

Acts 17:16–34

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[0 : 0 0] 17 verses 16 through 34 and may be found on page 1026 of the White Bibles. At this time, the children from age 3 through 2nd grade may walk quietly out these back doors on the side and go down the hall to their classes for Kid City.

There is a nursery available for those under the age of 3. Again, today's passage is Acts 17 verses 16 through 34, page 1026. Please remain standing for the reading of God's Word.

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. 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.

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.

And they took him and brought him to the Oropagus, saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean.

[1 : 1 3] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Oropagus, said, men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in 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.

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, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 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.

[2 : 2 5] 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. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has 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. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this.

So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom were also Dionysius the Oropagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Thanks, Drayton. Well, good morning.

And I bring my own greetings to those of you who have been in our midst for months or years, and will be leaving this summer. We do pray God's richest blessing upon you.

[3 : 3 9] And yet I'm also aware that there are some that are arriving in our city, and perhaps even here for the first day. We welcome you, and we pray that you will flourish as you find your way here week by week.

Well, if ever there was a day to be a fly on the wall of the Apostle Paul, his minute in Athens might be the moment I would choose. This text is and has been electric throughout the history of the church ever since Luke recorded it.

In one sense, some have even argued that it stands in the middle of the book of Acts almost as the climactic scene for the entire narrative.

Structurally, as if to say to Theophilus, his first reader, if you want sure footing for the things which you have been taught, that you might know they are true, look no further than to this scene.

For if the gospel can make a successful stand in Athens, it can make it anywhere. Perhaps that's what's really in play.

[5 : 00] Three times in the summer of 2009, I preach from these same verses. I don't know that I do that very regularly. Take one text and go three sermons.

But so rich this text is. I can't do today in 30 minutes what I did those years ago in three 45-minute sermons. But I just want you to know that the scene depicted here resounds down through the centuries.

And that ought to be enough to require our own attention this morning. This text that was read to you is much more written on than our most text.

And it is an unending source of material, particularly for urban Christians who glory in notions of living in the midst of Athens.

Take a look at the organization so that you'll be able to follow in just brief moments this morning my thoughts along with his own structure.

[6 : 13] In 16 to 21, you have the context for Paul's speech before the Areopagus. In verses 22 through 31, you have the actual content of that speech.

And then those final couple of verses just lay down easily for you the consequences of what took place. If you don't like the letter C, pick up the letter S.

There's a setting for Paul's Athenian discourse. There's the actual speech itself. And then there's the upshot, which I think concludes with this great notion.

The gospel made it in Athens. And if it made it in Athens, it can make it anywhere. Take a look at the setting.

Just three observations under the words Athens, the Athenians, and the Areopagus. Notice verse 16 where we are.

[7 : 21] Now Paul was waiting for them at Athens. Let me say a word on this. Athens is the city. You've probably watched athletes on television indicate their university of choice as they introduce themselves to a national audience.

I'm so-and-so. I play defensive end. I'm from the University of Ohio. They are trying to indicate that they are the university among which all other universities in Ohio must be measured.

It would be like saying I am from the University of Chicago. Not merely a university in Chicago. Athens is not merely a great city.

It is the city upon which all great cities are measured. This is the secretariat of all horses. I thought some of you would understand what I had to say.

You're too young. This is the horse upon which all horses are measured. Not even justified. Justified will be measured on secretariat.

[8 : 30] Athens is the city. And Paul is now there. Athens, by the point in time in which he was here, was a bit beyond its cresting moment.

Rome was the shifting power. Athens had its illustrious past. Athens would have been known to have the pride of place really probably throughout all time in regard to its intellectual prominence. Athens would have had not only its intellectual prominence. It would have been culturally the preeminent place outside of probably Babylon in the ancient day before that.

And so you've arrived at the city of all cities. It's the adopted city of Aristotle. It's the native city of Socrates and Plato.

It's where Epicurus and Zeno find their life-giving words. It's home to the Parthenon. All of the temples. The Greek mints. The marketplace.

[9 : 45] If you arrived in Athens, you arrived at the center of the universe. Paul was there. Let me say a word about the Athenians. Notice in the text that the Athenians were a diverse citizenry.

As Athens was a great city, the great city, the Athenians were a diverse citizenry. Look at verse 17. He's reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happen to be there.

Three categories of persons are listed right there, right at the outset, in the setting. He's painting the picture of the speech which is going to come.

And you find there are monotheists, Jews living in Athens. There are devout persons, individuals who might not have been born into that cultic religion as a child of Abraham, but were nevertheless curious and gave their minds to the consideration of a god and what their life would mean under the existence of a god.

And then he's also there in the marketplace. It is as though he were in the midst of all the business men and women, the traffic of all those things heading.

[11 : 12] He's trying in that simple line to evoke for the reader the diverse citizenry of Athens. And beyond that, you'll notice there were also Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Verse 18, a fourth category of persons. These are the academic elites. Epicurus, of course, would have lived some hundreds of years before Paul. He would have been, in some sense, the father of a school that was just taken with the physical world in which we live and wanting to explore every aspect of the domain of creation.

And physics would have had its play. And chemists as well. And the body would have been on display in a sense of wanting to know what this material world is like.

Sometimes they're falsely accused as being sensualists. Not really so. But they did feel that life was to be lived with all of its fullness and pleasure.

In one sense, he's the father of the school that gives you the idea that the greatest life to be lived is an elevated life of the mind. Not only that, the Stoics are there.

[12 : 27] The descendants, in a sense, of Zeno who would have begun to have a principled way of life. These would have been the alarm setters of the culture.

They would have awakened with a moral degree of duty. They're the kind of men and women that you see regardless of their religious underpinnings.

And you can say this. They are the most moral person I know. They're concerned with the context in which they are navigating life. And they want to live in a very disciplined way.

This is the diverse citizenry of Athens. Monotheists. Devout Jews. Devout persons who are exploring whether or not God exists and what he might mean for them.

The business class. Selling their wares and getting on with their life. And the great academy itself. It was all there. Which makes me think of an implication.

[13 : 24] I think as I read people who write on this text. Especially urban people like ourselves.

We try to equate Athens with us. As Athens was. So we are.

Aren't we great in the greatness of citydom? Aren't we diverse? Don't we run from the business class and the educational elites?

Let me say this though. And it must be said. Ours. I'm talking Chicago. And probably any great city on the face of the earth today.

Our center of gravity in our cities is more debased than the elevated convictions or threads that held the great republic of Athens together.

[14 : 31] Their gods. Their gods. And I'm not talking about Christian god. Their gods. Were higher than our gods. Their likes.

Were more elevated than our likes. Their aspirations. On what to do with their summer free time. Was greater than our appetites.

We have little awareness. Of the strength and the glory and the beauty of Athens. Let me.

By way of implication. Something I've been thinking of. About our own setting. Oh for the day when we elevate our mind beyond simply serving a no waiting fulfillment of all appetite.

Oh for the day when we quit frittering around aimlessly on our phone for 45 minutes.

[15 : 39] And at the end of which not having given ourselves to anything noble or worthy. We are not ready for the recent collection of essays which come under the hand of Leon Cass in regard to even what is the worthy life worth living.

I guess I'm mentioning this under setting because I don't want us to think that we are Athens. I will say that Hyde Park is about as approximate as you might get.

But our city is not and our world is not and our neighborhood is far less than the ideal of Athens.

Let me say one more comment on the setting. Other than it's time for us to reach a little higher. Not only something about Athens or the Athenians.

But this Areopagus which comes up. You can see it there in verse 19. They took him and brought him to the Areopagus. Literally in a sense. They brought him to the mountain or the mount.

[16 : 56] A physical plane. A mount of the god Ares. Or in the Roman world. They brought him in a sense to the hill where the god of Mars would have had his way with the world.

In other words, there was a geographic place from which Athens was ruled by what you and I might consider to be the city council.

Now that's actually what's happening there. It's an underappreciated aspect of the setting. I've been looking recently at a book by Eckhart Schnabel again.

Having read it years ago. And he indicates the role of the Areopagus and the council that would have been listening to Paul on this day.

But he quotes an Athenian decree. Let me quote it for you. The king shall fix the boundaries. The king Archon. Think of it more like the ruler and the rulers of Athens.

[18 : 00] They would fix the boundaries of the sanctuaries. Sacred precincts. And in the future, no one shall be able to found altars. Cut the stones.

Or take out the earth of stones without the authorization of the council. In other words, the place to which Paul is now going to give this speech in regard to a setting.

Were the ones who granted permission for you to bring a new deity into their pluralistic play.

And in that day, if you had a god you were following, then you probably would have not been merely wanting for permission to speak of that god in the city.

You would have wanted a building permit to build the temple for that god. And then you would have constructed a worshiping community around that god with festivals and parades and sacrifices.

[19 : 03] And the indication is you can't do that in Athens without the approval of the council that sits on top of the hill, the Areopagus. Now once that is laid down, when you understand that what they thought Paul was doing was introducing a foreign deity, a new god.

And that they bring him to say, you bring strange things to our ears. In a sense, he has been detained, brought into the council chambers, or on top of the hill if they were still meeting there.

And he was now on the docket, 9 a.m. till however long it takes, Paul. A foreigner who seeks admittance into our city for a new god, which inevitably will bring him over to the building department for his permits.

And we will make a determination today on what that means. Now, that's the setting. So, the implication is that this sermon, which we now move to, this message in 22 to 31, is a particular message for a particular setting.

Much more than it is Luke trying to tell you, oh, generations from now, let me tell you how to talk to people who don't know the Bible. No, he's focused in here on Paul.

[20 : 42] Now, what Paul does is absolutely masterful then in the speech. And to that, I want to spend a few minutes' time. In verses 22 and 23, his introduction basically tells the city council, guys, you're not going to be here as long today as you think you are.

Notice what he says. So, Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God.

What therefore you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you. Genius. What Paul basically says is, let's get one thing straight. I'm not sure how I ended up here today, but I've got nothing new for you. Really, I thought you came to get permission for something new. No, I'm just speaking of what you already have, but you imply that he's unknown to you, and I've come to make him known.

Oh, every person on that council breathed a big sigh of relief, because we're now 10 minutes into the convening work of the docket of the day, and they all think they can still keep their lunch appointment.

[22 : 00] He disarms them by saying with those verses, I'm not here looking for formal permission by which you would have had to have given authorization anyway. And then he goes on to indicate in verses 24 and 25, ingeniously, not only am I not here for your permission, I'm not here for your permits.

Listen to how those verses read now. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in 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.

What he's saying is, I don't need a piece of land. I'm not looking to put down a down payment.

You're not going to have to have construction permits drawn. I'm not regulating festivals for what I'm here to do.

And all of a sudden, everything is disarmed in that moment. In fact, what he does next then, in this very opening of his discourse, accomplishes everything he needed, really, by the end of verse 28. What he wants to do for the gospel really commences, in my opinion, beginning in verse 29. But up into verse 28, he's basically said, no permission asked for, no permit required.

[23 : 28] And in fact, if you want to know what's really happening here, I'm not saying anything different than your written sources already record. That's the quotation of the poets in verse 28, probably from Epimenides in the first half, and Articus in the second.

In him we live and move and have our being, for indeed we are his offsprings. These are the things your poets say. In other words, he's saying, I'm not here to build a temple. Of course, you guys already know that God is a lot closer than that.

He doesn't require brick and mortar. In him we move and have our being. I agree with you. God is a spirit. We try to discern him and come to know him.

That's not going to be done through some religious act of worship that requires Paul to set up his own denomination or church plant in their way of thinking in the city of Athens.

What a stunning way to see it then. He basically has indicated, whatever you think we need today, it won't need to be long.

[24 : 49] Which is why at the end of the speech, they basically say, yeah, we'll hear you more on this. They let him go. And he didn't have to stand in any long lines down at City Hall. Some of you haven't done that.

He didn't, let me say it. He didn't, because some of you, I should get a witness on that. He did not have to stand in any long lines. He wasn't even looking for a line. Let's take a look then at the speech itself.

I prefer to think of this speech on the very simple terms that ancient commentators used to speak of it. Three movements. Creation.

Preservation. Salvation. So he, he, he, the content of the speech, he declares that God, that there is a God, and that God created.

He created the world. He created humanity. He created humanity from one beginning person. He's the creator.

[25 : 56] That's what those verses in 25 and following are indicating. He is the creator. God created us. That's what he wanted them to know.

Now this is interesting because not all of them, particularly those who would have been in the school of the Epicureans, they would have thought, well, we deal with the physical world, man. We deal with the world of science. I'm not dealing with philosophy. You've got to go down the hall a little bit, or you've got to get over in that corner classics department, and they might lead you in that direction. But right here, we just do lab work. But he wants even them to know, no, all the scientists need to know this.

God created us. Now this is worthy of a couple of thoughts because today's elites, some of them tell us that we created God.

Karen Armstrong, who is interesting to read, but irritating to absorb, opens her book, A History of God, with this line.

[27 : 04] quote, in the beginning, human beings created a God who was the first cause of all things and the ruler of heaven and earth.

Now this is fascinating to me. People today in the world of religious studies are putting a dominant footfall on the notion that when you read your Bible, you're not reading about the God of history, you're reading about, as she titles her work, A History of God.

That it wasn't in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. No, when you pick up the scriptures, in the beginning, human beings created a God who was the ruler of all things of the heaven and the earth.

Let me say it clear, says Paul, in the midst of those who hold that conviction, God, verse 24, made the world and everything in it, being Lord of the heaven and earth.

Literally, in the Greek, when it says that God created the world, it simply means God created the world. How's that for insightful?

[28 : 19] And that's where the Christian message begins. How he created all things. We will spend our life trying to sort all that out.

That he created all things is an indispensable notion of getting your head on straight. So get your head on straight.

God created the heavens and the earth. God created us. We did not create God. how far we've fallen from Athens.

Psalms 14, 1, the word of the Lord says this to you, the fool, the fool, the fool, the fool, nobody wants to be the fool, the fool says there is no God.

I don't care what degree you have. I don't care what high school you graduate from or whether you don't graduate at all. God created us.

[29 : 29] And you need to know that. In fact, the book of Revelation says that because he created us, he's worthy of all praise. Why should you even think about how you might relate to God?

Is it just because Christianity says he saves you? No, you should actually be thinking about how do I relate to God in a worthy way, not merely with the fullness of salvation, but simply with the declaration of creation.

There's a creator, creator, which means he made you. And it says he's the ruler, which means he owns you, which means you're not your own.

No matter how much freedom the world in which we live tells you you have. Well, there it is. God created us.

And then notice how the speech moves from creatio to, in a sense, conservatio to this, the way he conserves his creation, the way he preserves us from his creating us to his keeping us.

[30 : 41] Verses 26 and 28, he actually gave us a life where we live, determine the days in which you're going to live, the boundaries upon which you will live.

And he did so that you would seek God. That's an amazing truth. He is preserving you so that you might meet him.

Wow. This would have been revolutionary to parts of his audience who thought, well, I don't believe there's a God, but if there is a God, I can't imagine that he has anything to do with what's going on down here.

And if he does have something to do with what's going on down here, he certainly doesn't care about us. And Paul is saying, no, no, don't believe the lie. Dylan said, from when we were born, sparks fly, and we are made to believe the lie.

And the lie is that God actually doesn't want to know you. He does want to know you. In fact, he's got you feeling around. Look at that verse 27. Trying to find your way to him.

[31 : 45] Trying to pull back the curtain. And in actual fact, he's not that far away. Indeed, he gave us our life. Indeed, we are his children.

What's the implication for you? God created you. Therefore, you need to figure out how you relate to God. Because you need to assume that he wants to know you.

He wants you to know him. And Romans will tell you that you go wrong in life when you do not acknowledge God as God, nor do you give thanks to God.

That's the first step in life. Even before you become a Christian, you need to acknowledge God and give thanks to God. Because if you don't honor him as God, you are working against everything that he's actually doing in bringing you to life in this allotted period and in this place.

That's the implication. Did you become a Christian today? Some of them would say, no, no, but the pastor at least encouraged me to think about this. I need to honor God.

[33 : 05] I need to give thanks to God. That's a start. You'd be in that midst then later down about those who might want to hear more. The third aspect of the speech though goes from creation to he preserves us to salvation.

Look at this. This is amazing. Verse 29, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone or an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he is appointed and this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

That's the uniqueness of the Christian message. The resurrection of Jesus as the righteous one whose righteousness can be applied to the unrighteous that they might actually have a direct pathway toward God.

He begins now to unfold the distinctive message of salvation and what he's saying is if you first begin to believe that God exists and secondly you want to begin to honor him or thank him then do

it in the right way.

[34 : 22] He doesn't want you bringing wood, hay, stubble. He doesn't want you crafting something thinking that's a God. He doesn't want your idolatry. He doesn't want you to relate to him the way you choose to relate to him.

He wants you to relate to him according to the resurrection in which he relates to you. So all of a sudden the resurrection of Jesus becomes everything.

And then you begin to realize that all the way back in verse 18 this has been the content of what he's been doing in Athens all along. He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

That's what I would tell you. What he wants you to know is this. Hey, until you came into Holy Trinity on June 10th and were getting ready to go out to a picnic, perhaps in the rain, you related to God any old way you chose.

But now you have a text that you have to grapple with which says, I guess I was just ignorant. I believe the lie.

[35 : 29] I thought we did create God. I've been corrected. corrected. I thought God did want my religious acts of piety.

I've been corrected. I thought I could get to him the way that he just imagined my subjective sense of rightness would work with him.

And the answer is no. That was a time of ignorance, verse 30, of not knowing. You didn't know. And I'm telling you this morning, Paul would tell you, let me make the unknown known.

Let me talk to you about the unknown God who can be known. And it's through Jesus and the resurrection.

It's one thing to be ignorant. That's okay. But Paul says now there's a command, Luke does, he writes, now there's a command for everywhere to repent because it's a different day.

[36 : 45] Here's the fascinating thing. In the Old Testament, that's where you have a God of love. The Old Testament shows you centuries and centuries of a loving God. He's like, man, these people are ignorant. They have no clue how to be relating to me.

But I'll keep letting them live for a long time. Man, that Egypt, they're driving me nuts. But I'm not going to mess with them for, I don't know, maybe 400 years. I'll just let them do what they're doing. They're kind of ignorant. Eventually I have to say something.

But God is this long-suffering, unbelievably forgiving, merciful, steadfast God in the Old Testament. He is a gracious God.

He is a loving God. He is a kind God. He's a waiting God. He's an unjudging God. But now he says, those times of ignorance, man, God's not messing around anymore.

He's got a son on the throne. You got a son on the throne. It's not just that he's a ruler of the heaven and the earth. He got a man in heaven who rules the earth.

[37 : 49] So all allegiance goes to that one. Therefore, repent and believe. In other words, this is how you become a Christian today. you start thinking differently.

I've got to start figuring out who Jesus is. If he's on that throne, I need his word. I need to follow his ways.

The proof, of course, is in the resurrection. Let me shut this down. I'd like to say a lot about Epimenides who was a legendary figure in Athens who centuries before came in and purged Athens of a polluted religious scene and who prophetically declared words that would set Athens on its right feet and who, according to folklore, was resurrected from the dead in the sense that he fell asleep for 57 years and then walked back into Athens.

All these things would have been well known to the Athenians of this day. In fact, Epimenides was the one who we have language from Dionysius who actually indicates he came in with altars to the unknown gods.

And what Paul is basically playing on here is this. Just as the great figure your city hero, Epimenides, came here, purged the city of sin, proclaimed the goodness of God, and in his own person did so in the sense as a foreign God who came in a resurrected state, so too now I proclaim to you Jesus the Nazarene, who through his blood purges this city again of all sin and completely encapsulates what it is to be the word of God.

[39 : 52] And through his resurrection now brings you and your city clean access to the heavenly father. That's the word that fell on the hill that day.

The upshot, 32 to 34, three things. Mockery. Let me hear more. And some were moved to believe.

I'm guessing I got all three here today. Give me a break. Maybe I'll come back. Wow. I think I believe what he's saying. He lists a couple of people here. Here, they're there by name. Dionysius, who Eusebius, who's a Roman historian, indicates just some few years later through the writings of another that this Areopagus, Dionysius, was indeed the first bishop of the church in Athens.

[41 : 07] Damaris, a woman, 17 times in Luke-Acts, women are early in the movement of becoming Christians.

Learned women, in this sense, maybe even a courtesan, maybe a high-flying woman of the night that served the Areopagus men. We don't know.

But Damaris is listed and others. And the point for the reader is simply this. the gospel made a go of it in Athens.

And if it could make a go of it there, wow, it just might be able to make a go of it anywhere. And with that, I invite you to watch what unfolds in the coming ten minutes.

We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. People that believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, believers in that message are going to come to the middle. They're going to partake of this meal, acknowledging their sin and asking him for strength to go on in their faith.

[42 : 17] So what you're going to see, you're going to see this. The gospel. We're 20 years in. The gospel is standing on its own feet in Hyde Park under the wonderful shadow of a world-class university.

The gospel has taken root here in a diverse citizenry to the praise and honor of his name.

Our heavenly father, as we now prepare for the Lord's table, we acknowledge that Paul, who stood in Athens, also received from the resurrected Lord instructions that on the night you were betrayed, our Savior, you took bread, gave it to your followers and said, take, eat, this bread is my life for you, and we celebrate that today.

And you also said, this cup is the covenant in my blood, take it, all of you, in remembrance of me. and so now we come, we stand, we visualize the most powerful and expressive argument for the reliability of the gospel in our neighborhood.

Men and women who believe strengthen each one who comes in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen.