

Paul in Athens: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] Good morning again. As I said at the beginning, my name is Tommy. I'm delighted to be here with you. Continuing to look at the book of Acts chapter 17. It is a common thing to these days here that we live in increasingly post-Christian society. And I think in many ways that is certainly true.

One of the pieces of that narrative that we hear is the declining numbers of people who are followers of Jesus, who participate in organized religion. And to a certain extent, those numbers have been true as well.

And yet what's really interesting is right now, something very interesting is happening that bucks that trend. There's a new trend emerging. And it's just over the last few years, a kind of increased openness and hunger to the truth of the gospel.

Over the last three years, since about 2021, 2022, the number of people who say they follow Jesus, they believe in and follow Jesus in a very meaningful way, that has gone up about 12% just in the last three years.

And maybe that doesn't sound like much, but statistically it's very significant. That represents roughly 30 million people over the last three years. 30 million more people in our country saying that they're followers of Jesus.

[1 : 20] And what's even more interesting about that is that a lot of those people are either millennials or Gen Z. So relatively speaking, you're looking at younger generations. Those of us who are, I'm Gen X, so I'm far past being able to say young, but I think millennials can still claim to be within a younger generation and certainly Gen Z.

And so people are looking at these numbers and trying to figure out what's happening. What that means for us is the chances are there are people in our lives right now where we live and work who may not be followers of Jesus, but who may very well be open to the truth and the power of Jesus. In other words, alluding to our gospel reading a moment ago, the fields are ripe for harvest, but the laborers are few. That's the problem. Why are there so few laborers?

Well, I think most of us who are Christians get very uncomfortable with the idea of sharing our faith with other people. The word evangelism sort of makes people cringe.

You get twitchy when you hear people talk about the fact that we should be doing more evangelism. You know, there's a lot of reasons for this. I think we don't want to offend people, and it feels like that's offensive to bring up faith in today's world.

[2 : 38] If we were to bring it up, a lot of us feel like we don't know what to say or do. I think some of us are just frankly afraid of how people will respond to us or what they might think of us.

And so it raises this question of how do we talk to people about faith? How do we talk to people about Jesus when we live in a post-Christian society, and yet there's a hunger in the society?

There's a longing, a searching. This is why we're looking at Paul's example in Acts chapter 17. We started last week by talking about what it means to think theologically about the culture. And this week we're going to look more closely at Paul's actual approach that he takes in Athens.

He's in Athens. At this point in the story, he's been invited to present the gospel at the Areopagus. So that's like being invited to give a lecture at Harvard or Oxford. And all the leading intellectuals are going to be there, and they're very skeptical about this message.

And so we're going to look at Paul's approach. These are highly educated, skeptical people. Where does Paul begin? Let's pray, and then we're going to break it down. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that independently, Lord, independent of anything we might do, of any

strategy we might employ, of any rhetorical devices, Lord, your word itself has power.

[4 : 00] And you can work through your word in ways that go far beyond what we can ask or even imagine. And you know what we need better than we do, Lord. And so I pray for myself and for those of us gathered here.

Lord, would you do your work in us that we might, through your written word, come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. Lord, he's the one that we are here to encounter this morning. That's who we need to see. We pray this in his name. Amen. Amen. So Paul is in Athens. What's his approach? The first thing that we see Paul do, right off the bat, is to affirm the longings that he sees in these Athenians as he has observed them by walking through their streets and living in their culture.

He affirms their longings. The first time I was taught anything about how to do evangelism was a very long time ago, not long after I came to faith in my early 20s.

And we learned a kind of method called the Romans Road. And I don't know if you're, some of you, many of you are probably familiar with this. The Romans Road. And that's a way of taking people through the book of Romans to lay out the gospel.

[5 : 14] But what's interesting about the method is that you begin in a place, the first thing that you tell people is that all have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God.

So the starting place is you need to recognize that you're a sinner. Now, of course, this is theologically true. We believe every word that Paul wrote in Romans.

And if you're speaking to somebody who already has a relatively high view of the Bible and sees it as a trustworthy document, if you're dealing with somebody who already feels a sense of guilt and shame and is trying to figure out what to do with that, then this would make a lot of sense.

This way of laying out the gospel would be ultimately very comforting for somebody like that. But that's simply not the case in Athens. And so Paul begins in a very different place.

It says, So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Now, we need to understand, you know, he's not starting from a place of condemnation.

[6 : 18] You're a bunch of idolatrous pagan-worshipping sinners. He starts with a compliment. He starts by affirming their spiritual hunger. I mean, this is a very positive statement.

When he said, I perceive that in every way you're very religious, they would have been like, Yes, we are. We take these things seriously. And so he's affirming them. Of course he recognizes the spiritual darkness of the idols they worship.

We said last week, we looked at the fact that he's deeply disturbed by them. He's deeply disturbed by them. But what we see here is that Paul also recognizes that underneath the surface, these people have very legitimate longings that all human beings share in common.

So he's disturbed that the Athenians worshipped Athena and named their city Athena instead of the true God. But he also recognizes that under the surface, these are people who are longing for what?

Why do you worship Athena? Well, you want your political leaders to have wisdom. You want political stability. You want economic prosperity. Those are things that most everyone wants.

[7 : 28] And they're longing for these things. Paul's like, I know what that's like. He's disturbed by people who make offerings to the goddess Artemis instead of worshiping God.

But Paul also recognizes who goes to worship Artemis. Well, women who are pregnant and who are terrified of an awful, painful death for themselves or their child.

Because there is no technology, nothing near what we have today. And so they're going and they're making offerings because Artemis is said to be the one who can deliver them safely through childbearing.

And so they're going and they're putting their hope. And so Paul recognizes, you know, on the surface they're worshiping an idol. But underneath, everybody wants that. Nobody wants a horrible, painful death when they're trying to have a child.

And so there are these legitimate longings underneath the idol worship. The people who worship the false gods of Athens are motivated by the same longings that anyone else would be motivated by.

[8 : 27] They want to be safe. They want to be financially secure. They want to have meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose. They're afraid of the unknown and they want some sense of

control over the future. Like everybody you've ever met.

This is what we need to understand about idol worship. When we talk about idol worship, that's just another way of saying that people tend to prioritize and devote themselves to the things they believe are most likely to satisfy those longings.

That's essentially what it is. We tend to prioritize and ultimately devote ourselves to the things that we ultimately believe are most likely to satisfy those inner longings. You see the same thing in a place like D.C.

You know, you have a co-worker who maybe you feel like you have nothing in common with. You know, they go by, you know, they use they-them pronouns. They have a whole way of seeing the world that, you know, you personally don't subscribe to that gender ideology at all.

And you feel like there's no common ground. And what you need to understand is that underneath the surface, that's simply someone who is just wanting to feel comfortable in their own skin. Right? It's somebody who is wanting a sense of identity, wanting a sense of belonging just like you, just like anyone else.

[9 : 39] Right? The neighbor down the street who's obsessed with politics and has all the yard signs laying out all the views. You know, maybe you totally disagree with their politics, but underneath the surface, that's a person who's longing for some sense of meaning and purpose.

They're longing for some clear sense of right and wrong of good guys and bad guys. And they found it in the world of politics. So this is where we start by recognizing and affirming the longings under the surface.

That is the place where you will find common ground. Always. So just a couple of takeaways before we move on to the next point. Don't assume that the people around you are not interested in God. Every human being on the planet is a worshiper. These are people with real spiritual longings. They're simply looking in other places to satisfy those longings. And really, this is all about posture. And some of you get this and you do this naturally so well. But when you start this way with people, your posture is such that you're not talking down to somebody from a position of spiritual superiority.

[10 : 43] Or as though you're the one with all the answers. You're coming alongside that person as a fellow pilgrim. Right? You care about those things. I care about those things.

We both care about the same things. We both want the same things for ourselves and our families. Right? We're heading in different directions as a result. But underneath, there's common ground. So this is where Paul starts.

Wow, I perceive that you're very religious. You're asking good, big, hard questions. You take these things seriously. Well done. And then, Paul finds an opening. It's the second thing he does. He confirms the wrong ease.

He finds an opening. He says, As I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription. To the unknown God. Verse 23.

Now, this is remarkable. The Athenians, despite their vast pantheon, still sensed that there was something missing.

[11 : 40] Right? Despite all of the options on the religious buffet, they still have this altar to the unknown God. They still sense there has to be more.

Something still felt incomplete. So they left a space open, a kind of placeholder, for whomever or whatever that thing might be.

And, you know, as we said a moment ago, people tend to prioritize and devote themselves to the things they believe are most likely to satisfy their longings. But here's the next thing we need to see. Inevitably, anything we devote ourselves to other than God is going to fall short. It's going to make promises that it can't deliver on. Just to give one example, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be successful.

There is a kind of good and godly form of ambition that drives us to work hard, to get up early, to put our best effort into things. But there are countless people who are completely devoted to success and status.

[12 : 48] It's not just important, it's become ultimate. It's become a kind of idol. I don't know who I am or what value I have if I'm not successful. I can't imagine my life being worth living if I'm not successful.

They've crossed a line. What's interesting is to talk to people when they have achieved success and status, when they finally get what they're after. Right?

If you don't, then you can always say, well, if only I had been successful then. But what happens when people actually get it? And there's so many examples of people saying versions of the same thing. I think of, this is an old reference now, but Tom Brady, back when he only had three Super Bowl rings, saying, why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me?

And he says, it's got to be more than this. And what he says, like, he's won three or four more. Right, so he said, I think of Brad Pitt in a Rolling Stone interview saying, I got everything I thought I wanted.

And it was empty. I think of Jim Carrey saying, I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.

[13:58] All of these people, if you read interviews with them, if they're honest, again and again and again, people who you look at, or I look at, and we think they're at the top, they're at the apex, they have done it, they have made it, they've gotten everything they ever wanted.

And those are the people who are saying, there's nothing here. It's all empty. It's all vanity, to use the phrase from Ecclesiastes. There's a lot of people who are devoted to the search for identity, to give another example.

And they're trying to discover their true self, and so identity is the thing that they're after, and they're searching, and they're seeking, and that's the thing they care most about. It was interesting, I read a personal story that someone shared anonymously in The Guardian last year, and I saved it, because it was just incredibly powerfully personal.

A woman, presumably, is sharing about the fact that she came out as gay in her late 20s, and she says in the article, in her disclosure here, she says, you know, that when she did that, she hoped that that newfound freedom would bring kind of a greater sense of identity and self-worth.

Right now, I'll be free to live out who I truly am, and I'll get that thing I'm after. But she says instead of that, that actually led to more depression and more confusion over her identity.

[15:11] Despite trying on all different labels, she says she still felt lost. And then she says this, and this is why I saved the article. I'm now in my mid-30s, and I'm worried that this exploration of different lovers and ideologies and roles within sex is taking me further away from what I actually want, love and intimacy.

And I just thought that was really powerful because there's somebody who's saying, I've been looking and looking and looking and looking, and I realize that there's a longing under the surface, and here's what I really want. I want love, and I want intimacy.

And I'm like, every single human being on the planet wants that. So these are examples, right? You know, Jim Carrey and Tom Brady and Brad Pitt and then this anonymous woman.

These are all examples of people who have devoted themselves and they've prioritized things they think are going to satisfy those longings. only to discover that there's still something missing. So metaphorically speaking, they find within themselves an altar to an unknown God.

Right? They're struggling and this or that and the emptiness of where they are and they're trying and then they realize that there's an altar to an unknown God in their heart. There's a kind of placeholder, a spiritual placeholder.

[16:28] It's a space that they can't fill up no matter how hard they try. And sometimes, people who were never previously open to the possibility of Christ, when they reach a point in their life where their idols have let them down and when they have begun to see that altar to an unknown God inside themselves, that's when they start to become spiritually open.

You know, another example of someone who made an idol of success is Lecrae, you know, the Grammy winning artist, rap artist.

And he says in one really candid interview that for a long time, he was completely devoted to success and status. He lived for that and he wanted all the trappings of that, the drugs and women and fame and all that comes of that.

And yet, just like all the other examples, he sort of reached a place where he realized all of that was empty. But for him, that ultimately opened him up to the possibility of the gospel and of Christ and it completely reoriented his life.

And he says in an interview, I had to lose everything I idolized to see Jesus clearly. You know, I had to, I had, the idols had to come down, I had to see the emptiness there and then I was able to see

Jesus clearly.

[17 : 45] He's probably somebody who had heard the gospel thousands of times and it just bounced off. Like toughness. But then he saw the altar to an unknown God in his heart and he realized the emptiness of the idols he had been chasing and then he became open.

So just to stop here before we move on to the final point. If you're here and you're not a Christian and you're struggling in your faith or you know people who are, consider these questions.

Right? Now, first question would be where are the altars of devotion in your life? Where are the things that, what are the things that you're most prioritizing and devoted to? Religiously.

Maybe you've built an altar to your career or to being liked by everybody or to your own comfort or to the safety and well-being of your family or to security.

See, these are good things but have they become things that you are devoted to? And then the second question I would say is this, is there also an altar to an unknown God in your life?

[18 : 46] Are you absolutely certain that this is all there is that you figured it all out? Or are you open to the possibility that there may be a God out there who made you and that he's the one you've been looking for your whole life?

So, here's where we are so far. Deep down, everybody has spiritual longings and desires and the gospel does not say your desires are wrong. The gospel says they're misdirected.

Most of the time they're good and godly desires but they're misdirected. We're looking in the wrong places. So, Paul's approach is affirm those longings and then find an opening.

Find people who are in a place in their lives when they realize something is missing. Find people who have realized that the idols are not delivering what they promise. Find the altar to the unknown God. And then, and only then, does he begin to reveal the true God?

That's the third thing we see here. So, then he says after he observes that altar to an unknown God he says, what therefore you worship is unknown this I proclaim to you. See what Paul does here.

[19 : 53] He's connecting their desire to worship. He's connecting that desire with the truth about God found in Jesus. The gospel always is best presented as the answer to a question.

an answer to a question that somebody is already asking about their life, about the world. So, this is what Paul does. What you worship is unknown I proclaim to you.

And as we're going to see next week, we're going to look much more in depth in what he says. This is not syncretism. In other words, this is not Paul saying, well, you have your path to God and I have my path to God and look, they're all basically the same.

That's not what he's doing. He's not simply affirming their religion. He's affirming their longings and desire to know God and then he calls them very clearly to worship the true God instead of these idols.

But this is not coercive. He's simply offering an alternative to people who are already looking for one. Some people are not going to be looking. It's okay. They're going to reject it outright.

[20 : 53] Paul experiences that. We'll see that in a couple of weeks. But there are some people who are looking and Paul, for those people, is offering them an alternative that maybe they've never considered before. When your heart is closed, no amount of persuasion can ever convince a person the gospel is true.

But when your heart is open, when you are spiritually hungry, that's when the gospel starts to make sense. You begin to realize that the idea that there is a God who made us and who loves us and who has a purpose for us is beautiful.

You begin to realize that even though we have turned our backs on him, he has enacted a plan to save and restore us through the death and resurrection of his son, that begins to mean something to you.

When you begin to realize that God is not only saving us, but he plans to put the whole world right again, that starts to matter. The beauty and the grandeur of that story starts to outshine everything else.

Ultimately, the gospel confirms the deep longings of every human heart, regardless of their culture. nature. The gospel says, you're right to desire these things, but you're just looking in the wrong place.

[22 : 00] To paraphrase the theologian Daniel Strange, he says, the gospel offers what all human hearts rightly need. In the gospel we find meaning, but it's a kind of meaning that suffering can't take away.

We find satisfaction, but it's a kind of satisfaction that is not dependent on our present circumstance. You find freedom, but it's a kind of freedom that doesn't break down community. You find identity, but it's a kind of identity that doesn't elude you or crush you or lead you to exclude others. You find relief from shame and guilt, but it's a kind of relief that doesn't resort to relativism. You find hope, but it's a kind of hope that can enable you to face anything with poise. Even death itself. You find these things that everybody's looking for, but you find them in a way that you're never going to find them anywhere else.

And we're going to look more in detail next week at what Paul actually says about God, but here's this approach in a nutshell. He affirms their longings, he finds the openings, and then he reveals the true God.

[23 : 15] So think back to the statistic that we talked about at the beginning of all of this. 30 million more people in the last several years saying they follow Jesus. There are people in our lives right now who are searching for that which is true and real.

And so as we look around our city, our neighborhood, our jobs, we need to be asking as Christians, friends, where are the openings? Where are the altars to an unknown God?

Where are the little snippets and pieces of conversations that we're having day in and day out where we're sensing that there are some people in our lives who may be questioning things? I think that's been happening quite a lot in the last several years.

Where are those openings? And for those of us who are Christians, may Paul's example give us courage and boldness to be willing to proclaim Christ to those who are ready to meet him.

Let's pray. Lord, we're talking about something that only you can accomplish, and that is to work in the hearts of people, to bring about change and transformation.

[24 : 25] But Lord, before we can be a part of this work, we need to be not only convinced of the truth of these things, but passion. Lord, we pray that the Holy Spirit would move in our community, would impassionately molden us, to see the openness, to see the, through your eyes, the people of formalized, and the work to teach.

Lord, we pray this for their good, and for our good, and all the good of your name, and for our God. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.