

## “Easter Words for the Religious Skeptic” Acts 17:16-34

### Introduction

- [Slide #1] About five years ago I paid my first and only visit to London. I had about six hours to kill until my connecting flight. So the plan was to cram as much of the London experience as possible into that time. With only six hours, how in the world do you do justice to one of the great cities of the world? You can't. I felt like [Rick Steves](#) after drinking a Red Bull. It was one thing after another.
- My first stop was the Queen Victoria Memorial and Buckingham Palace. Saw the unflappable guards. The Queen was home; the Royal Standard was flying on the flagpole. But she didn't step out to say hi so I headed through St. James Park toward Westminster Bridge and the Thames River.
- From Westminster Bridge it was a cornucopia of Kodak moments. The London Eye, that huge Ferris wheel, to the North. To the southwest, back across the river, the House of Parliament, the House of Lords, and Westminster Abbey. I spent a few minutes in Westminster Abbey. Saw the graves of a lot of famous dead people. And later I did get to see London Bridge, the Tower of London, and St. Paul's Cathedral, one of the great cathedrals of the world.
- But of all the things I saw, the first thing I saw struck me the most. Jetlagged and sleepy from the flight and then train ride from Heathrow, I really didn't know what to expect or where to begin. But as I exited street level from the Tube there it was. My very first glimpse of one of the great cities of the world. It was Big Ben peeking over the tree tops of St. James Park. As long as I live I will never forget that image.

### Transition

The Apostle Paul was profoundly affected by something he saw when he visited another world class city, Athens. While waiting for his friends, Acts 17, starting in verse 16, tells us what Paul saw. Listen.

- *While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*
- Like my trip to London, Paul found himself in Athens with time to kill. What do you do when you have time to kill in a great place like Athens? You sightsee. And there was plenty to see in Athens.

### Background/Setting

- By Paul's day Athens was 500 years past its prime; the glory days had passed.<sup>1</sup> But its glory hadn't completely faded. Athens' contribution to the arts, to literature, to philosophy was unparalleled in the ancient world and its influence was still being felt by the time Paul arrived. It was the home of Socrates and Plato and the adopted home of Aristotle. Even

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on The Book of Acts*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, p. 329.

past its prime Athens was still a cultural monolith and the intellectual center of the Greek world; it was still a world class city.

- If you and I were to visit Athens today, especially the [Archeological Museum of Athens](#), we'd be able to see much of what Paul saw.<sup>2</sup> What we now consider great works of art—statues, architecture, relics and the like. In Paul's day those things were religious shrines or idols; a testament to the Greek preoccupation with spiritual things. In the same way that most of the great sites in London somehow relate to the British monarchy, the British are obsessed with all things royalty. Most of the great sites in Athens were religious in nature; the Greeks were obsessed with the gods. And they created magnificent structures and statues to honor these deities. In fact, it's been said, "there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together, and that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man."<sup>3</sup>

### Transition

That's what Paul saw as he walked the hilly cobblestone streets. He saw a city thick with idols. And the text says he was so provoked by what he saw he had to do something.

- [Verse 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.*
- Paul naturally went to the place where somebody, anybody might listen to what he had to say. He was a Jew so he first went to where the Jews hung out. The synagogue. And he was in Athens so he went to the place where the Greeks hung out. The open air market. Imagine the crowds and the stalls and the merchants selling and all the smells and sounds of an open air market. It's the first century version of a mall in any town USA with Build-A-Bear Workshop and Radio Shack beeping and the smells of Cinnabon and Starbucks wafting through the air.
- And Paul's words nearly start a fracas. With a group of philosophers! Apparently rowdy philosophers. Epicureans and Stoics. [Verse 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.*
- The [Epicureans](#) believed the gods were removed from the hurly-burly commotion and disorder of day to day life. So they advocated living for all things pleasurable.<sup>4</sup> What did it matter? Enjoy life they taught. And forget about what the gods might think. They were basically the agnostic secularists of their day.<sup>5</sup>
- [Stoicism](#), on the other hand, was one of the major philosophical traditions in Paul's time. Stoics had a high moral sense of duty and a deep commitment to reason and to thinking. The aim of stoicism was to teach people to attain happiness by being in control of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Living virtuous lives was really important.

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary, 2007, p. 560.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Daily Study Bible series. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1962. p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> Bock, p. 561.

<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, p. 1140.

- Again, I don't know any Epicureans or Stoics by name but I can walk down any isle at [Barnes & Noble](#) and find countless books espousing those two descriptions of life almost to a tee. In fact, those two descriptions describe a lot of people I know and the way they try to live. Maybe it even describes you.
- At any rate, look at the text. Together these philosophers accuse Paul of something. They accuse him of being a babbler. Literally, a seed picker. A worthless person. Someone who picks up scraps of ideas and passes them along without really understanding those ideas. These highfalutin philosophers think Paul's incapable of espousing a clear and coherent system of beliefs. But, in spite of that, something he's said makes them want to hear more. *Jesus and the resurrection*. They're intrigued. So what do they do? They drag him away. [Verses 19-21](#) tell us why.
- *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? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*
- Being the sharp tacks that they are they realize Paul's been discussing some new god and this god's divine activity. But they don't quite understand what they hear.<sup>7</sup> Resurrection? So they take him to the Areopagus to speak.
- The word Areopagus simply means hill of Ares or Mars Hill. Ares being the Greek god of war. Mars being the Roman Empire's equivalent. The Areopagus was the hub of all important activity in Athens.<sup>8</sup> And more than just a hill. The Areopagus was also a Council as [verse 33](#) points out. A Council of city leaders and thinkers who controlled the many visiting lecturers who came through the city.<sup>9</sup>
- I kind of picture the Areopagus as this weird combination of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London where you can stand up—in public—and pretty much blather about any topic you want to a crowd always willing to listen and a more formal University setting with trained academics. Whatever the Areopagus may have been like we are given an editorial comment in [verse 21](#) that reveals a lot about how Athens operated. *(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*
- What a place, right? An entire city obsessed with staying current on the latest ideas.<sup>10</sup> And they give the city's newest hottest lecturer Paul the floor—and they wait for him to share the new thought of the day. By the way, we do that now too, don't we? Albeit informally and usually not in public. We love to stay current with blogs and podcasts and RSS feeds that are automatically siphoned right into our inbox and magazines and WRCO. These events may have happened 2,000 years ago but has human nature really changed all that much?

## Transition

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<sup>7</sup> Bock, p. 562.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, p. 563.

<sup>9</sup> Reinecker, p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> Bock, p. 563.

And then Paul opens his mouth to speak. Aren't you curious about what he says to that group, in that setting? Me too. Look at [verse 22](#).

### Main Points

- *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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 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. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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."*
- Paul begins his speech by acknowledging what he's observed; this city-wide fascination with spiritual things. *I see that in every way you are very religious* he says. The Athenians were so religious, or superstitious, they even had an altar dedicated to an UNKNOWN GOD, just to cover all the bases. Frankly, in some respects, Richland Center is not that different. How many churches are there in this town? This place is overgrown with churchy kinds of places. Everywhere you look there are architectural monuments to this town's historical preoccupation with religious and spiritual things. The fact that you're here this morning probably means you too are interested in spiritual things, even if it's just once or twice or ten times a year.
- Paul basically tells his religious audience that their religious zeal was completely misdirected. Is yours? He says, "I see how religious you are." "I see how ignorant of God you really are." And then he tells them [three things](#) about the one true God they know nothing about.<sup>11</sup> The God they superstitiously or religiously worship as UNKNOWN is the [creator of all](#). He is the [sustainer of all](#). And he is the [judge of all](#).
- This Easter if you, like the people of Athens, find yourself interested in spiritual things but not really knowing who God is, then pay attention. Because Paul's words are for you. As he says in [verse 27](#), God is not far from you, here, right now, if you would just seek him. Let this Easter be a turning point in your life. Or as someone once said, "The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is."<sup>12</sup>
- The [first thing](#) Paul says is that God is so much bigger than any of us can imagine or think. [Verse 24](#), he *does not live in temples built by hands*. God doesn't reside in a building, this

<sup>11</sup> Dick Lucas, "Seven Principles for Reaching Lost People," *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, p.453-461.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Morley, [The Seasons of a Man's Life](#), *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 3.

building, or any building. He can't be confined to a box. He is the creator of the world and everything in it. He is the *Lord of heaven and earth*.

- And because he's your the creator and not the creation he is completely self-existent. *He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything*. God is not a domesticated god. He is dependent upon no one, least of all you. You can't bribe him. You can't stroke him. Why? Because He doesn't need you. But he loves you. He made you.
- And more than just being your creator, the **second thing** Paul says is that God is the sovereign ruler and sustainer of all life. **Verse 25**. *He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else*. You live and breathe because he says so. He sustains you and provides for you even if you don't acknowledge him or exactly know who he is. In fact, you are here right now at this point in history, living the life you live because God has determined it. **Verse 26**, *he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*. This morning, is no accident either. God wants you to hear these words about him. He has you here for a purpose. *So that men would seek him and find him*. And he sustains you and providentially provides for you because he wants you to seek and to come to know him.
- And most importantly, the **third thing** Paul says is that because God made you and sustains you are accountable to him. Because of who God really is idolatry is unthinkable. Ignorance of him is intolerable. And for those who reject him, judgment is inevitable.<sup>13</sup> **Verse 27**. *Since we are God's offspring, we should not think the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill*. God cannot, he will not tolerate improper, false, or superstitious religiosity. He is not the bad cop in the sky out to get us when we screw up. He is not the heavenly grandfather with the white beard—genteel and feeble. He is not our magic genie, someone we call upon to do our bidding, to help us in our hour of need. He is not the god of the Epicureans, removed from life and distant. Nor is he the god of the Stoics only concerned our happiness that comes through virtuous living. All those false conceptions—false notions of him, Paul says, are idolatry. **Verse 30**. *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead*.
- The good news of Easter is Christ crucified for sins, yours and mine. Christ bearing God's punishment for sins, the punishment meant for you and me. Christ dying, yes. But more importantly, Christ raised, resurrected. And this non-negotiable core of the Christian message is God's ultimate and definitive proof that history has a purpose and that you are accountable to him for how you live. God wants you to be right with him, to come clean; which is why he *commands all people everywhere to repent*. He wants you to stop living for yourself and acknowledge your disobedience of him, your failure to live under his rule and authority. He wants you to confess your need of him and to turn to the one he has sent, to Christ, who once was dead but now is alive. Through him he wants to offer you forgiveness and mercy and grace. He wants you to live with Christ, for him and in that grace. Trusting in his grace. Placing all your hope in the grace that comes through Christ. You do this and you will know and recognize Easter for what it is. The best news in the world.

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<sup>13</sup> Taken from article by Dick Lucas, "Seven Principles for Reaching Lost People," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, p.453-461.

## Conclusion

- I want you to notice one last thing. When Paul gets to the part of his speech about the resurrection the speech ends. He never gets to finish his speech. [Verse 32](#) says *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."* *33 At that, Paul left the Council. 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.*
- There were three reactions to the resurrection. Outright rejection. Some sneered. They scoffed. Others showed casual flirtatious interest. *We want to hear more.* And finally, belief. *A few became followers and believed.* You're only going so many chances to hear about Christ. You must do something with what you've heard. *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*<sup>14</sup> What's your response? The tomb is empty. His body gone. He is risen.

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 4:12