

Acts 17:16-34

I thought we'd look for a short time at the apostle Paul's visit to Athens.

I want to first of all look at the spiritual state of Athens. Secondly, I want to look at Paul's message, and how he applied it to the situation in Athens, and thirdly, I want to briefly look at the results.

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

保罗在雅典等候他们的时候，看见满城都是偶像，就心里着急

1. Paul was alone in Athens. We see in v.15 that he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, but in the meantime he was alone for a few days with nothing to do.

Now, if we had some time to spare in a city we'd never been to before, what would we do? See the sights? Visit the local museums? Sit in the cafés drinking tea? Sadly, I really think that that's what we'd have done. Given the opportunity, we fill ourselves too easily with things of this world.

But Paul wasn't interested in sightseeing. His first concern was the religious nature of the city. We're told that, "*he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*" When we become a Christian, we ought to have new priorities. We're not here to please ourselves any more. We've got higher things to think about now.

We too ought to be concerned at the spiritual state of any place where the Lord has put us, whether we're visiting somewhere, or whether it's our own city. There are so many people out there who know nothing about having their sins forgiven by God, through Jesus Christ, and the new life that He gives to anybody who truly comes to Him.

So what did Paul do? How did he spend his time?

17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

于是在会堂里，与犹太人，和虔敬的人，并每日在市上所遇见的人辩论。

Firstly, he went to the synagogue. The Jews had the Scriptures, so Paul could bring the message of Christ to them through their own Scriptures. Christ was prophesied in the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures.

But the gospel is to go to the whole world, not just to Jews. So Paul also spoke about Christ with anybody in the market who would listen. These didn't know the Scriptures, so Paul had to find another way to get them to understand.

This is the situation we find ourselves in today. Most people we meet, don't know the first thing about the Bible. So we have to start speaking to them from what they do know. And that's why Paul's speech here in Athens is so useful for us. He speaks to people who have no background in spiritual things. They know nothing at all about God. Just like the people we meet every day.

And we're told that Paul did this "*day by day*." No break. No day off (maybe apart from the Sabbath). Are we as devoted as Paul to spreading the gospel?

In the course of his discussions in the market, two groups of people encountered him:

18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

还有以彼古罗和斯多亚两门的学士，与他争论。有的说，这胡言乱语的要说什么。有的说，他似乎是传说外邦鬼神的。这话是因保罗传讲耶稣，与复活的道。

Now, if you want to, you can read all sorts of commentaries about what these two groups believed. But I'm not going to go into that. I don't like taking information from outside the Bible to try to explain the Bible. Information we get from outside the Bible might be true. But then again, it might not be true. All of the Bible is always true. So I'd rather stick to Scripture alone. Epicureans and Stoics don't occur, by name, anywhere else in Scripture, so we should just leave it at that. All we *need* to know is that they were two groups of people with their own particular philosophies. But one thing they did have in common was that they both wanted to listen to what Paul had to say:

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"

他们就把他带到亚略巴古说，你所讲的这新道，我们也可以知道吗？

20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

因为你有些奇怪的事，传到我们耳中。我们愿意知道这些事是什么意思。

21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

雅典人，和住在那里的客人，都不顾别的事，只将新闻说说听听

Athens was a city full of people who “*spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.*” Now, you might say that that’s far more than we get from most people today. We try speaking about God to people, and nobody’s interested. Most people seem only to be interested in their own little lives and what they can get for themselves.

But, actually, underneath everything, more people than we realise do want more than that. Many people are open to finding out new teachings or strange ideas, just like the Athenians. But the problem is, any new teaching is only seen as one new teaching out of many. The world is full of religions, and philosophies. We have a whole range to choose from. Which one is right?

Christianity is one of many religions that claims to be the only true religion. All other religions are wrong. Jesus Himself said:

John 14:6

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; No-one comes to the Father except through me.”

耶稣说，我就是道路，真理，生命。若不借着我。没有人能到父那里去。

Do we think that’s arrogant, claiming to be the only true religion? Well, let’s allow Paul to explain it to us.

2. And here we come now to Paul’s message. Look how Paul dealt with this.

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

保罗站在亚略巴古当中，说，众位雅典人哪，我看你们凡事很敬畏鬼神。

He first of all told them that their own society was very “religious.” There were so many religions in the city. Each religion had its own set of rituals. If you perform the rituals, you’ve performed your duty to the god. He’s pleased with you, and that’s all you have to do. But our religion, the true Christian religion, is completely different. We worship the only true God. He’s real. He’s not impressed with ritual. He wants a living, real relationship with people. We communicate with Him. He communicates with us. We’re guided by Him. All other religions have absolutely no idea about a God in a living relationship with His followers. And that’s important to understand.

And, Paul then told them why he thought they were “*very religious*”:

23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

我游行的时候，观看你们所敬拜的，遇见一座坛，上面写着未识之神。你们所不认识而敬拜的，我现在告诉你们。

Paul had seen an altar “*to an unknown God.*” He used this, to tell them there is a God they didn’t yet know about. A God, unknown to them at that time.

Now, we don’t have any “altars to an unknown god” around today. But the point is that we need to start from where the people are, to try to make a connection with them. For example, most people today are very materialistic, so we need at least to show them what Solomon had found out:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

我见日光之下所作的一切事，都是虚空，都是捕风。

Anyway, Paul then went on to tell them about the true God, the God they didn’t know about yet. And he did this by starting to communicate the nature of God. God is far greater, and more powerful than anyone can ever imagine.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

创造宇宙和其中万物的神，既是天地的主，就不住人手所造的殿。

The Greeks thought of gods as creatures more powerful, but otherwise very similar to themselves. They fought, they became jealous, and so on. But Paul declared that there’s only one God, and He’s all-powerful. If you really think about it, by definition, there can only be one God. If there were two or more, neither of them could be God, because both couldn’t be all-powerful.

He “*made the world and everything in it.*” He created everything.

Psalms 19:1

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

诸天述说神的荣耀，穹苍传扬他的手段。

But not only did God create the world and all things therein, but He “*is the Lord of heaven and earth.*” He upholds all things in His providence. There’s nobody else in charge. Absolutely everything is under His control.

Matthew 10:29,30

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

两个麻雀，不是卖一分银子吗？若是你们的父不许，一个也不能掉在地上。就是你们的头发，也都被数过了。

There's a quite a common view, which is totally wrong, which says that God is only in control of part of the world and Satan's in control of the rest. A territorial battle is going on between them, but God wins in the end. That's not true at all. Everything, absolutely everything, is under God's control. He ordains and upholds all things in His providential control.

But you might say, "What about all the evil in the world?" That can't be of God. Well, Satan wanted to do all sorts of things to Job, but he couldn't do anything unless God gave him permission in the first place. So, whether it's the temptations of Satan, or earthquakes, famine or wars – all things are under God's overall control. We might often wonder what God's doing, but we must live by faith, not by sight. He knows what He's doing, despite what it seems like, and everything will be ordained to His greatest glory in the end.

Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

我们晓得万事都互相效力，叫爱神的人得益处，就是按他旨意被召的人。

And he "does not live in temples built by hands." The Greek gods had their own temples, all built by men. But our God is present everywhere. We don't need a special place to approach and worship Him.

John 4:21,23,24

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem..... Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

耶稣说，妇人，你当信我，时候将到，你们拜父，也不在这山上，也不在耶路撒冷。....时候将到，如今就是了，那真正拜父的，要用心灵和诚实拜他。

25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

也不用人手服事，好像缺少什么，自己倒将生命气息，万物，赐给万人。

And He isn't "served by human hands, as if He needed anything." The gods of all the other religions need something from us. They at least require our devotion. They often require sacrifices or good works. But our God doesn't need any of that. In fact He doesn't actually *need* us at all.

He "gives all men life, and breath, and everything else." Everything we have comes from Him. Even our very lives, and every breath.

Genesis 2:7

the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

耶和華神用地上的塵土造人，將生氣吹在他鼻孔里，他就成了有靈的活人，名叫亞當。

Our bodies are just dust of the ground, but our spirit, our soul, our life is from the Lord. He gives us life and breath and everything else, for a time on this earth, until that day the Lord has ordained when we shall return to Him again.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

塵土仍歸于地，靈仍歸于賜靈的神。

And we should be thankful to Him for all of this. Sadly, unless we've ever been near to death, we tend to take all these things for granted.

26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

他從一本造出萬族的人，（本有古卷作血脈），住在全地上，並且預先定准他們的年限，和所住的疆界。

Again, here we see God's control over all things. We all came from the same ancestor, Adam. And all nations, wherever they are, regardless of whether they acknowledge God or not, and regardless of how evil they are, have come into being by God. And they're taken away again by God when it pleases Him.

But there's a purpose behind all of this:

27 God did this so that men would seek him

要叫他們尋求神

That's why God ordains things the way they are. In order that men would seek Him. We don't naturally tend to seek God at all. As long as everything is going along smoothly in our lives, we'll forget God. We just will. That's why there are

far more mature Christians in places of persecution than somewhere like here, where we're all quite comfortable. It's sad that often the only way God can wake us up to reality, is by giving us trials in our lives.

and perhaps reach out for him and find him,

或者可以揣摩而得，

Notice it says "...perhaps...find Him." That implies that it is possible to find Him. God would never have said that, if it was impossible to find Him. Have you come to a point in your life yet, where you don't want to carry on living for yourself any more? You're fed up with it. You maybe want to reach out to God, but you don't know where to start. Well, we're told here that it is possible to find Him. It is possible to have a real relationship with Him.

But how do we find God? And why has God made it so difficult? Well, it's not that difficult, because:

though he is not far from each one of us. 28 For in him we live and move and have our being.

其实他离我们各人都不远，我们生活，动作，存留，都在乎他，

The problem is that men are looking in the wrong place.

Naturally we think that, if there is a God, He's out there somewhere, far away. But He's not a distant god at all. No. Actually, He's not far from every one of us. He knows our every thought, our every desire, our every motive for everything we do. He knows our hearts and everything about us.

Psalm 139:1,2

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

耶和華阿，你已經監察我，認識我。我坐下，我起來，你都曉得。你從遠處知道我的意念。

Psalm 139:14

I am fearfully and wonderfully made

因我受造，奇妙可畏。

If we want to know God, we have to look within ourselves. There's nothing we can hide from Him. So, we can communicate with Him, not by outward rituals or great religious works, but by simply talking to Him. We can have a relationship with Him as a man does with his friend. We don't have to go anywhere, or do anything. On the one hand, the one true living God controls the whole world, and on the other, He's as near as being within us all the time.

I really don't think we understand how big God really is, He's altogether different from any other god that men have invented. The true God is far, far greater than anyone can ever imagine.

As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

就如你们作诗的，有人说，我们也是他所生的。

Paul then went on to show the Greeks that even some of their poets have understood the idea of one all-powerful Creator God.

Where did these poets get this understanding from? It could have been from their own imaginations. Poets are creative people. But I don't think so.

There was a Greek poet called Homer, who lived about 2,800 years ago from today, and we still have his works preserved for us today. Now, if poetry can be preserved for 2,800 years for us today, why not in Paul's day? If Paul was talking about Greek poets from about 2,500 years before *his* day, that's significant. A great biblical event took place about 2,500 years before Paul's day. There was a worldwide flood. And Noah built an ark to escape it.

All of us are descended from Noah's family. Everybody else died in the flood. Noah was a true believer. He worshipped the one true living God. After the flood, Noah's descendants spread out throughout the world. In the process, most of them rejected the true religion and invented their own gods instead. But in some of these societies something of the true religion remained.

Greek poets from about 2,500 years before Paul, would have still known about one all-powerful Creator God from Noah. The Greeks subsequently abandoned the true religion, but the witness to the truth was always there in the writings of these old poets.

Now Paul had spent a long time telling the Athenians about the nature of God, and describing His attributes. That was an important starting point. Once that had been established, he then went on to explain the gospel message:

29 Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill.

我们既是神所生的，就不当以为神的神性像人用手艺，心思，所雕刻的金，银，石。

30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

世人蒙昧无知的时候，神并不监察，如今却吩咐各处的人都要悔改。

31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

因为他已经定了日子，要借着他所设立的人，按公义审判天下。并且叫他从死里复活，给万人作可信的凭据。

That's the gospel message. The gospel is not "Come to Jesus and you'll be happy." "Jesus has a wonderful plan for your life," although He may have. Neither is it, "Jesus loves you," although that may be true.

About 20 years ago, I went to a funeral. A consultant at the hospital where I worked was killed in a car accident. I knew him because he was an elder in the local Baptist church. The funeral was full of people who worked at the hospital, who otherwise would never go to church. So it was a wonderful opportunity to get the Christian message across, especially because the person who died was a Christian, and had a sure hope for the next world.

Now, I know you have to be sensitive at funerals, but I think the minister was being too sensitive, because all he said in his message was, "God loves us all." That's it. No call to follow Christ. He just kept saying, "God loves us all."

Afterwards, I met my boss from work. He's not a Christian at all, but he knew I was, so he came over to tell me that he really enjoyed the funeral service. The point is that before he went to the service, he was a drinker and a swearer. After going to the service, he's still a drinker and a swearer, but he now thinks God loves him. So, it's now a lot harder to convince him that God is not pleased with his life, and that he needs to change.

Read through the four gospels and the book of Acts. The main message of the gospel is always "*repent*." "*Repent and believe*." Because there's a Day of Judgment coming when God will judge the world by Jesus Christ. And that's exactly what Paul told the Athenians here.

He said that their past ignorance God "*overlooked*." We've got to make it clear straight away that God never "*overlooks*" sin, in the sense of ignoring it, sweeping it under the carpet, pretending it doesn't exist. God takes sin seriously. Sin took Christ to the cross. God never takes sin lightly.

What it really means here is that God is *longsuffering*. He puts up with things He doesn't approve of for a very long time. He'll punish it eventually, because He's a righteous and holy God. But He puts up with it, He allows it to exist, to give us all plenty of time to repent.

God "*commands all people everywhere to repent*." God commands us all, even today, to turn from our empty, meaningless lives, to turn from our sins and sinful nature, and to turn to Jesus Christ for salvation.

If anyone ignores this call, eventually God will judge them. Their time will run out. And they can't complain about it, because they've had plenty of time. God has "*set a day*" in the future in which He will judge the world.

And He'll judge it "*with justice.*" God's punishment will be perfectly just, because He can see our hearts. We can't see other people's hearts, so we can't judge them justly. But God can.

And God will judge the world "*by the man He has appointed,*" in other words, by Jesus Christ.

The first time Christ came into the world, He came to save the world:

John 3:17

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

因为神差他的儿子降世，不是要定世人的罪，（或作审判世人下同）乃是要叫世人因他得救。

But one day in the future, Christ is going to come as our judge. Nothing else will matter except what we thought of Christ when He came the first time.

So, what do we think of Him? Do we ignore Him completely? Do we think of Him as irrelevant? Do we think He's just another moral teacher, one of many? Or do we love Him, cry to Him for mercy, and ask Him to save us from our sinful nature? It's what we think of Christ that will count on the Day of Judgment, not how good we are. We can never be good enough. We need a Saviour, because we can't save ourselves. And that's exactly why Christ came into the world, to "*save His people from their sins.*"

And God has "*given proof of this to all men*" by raising Him from the dead. The resurrection is our assurance that all of this is true. Christ's dying on the cross was accepted by God, as a satisfaction for the sins of all those who would come to Him by faith. What each one of us must do now is to repent of our sins personally, and turn to Him for salvation. That's the gospel message.

3. So now we come to see the results of this gospel message. The message separated all those who heard it into two groups:

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

众人听见从死里复活的话，就有讥诮他的，又有人说，我们再听你讲这个吧。

When the gospel is preached, there's always a division. Some people will want to hear more about the salvation of their souls, whilst others will just laugh and walk away. So what did Paul do about that? Nothing. He just left it there.

33 At that, Paul left the Council.

于是保罗从他们当中出去了。

Paul had said and done all he could. He told them the true message of salvation from the one true living God. That's it. That's all we can do too. Our duty is just to deliver the message in the best way we can, and then we must leave it with God to change hearts. We can't change hearts, only God can.

A lot of Christians today think that the burden's on their shoulders to persuade men into the kingdom of heaven. So they use smooth talking, and persuasive sales techniques, just like a salesman trying to get you to buy something. That's a terrible witness for Christ. We're called simply to give the message. We can't do anything else. We can't push people into the kingdom of God. We must leave it to God to work in people's hearts. We should never pressure anyone into accepting Christ. If we do that, we would end up with a church full of false believers – people who really follow the persuasive speaker, rather than Christ Himself. We don't want that. We want people to sincerely, genuinely come to know the Lord.

And look what happened. Some people mocked, but others believed:

34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

但有几个人贴近他，信了主，其中有亚略巴古的官丢尼修，并一个妇人，名叫大马哩，还有别人一同信从。

Those who wanted to know more, followed Paul and believed. The church will be gathered by the Lord, we don't need to use worldly methods and techniques. We just simply explain the message. Christ said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

我要把我的教会建造在这磐石上，阴间的权柄，不能胜过他。

Well I hope this passage gives us some insight into what the true Christian message is, and how we should present this message to the world. Speak to people where they are. Try to relate to something they're familiar with and show how it can't satisfy. Speak of the greatness of the one true living God. Speak of the Day of Judgment to come. Call all men to repent and turn to the God through the one Saviour He has provided, Jesus Christ. Once we've presented this message, we must leave everything else to God. That was Paul's way of doing things, and it should be ours.

Well, these are a few thoughts on this passage. May all of us come to the knowledge of the truth, and embrace the Saviour of the world.