

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Good news that changed Cities: Athens - Acts 17:15-34

Today I continue our series "Good news that changed Cities" by considering Acts 17:15-34, Paul preaching the Gospel at Athens. Unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica had stirred up trouble for Paul in Berea (Acts 17:13-14). So Paul was escorted by sea to Athens, where he sent his escort back with instructions for Silas and Timothy to come and meet him there (Acts 17:15).

The twentieth century Christian writer AW Tozer wrote<sup>1</sup> that the Gospel message embodies three distinct elements:

- i. An announcement of good news of redemption accomplished in mercy.
- ii. A command to all people everywhere to repent.
- iii. A call for everyone to surrender to the terms of grace by believing on Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Previous talks told of how this happened first in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, Philippi and Thessalonica. Today, we shall see how well Tozer's summary fits with Paul's Gospel messages to the Athenians.

Let's divide this talk up into five parts:

1. Paul surveying Athens (Acts 17:16);
2. Paul preaching in the synagogue (Acts 17:17a);
3. Paul preaching in the marketplace (Acts 17:17b-18);
4. Paul preaching in the Areopagus (Acts 17:19-31); and
5. Paul leaving Athens (Acts 17:32-33).

### 1. Paul surveying Athens (Acts 17:16)

Athens is one of those places that I'd like to visit as a tourist. Perhaps it's wrong to say that Paul first spent some time in the city as a sightseer for I'm certain that he realised that the Lord had a purpose in taking him there. However, even in Roman times, Athens retained its reputation as a centre of excellence for learning and culture, a carryover from former Greek empire glory days. It wasn't these issues that Paul particularly noticed. He was shocked by the sheer idolatry of the city which spoke so much of man's civilisation. *"While Paul waited ... [in] Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols"* (Acts 17:16, New King James Version). All kinds of idols that the mind of reprobate man had dreamt up! Was this the best that the wisdom of man could produce? It appears so, for Paul later wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:21-22, *"The world did not know God through [its own] wisdom ... and Greeks seek wisdom"* (English Standard Version).

Paul was sensitive to the requirements of God, *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them for I ... am a jealous God"* (Exodus 20:4-5). Disturbed by the evident gross violation of this commandment, Paul set about to preach the Gospel first in the synagogue and then in the public marketplace.

But before I speak on these activities, I'd like to raise the issue of idolatry in twenty-first century Britain. Perhaps you think that it's not so much a problem for us but there are still areas of Christendom where worship of idols continues. Brits may say that they wouldn't be duped nowadays to bow down before hand-crafted pieces of stone, wood or metal. Like Isaiah they can easily see that these are lifeless and powerless! However, there are the twin pursuits of pleasure and sports in modern life. It's so easy for these things to dominate life and for us to idolise celebrities and famous people. Also, 2 Timothy 3:1-4 warns, *"that in the last days ... people will be lovers of self, lovers of money .. lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."*

### 2. Paul preaching in the synagogue (Acts 17:17a)

First, Paul reasoned with the Jews and the Gentile proselytes in the synagogue. As a fellow Israelite, he knew Psalm 81:8-9: *"Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me! There shall be no [idol] among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god."* Understanding that idolatry brings God's judgement he

may have warned them using words such as, *"We know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people'"* (Hebrews 10:30). Luke, the author led by the Holy Spirit, doesn't give any indication, but on other occasions, details of Paul said are given:

- In Thessalonica, *"Paul, as his custom was, went into [the synagogue], and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ'"* (Acts 17:2-3, New King James Version).
- Acts 13:14-50 is a full account of Paul's preaching in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. His main point to the Jews was, *"Let it be known to you ... that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins"* (Acts 13:38).

I find these preachings very helpful for they show what, and how, to preach to people who have some background knowledge of God from the Scriptures. Sadly, we can no longer rely on this kind of approach in Great Britain, where people were once knowledgeable of bible truths.

### 3. Paul preaching in the marketplace (Acts 17:17b-18)

Paul then took the Gospel out into the public arena. He spoke, *"in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."* He preached *"Jesus and the resurrection"* (Acts 17:18). You may query his wisdom and ask the question, *"Would that be understood by them?"* Let me quote Paul Linnell of the Open-Air Mission, an organisation who focus on outdoor activities today. *"We hear a lot today about how to make the Gospel 'relevant' in churches to the current generation. When engaging with people on the street about the big issues of life and death, judgment and salvation, it is clear that all of the Word of God is already supremely 'relevant' to everyone. However, it is also 'reasonable' in addressing people's greatest need."*

The LORD reasons with sinners in Isaiah 1:18, *"Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'" How kind and gracious of the Holy Spirit to ensure that the message of salvation is not cloaked in obscurity, but is clear, relevant and reasonable to everyone; for all ages, at all times! When the Gospel is expressed with the Saviour's pleading love for the rebel and enemy of God, our prayer must be that it is also 'irresistible'.* Yes, *"Jesus and the resurrection"* is always a necessary message to preach!

But the question is really answered from Acts 17:17. *"Those who happened to be there"* were there not by chance but by divine appointment! God gave everyone in the vicinity that day the opportunity (and maybe the only opportunity) for salvation! And I think it's true that, somehow and in some way, everyone who ever lives is given at least one opportunity in life to hear something about God relevant to their eternal salvation.

Acts 17:18 informs us that some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were interested enough to discuss matters with Paul. We would have thought that both were unlikely candidates to respond! Epicureans thought that life was there to be enjoyed to the full. *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"* (1 Corinthians 15:32). Stoics taught that all adversities and all carnal pleasures of life must be overcome by applying your mind to resist them. Paul's preaching certainly caused them to think again, *"And some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods' because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection"* (Acts 17:18). This core message of the Gospel challenged them, even though they didn't fully understand it!

### 4. Paul preaching in the Areopagus (Acts 17:19-31)

These philosophers grabbed hold of Paul and took him to the Areopagus, a hill where all matters, both moral and political, were considered in an ancient supreme court of justice. Paul was invited to present his case to them. They asked him, *"May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean"* (Acts 17:19-20, English Standard Version). Their intention was to debate it: *"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). Presumably they thought that the court members would give some kind of verdict about Paul's teaching. But Paul seized this further opportunity to preach the Gospel again. He made his message relevant to his audience.

First of all, he told them that they were very religious in that they had altars to all kinds of gods. Athens was indeed a religious city and was reputed to have more idols in it than people! As a catch-all, they even had an altar inscribed, *"To the unknown god"* (Acts 17:23a). Paul told them, *"The One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you"* (Acts 17:23b, New King James Version). Because of their ignorance, he started with the everlasting Gospel - that God is the only real living God, *"The God who made the world and everything in it"* (Acts 17:24a). Revelation 14:6-7 states that creation is a constant witness to every person of every age and for the whole of time: *"... the everlasting Gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth ... to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people [is], 'Fear God and give glory to*

*Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.”* Paul had already spoken in this vein at Lystra (see Acts 14:8-18), where the people mistakenly thought he and Barnabas were *“the gods come down in the likeness of men”* (Acts 14:11). *“We ... preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them”* (Acts 14:15).

At Athens, the focus was that, *“since He is Lord of heaven and earth, [God] does not dwell in temples made with hands”* (17:24b). Paul asserted that God was therefore independent of mankind, *“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, English Standard Version). But the truth is that God does have a purpose for mankind, about which the Gentiles were completely ignorant. *“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, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us”* (Acts 17:26-27).

Today, these truths need to be fervently preached and reiterated in Gospel messages. Let’s think what they actually mean:

- i. God exists - He is!
- ii. Every human being comes originally from Adam, who was created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26-28). Therefore, each one of us is very special to our Creator.
- iii. So special that God has planned for each person his/her time-slot in history and places on earth to live so that they may seek Him (Acts 17:26).
- iv. God’s nearby everyone (Acts 17:27-28). However most people attempt to find Him by their own efforts, which Paul likens to groping in the dark!
- v. There’s only one priority in life. It’s to find this Saviour God, who graciously makes Himself available to every true seeker of Him. *But “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists, and that he rewards those who [diligently] seek Him”* (Hebrews 11:6).

Currently there are millions of displaced peoples in our world. If Acts 17:26-27 mean anything, they mean that God has arranged their circumstances for the sole purpose of enabling them to hear about Him. As we pray for some resolution to their plight, we must bear Acts 17:26-27 in mind and primarily pray for their spiritual salvation - that they may hear the Gospel of the Lord Jesus and be saved! Also, we must urge those in the western world, where the Gospel can be readily heard, not to ignore or neglect it!

In Acts 17:28 Paul does (for him) a most unusual thing. He quotes from Greek philosophy to back-up this information about God. *“For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’”* I think there were at least two reasons for him do so:

- a. Some of his audience thought that he was a babler, who was just prating on (see Acts 17:18). He used these quotes to show he knew what he was talking about.
- b. More importantly, he skilfully reminded everyone of that which lies in every person’s subconscious and cannot be eradicated - the truth that God is our Maker and that we are alive only because His sustaining power allows the universe to continue.

Paul then applied the logical consequence of these undeniable truths to the Aeropagites. He wasn’t there to debate what he taught but to challenge the consciences of his hearers. He argued that since people are indeed God’s offspring, then they ought not to think of the Divine Being as a gold or silver or stone idol. These images originated in the imagination of men and were formed by their art (Acts 17:29). Through sin, mankind has become ignorant of the true God. But the good news of the Gospel was that those former times, when only Israel possessed the true knowledge of God, He had overlooked or took no notice of or did not attend to the issue.<sup>2</sup> By the coming of Jesus Christ, God fully revealed Himself in His Son, who is *“the Image of the invisible God”* (Colossians 1:15). This revelation demands action, *“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now [He] commands all [people] everywhere to repent”* (Acts 17:30, New King James Version).

This announcement by Paul reminds us that the Gospel remains relevant to people even in the twenty-first century. Why? Because it’s from God to, and for the benefit of, every human being. Paul also states in Romans that the Gospel is to be obeyed by all nations; and that this obedience is commanded by the eternal God (see Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:26)!

But there’s a further dimension to the Gospel. This command is based on God’s declared intentions to judge mankind. Repentance is necessary *“because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by [Jesus Christ] the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead”* (Acts 17:31). This was the “new doctrine” that troubled the Athenian philosophers’ consciences.

Acts 17:31 reveals what Paul preached when he spoke of *“Jesus and the resurrection.”* The resurrection of Jesus is the certainty that all people will also be resurrected. *“As it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many”* (Hebrews 9:27-28, New King James Version). The Lord Jesus Himself said, *“[God] the Father... has given [God the Son] authority to execute judgment ... because He is the Son of Man [and] the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”* (John 5:26-29, New King James Version). In Acts 17:31 Paul states that this judgment will be a righteous one. Therefore those who have practised evil will be condemned to Hell (see Revelation 20:11-14).

But there’s another way in which God will judge the world in righteousness. Prophetically God says, *“I choose the appointed time [to] judge [righteously]. When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who holds its pillars firm”* (Psalm 75:2-3, New International Version). The expression, *“He will judge the world in righteousness”* is also a prophecy (Psalm 9:8; Psalm 96:13; and Psalm 98:9). These prophecies speak of the day of the LORD, which will also permeate the millennial reign of Christ. As we are daily confronted with the sinfulness of mankind and with all the wars, atrocities and injustices happening throughout the world, do we not yearn for a different world - a world in which righteousness reigns supreme?

Most people remember the prophecy in Micah 5:2 - about Jesus being born in Bethlehem. But that’s preceded with another about Him in Micah 4:2-6: *“Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.”* It’s then, and only then, that: *“The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever”* (Isaiah 32:17, New King James Version).

## 5. Paul leaving Athens (Acts 17:32-33)

There were three different responses to Paul’s preaching at the Areopagus: some mocked, some wanted another audience with Paul and some believed. Any preaching of the Gospel results in these same outcomes. The first two groups neglected the call of God for Acts 17:33 starkly records, *“So Paul departed from among them.”* As Paul left, those who believed followed him. By believing the Gospel they became saints - those called out from the world to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Two of them are named: Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. Perhaps Dionysius lost his place in the court? Maybe Damaris is named because, as a Christian, she filled out the meaning of her name, “gentle”. How much was Athens changed by the Gospel? We don’t know but God did establish a faithful Christian testimony in such a notoriously idolatrous city. What is important is that the Gospel changed the lives of these individual Athenians.

So I finish today by repeating AW Tozer’s statement that the Gospel message embodies three distinct elements:

- i. An announcement of good news;
- ii. A command; and
- iii. A call.

I pray that **you** have heard the good news from today’s talk and have obeyed God’s command; and also that **you** have heeded the call of the Lord to follow Him and to serve Him.

## Footnotes

1. Derived from *“The Knowledge of the Holy”*, AW Tozer, STL Productions, Bromley, Kent, 1977.
2. *Vine’s complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words* explains the meaning of “God overlooked” (Acts 17:30): “God bore with [the Gentiles] without interposing by way of punishment, though the debasing tendencies of idolatry necessarily developed themselves.” Vine, WE, Unger, MF, and White, W 1996. Thomas Nelson, Nashville USA.

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