meets our every need, from medicines to construction material to food. The systems we depend on are amazing. We still don't understand photosynthesis and marvel at its efficiency. It is the very basis for our food chain (Psalm 136:25<sup>xiii</sup>). We take for granted the rate of rotation of the earth, the moon's effect on ocean currents and the capacity of water to store heat, all of which even out temperatures around the world making the planet habitable. Our moon is just the right size and distance to stir the ocean but not create enormous waves, making the ocean temperatures more even and seas navigable. The atmosphere is just the right mixture of oxygen and nitrogen. A higher rate of oxygen and fires would be difficult to extinguish. Nitrogen fixes to rain drops to fertilize the earth. I could go on and on. But if you want to read more on this get a copy of Inspired Evidence<sup>xiv</sup>.

*<sup>26</sup> 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,*  
*<sup>27</sup> 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,* Acts 17:26-27 Next, Paul brings up the sovereignty of God in human lives. This is a profound teaching. Nations are God's plan.

Every descendant of Adam lives where they live and when they live because that is the perfect place for their personality and make up to be drawn to God.

Skeptics often bring up a question about the people who never heard the gospel. Just like Abraham was in the land Ur who worshiped the moon and the stars, God put him there at that time because it would cause him to seek God and find Him. He is near to everyone who ever lived at whatever the location or time they live. John declared that Jesus is the light that lights every man who comes into the world (John 1:9<sup>xv</sup>).

We limit God when we suggest that He has made some kind of mistake by having Jesus born at the time in which He came into the world. It was when the world population began to start climbing, when roads and ships made travel for the missionaries possible. It was late enough in time that the written Gospels could be accurately preserved and conveyed to the most people.

*<sup>28</sup> 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."* Acts 17:28 Paul quoted Epimenides of Crete and from Artus poem, Phainomena. Man is made in the image of God. By using these points of truth which the listeners already accepted, he was building a bridge to help them be open to accepting the rest of the story. There are points of truth in most philosophies and religions and we can use those to build bridges. It doesn't mean we accept all that they teach, but the kernels of truth that line up with Scripture can be used to make a connection. We don't build bridges into lives by being contentious or demanding others listen to us. We build bridges through love and finding points of agreement. Someone has said that to win some, we must be winsome.

*<sup>29</sup> 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.* Acts 17:29 Now Paul draws a logical conclusion showing the futility of idolatry - with gentleness and grace. He doesn't use the pronoun "you" but instead uses "we." That puts us all in the same boat. We all struggle with idols, which is to limit God to some human idea or even human response or ability. We tend to think God would act like us (Psalm 50:21<sup>xvi</sup>).

The only relatable image is the life of Jesus. There was never a likeness of Him drawn by anyone who knew Him. That's because we are meant to focus on His words and deeds, rather than his physical form. His words were so radical, you can't imagine them coming from anyone else. I wrote a little e-book on this called *No One Ever Spoke Like This Man*. If you'd like me to email you a copy just put your email address on a card and I'll send it to you. (Subscribers send an email.) Here are a few samples: Who would dare to say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9<sup>xvii</sup>)? Who would pray, "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5<sup>xviii</sup>). There was only one image that faithfully represented God, and we don't have a record of His physical being, only of His words and deeds (John 15:24<sup>xix</sup>; 6:63<sup>xx</sup>).

*<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,* Acts 17:30 Because of the facts he has shared, the conclusion is

that man needs to repent. God is working in the hearts of all people everywhere to bring them to repentance. How does He do that? Sometimes it is the proclamation of the gospel. Sometimes where no missionary has gone it is the conviction of the Spirit of God in a person's heart. If God could speak to Abraham in Ur, He can speak to anyone anywhere (Genesis 12:1-3<sup>xxi</sup>; Romans 4:16<sup>xxii</sup>). When the gospel is proclaimed, the truth is made known and hearts come under conviction. If the choice is made to reject that conviction, God will hold the person accountable. I believe God faithfully stirs the word that is preached until a person will accept or reject it altogether and insist on being separated from God.

*<sup>31</sup> 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.*" Acts 17:31 The man Christ Jesus was verified to be the judge by resurrection. This account is probably Paul's abbreviated version of the message that he relayed to Luke. He may have spoken of the cross followed by the resurrection, a cornerstone of Christian doctrine (1 Corinthians 15:17-19<sup>xxiii</sup>). The proof of Jesus' divinity and authority is the resurrection. It showed His sacrifice was accepted by God. It fulfilled prophetic passages that tell us that this One who ascends to the right hand of God is the anointed of God and will be worshiped by all. That was predicted by the prophet Daniel and the Psalms of David (Daniel 7:13-14<sup>xxiv</sup>; Psalm 110:1<sup>xxv</sup>).

John Stott sums up Paul's message on Mar's Hill as follows: *He proclaimed God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. He took in the whole of nature and of history. He passed the whole of time in review, from the creation to the consummation. He emphasized the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the One to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are therefore inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent.*<sup>xxvi</sup>

*<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."* Acts 17:32 It is hard to believe. Think of someone telling you their friend rose after being dead for three days. But there was at least interest to hear more. Or perhaps they were under conviction and didn't want to hear anymore. Resurrection is a dividing point between belief and unbelief. While Jesus raised some to life, they eventually died and stayed in the grave. Jesus arose from death never to die again, transformed, and ascended into heaven. This is such an essential point that Paul's letter to the Romans tells us it is necessary to believe it to be saved. *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Romans 10:9

*<sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.* Acts 17:33-34 The fruit of this God given opportunity was a few believers, the start of the church of Athens! There was Dionysius, a member of the court held on Mar's Hill, a prominent woman pointed out by name, Damaris, and others. Perhaps

Luke is mentioning these people of the upper class by name to help Theophilus, the man to whom Acts is written (Acts 1:1<sup>xxvii</sup>), realize the gospel is for all classes of people. Since the majority of the church were slaves, it would help Theophilus know others of his status had come to faith. This whole passage has shown us Paul's ability to communicate the good news to people by starting with points of agreement. Luke is doing the same for Theophilus by mentioning these upper-class citizens.

### Questions

- 1 What provoked Paul?
- 2 What was his response to that stirring?
- 3 What was the opportunity and how did it come about?
- 4 How did Paul make a connection with the listeners?
- 5 What was the tone of his speech?
- 6 What can we apply from the way he spoke to them?
- 7 What were Paul's key points?
- 8 What ended the speech? Why?
- 9 Why is that topic so important?
- 10 What was the fruit that came of it?

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#### <sup>i</sup> **Acts 15:28-29 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:

<sup>29</sup> that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

#### <sup>ii</sup> **Matthew 10:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.

#### <sup>iii</sup> **Acts 17:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

#### <sup>iv</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

#### <sup>v</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:4-5 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

<sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

#### <sup>vi</sup> **Romans 1:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

#### <sup>vii</sup> **1 Corinthians 6:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

<sup>viii</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.38.5

#### <sup>ix</sup> **Acts 17:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

#### <sup>x</sup> **Acts 7:48-50 (ESV)**

<sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

<sup>49</sup> "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?"

<sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?"

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<sup>xi</sup> **1 Kings 8:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

<sup>xii</sup> **1 Timothy 6:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

<sup>xiii</sup> **Psalms 136:25 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>xiv</sup> Inspired Evidence – Only One Reality by Julie Von Vett and Bruce Malone

<sup>xv</sup> **John 1:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>xvi</sup> **Psalms 50:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

<sup>xvii</sup> **John 14:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

<sup>xviii</sup> **John 17:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

<sup>xix</sup> **John 15:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.

<sup>xx</sup> **John 6:63 (ESV)**

<sup>63</sup> It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

<sup>xxi</sup> **Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

<sup>xxii</sup> **Romans 4:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

<sup>xxiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:17-19 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

<sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

<sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Daniel 7:13-14 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

<sup>xxv</sup> **Psalms 110:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

<sup>xxvi</sup> John Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today – The Message of Acts: To the ends of the earth.*

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Acts 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,