

Reactions to the King

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- [0:00] Good morning. Please keep your Bibles open to Acts 17. This here on the screen is our dog, Rosie.
- I used to go to dog competitions with her. So she's got a few titles behind her name. Believe it or not, she's got more titles behind her name than I do. And one of them, one of the titles is a TDCH, Trick Dog Champion.
- So you can see that she's got a certificate and a medal around her neck. But when we first got her, she knew nothing.
- We got her when she was three or four, and she knew nothing. Not even her own name. And I knew nothing about dog training either. So when I first trained her, it would take so long for her to get even one command right.
- And that led to many frustrations. And to be honest, a lot of yelling from me as well. But I think that trained my passions before Kai arrived.
- [1:21] So that's all good. So I took a few dog training classes after that because I got so frustrated. And I learned that there were strategies to dog training.
- Surprise, surprise. And I thought, if only I knew this before, it would have been so much easier and less frustrating. I would have saved so much time and energy and frustration.
- Well, the same goes with evangelism. There are strategies to evangelism. But there's also one crucial thing that must lie at the heart of every evangelistic message, regardless of the strategies that you use.
- And that is Jesus and his resurrection. So in this passage, we'll look at Paul's strategy in evangelism. And we'll see that at the center of his message is Jesus and his resurrection.
- But first, let's see the context of the event in verse 16. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.
- [2:40] Remember from last week, Paul got kicked out of Thessalonica and then from Berea. And Paul went to Athens.
- And while waiting for his companions in Athens, he saw that there's a lot of idols. There's a lot of idol worship. And he was greatly distressed. Other translations include provoked and outraged.
- This is the feeling that often pushes people to say something, to evangelize. I've got a friend who apparently knows the best kwei chow in Melbourne.
- If you don't know what kwei chow is, it's a Malaysian dish. So every time he sees someone eating kwei chow from somewhere else, he gets a bit annoyed.
- And then he just goes on a monologue on how the kwei chow in his favorite place is the best. And he tries to convert people to go to his favorite restaurant.
- [3:47] So perhaps this feeling that Paul had is a more intense version of that feeling. Paul had known and tasted the best God, the only true God, in fact.
- And then he saw others enjoying bad-tasting gods. So he wanted to point them to the real thing. I wonder if we have this feeling when we see Melbourne full of idols.

British Anglican pastor Michael Green said, Not everyone is a gifted evangelist like Paul. But just like if we've tasted the best kwei chow, we want to let people know. If we've seen the best scenery, we want to let people know.

So if we've tasted the love and grace of God, the fountain of all delight and blessings, we also want to let people know.

[5 : 18] Surely, we feel when we see others worshipping idols, we feel just a tiny bit distressed like Paul. And we take action.

And so Paul also takes action in verse 17. He reasoned with those in the synagogue. And in verse 18, he reasoned with the philosophers in Athens, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

You might be wondering, who are these people, the Epicureans and the Stoics? Well, the Epicureans were a group of people who thought that the gods were far away from human beings and human affairs.

And so everything that happened in this world was only by chance. Stoicism was almost the opposite. And the Stoics were often the opponents to Epicureans.

But in this context, they're both debating with Paul. Stoicism was almost the opposite. Stoicism taught that God was one with nature.

[6 : 31] And so whatever nature threw at them, they could only accept their fate with indifference. Being a stoic, that's the saying.

Paul, however, preached something completely different in verse 18. He preached the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

This is important. Whoever his conversation partner is, whether it's a Jew from Thessalonica or Berea from last week, whether it's a Stoic or an Epicurean in Athens, the center of his message is always the same.

Jesus and his resurrection. But how he preached the gospel of Jesus' resurrection is different here compared to when he was preaching to the Jews last week.

We will see that a bit later. Now, interestingly, although the Greeks found Paul's teaching weird, they brought him to their place of debate in Areopagus.

[7 : 45] Yep, in Areopagus, in verse 19. And at first, it sounds like these Greek philosophers have an attitude like the Bereans. They would like to hear more because in verse 20, they would like to know what the message means.

But I think their thirst for knowledge is really a futile attempt at trying to access the heavenly realm through wisdom and knowledge.

And so, verse 21 says that they spent all their time doing nothing but discussing the latest ideas. They're trying to explore ways to access the gods, the heavens, through ideas, through wisdom, and through knowledge.

And so, they heard the preaching of the gospel through Paul, and they thought, oh, a different idea. Maybe this idea would get us to heaven, would get us to know the gods better.

Let's hear it. So, Paul continued his message, and he challenged both the Epicureans and the Stoics.

[9 : 01] We see in verse 22, first, Paul challenged their idea of knowledge. Paul calls them religious because they have statues of all kinds of gods.

They tried to get access to the heavens, to the gods, using knowledge. But this is as far as they could get. They had to guess. Oh, there might be that god, that god, the god of war.

There might be that god, the god of wisdom. Might be that god, the god of the sun. But they could not see the whole truth. And so, in verse 23, they saved a spot for an unknown god, just in case they missed something.

But Paul is saying here that we don't need to guess we can know. And in verse 28, if we jump ahead a bit, Paul quotes a Greek poet to point out that we can know God because we are his offspring.

We are God's children in the sense that we are created in his image. And therefore, we have the innate ability to know God just like our children can know us.

[10:23] And later on, in verse 31, we can know because God has appointed his son to come down here to reveal heaven to us through his resurrection.

In other words, we don't have to guess what's up there from down here because someone from up there has come down here to show us through the resurrection.

And so, Paul challenged the philosopher's idea of knowledge of God. Knowledge of God could not be acquired ultimately through speculative discussions or debates.

True knowledge of God could only be acquired by God's own revelation in Jesus. Like, the true meaning of a painting can't be acquired by guesswork through looking at the painting but by the painter's own explanation.

And Jesus is that painter coming down here to tell us this is what I want. This is what you should do.

[11:43] And then second, Paul challenged their idea of God. Remember, the stoics on the right-hand side thought that God was one with nature.

And so, in verse 24, Paul challenged the stoics. The Christian God, says Paul, is separate from nature as he's the one who created nature and he is its Lord.

And therefore, he doesn't live in temples as part of nature. But also, remember, the Epicureans thought that the gods were not involved in human affairs.

The gods were far away. And so, in verse 26, Paul says that the Christian God is actively involved in human history.

And in verse 27, God even reveals himself so we might reach out to him and we can know him. In other words, God is not far away.

[12:50] He is close and we can know him. So, Paul's unpacking of the gospel challenged both sides of the society.

but also, at the same time, comforted both sides of the society. To the Stoics, who thought that God was a part of nature, the Christian gospel offered the God who's holy and different and separate from this chaotic and sometimes evil world.

And that's a good thing. But to the Epicureans, who thought that the gods did not care about humans, the Christian gospel offered the God who's close and wants to share his love to us.

The Christian God is both our Creator in verse 24 and our Father in verse 28. He is both sovereignly ruling in verse 26 and graciously providing in verse 25.

Paul presents the gospel in a way that challenges both sides and at the same time comforts them both.

[14:11] So here we see Paul's methodology of presenting the gospel in a way that is relevant and sensitive to the culture.

So I would like to repeat my challenge that I gave last week. perhaps you can think of one person that you know who is not a Christian. Perhaps you can understand their way of thinking and try to think of a way to offer the gospel to both challenge and comfort them in their worldview.

of course that involves a lot of conversing a lot of talking with them. Several years ago I was working at St. Paul's Cathedral in the CBD to help with the English class and to conduct a service after class.

there were always some non-Christians who joined us because they came as tourists and they went to the cathedral and they saw that there was an English class and they wanted to take it.

And during this time I got to know several people. One of them was a Japanese guy. And as you might know, Japan is one of the most atheistic countries in the world.

[15:37] So he did not know Christ. And once after service I invited him to have dinner with me. And he agreed and we talked. And he revealed that he knew quite a few things about Christianity and I was surprised.

He said, oh, I know about Christianity. You Christians worship Jesus because you believe that Jesus died and he died for your sins and you believe in him because he's love.

all those things. He could understand, he could explain what Christianity was all about. So I asked, okay, that's very good, but do you know why Christians believe in Jesus?

And he said, I'm not actually sure. I guess because Jesus offers forgiveness from sins through his death? And I said, yes, but that's not all.

Jesus, we believe that Jesus did not just die for our sins, but he rose from the dead. His resurrection is central to our faith.

[16:49] And he, we believe that he will return to give us his resurrected life and to make all things right. So we can live without sadness, sickness, or pain, or death.

death. And he said, oh yeah, that sounds good, but I don't really care about death or life after death or the future.

It all sounds so abstract. I only care about what's here and now. And I thought, yeah, that makes sense because the Japanese culture is quite pragmatic about spiritual things.

they're quite humanistic. They care a lot more about progressing technology and science for the advancement of humanity in the here and now. So I thought hard about his response and was praying silently and I said, but you know, the hope for future resurrection actually changes our lives now.

Did you know that the first hospital was built by Christians? And the early Christians also took abandoned children into their homes. They did this because they wanted to bring the hope of life without pain, tears, sickness, or death into the present to a certain extent.

[18:20] And then I saw that his jaw just dropped. and he said, oh, it all makes sense now.

I wanted to present the gospel in a way that both comforted and challenged him and his humanism, while at the same time keeping the resurrection of Christ in the center of the evangelism.

God and that's what Paul did as well, I think, in verse 29 to 31. He said, 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 human 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, and he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

So, previously, Paul has challenged the philosopher's idea of knowledge and their idea of God, and here, Paul challenged the philosopher's attitude towards God, because God is both our creator and our father, both above creation and close to us, because we are his image, then, in verse 29, he's not like dead statues, made of gold or silver or stone.

[19:59] In other words, they should not worship God through dead things, but through his living son. Worshiping idols arose from their ignorance, others, you know, they're trying to guess things from here, from below, which now cannot be overlooked, because God has revealed himself in Jesus, and he has proved it through his resurrection, in verse 31.

You see, the resurrection was such an anomaly of nature. No one gets resurrected from the dead, except Jesus, and so it could only have been done by God himself.

It serves as evidence, as proof. It proved that Jesus came from God, and he is God's appointed king. And so there's no more excuses, Paul says.

No more excuses. We can't say, oh, I can't, we can't know you, God, because we're down here, and you're up there. No, no more excuses, because God has revealed himself in Jesus and proved it through his resurrection.

Jesus and his resurrection are the foundation of Paul's gospel message, even though, as we see here, he did not use the Bible in his encounter with the Greek philosophers.

[21:29] And so, he ended his message with a challenge in verse 30. It's there. God commands all people everywhere to repent, that is, to turn around from worthless idols to the true God.

So, here, Paul did not just provide a crash course on systematic theology, he was offering the gospel, and the offer of the gospel must always be followed by a clear call for repentance.

Christians. And I have failed doing that before. A few years ago, when I was preaching about hell in another church, there were a couple of non-Christians who came and joined us.

One of them came up to me afterwards and wanted to meet up with me. So, we did, and we met up for a year to read the Bible. and he told me in our first meeting that he was afraid of going to hell when he died, even though he did not believe in Jesus or the Bible.

But he was so afraid of going to hell after he died. And so, after reading the Bible for a year, he began to understand the comfort of the gospel.

[22:55] and I guess that reduced his fear for hell, but he still did not want to turn to Jesus, until eventually he refused to meet anymore.

Now, I know that people's conversion is sovereignly enabled by the Holy Spirit, but looking back now, there were things that I should have done.

I gave him the comfort of the gospel, but I should have challenged him more. I should have pointed out his idols and invited him to repent.

I shied away from inviting him to repent for too long. But here, Paul did not do that. In his first meeting with the Greek philosophers, even before he used the Bible, even before he elaborated on his message, he already challenged them with a clear call for repentance.

And so, as what previously happened in Thessalonica and Berea, there were a couple of different responses in Athens as well. In verse 32 to 34, 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.

[24:22] At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

So, I think Paul's evangelistic methods in Thessalonica and Berea from last week, and in Athens from this week, can be summarized by what he says in 1 Corinthians.

Paul says, Jews demand science, and Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified and resurrected, of course, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

That's why some did not believe. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

That's why some believed. So, there are strategies to doing evangelism, but Jesus and his resurrection must always lie at the center of every gospel message.

[25 : 38] Nonetheless, I think it's so comforting to know that at the end of this passage, the Holy Spirit planted further curiosity to some people and enabled them to have faith, even though some others sneered at Paul and thought that he was just blabbering, because the gospel was just foolishness to them, just like a lot of people these days think that Christians are dumb and brainwashed.

But that means that the success of the gospel is not up to us, and that should free us from having to worry about the result of our encounter with our non-Christian friends.

evangelism. In evangelism, we are called not to be successful, that's the job of the Holy Spirit, but to be faithful in spreading the seeds of the gospel over and over again, and then pray so that the Holy Spirit might change people's hearts.

So why don't we pray now? Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you've revealed yourself through your son Jesus.

Thank you that through him we can know you and even have a relationship with you. And through Jesus' resurrection, we can have eternal life and have the evidence of your presence, power, and promises.

[27 : 13] Help us to share your son with others around us. In his name we pray. Amen.