

The Name That We Know

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[0 : 00] Now I want to start my little talk to the older people by actually showing a map right now on the screen because I want in your mind to have Paul's journey where he's gone over the last few weeks.

And last week you can see on the left side of the page that Paul was in Philippi. And then he goes by road through Thessalonica down to Berea. He's kicked out of both those towns. And then he hops on a ship and he goes down to Athens. Here you can see on the left in the green where it says Achaia. And that's where we are now. This is where we are in this great city of Athens with Paul.

It's only a population of about 20,000. But it's a very impressive city. In the golden years, 300 or 400 years before, it is the birthplace of civilization, the cradle of civilization.

And it's the birthplace of modern philosophy. It is the birthplace also of modern medicine. That's why the Hippocratic Oath, which is from Hippocrates, which says, I will respect life for all doctors.

[1 : 08] It's the foundation for philosophy, the center of profound learning. It has also the most incredible architecture. And most spectacular were the temples.

Even the ruins today are awesome to see, as you can see in this photo. Athens represents the highest of human achievement and knowledge.

But you know, the one thing that they didn't know with all of that learning, they didn't know the living God. And this is the gift that Paul gives today in our passage.

And I want us to turn to that. If you have your Bibles, turn to Acts 17, 16 through 34. And that will be helpful. We're also going to put some of the verses on the screen as well. It's an incredible reading because Paul introduces that great city to the living God who makes himself known.

And God gives three things to Paul so he can do this. He gives Paul a grace-filled heart, first of all. He gives him a bridge.

[2 : 14] And then he gives him a clear, personal message. And it's important for us, so relevant, because he gives the same to you and I today.

So first of all, I want to talk about God gives a grace-filled heart. Paul came to Athens simply to wait for his good friends Silas and Timothy.

But while he's there, he does the tourist thing. He spends a little time in the city to see the greatness of it. But something happens to him as he spends time there. Something happens to his heart.

Look at verse 16. 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. And that word provoked is a very strong word.

It means paroxysm. Literally, that's what it is in the Greek. And it means that Paul's heart had a seizure. He could see a city full of idols.

[3 : 16] In fact, many observers who went there said there seemed to be more idols than people in Athens. All of whom were made and designed to try to bring people success and meaning.

But these people, Paul saw, were devoting themselves to things of no value. Things that do not last. As you could see in that photograph of the ruins of Athens.

But Paul had such a strong reaction in his heart because it was filled with two things which were beautiful.

The first thing was a desire for God's glory. Paul was gripped in his heart and mind by the vastness of God's love. Of God's majesty, of his holiness, of God's mercy and goodness and love.

And he has experienced this in his own life from the moment he encountered Jesus on the way to Damascus. In fact, he wrote to the neighboring city of Corinth a number of years later.

[4 : 17] He said this, For God said, let light shine out of darkness. And he has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus.

See, Paul looked at Athens and he said, how could people ignore that glory that we were all missing, that we all were meant for? How could they miss out on it?

Jesus deserves all honor and glory and praise. It's what we were made for. It's a gift from him. And that's why he spoke constantly about Jesus and his resurrection at the end of verse 18.

In Jesus' face, we see the glory of God. It is right that we respond to it. But secondly, he also had a deep love for those who didn't know God, who were ignoring his glory.

In verse 17, he spent time with all kinds of people in Athens. You know, he spent time with church people. He went to the synagogue and talked. He spent time in the aggro, which was the marketplace.

[5 : 21] It was like our modern-day stock market. Those businessmen who were there. Many conversations. And finally, he spent time with the leading figures of that city, the leading leaders who were all incredibly educated.

These intellectuals were thinking about the big questions of life and guiding the culture. Two groups were the Epicureans. And they considered gods to be so remote and so unknowable that they took no interest in the affairs of humans.

So they didn't have any relevance to us. All things that happened in the world were due to chance. And so there's no life after death. There's no judgment. And humans simply should pursue pleasure.

Especially the serene enjoyment of life that's detached from pain and from passion and from fear. Does that sound familiar? I think today many in Vancouver are Epicureans.

But Paul turns that thinking upside down. He says we know God in Jesus. He is near us. His Holy Spirit fills us. He is deeply relevant to every aspect of our lives.

[6 : 31] And our purpose is to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. He will come to make all things right. He will judge the earth. He will hold us to account.

It is the most important thing we can live for. So different from the Epicureans. And then there were the Stoics. They said that there was a supreme God. But in a pantheistic way.

They confused God with a world soul. It's a very vague spirituality that again we see a lot in Vancouver. You know the world is determined by fate.

And human beings pursue their duty in their regular life. And they resign themselves to being in harmony with nature and reason. And they were all about developing a self-sufficiency.

I'm a life of my own. I make myself what I want it to be. And again Paul turns their thinking on its head. God is not an impersonal world soul.

[7 : 31] He is the deeply loving personal God who created us for Himself. To love Him. We're not self-sufficient. God sustains us.

Every breath we take is a powerful work of His love and His grace. And we desperately need Him for our salvation. We need Him every day for the purpose in our life.

And true harmony can only come if we are at peace with God. Because that peace affects all relationships. And one day He makes all things right.

Well with all of that reasoning with the people of Athens. Paul knew he would experience rejection in his life. And indeed the philosophers called him a babbling fool.

He was rejected by his own people in the synagogue. And I'm sure he met a lot of business people in the marketplace there that said, Is it going to help my bottom line? And if not, you can walk away Paul.

[8 : 35] But you know, Paul's passion for Jesus and for those who don't know the true God overcame any fear of rejection that he had. And he had that fear like you and I do.

Paul was able to replace that with a constant boldness and perseverance about him. And it is because of his heart gripped by God's grace.

You know, all of us face rejection when we think about sharing our belief in Jesus and what we know about him. The greatest help that we receive from God is to allow him to grip our hearts with his grace.

If his good news is deeply good for us, that gives us courage. We know God. It is the greatest gift that we could ever have received.

So today, ask God to grip your hearts with both a passion for him and a deep love for those that you know or come across who don't know God at all so that you can speak of this God who speaks to you.

[9 : 49] Well, what happens to Paul next is that there is a bridge. And I love the fact that God gives to Paul's grace-filled heart a way to go from God to people and people to God.

Look at verse 22. He says this, You see, Paul perceives what these Athenians are going through because he cares enough time to spend time with them, to try to understand why there's so many idols in that city.

And he affirms their search for God and their insight that there is a God that they don't know. That is very important. It's the perfect bridge for Paul because he can say, I have found that unknown God. None of us can know him, Paul says. But he has revealed himself to me and to many through Jesus Christ. And nature is telling you that there is God out there that you need to know.

I have found him through Jesus, through God's spoken living word. And he did it even when I hated Jesus. I want to tell you about him, Paul says.

[11 : 22] Now, God gives bridges to you and me, not just Paul as well. And he does that as you spend time sincerely listening to people in your own life about their beliefs, their fears, their concerns.

And it can come unexpectedly, these bridges. A couple of years ago, and I shared this earlier with the CCQ people, but I had a stucco company come and repair my house.

The owner came with his crew and they did great work, although actually the crew did most of the work. And the owner spent a lot of time talking with me. He was a great character who talked a lot. And part of our conversation began talking about his struggle with alcohol and how he had given it up and things were a lot better for him now. And I said, well, that's great.

And then he said, you know, I didn't have a come to Jesus moment or anything like that, but I'm living without alcohol now.

[12 : 24] And I said, you know what? You missed the best part. And he sort of took a double take. He said, are you religious? And I said, well, I believe in Jesus and he has changed everything for me.

And he said, so you believe that stuff? And I said, well, yeah, actually, I believe it so much that I am a minister now and I get paid for telling people about God. And he, you know, sometimes that can make a real damper in the conversation.

But for him, he took off running. And we talked for most of the project about the church and God and what all this was about for him. And at the end of the time that we had together, when it came to pay the bill, he gave a donation to the church even.

Now, I give that as an illustration because for me, that was totally unexpected. But if you have a love for those who don't know God and you have a love for God's glory, God gives openings to speak about Jesus in your own conversations with family, friends, or even strangers like I had in those moments.

And I would invite you today to pray for those bridges, to use those bridges to bring the gospel or even parts of the gospel into people's lives.

[13 : 43] It's the way God brings people to know him. It is by having people who know God, the living God, speak about him in their conversations.

And that brings us to the third and last thing that God gives Paul. Not only does he give him a heart that's filled with grace, not only does he give him bridges, he gives him a clear and personal message.

And I want to share that message with you briefly. The leaders and the intellectuals want to hear more from Paul because it was something new. And they brought him to a place called the Aeropagus.

And they wanted to judge whether his message was worthy of hearing or not. And we have the shorthand of that day of speaking. It was actually a day full of questions and full of speaking.

It's all condensed in chapter 17 there. And he begins, Paul does, by showing to us that God who made the universe sustains all of it as well.

[14 : 53] Look at verse 24. He says, 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 needs anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

This is how Paul starts. And I want to show a photo here because this is from where Paul was speaking. This picture is taken from where Paul was speaking.

And over him is looming this massive Parthenon. It's the temple to the goddess Athena. And Paul says to them, Look, we don't make a home for God.

No. The true God makes the world so that it is a home for us. He is in charge of it. And then the second thing he says is that God created people to know him personally.

That was the purpose. Look at verse 26. He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. This is what the kids are going to be drawing. Having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

[16:08] Yet he actually is not far from each one of us. You see, Paul says people are created in God's image. They are made to know him personally.

And you will not find what you're looking for unless you believe in him and begin to trust your life to him. There is a very famous quote from Blaise Pascal, which is really good for us to remember here.

It's what Paul is saying. He says this, That God-shaped vacuum is what Paul was teaching these Stoics and Epicureans and thinkers.

He is telling them, That's what you're all about. That is what you are made of. That is the key to all of life. And he says to them, You know what?

This God, this living Heavenly Father, he actually calls you to know him and to turn to him. Look at verse 29. He says, You see, unlike idols, unlike human philosophy, God the Creator personally speaks to us.

[17:45] And he says to me, He says to you, Turn to me for real love, for forgiveness of sins, for restoration, and for a new life of obedience and worship.

He is speaking us in an invitation to come to him. And he ends that talk by a very interesting way. He ends it by saying that there will be judgment.

There will be judgment. Look at chapter 17, verse 30. Because God 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 us all by raising him from the dead. Well, Paul is saying, Look, you great leaders, you're not my judge.

In fact, there is one man who is greater than all of the great figures in the history of Athens and of the world, of all the learning that has ever happened. He is Jesus, God and man, who has risen from the dead, and he is Lord of all.

[18:57] And this is the one thing, the one person worth devoting your life to. Because he is the only one who gives your life true purpose and true love.

He has the future in his hands and he will judge the living and the dead. This is how the message ends. It ends with this man, Jesus, the glorious picture of the one risen from the dead for our salvation, for the great purpose in our life.

And I pray today that as we go away from the sermon, that God himself will give you grace to make him known. That he will fill your heart with a love for those who do not know God.

And fill your mind and heart with his glory, with his goodness, with his beauty, so that you will have the courage to make him known to the people in your life.

It is the greatest gift that you can give. Amen.