



29 | ACTS 17:16-34

MARS HILL EVANGELISM

We must we evangelize our present culture that is ignorant of the gospel.

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The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. ² Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. ³ The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. ⁴ Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty! —Psalm 94:1-4

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Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

GIVING: You can give over Zelle through your bank with no fees (use secretary@livinghopechurch.net). We also have a collection box on the Welcome Center. Malachi 3, “Test me in this” Proverbs: “**Give of your firstfruits.**” We believe blessing comes by putting God first.

Introduction

Salvation is of the Lord. It’s all of grace. **I’ve never been able to win anyone to Christ through my charm or good looks.** It is true that I **do not** have **beautiful hair**. I have a few hairs that are **turning grey** and some that are **turning loose**. Nor do I have **beautiful teeth**, for several of them are **really not mine**; they were made by the dentist. I do not have a beautiful face, nor can I afford to wear beautiful clothes. Almost everything I am wearing, including my shoes were either given to me or purchased at the **secondhand clothing store**. But this I know: **I have beautiful feet!**

Isaiah 52:7 | How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that brings good tidings, that publishes peace.

Do you have beautiful feet? When God saved you, he saved you entirely, and that includes your feet. Jesus tells us to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15, KJV).

As we increasingly move towards paganism in our American culture, the words of Paul in Athens that we will read about today become more and more relevant. Our current culture is becoming more ignorant of the Bible in each generation.

Key Thought: We must make sure that each of us is equipped to evangelize our present culture that is ignorant of basic biblical concepts such as sin, God, and eternal life.

Paul had this desire to bring the gospel to **every creature and culture**. The **curtain of ignorance** about the one true and living God around Greece in Europe did not stop him. We have that curtain surrounding our nation more and more.

How did Paul reach the pagan Athenians? For Paul, it seems this wasn’t necessarily one of his primary destinations. But in stopping through Athens on the way to Corinth, he plants a church! How did he do it? First, he began by defending the existence of the one true monotheistic almighty God to a **pluralistic, polytheistic city**. The crown jewel of Greece: the **glorious city of Athens**.

1. DEFENDING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD (17:16-23)

Paul arrives in Athens because he was **pushed out of Berea** because of persecution. He comes to a moment where he has to defend the existence of God—not that Athens denied the operations of deities, but they **didn’t believe in the existence of just one**

creator God, but of **many competing gods**. They were by definition, **polytheistic**, not monotheistic. Despite their ignorance of the one true God, they were still an incredibly accomplished city—a truly legendary city, not only in the ancient world, but until this very day.

Athens in Paul's day was in a period of decline at this time, though still recognized as a center of culture and education. It still had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, but it was not the influential city it once had been. The city was given over to a **“cultured paganism” that was nourished by idolatry, novelty** (Acts 17:21), and **philosophy**.¹ In the pinnacle of Greece culture they rebuilt their civilization.

It was an age of **democracy**. In Athens they had a city-state run by **elected officials** who were responsible to the citizens.

It was an age of amazing **architecture**. The **Parthenon** stands in **Athens** upon the great Acropolis in the very center of the city.

It was an age of **literature**. The classical Greek plays were written at this time, like **Prometheus Bound, Oedipus Rex, and the Cyclops**.

It was an age of **philosophy**, with **Socrates** and **Plato**.

It was an age of **art**. They developed the classical forms of human sculpture that would one day be the chief influence **Michelangelo**.²

Paul, as a Hellenized Jew, Paul had been exposed to Greek culture with its outstanding traditions in art and philosophy. Athens was the center of that culture. In its heyday, several centuries before Christ, it had been the greatest city in the world.³ Yet **for all her greatness, Athens had no place for the true and living God**.

In a culture that had no place for the one true God, Paul boldly declared and defended the existence of the monotheistic God in the midst of a fiercely polytheistic culture.

He called those ignorant of any theological parameters to faith in God's Son. We are called to do the same. But where does evangelism in this post-modern world begin? For Paul, **begins with a burden**.

THE BURDEN OF EVANGELISM

Acts 17:16 | Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Paul is launched suddenly into the center of the city of Athens. He had **not intended to evangelize Athens**. He wanted to get to **Corinth, the cultural leader of the time**. He was without helpers, and he needed rest. But as he saw the extraordinary number **of idols on every side**, he became more and more exasperated.⁴ But with Timothy and Silas still in Berea, he was alone in Athens. And a stroll through Athens turns into a **unique evangelistic opportunity**.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 471.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 294.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 129.

⁴ John Pollock. *The Apostle: The Life of Paul* (John Pollock Series) (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook: 2010), 147.

Paul saw something that moved him to tears—sights and sounds that portrayed man’s fundamental idolatry and rejection of God. **The city was “full of idols,”** and like Calvin, Paul could have said, “That man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual **factory of idols.**”⁵

Paul had such a heart for people that as he was in Athens, we learn that “his spirit was provoked within him” as he saw the people enslaved to idols. While Paul is in Athens, instead of gaining his co-workers right away, he sent them first to Thessalonica to establish the believers. Remember many of the persecutors that were pursuing Paul in Berea were from that beautiful port city of Thessalonica.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-3 | Therefore when we could bear it no longer, **we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,** ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.

It was hard to be alone in Athens. During these times of our lives, we might feel like we need a rest or a break, and Paul had those times, often in the winters. But on this occasion the Spirit of God gave Paul a broken heart for these people so crushed by idols.

Do you have a burden for souls? Proverbs 11:30 tells us, “**He who wins souls is wise**” (NKJV). Are you wise? Are you a soul winner?

THE PLACES OF EVANGELISM

Paul began dialoguing with anyone who would talk, and he found three groups of hearers: the **church people** from the synagogue, the everyday **pagans**, and the sophisticated **philosophers** called “**Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.**”

The Church

Acts 17:17-18a | So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ^{18a} Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

There is a place for evangelism in the church. Many lost remain in the church—the wheat and the chaff abide together. There is obviously a place to evangelize in the world. This was Paul’s pattern: he reasoned in the synagogue as well as in the pagan marketplace.

The Marketplace

In the marketplace, Paul channeled his emotion into action. Because of his **outrage** over the Athenians’ blasphemy of the Lord God by their idolatry, he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. Following his normal pattern of ministry, Paul went on the Sabbath to his countrymen.⁶

There were also **Epicureans and Stoics.** These latter two groups represented the competing philosophies of the day. The **Epicureans** were the **atheists.** They believed that everything happens by **chance**, and death is the end—extinction with no afterlife.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.8.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 130.

They were practical agnostics who believed pleasure is the chief end of man and that a simple lifestyle is the most pleasurable. The **Stoics** were **pantheists**, believing that everything is a god and that whatever happened to them was **fate**. They couldn't change it. It was their destiny.⁷

THE MESSAGE OF EVANGELISM

What was Paul preaching in the synagogue and in the marketplace? We get a glimpse of Paul in the Athenian marketplace when he meets some of the philosophers there. With all the wisdom of the Athenians, they were ignorant of the one true God, and Paul was going to make that right.

Acts 17:18 | Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because **he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.**

Paul's message was Jesus and the resurrection, which includes that he was crucified before he was raised from the dead. Whatever else we may say about Paul's preaching in the Areopagus, he had no qualms at all about **preaching Jesus to a people who had never heard of him** and who did not know the contents of the Old Testament Scriptures.⁸

RESPONSES TO EVANGELISM

There are many responses to evangelism. When I begin on a street corner, I will often ask, "Who here is a Christian, unashamed of Jesus? Raise your hand." There is always a positive response from those who love the Lord. We love evangelism! Paul was preaching the gospel of "Jesus and the resurrection" (17:18). Paul got three responses: apathy, cynicism, and curiosity.

Some are Apathetic

Acts 17:17a | So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons.

When Paul unburdened himself in the synagogue, some believed, but many seem to be apathetic. **Many Jews had written off their Greek neighbors** and were content to treat them merely as lucrative customers, but moral and religious blindness were of no concern.

Before we judge the Jews of Paul's day, let us first judge ourselves. We are in the hotbed of materialism. This is the control center of the beast, the very world system right here in America. Satan's greatest opioid for Christians to numb them is our material prosperity. Many of you stand against the kingdom of Satan, and you see yourself as a steward of God. But some are lulled to sleep by the pleasures, fears, and cares of materialism, just like those in Athens. Are you willing to become uncomfortable for the lost? Don't be apathetic.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 231.

⁸ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 501.

Some are Cynical

The Athenians may be far too sophisticated to resort to physical violence, but intellectual opposition and ridicule can be just as wearisome; and the Athenians, at least most of them, called the apostle a fool.⁹

Acts 17:18 | Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Whether Paul was in the synagogue or in the marketplace, Paul’s message did not change. “He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection” (17:18b).

The **cynical** called Paul a **“babbling,” literally a fool**. Socrates had been sentenced to death for teaching strange doctrines, and although Paul was in no danger of hemlock, he **could be expelled**.

It all sounded like rubbish and possibly dangerous to the pluralistic way of life of such Athenians who troubled to listen. Though speech was free in Athens, there were limits.

Some are Curious

They decided that he must expound his views before the esteemed **Court of the Areopagus**, which had the right to expel unsuitable philosophers. They approached Paul good-humoredly and invited him to accompany them up the **slope of the Acropolis** with the **great Parthenon**. They would come to a small steep rock, called Mars Hill with the Acropolis as a backdrop.¹⁰

Acts 17:19a | And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus.

Years before, **Socrates** had been “brought” before this court, charged with “impiety”—a court that found him **guilty of “corrupting the youth” with strange doctrine** and ordered that he be put to death by drinking the cup mixed with hemlock. They question him about his “strange” teaching, as they call it.

Acts 17:19-20 | And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know **what this new teaching** is that you are presenting? ²⁰For you bring some **strange things to our ears**. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.”

What does the apostle say? It is a masterly blend of reason and rhetoric. He is addressing the intellectual elite—a bit like being asked to give a lecture before the faculty of Harvard or Yale or, in England, Oxford or Cambridge.¹¹ They had one thing in common: they are **curious**.

⁹ Ibid., *Acts*, 500.

¹⁰ John Pollock. *The Apostle: The Life of Paul* (John Pollock Series) (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook: 2010), 149-150.

¹¹ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 501.

Acts 17:21 | Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

The Lord in his **providence will bring people to you** for various reasons, but it is by his sovereign grace that melt the hearts of the hearers. We need to take the opportunity to always “give an answer.”

1 Peter 3:15 | In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

The Athenian mind-set was always in pursuit of the *nouveau*, the dazzling, the sensational, the whims of the hour. So now the crowd brought Paul before the Areopagus—the Council of Athens at Mars Hill. Immediately before him sat the most **exclusive philosophical review board** in the world! **What a face-off!** On one side stood Paul—divinely empowered, a man who had staked everything he had on his message. On the other side stood the Areopagus—sophisticated but indifferent.¹²

The **Council of the Areopagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city**, so it was natural for them to investigate the “new doctrine” Paul was teaching. They courteously invited Paul to present his doctrine at what appears to have been an informal meeting of the council on Mars’ Hill. **Paul was not on trial; the council members only wanted him to explain** what he had been telling the people.¹³

METHODS OF EVANGELISM

We **reject clever marketing** of the gospel or the peddling of it through tricks. We also believe you have to meet people where they are. **Paul** believed this and **Jesus** demonstrated this. Jesus used the illustration of “living water” for the woman at the well, and Paul uses the illustration of “the unknown god” to a group of mainly polytheists.

Paul was Observant

Paul was careful and observant as he went about his task of evangelism. These are precious people in God’s sight. He observes that they are very religious.

Acts 17:22 | So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are **very religious.**”

Paul was undoubtedly **eager to protest their idolatry** and point them to the truth, but **he restrained himself** and gave a genuine compliment first. He met them where they were.¹⁴ He had witnessed during his time in Athens the plethora of deities carved in stone and marble.

Indeed, the Athenians were **very religious**. As Paul is speaking, the Parthenon is standing in the backdrop as the most famous of all the buildings of the **Acropolis**, the ancient fortress citadel of Athens. **The Parthenon served as the treasury of Athens**, but was also a temple of sorts, dedicated to the **goddess Athena**, whom the people of Athens considered their patroness. In fact, inside the Parthenon would have been a large

¹² R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 232.

¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 472.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Acts*, 232–233.

statue **of Athena that stood 38 feet high**. There is actually an exact life-size replica of the Parthenon and the Athena statue in Nashville, Tennessee. The little god in Athena's hand is a six-foot statue of the goddess of victory, *Nike* (like the shoe company).

Paul was Missional

Acts 17:23a | For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'

Why, Paul had even seen an altar bearing the inscription "**The Unknown God**"—just in case they may have inadvertently missed one!

Paul was so burdened by the idolatry of the Athenians, but he made his appeal God-centered and not self-centered. **He did not attack the people**, but like the Lord in mercy, kindness, and grace, he met the people where they were. It is so vital in evangelism that we do not have a self-righteous spirit, but realize the deep darkness people live in, and meet them there, like a compassionate fireman going into a burning building.

Paul was **not a compromiser or a pragmatist**. He made sure the people understood the gospel in their own context. Paul explains further in his letter to the Corinthians. **He says, "to the Jew I was a Jew" and "to the Greek, I became as a Greek."** Paul met the people where they were.

1 Corinthians 9:22 | I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Paul was Bold

Based on his observations, Paul framed the argument for the one true living God in terms the citizens of Athens could understand. **He did not hold back** or withdraw because of the fear of man. He boldly proclaimed the one true God to them.

Acts 17:23b | What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The Bible does not offer formal arguments for God's existence. His existence is ultimately a matter of revelation and faith (Heb 11:6; cf Jn 1:18; 20:29). Such faith, however, is not a blind leap in the dark but is founded on evidence.¹⁵

Paul was what we might call today, a **presuppositionalist**. That is he presupposes that everyone already knows the one true and living God in their heart, but they deny him and excuse their conscience. He lays this out in Romans 1.

Romans 1:19-20 | What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Paul is using their God-given conscience to get through to them. They know God, so Paul points them to the reality that they already live in. Faith is the evidence of things not seen, and there is a lot of evidence! This is called the transcendental argument for God. There are things that are not seen that present evidence, like our **conscience** and **creation**, including the laws of science including **biology** and **cosmology**. The very cosmos points to the glory and attributes of God according to Paul.

¹⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 132.

We can all appeal to anyone, even if they have no context of Christianity because all people function under the power of a personal, transcendent God, even if they try to deny it. Paul boldly proclaimed this God. But how do you proclaim a God, when a culture has completely lost the concept of a compassionate, omnipotent God? Good question. Paul is about to answer it.

2. DESCRIBING THE PERSON OF GOD (17:24-29)

The Athenians were supposed to know everything, and they did, almost. But on the most important truth they came up short—**they did not know God**. Paul did not say this—they did (“TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”). This was the bridge God provided for Paul to share more intimately and personally with these Greek elites exactly who Jesus is, and you may be surprised that there was quite a positive response.

The future pastor of the Athenian church is present. He’s a judge of the great Areopagus named **Dionysius** who was already being drawn by God. We’ll learn about him in a moment.

Having established a bridge, Paul now began giving the Athenians doses of spiritual truth—first about God and then about themselves. Truth about God always helps us understand ourselves, our situation, and our eternal destiny.¹⁶ Paul now gives them a very brief class in Christian Theology Proper 101.

GOD IS CREATOR

Acts 17:24a | The God who made the world and everything in it.

There’s a lot packed into this one sentence. First there is **one true and living God, and he made the world and everything that is in it**. You are not a god. There are not many gods. In one sentence Paul refutes polytheism and pantheism. He presents God as **completely separate from his creation**. He made creation. Creation is not god. God is separate from creation, and that makes him person. God, being separate from his creation is not a force. **He’s not some impersonal collection of laws as many people consider the concept of “God” today**. No, the true God is not a detached, impersonal force. God is a caring, loving, holy and infinite Person. **He is personal**. He loves you, and because he is separate from creation, you can have a personal relationship with him.

GOD IS RULER

Paul then fortifies this point by further demonstrating the personal nature of God as ruler in heaven and earth. **He distinguishes the one true God from the pantheon of false gods they worship.**

Acts 17:24b | Being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

On the rocky ledges to the south of the Acropolis were countless idols. The Parthenon alone was a wonder of the world. **Everywhere he looked Paul saw the work of**

¹⁶ Hughes, *Acts*, 233.

genius in art and architecture. Fifty colossal figures were in the pediment of the Parthenon alone.

Paul dismissed it all as worthless, that is, as a sanctuary for true faith. There flashed into his mind something he had heard Stephen say years before about the Temple in Jerusalem: **“The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands”** (7:48).¹⁷

The **true God is bigger than anything you’ve conceived of.** He is the transcendent one: omnipresent, omnipotent, Lord of heaven and earth. He’s Lord of both the seen and unseen realms. He knows your heart and life. He is Lord, whether you recognize him as your Lord or not. Every knee will bow; every tongue will confess his lordship.

GOD IS GIVER

God is the source and giver of life. **Every breath we take, every move we make is granted to us by God.**

Acts 17:25 | Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Men may pride themselves in serving God, but it is God who serves man. If God is God, then he is self-sufficient and needs nothing that man can supply. Not only do the temples not contain God, but the services in the temples add nothing to God! In two brief statements, Paul completely wiped out the entire religious system of Greece!¹⁸

GOD IS SUSTAINER

Paul tells these Greek pagans that even though they don’t worship him, he loves them and guides them. **He’s determined our DNA, where we are born, our parents, and so much more.**

Acts 17:26 | And 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.

God has determined everything about our life. **There’s so much we don’t choose: our parents, where we are born, what language we speak,** etc. As they say, “Choose your parents well.” Ha! If only! Truly these are things that God chooses. He guides our lives. Theologians refer to this guidance as providence. In God alone lie his hidden counsels. We do not know the future. We do not know what God has determined to do in national affairs. Nevertheless, God is in control of what happens. He has made plans and thus also determines whatever comes to pass.¹⁹

We were all descended from one man. Even our genes demonstrate that. God made us all of one man, Adam (17:26), so that we bear his image as well as that of God. **We each carry a genetic code, the code that tells us who our ancestors were.** Paul was

¹⁷ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 17:24b–25.

¹⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 473.

¹⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 298.

saying that we carry within, by the very fact of our createdness, the sense of dependence on God.²⁰

GOD IS ADVOCATE

God is calling us to seek after him. What Paul does next is **he starts to give an invitation** before he even gives the gospel. He believes God's going to convert them, and God actually does convert several of them.

If God is guiding our lives, it follows that we have an obligation to seek God out and find him. God has revealed himself in creation and conscience so that we might seek him out.

Acts 17:27a | That they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Paul uses a word here for "reaching out for God and finding him." The word is used by the Greek poet Homer in his work called **The Cyclops** where a blind person is reaching for what he knows is there, but he cannot see it. It is as if Paul is saying: **In our sin we are as blind as the blinded Cyclops in Homer's poem.**²¹

Jesus is calling. He's not willing that any should perish (2 Pet 3:9). We may be blind, but he is calling out to us in the darkness to come to him.

John 12:32 | And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

No matter how blind you are, you can reach for Jesus. He's calling you and drawing you. Jesus calls anyone who is "weary and burdened" with care and sin to come to him (Mt 11:28). Paul says to his hearers: "In your blindness, feel after God that you might find him." Jeremiah's promise gives any lost sinner hope.

Jeremiah 29:13 | You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Come to him now. He's right there near you.

Acts 17:27b | Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

There is a sense, **even for the most hardened heart**, that God is right there, next to us. God is immanent in the creation.²²

GOD IS TRANSCENDENT

Transcendent is a big word, but it means that God transcends time and space in his power, presence, knowledge, etc. God is bigger than anything we can fathom through idols and temples. To prove this, Paul starts where they are, not by quoting the Bible, but by quoting what these men know.

²⁰ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 504.

²¹ Boice, *Acts*, 299.

²² Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 504.

Acts 17:28-29 | For “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Paul quotes ancient poetry that says the same thing as the Bible. But the Areopagus has no context for the Bible so he connects with them through their poets.

In particular Paul quotes the Cretan poet **Epimenides** noted that “in him we live and move and exist,” while **Aratus**, from Paul’s home region of Cilicia, added, “For we also are his offspring.” These words, of course, were addressed to Zeus, but they nevertheless corroborate Paul’s ideas (and testify to the breadth of Paul’s education).²³ Even people with mere common grace stumble across the truth as they feel their way toward God.

These quotes illustrate the universal revelation of God as creator, ruler, and sustainer. He’s the transcendent one we cannot run away from. While Paul could easily have documented those truths from the Old Testament, he chose instead illustrations familiar to his pagan audience, who were unfamiliar with Scripture.²⁴

Paul preaches the transcendence of God. He’s here with us right now in a personal way. He transcends time and space. **“We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”** He’s so much higher and greater than what we can perceive

No one can run from God. You can run away, but he’s still with you, talking to you through your conscience. You can try to avoid him, but everywhere you look is his masterpiece, his creation. God is transcendent. Wherever you go, he is already there.

Psalm 139:7-8 | Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence. ⁸ If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there.

3. DECLARING THE MESSAGE OF GOD (17:30-34)

Now that Paul has introduced the concept of the true God who made them and reintroduced them to the one who already reveals himself to them in creation and their conscience, Paul goes from general revelation to special revelation. He turns from what all people know—that God exists—and then proclaims what you can only know by divine revelation: that Jesus died and rose for our sins. The gospel is good news to those who believe.

A MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE

All people everywhere are called to repentant faith in Christ. Repentance is a change of mind, a transformation of worldview.

Acts 17:30 | The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

²³ William H. Baker, “Acts,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 911.

²⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 141.

Up till this point in history, Paul is saying to the Athenians, **God has been unbelievably patient.** He has been patient while they have built altars and temples to gods and goddesses that do not exist. **He knows that they have exchanged his glory for a lie,** and that every one of the statues slanders the living God. God has been putting up with their boasting in their glorious philosophy and culture, a culture smothered in idolatry, “but now commands **all men everywhere to repent**” (17:30).²⁵

In the Bible, whenever you see repentance, God is not just calling us to give something up, but **we are to repent by trusting in the true and living God.** The point of repentance is not merely the giving up of sin but giving up our idolatrous sin and trusting in and enjoying God.

A MESSAGE OF RECKONING

If you repent, you will have eternal life. If you bypass God’s mercy, and you reject his love, Jesus will not be your Savior but your judge. Everyone will appear before him (2 Cor 5:10).

Acts 17:31a | Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

The man who is also God and judge is Jesus Christ. God sent his Son to live a perfect life and die on the cross for our sins. He was buried. He was raised again from the dead. Receive him, and you’ll be saved. Reject him, and you’ll stand before him at the judgment.²⁶ Jesus Christ is not only Savior, but judge. He doesn’t get pleasure out of holding your sins to an account, since he died on the cross for the world to come to him.

1 Timothy 2:4 | He “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Come to Christ today in mercy or you will one day be crushed by him in judgment. There is no escape.

Hebrews 9:27 | It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

A MESSAGE OF RESURRECTION

How is Christ worthy of judging the human race? We learn that he conquered death, and God raised him from the dead.

Acts 17:31b | And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

We have the assurance that Jesus Christ is the judge of all since God confirmed it and gave us this assurance by raising him from the dead. He is worthy to judge since he is God, but also he is worthy because he is now a glorified man. He has permanently taken on our nature. He’s been raised from the dead having tasted humanity, being tempted in every way as we are, “yet without sin.”

²⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 317.

²⁶ Adrian Rogers, “Three Challenges to the Cross,” in *Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive* (Signal Hill, CA: Rogers Family Trust, 2017), Ac 17:16–34.

Yet and still, **the resurrection was a very difficult doctrine for any Greek to believe.** Epicureans believed in no human existence after death. Stoics believed that only the immaterial spirit survived death.²⁷ **To a Greek, the body was only a prison;** and the sooner a person left his body, the happier he would be.²⁸ Could God work even in this crowd when the concept of resurrection had been totally rejected by every segment of society? Yes, **because our message is a supernatural message.** God has to open the eyes **and reveal himself to the people** as we preach. What would their response be?

OUR RESPONSE TO THE MESSAGE

Is the gospel powerful enough to save even these people?

The Curious

At first you might think, no. God will not save these ignorant people. They don't even have a right concept of God or have a category for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of that, some of the great leaders began to mock Paul.

Acts 17:32-33 | Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."³³ So Paul went out from their midst.

"Now Paul, you almost had me, but they you had to go to this resurrection? What is this nonsense?", they might have said.

The Converted

It is here on Mars Hill that we see so clearly that salvation is a miracle from the Holy Spirit. It's a gift of grace from God.

Acts 17:34 | But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

According to church history, **Dionysius was a well-respected judge in Athens.** He writes that he had been in **Egypt one day when the sun went completely dark,** and he wrote the day and the hour down, which coincided with the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. **More than twenty years later,** he encounters a man on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul, telling about the crucifixion of Jesus and how the sun went out. He proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, and Dionysius believed and was born again. It is said that Paul baptized him.²⁹ **After his conversion, Dionysius became the first pastor of the church at Athens.**³⁰

Conclusion

What about you, do you believe in the power of the gospel? Do you need more than the gospel to see someone truly follow Christ? I hope not. What can we say except no

²⁷ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 378.

²⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 474.

²⁹ Nick Kampouris & G.E. Koronaios, (2022, February 20). *The History of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Patron Saint of Athens*. GreekReporter.com. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://greekreporter.com/2022/02/20/the-history-of-dionysius-the-areopagite-the-patron-saint-of-athens-2/>

³⁰ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae III*: iv.

person has such a hardened heart that the gospel cannot penetrate it. Preach the word with boldness and love. How? Start where you are. We have so much of the gospel, and the world has so little.

The story is told of a **man who served in George Washington's cabinet**. He was totally bald. The top of his head would have been the envy of a shiny billiard ball. But in contrast to that barren scalp, he had a long, flowing bushy beard. Washington pointed to him, with a touch of humor, as someone particularly reflective of the problem of **"overproduction and poor distribution."**

This is the problem that we, as Christians, live with every day. We have more Bible resources in this country than at any other time in world history, and yet our missions' movements are dying. Have you noticed this problem of "overproduction and poor distribution"? It starts with the same burden of heart Paul had in Athens. Are you disturbed that the most sobering reality in the world today is that people are dying and going to hell today? Will you love your neighbor by getting to know them and speaking the gospel to them?

Are your feet beautiful? As the years go on, we are all turning into raisins. We used to be grapes. We cannot stop the atrophy of our appearance. Our hair is turning grey and for some it is turning lose. But you can always have beautiful feet as you go into the world and preach the gospel.