

Reaching a great city with the gospel

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[0 : 00] could you turn to the book of Acts chapter 17? Tonight we're going to be considering what, this morning, sorry, we're going to be considering what it is to reach a city with the gospel of Jesus Christ. So I'm just going to read from verse 10 to the end. Let us hear the word of God.

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus.

And the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Araocobus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting?

You're bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we want to know what they mean. All the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Paul then stood up in the meeting at the Araocobus and said, men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown God. Now what you worship is something unknown, I'm going to proclaim to you.

[2 : 44] The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he has not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men and that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determined the time set for them in exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject.

At that, Paul left the council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysus, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. Amen. And may God bless the reading of his holy word to us this morning. Well, I hope you've got your Bibles open at Acts chapter 17. Let's pray that we would be like the noble Bereans and study the scriptures together. And if there's anything that you think is incorrect, use the word of God to correct me. Let's come before God and let's pray once again.

[5 : 05] Father, we thank you that you have spoken in your word. We ask, God, that we have ears to hear what you have to say to us. And Lord, as I come and share from your word, I pray that, Lord, people would not hear my voice, but they would hear you speak once again. Father, shape and fashion us.

Make us effective disciples. Lord, there's a lost and hurting world out there. And you have given us the wonderful privilege to partner with you in your ministry of the gospel. Lord, may we be ready to be in your service. May we be eager to go out into this world of darkness and see your light shine forth. Forgive us, O Lord, for our sins. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Most of you know that I'm a country boy. I grew up not too far away from here in a little village called Kirkmere Hill in Blackwood, outside Straven. I'm growing up in the country. I've appreciated the landscapes, working on the farms as a teenager. But one of the things about being a country boy is I like to escape. And the place I like to escape is to get into the hubbub of the world, into places that we call cities. I love visiting cities. My favorite city in Scotland is Glasgow, because I'm a West Coast boy. But my favorite city in the whole of Britain that I've visited would have to be London. I love Manchester. That's probably my second kind of home. But London just surpasses all the cities. I love wondering about that great capital, checking out its sights, watching the world go by. It's such a fascinating place. The charm of the great city, the rich history it possesses, the endless cultural attractions it boasts, all the magnificent buildings, the detailed architecture, the museums, the art galleries, the palaces, the skyscrapers like the Shard. You name it, London has it. And it's really no surprise then that London is the most popular tourist destination in the UK. And that London is regarded as one of the world's most leading cultural capital cities.

And the reason I mention this is because we're going to be thinking about this morning about the subject of how to engage a great city with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here in Acts 17, Paul models what engaging a great city with the gospel looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

[7 : 50] In fact, I think we'll discover that the city of Athens back then isn't too dissimilar from the London of today. And not only that, I hope that we can draw some aspects of what Paul demonstrates of how to engage a great city with the gospel and how we can apply that to our towns, to our villages, and the places that we come from. Now, at the time of Paul, Athens was one of the cultural capitals of the first century world. Athens was a place where Plato and Socrates were born. It was in Athens that they plied their trade and developed their philosophies. Athens also boasted many beautiful and grandiose buildings. It was indeed an amazing place, aesthetically magnificent, philosophically sophisticated, but morally and spiritually decadent. And in Acts chapter 17 verse 16, we read that Paul was waiting for his companions Silas and Timothy to meet him in Athens. You may recall what was going on in this part of the mission journey. Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been to a city called Thessalonica.

They preached the gospel. And what happened? Many people got saved. But we're told that many Jews despised them and persecuted them. Paul was in prison. He was bailed out by a man called Jason.

And as a result of the persecution that they experienced in Thessalonica, they fled to another city called Berea. Whilst in Berea, Paul, as was his custom, went to the synagogue and he preached the gospel. What happened? People got saved. Some people were indifferent. But the Jews of Thessalonica came after them and persecuted them. Why is Paul in Athens? Well, his companions in their wisdom believed that they should send him to a place of safety and they sent him to Athens. No doubt, I imagine Paul was told to keep low and keep his profile down. But he didn't do that. What do we read? We find that he has spare time on his hands. And as he's waiting, we see him naturally and instinctively engage in this great city. In verse 16, we read that his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. In other words, Paul was emotionally moved by the things that he saw. In the context, the idols no doubt refers to the statues, the symbols and altars and buildings that he saw all around him. Many representing the idols of reason and various kinds of philosophies. One commentator points out that the phrase full of idols has the idea it was so jam-packed that it would have been impossible to walk through the city.

It was actually said that this about Athens, it was easier to meet a god than it was to meet a person. So picture it, Paul standing in Athens, waiting around and looking at all the shrines, altars and temples that surrounded him. Absolutely overwhelmed in his spirit because of the idolatry of that city.

[11:17] Now remember, Paul was raised a Jew. From a very young age, he would have memorized in complete Torah. From a very young age, he would have recited from heart the Ten Commandments.

And that being now a faithful Bible-believing Christian, Paul no doubt would have had that first commandment ring in his head as he looked at the city of Athens.

You shall have no other gods before me. You see, what Paul discovered as he waited in Athens was that God had been replaced by idolatry.

His heart saw the lostness of the people of Athens. Do you know Paul's heart reflects or mirrors what Jesus felt when he looked at Jerusalem?

We read in Luke's gospel that when Jesus looked over the great city of Jerusalem, that Jesus was deeply distressed and he wept over it. Here's a question for you and me.

[12:21] What do we feel in our spirits when we look at 21st century Scotland? Are we provoked in our spirits by the lostness of our great cities, of our towns and our villages?

As we look at our high streets, our neighborhoods, our communities, which all in their own way, our unique way, present the gods of this age, do you and I feel anything?

You see, the person who loves Christ and is becoming increasingly more like Christ, they love the law of Christ.

And they know that men and women were made to have Christ first in their lives. And it pains them when he is not. Can I ask?

Does it pain you? Does it pain me? Next thing that we see in this passage is that Paul's heart leads him to engage the people of Athens.

[13:30] All this idolatry could have led Paul to shy away or to run and hide or just stand in complete judgment over them. But he didn't. What we see here is that Paul stepped into the world of the people who didn't know Jesus.

He stepped into their lives, into the lives of the people who didn't have Jesus first. He went out and into the synagogue and into the marketplace.

He entered their world. He stepped into their lives. He got up and he got out there. And he went to the places where he could rub shoulders with people. Paul models here for us what people who love Christ and who love their neighbors do.

They go out and they engage people with the good news of Jesus. Now, it was Paul's custom to go into the synagogue. And there he had a captive audience. We read in verse 17 that he reasoned with them.

In other words, Paul opened up the Scriptures. He had a dialogue. He no doubt explained to his audience that the Messiah that they were waiting for has already come.

[14:44] That the Messiah that was promised to Adam and Eve, the serpent crusher. That the seed that would come from Abraham and who would be a blessing to all nations. The son that would sit on David's throne.

His name is Jesus. Jesus. He lived. He died. And he rose again. And he's coming back. And then Paul would know of that.

Got out of the synagogue. And as he left there, he'd go out to the marketplace. To the stalls. To the hustle and bustle of the city of Athens. And guess what you would do there?

You'd get up again. And start speaking to people. And he'd be telling them about Jesus. And what we learn from Paul is this. Is he counteracts the idolatry of Athens by proclaiming to them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here's another couple of questions for you and I. As we look around our cities, towns, villages. And as we observe the idolatry. How should we respond? Do we respond by looking for opportunities to proclaim the gospel?

[15:59] Or do we run away, hide, stay silent and shut up? Now Paul's evangelistic attempts provoked a response in the marketplace.

Verse 18. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, what does this babbling wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign deities. Because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. In verse 19 we read. And they took him and brought him to their opagus saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting? Now very quickly. A word about these two groups of men that he met in the marketplace. In short, these were two leading philosophies or worldviews in Paul's day.

And the only way Paul could have known that these were Stoics or Epicureans. Is that he asked them questions. Asked them questions like, can you tell me what do you believe?

[17:01] And so here we have another lesson about engaging. It's important to ask questions. But it's also very important to listen to the answers.

Now this may surprise you, but the beliefs of these men weren't at all dissimilar to what many in our society believe today. The Epicurean philosophy can be summarized with the words chance, indulgence and escapism.

The idea of the Epicurean was to seize the moment. Do your best. Their view is represented in all kinds of contemporary lyrics. Like, whatever will be, will be.

Or if you've got teenagers in your household or related to any, it can be summarized with that one phrase that teenagers love to say. Whatever. That's a summary of today's teenagers' worldview. Whatever. Whatever will be. Let's get on with it. On the other hand, the Stoic philosophy can be summarized with the words fatalism and endurance of pain. The Stoics believed that Zeus created the world.

[18:05] They believed in self-denial contributes to the highest end in life. Being a Stoic was to be a master of oneself. Being in control to suppress all your human passions and desires of lust and pleasure.

The Stoics also believed that death ended everything. There was no life after death. All you could do is just hope you could do the best in this life.

And then after that, it was nothing. It was this philosophical framework. And it was to these groups that Paul made his address. Today, you can find these worldviews all around our major towns and cities.

In your workplace, in educational establishments, in your neighborhoods, and in your local coffee shops. Now, when Paul shared the message of the gospel, it provoked a reaction.

In this case, it led men to take Paul to a meet at the Ropagus. In other words, these men took him to the place of the intelligentsia of that day. It's a bit like today's TED Talks that you see on YouTube.

[19:14] Sometimes they're in Glasgow, Manchester, and London, where all the most technical-minded, politically, cultural commentators come together and discuss the big ideas of today.

Well, the Ropagus was the TED Talk of that day, where cutting-edge thinkers of Paul gathered to discuss philosophy, religion, politics, and so on. And when Paul got there, they asked to give him the more of his teaching.

In verse 21, we read, Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing about something new. Here's a question for us.

Are there any contexts where people discuss ideas that we can go to? I wonder, is there places in New Mills, Darville, Kilmarnock, or wherever you're from, where people gather and discuss meeting places?

When I worked as a building surveyor, I worked in a building of 2,000 people. And it was one of these open-planned office arrangements. They used to have areas called breakout areas. So at lunchtime, we'd all gather with a packed lunchbox, wherever we got from the street, and sit down.

[20:32] What I really loved about the open-plan arrangement was there was no hierarchy. So that meant the CEO used to sit next to us guys, and when we got to the breakout room, I'd be sitting next to the CEO, the director of finance, and the caretaker that worked then in the basement, along with all those other surveyors.

We discussed politics. We discussed sex. We discussed sport. We discussed religion. And it was incredible the kind of discussions that you would have. I wonder, what's the context here?

Is there are mothers and toddlers groups where mums get together and they discuss family, discuss the pain and the bane of another lockdown, and the legislation that the politicians are giving us.

Other places like bus stops and train stations, or book clubs, or golf courses, where people come and get together and discuss. Well, what do we see?

Paul is standing in the midst of the Europagus, and he said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

[21 : 40] Paul shows us here how to engage a great city with the gospel, and he stands up and he says to them, I see that in every single way you are very religious. Do you know what Paul did? Paul allowed his circumstance to set the agenda.

It was a very skillful thing and a depth thing to do. Note this. Paul didn't begin his message by saying this. You people must be absolutely crazy by worshipping all these things.

He didn't go in there to intentionally offend of what he observed. No, what Paul did is he made a statement that was inviting, and perhaps provocative, but it was one that was rhetorically powerful. You see, Paul had observed. Paul had listened. He had read. He had questioned. And you know what? He tells him that. Let's read verse 23.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I find also an altar with this inscription. To the unknown God. What therefore you worship is unknown, this I proclaim to you.

[22 : 50] Paul used the people's unawareness of God to proclaim to them the truth about the living God. Now, just as I said, isn't it interesting that he didn't start with Jesus?

You notice that? He didn't even start with the atonement. No, what he did was he captured his hearers. Then he tells them that he had observed.

That is, he watched them. And as he observed and as he processes his thoughts, he says, now I'm going to proclaim to you the God that you don't know about.

In verse 24 and verse 25 onwards, we read his presentation. Now, let me say, what we've got recorded here in Acts 17 by Luke is just a summary of the message of Paul that day.

However, I think it's very helpful for us to learn from it on how to engage our cities and towns. Paul starts, What Paul did here was to present to them a very different worldview from their own, especially for the Epicureans who believed in chance and the random universe, and for the Stoics who were fatalists and believed in blind determinism.

[24 : 14] Paul says in verse 24, God is the maker of everything. Isn't that like an interesting road or entry point to share the gospel?

For some Christians today, we can be quite ashamed of the origins of the universe. But Paul wasn't. Do you remember at school, I remember at school, I was taught about the Big Bang.

I was told that life came from primeval sludge, that a little cell turned into fish and a little fish turned into a lizard and the lizard turned into a monkey and the monkey turned into an ape and the ape turned into me.

But my mom and my Sunday school teachers told me this, God created the world. He spoke the world into existence and over a period of six days, everything came into being and the seventh day he rested.

There's no random chance. There's a prime mover. His name is God and he started everything. Guess what? Paul shared that message to the people of Athens into a context where people believed in random chance.

[25 : 25] Does that sound familiar? Then notice, he goes on to describe this God. He says, God is not limited or confined to temples made by man, nor is he served by man.

In other words, Paul makes it clear to them that the God he believed in was far greater than any lifeless stone object or wooden object. He goes on, not only did this God create life, he also sustains life.

Paul underlines that God is powerful and he is a giver of life and breath. He goes on, he explains the origin of mankind through Adam. He adds that God is sovereign in his ruling and his reigning over all the details of every human being in this world.

And what we learn from Paul is this, is that when he got the opportunity to proclaim the gospel, he presented to the people the God who is the creator, sustainer of the universe, and the God who is sovereign, reigning, and ruling.

In other words, Paul did not reduce the gospel to some weak, wimpy, lighthearted message. No, he presented then a bold, strong, and weighty message.

[26 : 47] In the next verse, or verses, Paul says, human beings should seek him. They should reach out for him. In other words, God isn't some deity that sits on a cloud and cannot be reached.

No, this is the God who should be called upon. Paul then quotes to them from their own poetry, verse 28. In him, he says, in him we live, move, and have our being.

Some of your own poets say this, we're indeed his offspring. Paul is making reference to the fact that humanity derives itself from God. Therefore, their rampant idolatry is absolutely ludicrous.

Worshipping lifeless objects when they should be worshipping the true and living God. Paul's point was that their view of God in Athenian culture was not the true view of God at all. So that's why when we get to verses 30 and 31, he preached to them the message of repentance.

That's the heartbeat of Paul's gospel ministry. Turn from idols and turn to God just like we taught the kids. Turn the plane of your life around and turn to Jesus.

[28 : 08] Maybe it was at this point that Paul told them about Jesus' salvation working the cross. Do you remember in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 2, Paul says, I am resolved to know nothing other than Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's the message Paul would have been preaching and telling them. And no doubt Paul would have told them that God is far more accessible than they could ever realize that the thing that separates them from being with God is their rebellion, their disobedience, their sin.

But God has made a way to deal with that. And then Paul gets to the climax of his message. Namely this. That God is judge.

The judge of the world. Paul has spoken of God as the creator, sustainer, and almost certainly the saviour, and now the God who is judge of all the earth.

Let's read verse 31. Verse 31. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

[29 : 19] He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. Note that Paul mentioned that Jesus has been appointed as a righteous judge for the day of judgment.

A day when justice will be executed fairly. And that day is fixed. all of time, all of history is moving forward to one fixed point when every human being will stand before the judgment seat of God.

Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Wouldn't you agree that this is a bold presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The last thing that Luke mentions is that Paul preached God had given proof of this day by raising Jesus from the dead. And it's interesting because it's the crescendo of Paul's sermon that's the most controversial.

As Luke tells us, the meeting broke up and the message received a varied response. We're told that some people sneered and some said, we want more.

[30 : 39] And some joined with Paul. friends, don't expect anything less. When you share the gospel of Jesus Christ, people will mock you. They will laugh at you.

They will laugh at the God that you claim to follow. They will laugh at the prospect of being raised to life. They will laugh at the thought of judgment. But friends, pray with the expectation that some will hear and say, can I hear more?

They may be fenced sitters, but remember, it's God's seed that is good. And it's He that brings salvation, not you and your clever arguments.

And let's pray that we would see some come and join with us in believing Jesus Christ. Should we be surprised when people who have an epicure in philosophy think it's silly to believe in the motto. You live, you die forever. The idea of judgment didn't feature in their worldview that life would go. No wonder people would laugh at Paul's message. They've never heard such a silly thing.

[31 : 51] Like I said, it's like many in our culture. But let's always pray for those people who want to hear more. Let's pray that our friends and our family, those who we work with, would fall in love with Jesus Christ.

So as I close, let me just summarize our message. Our challenge is to understand the God of the Bible. Our challenge is to proclaim the good news of Jesus into the context of the places that we live, we play, and we raise our families.

These may be great cities, large towns, or small villages. Paul's experience reminds us of what we will face. It reminds us that our message needs to be relevant and yet direct.

How can it be relevant? Well, let's understand the people that we're speaking to and the culture that we live in. Paul's experience reminds us that we need to engage our neighbors and our colleagues and our friends.

And Paul's example of what Jesus does when he leads us on his mission. Paul looked at the city and he was provoked in his spirit. So what did he do?

[33 : 00] He engaged with it. We need Jesus to lead us in his mission. We need Jesus to revive our land once again. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for this challenging message of what is to be a people and mission. Lord, we ask that you would help us to discover the mind of Jesus.

That Lord, that you would give us his heart and his eyes. That we would have compassion for the least, the last, and the lost of our cities and our towns and our villages. Father, we pray that you would give us the courage and the strength not to be ashamed of your gospel.

For the gospel is the power unto salvation for those who would believe, first for the Jew and then the Gentile. Father, help us. Help us to have expectant hearts of big things that you would indeed, O Lord, save many and bring them home.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.