

Paul in Athens: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture (Part 3)

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[0 : 0 0] Imagine you were invited, can you all hear me? Good, thank you. Imagine that you got invited to go and give a TED Talk,¹ and your audience would include all of the intellectual elites of the day, all of the most highly educated Ivy League professors, thought leaders, influencers, and the like.

And imagine that you were invited to give a TED Talk and present the resurrection of Jesus. Did it happen? What does it mean? Why does it matter? That's almost exactly like the situation the apostle Paul finds himself in in Acts chapter 17.

He's at a place called the Areopagus. This is a place where this rocky outlook overlooking Athens, the philosophers, the leading philosophers and thought leaders of Athens would gather to debate their various worldviews.

And so Paul has been invited to present Jesus and the gospel to these leading thinkers. And he is essentially contending with two major worldviews that were very prominent in Athens, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Now these views sound ancient. And it first passed when you read chapter 17 of the book of Acts and you read about this interaction. It's easy to kind of write it off and think unless you're a first year philosophy student or just kind of a Bible nerd, a conversation that happened between Paul and these ancient philosophers doesn't really sound very relevant to where we are today.

[1 : 3 6] Why would we spend time looking at this? What we are going to find out is that even though these views have ancient roots, they are alive and well. We see the influence of Epicurean and Stoic thought everywhere we look in modern society.

And in fact, as our society is becoming more secular over the last several decades, we have seen this clear trend more in that direction. And as our society becomes more secular, more and more people are gravitating to ideas and worldviews that strongly resemble Epicurean and or Stoic thought.

So the message that the Apostle Paul has for the Athenian philosophers is just as relevant for us today. And in fact, it actually might be more relevant for those of us living in this time and place than it might have been one, two, three hundred years ago.

So that's why we're looking at this interaction. We're looking at what Paul says. We're looking at his message and we're trying to understand what it means for us today. Why is this relevant for people living in the 21st century who are trying to figure out who they are and what life is all about?

So here's what we're going to look at as we look at this passage. How do these ancient worldviews show up today? How do they fall short? And then how does the gospel offer something better, far superior?

[3 : 0 0] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the spirit, for your Holy Spirit that brings your word alive, that connects your voice to our hearts, your spirit who even now is praying for us on our behalf, interceding.

And Lord, we know that one of the prayers of the spirit is that our hearts would be open, that our minds would be open, that there's a way that you can do work in us through your spirit that you alone can do, Lord.

So take us away from human wisdom or ideas or rhetoric. And Lord, we ask that you would do your work in us through your word. And we ask ultimately that we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So we want to talk a little bit at first about how these ancient worldviews show up today. I read an interesting article back in April in the New York Times this year, earlier this year, by a woman named Lauren Jackson.

And the title of the article is, Americans Haven't Found a Satisfying Alternative to Religion. Very interesting title. Since the 90s, we've observed, as I alluded to a little while ago, a trend towards secularization in our country.

[4 : 20] People leaving organized religion behind, increasingly referring to themselves as unaffiliated, the rise of the nuns, as it's been called. That has produced a growing number of people who are now trying to figure out how to build a life and live a life without God.

And here's what Jackson says about her own journey after leaving religion behind. She says, I spent my 20s worshiping at the altar of work and in my free time, testing secular ideas for how to live well.

And I read it. I cared for my nieces and nephews. I pursued wellness. I paid for workout classes on Sunday mornings, practiced mindfulness, went to therapy, visited saunas, subscribed to meditation apps.

I tried book clubs and running clubs. I cobbled together moral instruction from books on philosophy and whatever happened to move me on Instagram. And I read that and I thought probably everybody in this room, we probably all, if we don't identify with that ourselves, we probably know plenty of people who do.

That sounds like the average person, and I feel like I've had probably a dozen conversations in the last few months with people who would probably describe their lives very much like this.

[5 : 46] And what's interesting about Jackson's description is that it reveals a deep resonance with both Epicurean and Stoic ideas. See, when it comes to God, these philosophers were not like the masses.

In fact, a lot of these philosophers looked down on the masses and their kind of superstitious worship of the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Their view of God or the gods was pretty different, and in many ways, they saw God as irrelevant.

The Epicureans said that if there were gods, they were clearly so far away and so distant and so irrelevant that they didn't really matter in terms of how we live. So it's up to us to figure out how to build a good life.

The Stoics didn't even really believe in a personal God at all. If anything, they believed in a more Eastern idea, a kind of, you know, God as a kind of impersonal force or energy or principle that we might align ourselves with, the way people might talk about the universe today.

But in both cases, you have philosophers who feel as though they have transcended, they've kind of moved past the superstitious religion of the masses. And their focus is really on human wisdom and trying to figure out how does one build a good life more or less apart from God.

[7 : 02] And at the risk of being highly reductionistic, we might summarize their areas of focus this way. Again, this is highly reductionistic. I'm admitting it out of the gate.

Epicureans essentially focused on a search for comfort. And Stoics essentially focused on their search for control.

So when Jackson talks about pursuing wellness, visiting saunas, subscribing to meditation apps, going to therapy, practicing mindfulness, she sounds very Epicurean.

Right? Epicureans get a bad rap because people think that they were a bunch of hedonists. Not really true. But they were seeking a life of peace and comfort and contentment.

And part of that meant focusing on and managing desires. They wanted to curate a life that maximized pleasure and freedom from anxiety and stress and pain.

[8 : 00] Part of that means creating your own sense of meaning and crafting your own vision of the good life sounds very similar to how many people live today. Now, when Jackson says, I worshipped at the altar of work, I built a community, I volunteered, I cared for my nieces and nephews, I tried book clubs and running clubs, there she sounds a bit like a Stoic.

You know, the Stoics focused more on control. And by control, I mean self-control, self-mastery, self-optimization, forming virtue through disciplined habit and intellectual growth and character development.

Learning how to be strengthened through experiences of suffering and hardship. That also sounds like many people we hear today. The point I want to make here is that these are not new ideas.

These are not, when Jackson describes her life, these are not new concepts or a new vision of a kind of post-Christian existence. The point is that for centuries, for centuries, for thousands of years, people have been trying to figure out how to live life apart from God.

That's always been an impulse in society. And the real point of Jackson's article is that people's best efforts to build a full and satisfying life apart from God haven't worked out.

[9 : 34] And many remain spiritually hungry. And while Jackson is not probably at this point ready to come back to church just yet, here's what she says at the end of the article. She says, I recognize that my spiritual longing persists.

And it hasn't been sated by secularism. And then she says, I want a God. I want a God. For years, I haven't been able to say that publicly.

But it feels like something is changing. That maybe the culture is shifting. We talked last week about how just in the last three or four years, there's been a major, a 12% increase in our country in the number of people who say they have a meaningful relationship with Jesus.

That's something like 30 million people who are saying that more than back in 2021. So something is definitely shifting in our culture. And people like Jackson are now admitting, hey, this whole thing that I've tried to build on my own apart from God, it hasn't worked.

And I think that there are millions of people in our culture who feel the very same way. Probably many of them, especially if you live in a major city center, are probably scared to admit it. But I think that there are many people who are longing for more.

[10 : 52] As we said last week, it's not only true today, the same sense of incompleteness, emptiness, there has to be something more. That was also present in Athens. Paul, as he's going along, sees an altar that is devoted to the unknown God.

And he realizes that despite this veritable buffet of spiritual options, that somehow the Athenians still felt that something was missing. And so they devoted an altar to whoever or whatever that might be.

There's still something missing here. And we want to acknowledge that architecturally. So the Athenians also had this sense that there was still something missing. Why is this the case?

Why does it not work? And this brings us to the second question. How do these attempts to live life apart from God, how do these worldviews ultimately fall short? And the answer is essentially that these godless worldviews offer empty promises.

These godless worldviews offer empty promises. Again, at the risk of being somewhat reductionistic, modern Epicureanism essentially promises comfort without God.

[12 : 05] Comfort without God. You know, the promise of the Epicurean mindset is you can find peace within. You know, if you find the right combination of therapists and saunas and meditation apps and long walks and maybe some minimalism and, you know, whatever the other ideas du jour circulating around our Instagram feeds might be, that it's possible that theoretically one can curate a tranquil life without God.

The problem is this. What you actually find is that these methods don't deliver what they promise because they don't deliver true lasting peace that exists despite your circumstances.

They deliver ways to momentarily escape, to momentarily numb or check out. Because within this view, there are no resources to help cope with the biggest, most existential challenges of life.

Because at the end of the day, if there is no God, that means that the universe is random and meaningless. And that causes a tremendous amount of anxiety. Because it means that there's nothing out there to give us any sense of purpose or direction.

It means there's no comfort in the face of aging and death. There's nothing to help you understand what happens after we die. There's no promise because there is nothing after death according to this worldview.

[13 : 41] There's no hope. There's no resources to help us deal with suffering. To help us name or make sense of evil when we see it. So the best that we can cobble together is an array of ways to temporarily or momentarily soothe that existential anxiety and dread.

But it is always lurking just under the surface. And then if we look at modern Stoicism, modern Stoicism promises control, but it's control without grace.

Control without grace. It says that life is about self-mastery. It's about self-optimization. It's about working hard. It's about taking responsibility. It's about doing our duty.

It's about making our bed when we get up in the morning. You know, it's about avoiding emotional messiness. You know, and there are people out there like Tim Ferriss and Jordan Peterson who exerted enormous influence offering what largely reflects Stoic ideas of life.

Right? How to take responsibility and become the kind of person, become the best version of yourself and aim at life's biggest challenges. Now, there's a lot that is inspiring in that.

[15 : 01] There's a lot that's inspiring in all of this. And a lot of things that we hear in these worldviews are true, or at least they reflect things that are true. But the problem with this worldview is, at the end of the day, it is all up to you.

It is all up to you. And if you fail, it's up to you to overcome that weakness in yourself. There's no ultimate forgiveness for our failures. If we make horrible mistakes, if there's guilt and shame that haunts us and hangs over us, there's no way to deal with that ultimately.

You simply have to detach from it and move forward and learn what you can from it. And as I said, while this can be inspiring at first, over time I think this view leads a lot of people, particularly men, into places of exhaustion and isolation.

So it's worth spending some time reflecting on your own tendencies. And I think we all have tendencies in one or other of these directions.

I think probably a lot of us, like Jackson, might have a mix of things if we looked at our lives that reflect these various worldviews. So it doesn't have to be cut and dry. But I think that a lot of people tend to focus primarily either on comfort in their lives or on greater and greater and greater degrees of control.

[16 : 21] You know, some of us deal with our stress by wanting to check out, wanting to disconnect. We try to go out of our way to avoid things that are inconvenient.

We want to make our lives as easy and as frictionless as possible. And I think others really lean in a different direction. I know people who really focus on control. You know, we manage anxiety and stress by wanting to have greater control over our lives.

We want to make sure there's a plan for everything. We want to make sure there's a schedule for everything. Right? We want to be highly organized. We want to not only control our lives, but we want to try to control the people around us.

We want to control what they think of us and how they respond to us. We want to try to control and manage our circumstances. We want to try to control future outcomes.

You know, we tend to be over-analyzers and over-thinkers. We're over-functioners. So I think that we all have a little bit of Epicurean and Stoic leanings within us.

[17 : 26] And it's probably different from one person to the next. The thing that we need to understand is everything that Paul says in this passage directly challenges these ideas. Not by saying that they're all wrong.

But by simply saying that they're not enough. That they fall flat. That they don't ultimately deliver what they promise. And that the gospel offers something incomparably better.

So that's the last thing I want to focus on is how does the gospel offer something better? And this is what we see. The meat of this passage, verse 24. Paul launches into this beautiful message by beginning with creation.

He says in verse 24, The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. Now they would be on the Areopagus and they would be looking out over all of the temples in the agora, right?

So he's, and they would be looking up at the Acropolis where the Parthenon was. And they would be looking at these things and he would say, God doesn't live there. God doesn't live there.

[18 : 28] He doesn't live in the temples made by man. Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. So what's he saying out of the gate?

The universe is not random and meaningless. And God is not this impersonal force or energy. He's saying the good news of the gospel is that there is a personal God.

And that God has created everything that exists. And that God didn't create you or me because he needs something from us. God wasn't sitting around thinking, I need worshipers or I need people to bring me food.

Some of the people believe that the gods needed to rely on human beings to meet their needs, right? Paul says the God who made you didn't do it because he needs anything from you.

He did it purely as a gift because he's a God of love. And that's what love does. It creates and gives life and causes it to flourish.

[19 : 28] So he did it as an overflow of his love. He goes on in verse 26. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods in the boundaries of their dwelling place.

Listen to this. That they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. This is extraordinary. Not only, Paul says, did God make you, but God wants a relationship with you.

And because of that, God has filled the world with evidence that points to him. And everywhere you go and everything that you do, you're going to be surrounded by things that point to and witness to the fact that there's a God who made you and wants you to feel your way toward him.

Right? Right? And then he does something extraordinary. He shows them. He says, on some level, you know this already because there is evidence that points to God in your own culture and in your own writings.

And he quotes their thinkers. Paul says he's actually not far from each one of us. Right? So unlike the Epicureans, God's not distant. God is right here.

[20 : 41] And he wants to know you. And then he quotes their thinkers. For in him, we live and move and have our being. That's one quote. And even some of your own poets have said, and he quotes another leading thinker, for we are indeed his offspring.

Right? So this is like Paul quoting Nietzsche. This is like Paul quoting from the New York Times. Right? And he's saying, even when you read this, which doesn't seem like it's religious, you see things that are pointing to what I'm telling you.

So he's quoting their pagan philosophers. These are essentially, Paul is saying, these are signposts, even within your own writings that point to the truth of the gospel because God wants you to feel your way toward him and find him.

And, you know, our culture is full of songs and movies and books and music and poetry that points to the reality of God and the longing that people have to know him.

You know, when people listen to the compositions of Bach, right? There's many people who have just said, there's something here. There's something that calls me, that points to there has to be more than this.

[21 : 49] Right? Or when scientists observe something like the finely tuned universe that is tuned just so in order to make life possible. Down to a fraction of a percentage.

Right? When we look at these variables in the cosmos, that if they were to change by the slightest fraction in one direction or another, no life would be possible. And yet, the universe seems finely tuned just so to allow for the possibility of life to flourish.

And so scientists will look at that and say, how could that randomly happen? Right? That has to point to something more than this materialistic world. And so Paul is saying, you're surrounded by evidence because the God who created you wants to know you.

Another way of saying it is, he's saying, despite what you think, God is not distant or irrelevant and he's right here. And then that leads Paul to point out the absurdity of worshipping things that we make.

He's like, it's absurd to worship things that we've made out of stoner metal. We shouldn't worship the things that we make. We should worship the one who made us. Which is more worthy of worship?

[22 : 54] And then he comes to the climax. Verse 30. The times of ignorance God overlooked. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Because he's fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. So Paul is saying, listen, times are changing. It's the dawn of a new day.

And up until now you didn't know these things. But God is doing something new. We've come to a point in history where God has now made a way for everyone in the world to know him.

Jesus Christ has come into the world to restore all that has been broken. Including our relationship with our maker. And then Paul says, we know this is true.

He's like, you don't have to take my word for it. We know because we saw Jesus raised from death. God's given us assurance that all this is true because somebody came out of the grave. So Paul is essentially saying, the time is now.

[24 : 01] Give up trying to live life apart from God. We've entered a new era of human history. And the time is now. Return to the one who made you and the one who loves you.

So he's telling these Epicureans and these Stoics and thus all of their followers. The real purpose of life, the real reason you're here, is not just to seek comfort.

And it's not just to try to develop some measure of self-control. Your real purpose is to live for and glorify the God who made you. So to all of the modern Epicureans out there, the gospel says that life is not just about comfort.

It's also about holiness. It's about holiness. It's about living all of life in reference to God. And that's not always a comfortable life.

In fact, Jesus makes it clear that it can at times be a very costly life. And yet the promise is that the gospel offers far more than momentary pleasure. The gospel offers joy that outlasts death.

[25 : 12] Joy that outlasts death. And to all the modern Stoics out there, the gospel calls us to let go of control. The gospel says we need to learn to trust God to be in control.

You know, the song we sang earlier, this is our father's world. It's not my world. It's our father's world. The gospel tells us that even though we want to be strong and it feels good to be powerful and it feels good to be in control, that true power is found in weakness.

And that's one of the great mysteries of the Christian way of life is that true power is found in weakness, not in us seeking personal strength. And that the gospel offers far more than self-optimization.

It offers grace. And only grace can transform a human being from the inside out. So the gospel gives us more than we will ever find in the wisdom and the worldviews of human beings.

It's not just a way to manage your life, but a way to be made new. It's not just a way to cope with death. It's a way to conquer death. It's not just a way to think about God.

[26 : 26] It's a way to know that God intimately. Paul says the time is now. Let's pray. Lord, may this truth and the beauty of it and the goodness within it, may that melt and soften hard hearts.

May it change lives. Lord, may it call people who already have a sense that there is something missing, people who look at the altar to the unknown God in their own heart.

May it inspire those people to seek after you. Lord, what a great comfort it is to know that you're not distant, that you're not holding back, waiting for us to get it right, that you're the God who desires that we would feel our way toward you and find you.

You want relationship and you are here right now. And all we have to do is open our hearts and ask you for that relationship. In the name and for the sake of Jesus.

And that your answer is yes. That you're like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. That the moment we take steps toward you, you run out to meet us on the road. You don't wait for us to get it right.

[27 : 42] Your arms are already around us. Lord, we pray that that would be true. We pray that those who are longing to know you would come to know you. We pray that your spirit would do his work.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.