

PAUL AT ATHENS

Acts 17:16-34

Some of the noble brethren in Berea showed their courtesy to and love for Paul by escorting him safely to Athens. When they were leaving him to return to Berea, Paul told them to have Silas and Timothy "come to him with all speed."

Meanwhile, Paul was left alone in the great and wonderful city of Athens, the capital of Greece. It had long been the world's center for literature, art, culture, sculpture, philosophy, and religion. The city was a vast museum of learning, sculpture, and art. There the great masterpieces of the greatest masters in architecture and sculpture were to be seen.

In Paul's day four hundred years had elapsed since the golden age of Athens. Although it had experienced a sad decline, it was still the artistic and intellectual capital or center of the civilized world, whither swarmed philosophers of different schools, teachers and professors of all kinds of knowledge, wealthy strangers, and students from all nations. But at the same time this great city was on the road to degeneracy. The Athenians lived on the glories of the past, both in art and philosophy.

I. The Occasion. 17:16-21.

1. Paul was waiting for his companions. 17:16.

This is an arresting statement, for it reminds us that we shall see how a Christian man waits in a godless city. How did he spend his time while he waited? One may waste his time doing nothing, or he may use his time seeing the wrong things, visiting the wrong places and doing the wrong things; or he may use his time profitably. Paul did more while he waited than some people do when they are working.

2. Paul was surveying the city. 17:16.

He made a tour of observation through the city. As he did so, he saw many idols on the streets, in the parks, on the buildings, in the temples, in the homes, and in the magnificent Acropolis. According to Pliny, there were 3,000 public statues in Athens at the time of Nero. Pausanias said that Athens contained more statues than all the rest of Greece. The city was stocked with more than 30,000 gods. Petronius started the witticism that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.

3. Paul was impressed by what he saw. 17:16-17.

It was not the sights in Athens, but the souls that attracted Paul. What impressions did the city make on Paul?

(1) It aroused his interest.

This is natural. How can anyone go to a strange city and not have his interest aroused? Paul was especially interested in the wickedness of the people and their vain show of worship. There were idols everywhere and no knowledge of God. Corruption stalked the streets amid the culture of the ages.

(2) It stirred his emotions.

His soul was stirred. He was touched by the pity of it all. His spirit was provoked within him because the people were living in a sham world. They were corrupt and brutal in the midst of their greatness. He could not keep his silence while the people were reeling into hell in their blindness. Paul was an emotional man, and these sights were too much for him. He was filled with pity and sorrow because he knew that these idols and altars all meant that

these men were made for worship and for God. He cried out against the open wickedness of the city. He exposed the emptiness of their worship, and the worthlessness of their many altars.

(3) It inspired his services.

He could not remain silent any longer. He had an eager zeal to do something for the salvation of these people. He did not wait until reinforcements could come to him from Berea. He attacked the problems at once and single-handed. The needs of the people challenged him. They needed his Christ. The setting of the situation was ideal for a sermon. Here was an altar to an unknown God; Christ was that unknown God. Here were hungry hearts yearning for the bread of life; Christ was the Bread they needed.

In the synagogue Paul reasoned with the Jews and other devout persons. In the agora or market-place he reasoned with whomever happened along and would stop to listen. The agora was an open square in the heart of the city. It was the place of buying and selling. When business hours were over then the gossipers began. It was the place where new opinions were expounded, where philosophers and traveling orators found a ready audience. Paul moved around in the agora, questioning and reasoning with all who would listen.

4. Paul attracted the attention of the philosophers. 17:18-21.

Soon he came across some Epicureans and some Stoics. The Epicureans were materialists. They denied that anything was created. They taught that everything came by chance or fate. To them a resurrection and the future life were impossible. They taught that pleasure was the chief good, and that pain was the chief evil. When Paul came to Athens, the Epicurean philosophy in practice and experience was lust in its most degrading form.

The Stoics were pantheists, holding that God is the soul of the world, that might and deity are inseparable. They declared that virtue was the chief good. They believed that human happiness was best attained by the practice of virtue, but their practice did not conform to their theory. They emphasized the importance of insensibility to both pleasure and pain.

The Epicureans and the Stoics, for the moment at least, forgot their mutual jealousy and made common cause against Paul. Some spoke of him with contempt. They considered him a quack. Some of them sneered at him. They called him a "babbler." The Greek word is "spermologos." It comes from two words -- sperma, seed, and lego, to collect. It means "a picker-up of seeds." This word is used for the birds that hop about picking up seeds out of street refuse. Plutarch applies the word to crows that pick up grain in the fields. Eustathius used it of a man hanging around in the markets picking up scraps of food that fell from the carts. It was a slang word used to describe a person who frequented the market-place and picked up a crumb of learning here and there. As applied to Paul, it means, "What would this picker-up of seeds, this chatterer, this empty talker, this ignoramus wish to say, if he could pick up enough words to get off an idea?"

But some others recognized that Paul was a religious teacher. However, he seemed to be a proclaimer of foreign deities. And this would have been a grave offense because the Roman law did not allow the introduction of a new religion. On this very charge the Athenians had voted the hemlock for their greatest citizen, Socrates. These men mocked Paul because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. They were really so ignorant of what Paul meant that they thought he was talking about a couple of deities. They thought that Jesus was a god and that resurrection was a goddess, and the wife of Jesus.

Then they took Paul to the Areopagus. It is not clear whether "unto the Areopagus" means the hill of Mars or the court itself. I think that it means that he was taken before the court, not as a criminal but simply for examination concerning the legality of his new teaching in this university city. With more or less of courtesy they asked him to explain his teaching. He gave them a new interpretation of life, a new philosophy, a new understanding of God. He made God real to them. He shed light upon their problems and sent many to their homes with a new joy in their hearts. He filled the city with surprise, curiosity, and seriousness.

The people of Athens were more interested in novelties and sensations than they were in truth. They were peddlers of weird and startling things. Paul matched the sensation of his Lord against all the novelties of their arts. Nothing was as new, as startling, and as gripping as the news of Jesus Christ. No preacher need turn to artificial sensations to draw and to hold his crowd. He has in the Gospel of Christ the world's greatest sensation.

Christ Himself was a sensation. His virgin birth was the world's greatest marvel. The life of Christ was a sensation. It was a life without sin. He lived in a sinful world and among sinful men, yet without sin. There had never been one like Him before, nor has there ever been one like Him since. His power and authority over storms, disease, and demons was matchless. His miracles have had no parallel. His death was a sensation. His resurrection was such a sensation that it rocked the world. It has been told for 2,000 years, but it has not lost its interest. His ascension was also a sensation. No man will ever tell a more fascinating story than that.

The Gospel is not a curious art. Novelties soon run into nonsense. Real problems are not solved by tricks. Sleight of hand performers may entertain, but they seldom elevate people. There are quacks in religion as in other things, but they are of little value.

II. The Sermon. 17:22-31.

The statement that "Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus" indicates to me that the Areopagus means the court instead of the hill. He would not have stood in the midst of the hill, but in the midst of the court. After an introduction, brief, but very tactful, Paul delivers one of the greatest messages of his ministry. Robertson said his sermon was "a masterpiece of real eloquence on the greatest of themes." Snowden said that "in courtesy, adroitness, philosophy, logic, polish, and power, it is one of the masterpieces of oratory." In its message it was also a masterpiece. It was really a commendation of the Gospel to the hungry heart of heathendom. He sought to commend the Gospel to the Greeks by proving it the fulfillment of their age-long yearning after God.

The life of Paul was a series of broken plans, of disappointments, of reverses, and of surprises. There were a few experiences that were destiny-making in their importance. His experience in Athens stands apart from all others in his life, in boldness, in shrewdness, and in adaptability. Paul's hour had come. He stood in the center of culture, in the midst of a zealous people, challenging him to do his best. He accepted the situation as he found it and began at the same place and preached to them Jesus. That city needed Jesus more than it needed anything else. The people of Athens were an idolatrous group. They erected altars to the god of war, the god of peace, the god of rain, the god of storms, the god of harvest, the god of beauty, etc. In the midst of this multitudinous array of gods they placed one altar to the Unknown God. By this they meant to include any god who might have been overlooked, lest they should offend that forgotten god.

Paul's sermon may be outlined as follows.

1. The Pleasing Introduction. 17:22.

(1) Its respectful salutation -- "Gentlemen of Athens."

(2) Its complimentary ascription -- "very religious people."

The first thing to arrest the attention of the reader in this address is the marked courtesy of the speaker. He wins the respectful attention of his hearers, not by flattery, but by finding something to commend in them. That something was their religiousness. Paul did not rebuke them for their multiplicity of gods. He rather commended them for their efforts to worship. He knew that to offend them would be to lose his opportunity to win them. He commented on a distinction of which they were naturally proud. They were given to worship.

2. The Pathetic Inscription. 17:23.

(1) Its tactful intimation. 23a. "To the God whose name is not known."

(2) Its startling declaration. 23b.

Here Paul found a point of contact with his audience and a point of departure for his new teaching. A new religion could not be introduced legally, but he could expound the nature of this "unknown god." The unknown God can be known. Paul took advantage of their altar and proceeded to make Him known to them. "Him declare I unto you." Millions today are blindly feeling after God, and they need some one to come and explain him to them.

Paul also did them honor in quoting from one of their own poets. He reminded them that this poet had said that they were all the offspring of God. Paul took advantage of that to declare to them that their poet had spoken more wisely than he realized, and that now he wanted not only to endorse what their poet had said, but he wanted to explain it to them more thoroughly. This was another stroke of wisdom. He proceeded to declare that if their own poet was right in saying that they were the offspring of God, then they should all live like His offspring and not degrade God by their godless living. If God made them He deserved their homage. He pointed out to them that their worship of these idols was worshipping the works of their own hands rather than worshipping the God who made them.

3. The Profound Interpretation. 17:24-31.

(1) The Doctrine of God. 24-25.

a. He is creator -- maker of all. 24.

b. He is preserver. 25a.

c. He is benefactor. 25b.

The source of life and all its blessings.

(2) The doctrine of man. 17:26-28.

a. He was created by God's power. 26a.

b. He dwells on God's earth. 26b.

c. He is governed by God's will. 26c.

d. He is dependent on God's mercy. 28.

(3) The doctrine of salvation. 17:30.

a. Saved by a living God.

b. Saved by an overlooking God.

c. Saved by a commanding God.

God calls all men everywhere to repent. This call to repentance is because of the judgment which is certain.

(4) The doctrine of accountability. 31.

a. Why? 31a.

Because God is sovereign, and man is subject.

b. When? 31b.

c. Who? 31c -- The inhabited earth.

d. By whom?

"The Man whom He hath ordained."

There was a time when God was indulgent with the people because of their ignorance. Those times are gone, and now God commands all men everywhere to repent. There are degrees of guilt. The sins of knowledge are worse than the sins of ignorance, because the first knows better and the second does not. The sins of premeditation are worse than the sins of impulse, because many sins are committed spontaneously that would not be committed if men had time to think and realize the consequences of it. The sins of purpose are worse than the sins of accident. The sins of maturity are worse than the sins of immaturity, because a mature man is more capable of weighing the consequences of sin than the child is. The sins of custom are more easily excused than others. There was a time when God and men winked at the custom of polygamy, but such a sin does not excuse now. The sin of slavery was once regarded as a legitimate thing, but it is not so regarded today.

The gospel should be progressive as much as any other institution is progressive. This does not mean that the essentials of the Gospel are revised, but it means that methods of conveying the Gospel must keep up with the age in which each generation lives. This is a tragic reality in our present age. We are ready to accept all modern methods in the promotion of all things except the Gospel. The stores, hotels, theaters, and public buildings are modernized, made attractive, air conditioned, and comfortable, but the church is the last to adopt such things. The commercial world sells its wares to the public by irresistible salesmen, whereas many churches want only slow, lifeless, and uninspiring preachers. Many churches give up their old standards with great reluctance. General Booth said, "You can keep company with God only by running full speed."

III. The Results. 17:32-34.

All seemed to go well with Paul until he preached the resurrection of Jesus. The wise men of Athens were not willing to accept his teaching. This threw the whole town into confusion. Satan will not object to the preaching of a Gospel of a dead Christ, but the resurrection has always been a sore spot with the forces of hell. The devil does not object to a social Gospel nor a moral Gospel nor an ethical Gospel; but he always objects to the Gospel of the resurrection.

The resurrection is the pivotal point in Christianity. The claims of Christ all rest on His resurrection. The entire Christian system stands or falls on this. The Jews feared His resurrection more than they did anything else. For that reason they placed a heavy Roman guard about His tomb. The disciples found in His resurrection the source of their greatest inspiration. But for His resurrection they would have had no message for the world. Paul made Christ's resurrection the center of his preaching; around it he built his system of theology; upon it he took his stand and rested his case. It had the same effect everywhere he preached it; the people were divided. Some believed it, and some disbelieved it. Some found great hope and inspiration in it, and others found occasion for hate and bitterness. Some were ready to die for it, and some were ready to die in order to stamp it out.

The resurrection is the heart of the Gospel today. It is the proof of the deity of Jesus; it is the basis of our faith; it is the guarantee of our resurrection. We declare it to men as a fact. The resurrection of Jesus is the basic belief of Christianity. It is impossible for men to accept Jesus as the Son of God without admitting His resurrection as a physical fact.

These three attitudes toward Paul's sermon have been found in all ages and in all lands.

1. Some mocked. 32a.

This reveals not only the attitude of these mockers toward religion but it reveals their attitude toward all sacred things. Those who mock at religion will mock at honor; they will mock at virtue; they will mock at truth; they will mock at sacrifice; they will mock at love; they will mock at marriage. Nothing is sacred to them. The mocker cannot be reasoned with; he cannot be appealed to; he cannot be convinced; he cannot be made ashamed. Such men must be left to their folly until their world shatters about their heads. Tragedy alone can change their attitude. Some mock because they close their eyes and ears and minds to truth. They do not want to believe. Some mock even when they know better because they think it is a mark of superiority.

2. Some procrastinated. 32b.

They said, "We will hear thee again of this matter." They were not willing to reject it wholly nor accept it wholly. They were convinced in their minds of its merit, but they were lacking in courage to say so publicly.

Procrastination is the chief trick of the devil. He is willing that men believe in God, provided they do not accept Christ and serve Him. He does not object to men believing in heaven, provided they do not make preparation to go there. He does not oppose good resolutions so long as men do not put them into effect.

"We will hear thee again" is the language of the dodger. He is unwilling to profess his convictions. He will neither positively reject the truth, nor publicly accept it. This is the most dangerous sin of the present age. There is little danger of men openly denying the truth about sin, God, and eternity; but there is great danger of men believing those things and doing nothing about them. It is not enough that men believe truth; it is necessary for them to follow it publicly. The opportunity of the Athenians was lost because they never had a chance to hear Paul again. He walked out, never to return to Athens.

3. Some believed. 34.

This verse tells the story of a group whose belief was shown by their actions. It was not only a head belief, but it was a heart belief. The intellectual belief drove them to a courageous proclamation of it. The believer must be willing to follow where the truth leads. To be unwilling to do this will close one's mind against the truth.

Paul's ministry was not entirely fruitless in Athens. It seems that he always had at least one convert everywhere he went. Here, his converts were few, but one of them at least was a personage of importance -- Dionysius, one of the judges of the Areopagus. History says that he became the first Bishop of Athens and died a martyr. Another convert was an aristocratic woman named Damaris. Paul's work was a glorious success. No sermon is a failure which leads one soul to believe in Jesus Christ.