

Meeting Jesus: Introducing Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, it's good to be here with you this morning, and we are continuing a very short sort of part of the sermon series about Meet Jesus with four really kind of practical sermons on sharing our faith.

And some of you have been part of the CCQ on Tuesday nights where we're encouraging each other in how we talk about our belief in Jesus with people in our lives.

And these readings that we have been looking at last couple of weeks and then next week too are examples of the Bible of people who are sharing their faith, and it helps us in our own conversations, in our own relationships.

In this reading, if you turn to Acts 17, Paul is in Athens, and Athens is a city that's kind of like Vancouver in some ways. There's all kinds of beliefs, all kinds of different gods, all kinds of ways that people kind of express spirituality.

It's also a very impressive city. It was the cultural and political, intellectual, religious center of the world at one time, several hundred years before, and it still had that glory.

[1 : 14] It's kind of a faded glory. Rome's kind of displaced that. But when you look around at the architecture, the temples, the things that are really testimonies to their beliefs in Athens, it is spectacular.

You go there now, if you have been on a visit, and you'll see ruins, and you can imagine, and that's impressive, and you can imagine what that looked like brand new. What it looked like when it was still gleaming white and things were still intact.

It was a tremendous city. It was a great city, and there was an amazing number of idols. And the way that Paul interacts with the people in Athens is really helpful for us as we share our own faith, as we grow in our sharing of faith.

And I just want to share with you three things that Paul teaches us that help us, just by his example. And this is an amazing passage.

There's so much to learn of it, but I just want to draw out three things. First, Paul has a gripped heart. And secondly, he builds bridges, real bridges to other people.

[2 : 28] And thirdly, he has a clear message. And I want to look first at Paul's heart. Paul's heart is really gripped by God's grace, you know, by his love.

Paul's heart is really gripped by God's grace in reaching out to people who don't know him. He also was gripped by a love for Gentile people, to people who don't know God.

And that's because God sent him to the Gentiles, and I believe gave him a deep love for them. He knows that they are people without God and without hope in the world, is the way that he puts it in Ephesians.

And that's why, if you look at verse 16, this is why Paul's spirit is provoked, as it says, within him, as he sees that the city is full of idols.

And that word provoked comes from the word, that's where we get our word paroxysm from. It's like a seizure of his heart, an outburst within him.

[3 : 29] It's the same word that is used of God's reaction to idolatry among his people. You know, when the golden calf was made, that's the word provoked that is used for God.

Paul's heart was for God's glory. He wanted people to honor God for his majesty, for his goodness, for his love and holiness and mercy.

He was a man after God's own heart. And that's why he responded that way when he saw what was going on in Athens. And with that came this deep love for the lost.

And that's why in verse 17, you'll notice that he reasoned about God with several different groups of people in Athens. He spoke in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

So he spoke to Jewish people, to people who were interested in the one true God. He also spoke to the agora, to the marketplace. All the people who were just trying to make a living, you know, who were buying and selling things.

[4 : 31] He had many conversations throughout the week. And then thirdly, the third group he reasoned with are in verse 18. They were the Epicureans and the Stoics.

These were the leading sort of thought, spirit of the age of that time. The Epicureans considered gods to be very kind of remote and unknown.

They took no interest in people. They had no influence in our human affairs. And so the world was all due to chance. There's no life after death.

There's no judgment. And human beings should pursue pleasure. Especially the enjoyment of life that's detached from pain or passion or fear.

Does that sound familiar? We could be Epicurean in Vancouver. But then there was also the Stoics who believed that there was a supreme God, but in a real kind of pantheistic way.

[5 : 27] So that God was this life force, a world soul. And the world was determined by fate. And human beings really just go after their duty.

They resign themselves to living in harmony with nature. And with reason, that is just moving them in a certain direction. And they want to develop their own self-sufficiency.

You know, there's lots of things in common with Vancouver that Athens has and those thinkers.

Those thinkers were, you know, I think of that group.

We don't really have an example of that that's a close parallel. You could think of the university setting where those kinds of conversations would be taking place. One person at CCQ gave a testimony of sharing his faith.

And he would look for skeptics groups or atheist groups to go to as a Christian and interact with them. And I thought, well, that's similar to what Paul was doing with that group, with the Stoics and the Epicureans.

[6 : 26] Internet chats on spirituality might be kind of like that group too. But with all that reasoning with the people of Athens, people knew that he was going to face rejection.

And he did. So with his conversation with Epicureans and Stoics, they called him a babblers was the word for him. That was the nickname that he got.

And not only that, but we know that in many of the synagogues that he went to in his travels, there was strong opposition to what he was saying when he came to Jesus. But it was Paul's passion for Jesus and his love for people who are lost that strengthened him to overcome feelings of rejection. He had this ongoing boldness and perseverance about him. This is so helpful for us because all of us face rejection when it comes to sharing our faith in Jesus.

I think that's the strongest thing that keeps us from sharing our faith. And the greatest help for us in overcoming that fear is to be really gripped by God's grace.

[7 : 37] To allow God to grip us with his love and his goodness and his gospel. You see, if the good news of Jesus is good for us, if we see it as the greatest gift that we could possibly have, you seize opportunities to share that gift.

And this was the essence of Paul's joy. He knew, I have found this great gift. And he wanted to share it. That overcame rejection. And I think that joy is really essential for us if we are to have that strength to persevere through rejection.

When God grips our hearts with a passion for him and a deep love for people in our lives, that is a wonderful gift for us in sharing faith. So that's what happens with Paul.

He is gripped by God's love. But not only this, Paul looked for bridges. And you see this in verse 22. He's speaking on this Europagus, which is up high.

You can see all of the temples, all the things that are beautiful and gorgeous about Athens. And he says this. He says, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are religious.

[8 : 57] For as I pass along and observe the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription. To the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

And away he goes. So you see, Paul has built a bridge here. He perceives that, he perceives what's going on for the people of Athens.

He knows what's in their heart. What is going on with their own beliefs. Because he has spent time with them. He wants to understand why it is their city is full of idols.

And so he has countless conversations. And so what he's able to do then is affirm the things that are good about what they are doing. He affirms their seeking after God, their religiosity, that actually allows them to perceive and see that they don't know God.

That there is a God that is beyond them. That they have no idea about. So they make an altar to that unknown God. It's the perfect bridge for Paul to say, I know that unknown God.

[10:11] And it's only because he has come to me. Because he has revealed himself in Jesus. And I want to tell you about him. And when he tells them, he actually quotes their own poets too.

You know, the Stoics would have loved it when he said, in God we live and move and have our being. In verse 28. And then he says, and we are indeed his offspring. Those were poets they knew.

And it pointed to the deep truth of who God is for us. Now I believe that there are bridges for each of us. In our own lives. All of the time.

And that it is so important for us to pray for those bridges. In our own lives. Spend time listening. To the people in your life.

And their own beliefs. Their fears. Their concerns. The things that are very important to them. And God gives bridges this way. Often unexpectedly. Recently I had to repair.

[11:13] I had to have our house repaired. And I had a stucco company come in. There was a group of four guys. And the lead guy who owned the little company. Was a real character.

And he talked a lot. He was talking to me about his life. He talked about how he had given up drinking alcohol. For the most part he said. And what a big help that was to him.

And he said to me. He said. It really changed things. He said. I didn't come to Jesus or anything. But I'm a much better person. Well how could I pass that up? So I said.

You missed the best part. And he said. What? He said. Are you religious? I said. Well. I believe in Jesus. And I believe he changes everything. He said.

Really? I said. Yeah. He said. But I said. I got to give full disclosure though. I'm a minister. He said. Oh. Now that can be a conversation killer. Or it can lead to all kinds of stuff.

[12:09] Well. It led to all kinds of stuff. So. We had lots of conversations about God. What it means to believe in him. And who Jesus is as well.

Well. That's a bridge that just came up. Right. And I think. Really. In praying for those bridges. We look for them. You know. God shows us. What those bridges are.

That lead into. This good news. The gift. If you have conversations. Those. With people. And spend time with them. With people who don't know God.

Those bridges are bound to come up. So look for them. And that brings us. And you can actually. Manufacture them. As Paul did. And that brings us.

To the third thing. That Paul's example shows us. Because he doesn't. Only have a gripped heart. He doesn't only build bridges. He has a clear message. So. In verses 24 through 31.

[13:05] He goes through the whole picture. Of who God is for us. And he. Ends up with Jesus. So. In verse 24.

He says. God's creator of the universe. He is Lord. He doesn't live in those beautiful temples. That we are seeing right now. And secondly. He says. God is the sustainer of the universe. In verse 25. He gives to all humanity. Life. And breath. And everything. It comes from him. And thirdly. God rules all the nations. In verses 26.

Through 28. At the beginning. So he determines. The allotted periods. Of mankind. Including the Greek empire. And he makes the boundaries.

For humanity. And then fourthly. He says. God is the father of people. In the sense. That he is. People are his offspring. They are formed. For him.

[13:59] In God's. Image. To have a real relationship. With God. Even for those. Who don't know him yet. That's in verses 28 and 29. And then finally.

He brings it down to the fact. That that God. Is going to judge the world. And this is where Jesus comes in. Because he says. Jesus who came to earth. Rose again.

To show that he is going to be that judge. And the time of ignorance is over. Where you say there's an unknown God. People must repent. And that is how he closes things.

He's very clear about who God is. So that bridge he made. Was not just to make friends. Or gain respect. It was to tell the simple message. Of salvation.

Revealed in God's word. So he didn't dress up the gospel. He didn't water it down. In order to try to make a bigger impact. On people. He simply told it as it was. Knowing that it would not be accepted. [14:57] For some people. In the great autobiography of Billy Graham. And he of course died. A little over a week ago. He wrote an autobiography.

Just as I am. And he tells in there. Of his invitation. To preach at Cambridge University. For a week. In 1955. John Stott. Helped to organize that.

Well the first three nights. That Graham preached. The results were modest. And he felt that his sermons. Were too academic. He knew he wasn't getting through. To students hearts.

He was kind of dressing things up. And having a debate. In his sermon. So he prayed about this. And instead. After that third sermon. He preached. A very simple.

Gospel message. To ordinary human souls. Is the way that he was thinking. He preached about creation's sin. Jesus' forgiveness of sin. And eternal life.

[15:53] And there was a breakthrough. There was an extraordinary response. In the last few sermons. That he gave. In fact afterwards. John Stott wrote to his congregation.

Who had been praying for the mission. He said. History will begin to show. But only eternity will finally reveal. How much was accomplished that week.

It was profound. One of the great evangelists. In the 20th century. David Watson. Was converted there. But often we are tempted to think. Even with somebody. Even somebody like Billy Graham might.

That gospel doesn't have. The same power. Unless we dress it up. We must win arguments. And debates. In order for people to hear the gospel. And respect us.

Or we must make the gospel palatable. But the gospel itself. Has the power to convict hearts. And to soften them. To bring about faith.

[16:47] In Jesus. It is very true. That some people in your life. Will reject you. And what you say about Jesus. It happened to Paul. You know. Some mocked him. At the end.

Of this sermon. But there will be one. One. Or maybe more. In your life. Who will respond. Or your conversation. As a piece. Of that whole complete puzzle.

That is. Faith in Jesus. You have given. A necessary piece. Of that. In our own passage today. Some wanted to hear. Paul speak later.

And wonderfully. Some of those men. And women. Came to a saving faith. In Jesus. And joined Paul. And this was the beginning. Of the church.

In Athens. Now. None of us have Paul's gifts. And as we go away from the sermon. We need to. See that. And we don't have that same exact opportunity.

[17:43] That he had. On the Oropagus. But we have the same gospel. And Paul says. That gospel is God's power to save. We don't need to be ashamed of it.

He calls us today. To know. And to love. That gospel. And he gives us grace today. To have your hearts. Gripped. By Jesus. And his grace. That is all that we need.

To be qualified. To speak about the gospel. To the people. In our lives. Even though it may. Very well. Be a very. Be a very. Impartial. And.

Imperfect. Telling. The. The thing that we need. In that telling. Is simply. Our own. Joy. In the salvation. That God has given to you.

That is what overcomes. Any fears. That prevent you from speaking. That's what strengthens you. To persevere. And go to those. Who don't know God.

[18:39] So. As we leave this passage. May God. God the Holy Spirit. Open your mouth. To proclaim his praise. The one who has taken.

Each of us. From darkness. Into his marvelous light. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.