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**A0921 – May 24, 2009 – Acts 17:19-23 – Jerusalem Meets Athens -
Part 1**

Alright, last week Paul arrived at Athens, the intellectual center of the ancient world, the native home of Socrates and Plato, the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno, Paul will face the challenge of Greek rationalism. The same thing we face in the West. So it's not Acts 13 that is a model for witnessing to Greeks but Acts 17. Acts 13 for the Jews, Acts 17 for Greeks. Therefore the challenge is different because the Jew started with Scripture as sufficient if he wasn't tainted by Greek culture, but the Greek started solely with human reason as sufficient. So we have two different starting points for knowledge. Paul started with revelation as sufficient and reasoned from it, the Greeks started with human reason as sufficient. And therefore there is a conflict of ultimate commitments between Jerusalem and Athens; one starts with God the other starts with man.

Paul the Jewish theologian has arrived; he's reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearers who shared his basic categories but then he went into the marketplace and began disputing with Greeks who did not. Isn't it a breath of fresh air to have an example of someone who actually goes out and discusses something a little deeper than the weather? Paul could talk about the weather but the way Paul talked about the weather was not as some impersonal process but as the personal plan of the living God. And so inevitably, whatever Paul was talking about ended up as somehow related to the plan of God and could lead to the gospel. And this is one thing I find different about Paul and how evangelism is done today. Today it's thought that if you want to give someone the gospel then you have to hand them a tract or initiate a conversation about sin, Jesus or the Bible. Paul didn't. Paul could be standing in the marketplace talking about apples and before you know it you're in a deep theological discussion. Because apples are God's

creation Paul could say, “Isn’t it marvelous that the tiny apple seed has embedded in it the information to grow into an apple tree?” Paul was quite different than the average evangelical. Paul knew that everything can eventually be traced back to God’s creation. And therefore every subject is a legitimate subject of discussion and can be used to lead up to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That kind of thinking, that kind of unified view of knowledge is the kind of thinking that comprises advanced sanctification. When we begin to view all things as somehow falling under the structure of the universe that God made then we can talk about anything in all creation and end up at the gospel. So someone might say, wow Paul, it looks like bad weather. And Paul might say, hmm, why do you think that is? Well, I don’t know Paul, that’s just the way it is? Well, you agree if it’s bad that something’s wrong? Yeah, something’s wrong. What’s wrong? Why do we have bad weather? How is it that we can even tell good weather from bad weather? I don’t know Paul? Well, let me suggest to you it’s because God made us in His image and we sinned against Him. And so you can see how Paul might have moved from a simple discussion about the weather to the God who controls the weather. So these are the kinds of questions we have to train ourselves to think through when you have a discussion with people and you talk about this or that. I think you’ll see there are a lot of questions you could ask them that would lead to a theological discussion.

Now, when Paul met the people of Athens in the marketplace he faced the same kinds of people we face today; they weren’t Jews who studied the Bible, they were Gentile pagans who had the same basic questions the Jews had but answered them in very different ways. They were people that when Paul met them did not have his basic framework of thinking. And since that was the case Paul couldn’t jump in and start quoting Bible verses to these people. Somehow he had to figure out how to work with people who didn’t have a biblical background but without leaving the Bible. In other words, he couldn’t step over into Greek rationalism and argue from there to the God of the Bible and the Christ of Scripture. Greek rationalism starts with man and ends with the glory of man. The Bible starts with God and ends with the glory of God. And there is no way you can build a bridge between those two positions; they are mutually exclusive positions. So Paul, in this kind of situation, had to reach them from his position. He could not give up the Scripture and ever hope of pulling them from Greek rationalism to the Bible. No matter how many arguments you build you’ll never finish the bridge. Human reason is

not the point of contact between Bible-believer and Greek. But there must be some point of contact. If we don't have a point of contact then we can't talk to the unbeliever. And that point of contact Paul derives from the Bible. Paul's simply going to say, "You know, the Bible is true in everything it says. Therefore it is sufficient. So I'm not going to leave biblical ideas out of the discussion. I'm going to use them at every point." In the end what that's going to do is not build a bridge, it's going to create a chasm. Paul on one shore of the Grand Canyon, the Athenians on the other side. Paul's actually going to push them away. Some people don't think that's very nice. But Paul knows that's what he has to do. If you don't push the other person away then they'll never see the difference between you and him. And that's the first thing they have to see, we are not the same, we are coming from two totally opposite positions. And in that context we can preach the gospel. So Paul, to have any hope at all of reaching these people for Christ, has got to push them away and interpret them in terms of what Scripture says about them. That's the challenge of doing evangelism.

So the first thing Paul says, "Alright, I want to stand on the solid rock of Scripture, so what does Scripture tell me about my audience?" Since they're Athenians and Athenians are Greeks and the Greeks descended from Japheth, one of Noah's sons, then ultimately I know these men got off Noah's Ark and therefore I know at one time they had revelation from Gen 1-9, they have a memory somewhere in their culture of the truths of Gen 1-9. And further I can trace Noah back to Adam and ultimately I know all men fell in Adam. And therefore I know these men are fallen. We said last week there are four basic things that fall out of the fact that man is fallen. These are crucial for your witnessing.

The first is that all men are fallen and therefore all men are at enmity with God (Rom 8:7; Jas 4:4). The very first thing you have to understand about any fallen person is that they are in a war against God. But they're such a nice, moral person. On the surface yes, but deep down they're hostile to Him. For example, if you enter a discussion and you start speaking of a personal God running the universe, realize that you are an offense, realize there are powerful forces at work because now you have engaged the enemy in battle. As long as you keep it on the surface it's not a problem, but the moment you go under watch out.

A second thing we learn is that if man is at enmity with God then does He know God exists? If you're in a war with someone you're pretty sure they exist. And Paul says in Romans 1 yes, indeed all men know God exists because God has made it evident to them. So therefore will you ever meet a person who has not known of God's existence? According to God...no. Does God lie? Do men lie? So who's telling the truth when a person says, "Look, it's just not clear to me that God exists." Are you going to trust God's word or man's word? The Christian life must be lived by what? Faith. So are you going to trust God or man on this? A lot of Christians trust man's word. My friend says he doesn't know God exists therefore I must construct arguments for the existence of God out of Greek rationalism. What did we say? Can you ever get to God from Greek rationalism? You can get to a god, yes. Antony Flew got to a god before he died, but not the God of the Bible. He got to the god of deism. The Greeks got to the gods and goddesses and they got there from Greek rationalism. But in the end they were gods made in the image of man. Images thought up by the sinful heart of man. What did the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome do? Lie, fornicate and murder. What do men do? Lie, fornicate and murder. The Greek gods are not essentially different than man, they're amplified humanity. Athens was full of amplified humanity. That's what stirred Paul's spirit within him. So could Paul use Greek rationalism to get to the God of the Bible? No. He had to trust Scripture

So we have to say a third thing Paul says about them in Rom 1 and that is that while they know God is there they're suppressing that knowledge. Why would you want to suppress the God you know? Think about that. Why do you hold down that knowledge of God? Isn't it because you're a sinner? Isn't it because you have short accounts with God? Isn't it because you know you're in trouble with Him? And so you try to hide from Him. Same thing Adam and Eve did in the garden, try to hide from God. There's nothing new here I'm telling you. This has been the story from the day Adam fell. Operation fig leaf, gotta cover up, going to fix my problem. In that framework of thinking, how do you interpret the Epicureanism and Stoicism of v 18? They're just philosophical fig leaves, attempts to hide from God. Deliberate sinful distortions of reality to shield themselves from the God they know exists. That's the suppression technique going on. And Paul says I know they know God but I know they're also doing everything they can to hide that they know Him. That's the fallen sinful flesh. It doesn't come out in the open and say,

“Here I am God, I’m subject to you and your righteous judgments,” because we all know His justice would look at our sin and just go BLAM and that would be the end of it. The flesh tries to re-invent reality to stay safe from God. The conscience keeps saying, God is there, God is there and the flesh keeps saying, let’s invent another way to suppress Him because I don’t like thinking about Him, I don’t want Him in my knowledge. It’s sinful rebellion.

And therefore, the fourth thing we know is that if men are suppressing their knowledge of Him then are they religiously neutral? Far from it. What we mean by that is that you’re either worshipping God or you’re not worshipping God. There’s no such thing as a person who doesn’t worship. There’s no such thing as a neutral zone where men can relax. Take math, I like math because everyone thinks math, math is math, it doesn’t matter whether or not God exists. I can sit down and add $2+2$ and get 4. Yeah, we can all do that. But the moment you’ve said $2+2=4$ whether or not God exists you’ve said that $2+2=4$ is not the result of God’s creation. And that is a denial of the existence of God, and that’s a heavy theological statement. There’s no neutrality there. You’ve said math is independent of God and therefore you’re making statements about God. You’ve started off a mathematician and ended up a theologian.

Now, those are four things Paul knows from His OT Bible and when he talks to these people He’s going to assume all four of those things. But we said Paul knows another thing and this is a thing that is very important to know and that is this: if you look long enough and hard enough an unbeliever will show you that they know very well that God is there. Put another way, there is no such thing as a 100% consistent unbeliever. We showed this with a great mind like Jean Paul Sartre, the French Existentialist who said reason could not be used to resolve moral problems. You just have to choose one way or another. But even he, when it came to the Algerian war, used reason to say that’s wrong. And the moment he said that’s wrong, he’s made a moral judgment and Paul would say, aha, now I’m going to eat your lunch because now you’re existentialism has to account for how you could do that. Or you can reject it. But I’m going to push you. Like it or not because I know that you know God is there. Here’s another example and trying to keep this as practical as I can: one of my Ph.D. friends back at the plant physiology laboratory, a Cornell graduate who wasn’t a believer, but a very brilliant man rejected God. And one day he’s walking into the building and he looked

disturbed so I just said, “Hey, is everything okay?” And he starts to tell me how his mother had a heart attack and she was in the hospital and then he said something I’ll never forget. “It’s a reality check.” People say it a lot and if you think about that statement, what’s the obvious question to ask a person that says that? Well, where have you been? What is reality? A hotel room that you check in and out of? Where they were was their false imagined reality, they’ve been living in an imagined world without death and suffering and then suddenly BAM, mom is starting to die and I check into reality. God is inescapable. People keep banging into God, everywhere they turn, oops there’s God again, bang. They’re lives are like one of those wind-up toys you get at McDonalds that goes for awhile and then bangs into a wall and turns, goes for awhile and bang it turns. They keep banging into God and then they turn over here to avoid Him and then bang, there He is again, so they veer off over here. It’s the same story over and over and over. People live in God’s world and He’s unavoidable. And therefore every once in awhile an unbeliever will show you that, every once in awhile they will go bang and they’ll slip and when you see that you’re seeing a very precious moment. God is giving you an opportunity. What are you supposed to do with that? Paul’s going to see some of that and when Paul sees that he says, “Hey, that’s what I’m going to use, I’m going to capitalize on that and use it to appeal to their God consciousness. That’s how I get to evangelizing people.”

In v 19 lets start to see how he does it. He’s been to the marketplace, they’re obviously enveloping Paul, they’ve reinterpreted him and it’s a mess, so Paul get’s his big chance to turn the tables, v 19. **And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? ²⁰“For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) ²²So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³“For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.**

Notice right off the bat, v 19, Paul, we want to know what you are proclaiming and by v 23, Paul says, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you and then he goes into it. But right off the bat, does that sound like a bridge building technique? Oh, come over here and let me give you a hug. No, it sounds more like ridicule; it sounds more like he's pushing them away. So let's see what Paul's up to.

First thing, in v 19 they're interested in Paul's **new teaching**. The **new teaching** is whatever Paul was saying in the marketplace. Obviously he'd talked about Jesus and the resurrection, but they interpreted that as *Iesous* and *Anastasis*, two new deities. Others said Paul, you're just a seed-picker, you take a little of Plato, a little of Aristotle, a little of Socrates and throw it all together in one big soup. You're an eclectic Paul; you don't know what you're talking about. So Paul gets his big chance here to explain and they take him to the **Areopagus**. What's the Areopagus? Well, it's two things. One it's a hill, the Hill of the Greek God Ares, the Romans called him Mars, and so it's the Hill of Ares or Mars Hill. It got its name because the Greek god Ares, who was the god of war, had committed a crime and this is where he was judged by the Athenian elders and the hill was named after him. And still in that day the gravest cases of homicide were judged on that hill.ⁱ Two, **Areopagus** was the name of the council of men that met at Mars Hill. And that's what they're talking about. Paul, you're going to get your big chance to explain your ideas to the Areopagus, the great intellectual council made up of well-educated men who used to serve as magistrates of Athens so they'd been educated, they'd served in the political sphere of Rome. Their responsibility was to oversee the educational, moral and religious welfare of Athens. Naturally they would be interested in Paul's philosophy. If Paul's disturbing things like Socrates had done he too may have to drink the hemlock.

But notice the verb **know** in v 20, **may we know**, they seem quite interested and v 20 the verb **know** again, **we want to know**. Verse 20, **you're bringing some strange things to our ears Paul; so we want to know what these things mean**, probably nothing better to do, let's have this guy come in and say something. And then Luke gives us a helpful explanatory note. What was the intellectual climate like in Athens at the time? Why all this interest in Paul? Is it because they were interested in truth? Is it because they're interested in the big questions discussed in the days of Plato and Aristotle? No, it had to do with the fact they were interested in **something**

new. (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) Eduard Norden says this verse is the “most Attic thing in the NT.” Most of the NT was written in Koine Greek but this is in Attic which means it is literary genius, very refined, very astute. I haven’t figured out why this is in there except perhaps to say that Luke was extremely well-educated. But what it means is that the quest for truth so sought for in the preceding age of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had given way to a quest for novelty, at least on the part of the population as a whole. These people were frivolous in their intellectual endeavors. And this is a perfect summary of the intellectual climate of the day. The Athenians admitted it. Demosthenes four centuries before had reproached them for it.

And so, v 22 we arrive where Jerusalem meets Athens, two worldviews in collision, two ultimate commitments in opposition. And we want to see how Paul does it. If chapter 13 is an example of how Paul gave the gospel to Jews and God-fearers then Acts 17 is an example of how Paul gave the gospel to pagan Gentiles. FF Bruce says, "Here Paul does not quote Hebrew prophecies...the quotations are from Greek poets. But he does not descend to the level of his hearers by arguing from “first principles” as one of their own philosophers might.” What did we say earlier? Paul doesn’t start with Greek rationalism. Where does He start? With Scripture, not by way of quotation, but by way of principle. Bruce continues, “His argument is firmly based upon the Biblical revelation of God, echoing...the OT scriptures. Like the Biblical revelation itself, his argument begins with God the Creator of all and ends with God the Judge of all.” Very important observations. Start where the Bible starts and never cross over and act as if you and the pagan share a common ground in autonomous human reason. You do not share that.

So he starts in v 22 and watch how Paul does it. Last week they enveloped Paul. This week Paul begins to envelop them; he’s going to interpret them inside his framework. **22So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.”** That word, **very religious** (*deisidaimon*) is a key word. The Greeks used it either in the good sense of religious or the bad sense of superstitious.ⁱⁱ It’s a very ambiguous term. At this point they must be thinking, “Now what does Paul mean?” Is he slapping us in the face or is he giving us a compliment? You weren’t supposed to compliment the Areopagus

but the term is so ambiguous it probably wouldn't leave that impression. It seems like Paul deliberately did this as an attention grabber. If they want to know what Paul means they're going to have to listen further. So what do you mean Paul? Well, wait and find out.

I observe that you are very religious in all respects, ²³**“For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship,** and how many objects were there to examine? 30,000. Paul didn't examine all of them I'm sure but he had ample objects to pick and choose. We probably never would have thought of these objects as objects of worship. We would have thought of them as art? We would have said, ooh, I like that, wow, look at that. Is that what Paul said? Paul said, I walk through here and I see your theology. I observe it in the work of your chisels and hammers, you've shown me your theology. So through the art and architecture what was Paul learning? He was learning about his audience. He was learning how they thought and what they worshipped. And he'd look at one piece and say, that's interesting and he'd pick up a few points. And he'd look at another and he'd pick up some more. And you know I can walk through all the objects and I can learn a lot about the Athenians by examining them. And then he says **I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’** Now is what Francis Schaeffer said starting to become clear? When people make things they are making theological statements, particularly in art, music, literature and philosophy. Those portray how a man thinks and as a man thinketh, so is he. Therefore, as Paul walked around and found this inscription **‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD’** think of what Paul must have thought. Here I am in the midst of Athens, the city where all the greatest minds the Greeks have produced studied and taught. They were far above the common man in answering the big questions of life. They were so advanced that the common man would sit and listen as they gave the answers, because everyone needs the answers, but they had little ability to disagree or argue against their answers. But here Paul found something. What did he find? Had the Greek mind attained all knowledge? Or was there something missing? Evidently there was something missing. And so Paul sees this inscription, **TO AN UNKNOWN GOD’** and he says, that's my in, that's a frank admission on one of their altars that they don't know all things, that human reason is limited, even for the greatest of human minds like Plato and Aristotle. And **Therefore what you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you** and that must have taken some gumption to swallow. You say Paul, that

wasn't a very nice thing to say. You just said in effect these people are religious ignoramuses. That would be the 21st century rendering of this. Can you imagine their response? Just who do you think you are Paul? First you call us religious or superstitious, now you call us ignorant - not the approach most people would envision as loving them with Jesus. But I can't change what the word of God says, Paul said, you guys are religious ignoramuses and that's a very important point to remember. You know why? It's not so you can get on your high horse and say I'm smarter than you. But do know this, no matter how many Ph.D.'s an unbeliever has after his name, he still needs knowledge that you have. I don't care who he is, I don't care how smart he is, I don't care how articulate he is, in the end you have something that he does not have and can never have starting with human reason. You have knowledge that God has revealed out of His infinite mind in the word of God. And therefore Paul can boldly say, **this UNKNOWN GOD I proclaim to you**. Now can you imagine how irritated they were with Paul? Many of them were probably angry. "What, you, Paul, a seed-picker, are going to give me knowledge? You have access to things that the greatest Greek intellects could not figure out? C'mon Paul, I seriously doubt that." But what is Paul doing? Is Paul building a bridge to the gospel, a nice logical bridge starting with man? Not at all. Paul is pushing them away. He's clearing the air. He's got to get their attention. Most people, when you share the gospel with them are not listening; they think that what you have to say is basically no different from what they say. And Paul is saying, you want to hear something novel, I've got something novel to say, you guys are in God's world and you're made in God's image and you're admitting right here that you know there's a God out there but you're not willing to go any further than that. You're suppressing Him and I tell you that as long as you do that you're worshipping in ignorance. I'm here to tell you who He is. And next week we'll learn who He is.

So let's conclude with what we've learned. The first thing we learned was that Paul could discuss any subject and move from there to the gospel. He didn't have to have the four spiritual laws booklet. That should be an encouragement to you to go out and discuss things and think of new questions to ask people that might lead to a theological discussion. The second thing we said was that Paul accepted the biblical analysis of men. He knew they were fallen and at enmity with God. He knew that they knew God existed but were suppressing that knowledge. And Paul also knew that since they were made in God's image and lived in His world they inevitably would

show him that they really did know God existed. And Paul used that to start a gospel presentation. The third thing is that to do that Paul got special knowledge about the Athenians. He does this by looking at what they produce, the art, the architecture and we'll see later his familiarity with their literature. A fourth thing is that Paul doesn't start by paying them a compliment. He lures them in with an ambiguous term and then ridiculed them. Probably not how we would approach. Why does Paul do this? He does it to push them away so they can see, you know, there really is a difference between what we're saying and what Paul's saying. And then in the end they can make a clear choice. And finally, this can happen only if Paul remains in touch with biblical revelation as a starting point. The moment you leave the word of God and proceed on the same principles as the unbeliever, the principles of human reason and logic, then you have no bridge to get to the God of the Bible. You may get to a god but you will not get to the God. He has enveloped you when you were supposed to envelop Him. So, these are some principles for doing evangelism, it's not always easy to do, you'll fail to get through, I fail to get through, you'll get enveloped by unbelief, it happens all the time. There's a war out there and Satan is clever, so we have to learn the principles better and better so we can be better and better evangelists for Him.

ⁱ William Mitchell Ramsay, Sir, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, Includes Index. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research System, Inc., 1995, c1896), 244.

ⁱⁱ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Ac 17:22.

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