

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] Well, what a joy it is to be here. I echo David's welcome to you all. And it is a wonderful thing to come back here to St. John's. Our family are moving to Ontario, going against the stream, I think, from BC to there in a couple of months.

And I will always think of this church and know this church to be a home church, my home church. And that way I know that you won't treat me any differently. I was talking to one person today who said they said they're going to come and the bishop was going to be here. And they said, well, how do you address a bishop? And she said, I do it by saying Dan.

That's a very good way to do it. And I feel like this is a church home for me and for my family. And I'm very grateful for you all as well. And certainly will be back a lot in my work as a bishop, even though I'll be in the center of the universe living.

It is, as I said, a great privilege to confirm Mina, Matthew, and Caitlin on your behalf. And as you heard from their testimonies, they have understood that in Jesus, they have found this treasure of surpassing wealth.

They have discovered that Jesus Christ is the one worth giving your life to. He is the one who is worth ministering for on his behalf to the world, even though sometimes it's difficult, even though there's obstacles far worse than a marathon with barricades to get through.

[1 : 37] That they have asked for the prayers of you and for the diocese as a whole to strengthen them for this work that God has given to them.

They are carrying this most precious of all gifts, and that is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this passage, Acts 17, that we heard, is all about a person, Paul, carrying that good news, that precious gift, to a world that does not know anything about him.

It's in pagan Athens, with no background, knowledge of the God who actually speaks to the world through his word. And so it's really helpful for us because I think that Vancouver is a bit like Athens. It's a bit like Athens. Paul is a great encouragement to us because he shows us what it is like to share this gift, and he shows us what the message of the gospel really clearly is as well.

Paul, as you may know, has been on a missionary journey, as you've been hearing in Acts. And he's been up in northern Greece, Macedonia, and he's come down before his friends Silas and Timothy, who he's mentoring.

[2 : 49] He's come down early to Athens, and he's waiting around, it says there at the beginning of our passage. And if you turn to Acts 17, 16, it'll be helpful because I'm going to be looking at this.

You'll probably be looking at that Bible more than you're looking at me, the way I've set this up. But he is on this waiting moment here. Athens is not a big city.

It's about 20,000 people that live there. But it is very, very impressive. You know, in the golden years, 300, 400, 500 years before, it was the birthplace of democracy.

What we have here in Canada, the birthplace of government was there. It is and was the cradle of civilization of that world. And it was the birthplace of modern medicine.

It's the foundation for philosophy. It is this place of incredible learning and human achievement. The most incredible architecture, the most spectacular of temples, the most beautiful of artistic works are there in that little city.

[3 : 55] It is just dominated by incredible human achievements. And even if you go to Athens today, we had our honeymoon there, Catherine and I. So I was there 22 years ago.

I'm very clear about this. 22 years ago. And it looks impressive with ruins 2,000 years ago. Imagine what it looked like to Paul. Just 2,000 years when things were still standing, beautiful, bright.

And so Acts 17 is a wonderful reading because Paul introduces this city to the living God for the first time. And we get to see it. Through that precious gospel that Mina and Matthew and Caitlin were

testifying to about in their own life.

It's that same gospel that Paul brings to Athens. And very simply, we know that the gospel that Paul preached, because he said it over again, was Jesus Christ crucified for our sins in our place.

And rising again in power to be Lord over everything, even sin and death. And not only that, but he, this almighty Lord, adopts us to become his children forever and be filled with God the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 18] That we are faithful servants, bringing that precious gift of the gospel to others. That's the gospel very simply that he preached. And Paul said, back in Romans 1, he said, you know, I'm always eager to preach the gospel.

Why is that? Because I am not ashamed of the gospel. It's the power, he said, for salvation for all who believe. Why did he say that? It is because he was tempted and the church was tempted, you and I are tempted, to be ashamed of the gospel.

To not really believe its power. Or to think it might not be relevant. Or to actually be embarrassed to stand for it or maybe fearful as well. He said this because we are tempted to be ashamed.

And the marvelous thing about the testimony we heard from Matthew, Caitlin, and Nina is that they spoke of the power of God to change them through that gospel.

Remarkable things have happened in their lives. And I know that. I've seen them. This is one of the great gifts of being a minister so long in this church. I have seen them change by the power of that gospel.

[6 : 28] And what a testimony that is for us. The relationship with the living God is a great gift. And it's not only for you. It is a gift to share.

And this is what we ask God, the Holy Spirit, to do for these candidates. And we are asking that today as we hear this word preached. And I think that this reading is very helpful because Paul gives us three ways, three things, that helps us to actually share this incredible treasure of the gospel with other people.

What Paul says is that God has given him, number one, a grace-filled heart. A grace-filled heart. And secondly, God has given him a bridge.

And thirdly, God has given him the message. And we see these things play out in this passage. I want to spend a little time looking at that.

Look at verse 16. While Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city was full of idols. And that word provoked is a really strong word.

[7 : 39] Paroxysm is where we get that word from in the English. And this is like a seizure. And it's a seizure in Paul's heart, in a sense. You see, he could see that there were lots of idols.

In fact, one satirist, a Roman, said there's more idols than people in Athens. And there actually probably were. 20,000 people only. And he saw that.

And these are idols that are designed to bring people success and health and well-being. They're idols that are not that different, really, even though they have a different shape, but different from our own city of Vancouver, where we strive after things that will make us successful, will give us status, will give us well-being and health.

They were devoting these things. They were devoted to these things. And Paul says, how can they be devoting their lives to things of no lasting value? And he has this strong reaction in his heart.

And there's a couple things going on in Paul's heart that's shown in this passage. The first thing is that he was really gripped in his heart by a desire for God's glory.

[8 : 50] He really knew and believed in God's glory. The vastness of his love, of God's majesty, of his holiness, of his mercy as well. Because he encountered God on the road to Damascus.

God changed his life utterly. He was working against God. And God said, you're going to be my minister into the whole world. And that's why he wrote to neighboring Corinth a little while later in Greece.

He said, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness. He's actually shone in our hearts. Mine and yours. To give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.

Where? In the face of Jesus Christ. Paul is gripped by a vision of that glory. He is absolutely devoted to the face of the Lord Jesus.

He is saying Jesus deserves all honor, praise, and thanksgiving. How can people ignore and miss out on that? And that's why we see in verse 18 that he spoke constantly about Jesus and about his resurrection glory.

[9 : 59] That's what he was doing in Athens. That's what he was talking about. So he's gripped by the glory of Jesus. And then also he's actually gripped in his heart by, if you notice, a deep love for those who don't know the living God.

He's deeply concerned. He cares about a whole city that has no knowledge of the Lord Jesus. That are wasting their lives going after these idols of financial success and health and status.

So he spent time with all types of people in Athens. If you look carefully here, you can see in verse 17 who they are. They're very different types. He speaks in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

So he's speaking to Jews who do have a background, religious background, but don't know the living God. He speaks secondly to countless, he has countless conversations in the agora.

And it's very hard to have a parallel to that in our society right now. I mean, it's a bit like the stock market, but it's also all the places where people are selling things.

[11 : 03] It's places where deals are made financially. But it's also a place where you discuss politics and philosophy. It's a learning place, too, where all the ideas are brought together.

It's quite an incredible place, the agora. And he goes there and he speaks to all these people where money is central or status and learning is central.

They're thinking about government policy. And he's having conversations with all these different people. And the thing in common that he has as he goes to all of them is this incredible, precious gift of the gospel he's carrying with him.

And then lastly, besides that agora, he also talks to these Epicurean, verse 18, and Stoic philosophers. Imagine having a job where that's all you do.

I don't know where they got their money from, but they were philosophers. And they considered the big questions in life. So maybe they were tenured. I don't know, but the Epicureans, what did they believe?

[12 : 02] They considered gods to be so remote and so unknowable that these gods took no interest in people. They didn't really have any influence on people or on human affairs.

And they believed that the world all came about according to chance, that there was no life or death, no judgment, or there's no life after death, and there's no judgment.

Therefore, human beings can pursue pleasure, especially, they said, the serene enjoyment of life that's detached from pain or passion or fear.

Does that sound a little bit like what people might believe in Vancouver? Vancouverites are very much equated with Epicureans. And what Paul does is he turns that thinking upside down.

And he says that we know God in Jesus. That's why he was always talking to them about Jesus and the resurrection. And that God is near us. He's not detached. By his Holy Spirit, he fills us.

[13 : 05] And our purpose is to glorify him and enjoy him forever. He is the one who created the earth. It was not by chance. Science is simply looking at how God worked and created the world.

It does not tell us how and who or why is involved in this. Paul is telling him that whole world is created by God, and God will judge the world.

He will recreate it, deal with the sin that has corrupted and brought brokenness into this world. And then the Stoics, they thought God was very impersonal.

There was a God, but it was very impersonal. He was transcendent. He was like a divine intelligence that governs and dictates the events of the world according to that purpose.

And our job is really to learn how to be self-sufficient and align ourselves with the fates and be in harmony with nature. Because actually, that impersonal God is actually infused in all of nature.

[14 : 09] So you've got to live in harmony with nature in order to live a fulfilling life. Well, again, Paul turns that thinking on its head, and he says, God is the personal God.

That he loves us. Each of us. That in Jesus, we call him Father, and we are adopted. That can be a hard thing for our culture to hear, that God gets personal with us.

That he would adopt us as his own, that we would belong to him. But this is the truth. And that means also that we are not self-sufficient. That's what the Stoics thought, but we are not.

God, Paul says, sustains every breath that you take. Every heartbeat that happens in your body happens because of God's work and by his permission.

He is the Heavenly Father, and we come to him for real life and salvation. He alone gives it. And so true harmony in your life only comes if you are at peace with God.

[15 : 11] And peace with God comes through Jesus, who forgives us and makes us his own. It affects all our relationships. That's why forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian life.

So, with all of that reasoning, with the people of Athens, Paul knew that he's going to face rejection. Because he's saying the very opposite, often, of what the world is believing.

And so that's why you can see there that the philosophers called him a babbler. And we know that when he went to his own people in the synagogue, they rejected him. And he met lots of business people.

And likely they asked, how is Jesus Christ going to affect my bottom line? Can he do as well as these idols can? If I don't see financial benefit from the gospel, I'm leaving you, Paul.

I'm sure that conversation took place. But Paul's passion for Jesus and his glory and for those who don't know him, his real love for them, overcame his fear of rejection.

[16:11] He overcame that fear. And as we prayed in the confirmation, he also prayed that the Holy Spirit would fill him more and more.

He prayed that for the church as well. To give a constant boldness and a perseverance and a love for those that are in your life. This is the gift of God the Holy Spirit for us as we are ministers of the gospel.

And I know that each of you and I, I experience it, face a fear of rejection when we share our belief in Jesus. And the greatest help for us is for God to grip our hearts with his grace, which is the vision of St. John's Vancouver.

And we are gripped as we hear and see his good news, his deep goodness for us. It gives us courage and we recognize the greatest of gifts that we have is that gospel.

And so today we pray that God will grip our hearts with both a passion for him and a deep love for those who don't know you, who don't know the Lord Jesus in your life.

[17:20] So that's the first part, which is the longest. He gives a grace-filled heart to Paul. And secondly, he gives him bridges. Now you can see how he does it in verse 22.

He says, men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. So this is something that's a point of contact for them. He says, for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar with an inscription to the unknown God.

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. That was the truth in Athens. They knew that there was an unknowingness to God, that there was God that they did not know.

There was something beyond their ability to understand and come up with in their own hearts. And Paul looks at that, he says, here's where the gospel is. Because the unknown God makes himself known through the Lord Jesus Christ.

None of us can know him. But God has revealed himself to the world through his word, through his living word written, and through the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel himself, showing Jesus to the whole world.

[18:32] And he says, I want to tell you about him. This is what Paul's whole sermon was about. And Caleb's, I told Caleb, so you're preaching this morning, are you, Caleb?

And he didn't skip a beat. He said, yeah, I got an hour sermon prepared. But Caleb, who read that Bible reading, was actually giving a sermon. He was giving Paul's sermon in about five minutes. But these are the points of it that we're going to hear.

And so this is what he shared with those Athenians. And God does give bridges to us. As you sincerely, if you listen very sincerely to people in your life, you will hear their beliefs and their fears and their concerns.

And often, unexpectedly, God will give you openings to speak. To speak about who God actually is for them. But a couple of years ago, it was actually a few years ago now, we were having to fix our house to put some stucco on it.

And we got a guy who ran a stucco company. He came, and they did a great job of the wall of our house. The owner with his crew did great work.

[19:43] Actually, the crew did all the work because the owner just liked to talk to me. He sort of watched what they were doing, and he was quite a character. And he would tell me about his life. He told me about his life story.

He talked to me about his struggle with alcohol as well, and that he had given it up, and for the most part, things were a lot better. And he said this. He said, I said, that's great.

And then he said, I didn't have to come to a come-to-Jesus moment or anything, but I've really changed, he said. And I couldn't pass this up, so I said, you missed the best part.

And he kind of did a double take. He said, are you religious? And I said, well, I believe in Jesus and that he changes everything. And he said, so you believe that stuff?

And I said, yeah. I said, I believe that stuff so much that I became a minister. Today I could have said I became a bishop. And sometimes that can dampen a conversation, as you may have experienced.

[20 : 45] But for him, it was actually the beginning of an ongoing conversation about God over the next two days when he was there. He was very interested in talking about the church. He even gave quite a large donation to St. John's at the end of this.

So he gave some of my money back that way. But I want to say that if you have love for those who don't know God, and if you have a love for God's glory, God will give you openings to speak about Jesus in your conversations with family, friends, and even strangers sometimes.

It's really our great gift because of the Holy Spirit that we can pray for those bridges. And that we can use them to bring parts of the gospel, and sometimes the whole gospel, into people's lives.

And it takes time. In our culture, that's a lot like Athens, it takes time to bring them. But it's the way God brings people to know him. That gospel is very powerful, as you heard in the testimonies.

And so I want to close by saying that there's a third thing that God gives Paul. Besides the fact that he has been gripped in his heart by the glory of Jesus and a love for people that don't know him, and God has given him bridges, God's given him this message really clearly.

[22 : 05] And I want to look at that in four minutes really quickly, what that was in this little passage. Besides bridges and grace-filled heart, God gives a clear and very personal message.

So the leaders and intellectuals, as you saw at the beginning, want to hear more from Paul because it was something new. And they brought him to this Oropagus, and Catherine and I were there. You look over the glory of Athens, which is still pretty glorious now.

And they want to judge whether his message is worth hearing or not. And we have the shorthand of probably hours of Paul speaking back and forth with these guys.

And he begins by saying, and there's about four things that he says, and I'll very quickly mention. He begins by saying that God made the universe, and he sustains all things in it.

And I've got to say that this is one of the important things that we need to share with those around us. That even though we have science that has talked about ways that theories about how the world came into being, that it is very incomplete.

[23 : 11] We only know a fraction of the knowledge of the universe. And what Paul is saying here is what God has revealed, that he has made it. And he sustains it now, everything about it.

That's the preparation for the gospel. So he says in verse 24, And he says that with the massive Parthenon behind them, this temple to goddess Athena looming on this hill above.

And Paul says, we don't make a home for God. The true God actually made the world as a home for you. That he actually sustains us.

He's in charge of it. And he has a plan for it. He is awesome and almighty. It makes the idols look like what they actually are. Ineffective.

They are things that do not have power, like God does. And secondly, he says God created people to know him personally. That great God who holds everything in his hands, he is personal. So he says in verse 26, 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 places, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

[24 : 39] Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. Each one of us. That means all those people who don't know God. He's saying God is very near you.

You see, people are created in God's image. Paul's saying we were made to know him personally. He is close to you and you will not find him unless you believe until you believe in him.

Until you receive what he has revealed to you about himself. And so Blaise Pascal, you know, the originator of calculus. My son Nicholas is not happy about Blaise Pascal, that he created calculus in the 17th century.

But he says this. That is so profound. There is a God-shaped vacuum, a vacuum in the heart of each person, which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, meaning idols or anything in this world, but only be satisfied by God, the creator, made known through Jesus Christ.

That is true. That is giving that sense of the message of Paul for those Athenians. This God is the living heavenly father who has created all things.

[25 : 54] He calls us to know him and to know him personally. And then this second to the last part he says about this God, now you do something about it. Here's the action that Paul gives.

He says in verse 29, listen to this. He says, 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 the imagination of people, which is so important in our culture, our imagination and our art.

He says the time of ignorance God overlooked, but now, right now, he commands all people everywhere to repent. That is an action word. He is actually calling those people, those great philosophers, to turn to that God that he's just been talking about.

And he says, unlike idols and unlike human philosophy, God the creator personally speaks to us. And he has this urgent command to turn to him for real love, for forgiveness of sins, for true and never-ending hope, restoration, and this new life of obedience.

He says, turn. And that's our call today. He's called to us. And then finally, he ends by saying that he will judge the world by Jesus who died for us.

[27 : 17] This is how he ends the sermon. That's not the proper way to do an evangelistic sermon, you know. You don't end with judgment. But Paul did. And he says this. He says, God has actually fixed a day.

There's actually a day that is fixed. It is that certain. When God 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. Verse 30. That is the great fact and truth of all of creation.

That he will judge the world perfectly. In a way so perfect we cannot imagine. And that that will involve the recreation of the world where all sin and evil is taken away.

And so Paul says, you're great leaders, but you're not my judge. In fact, there's one who is greater than all of your learning and all the leaders in this great city. He has the future in his hands.

[28 : 17] He will judge the living and the dead perfectly. He is God and man, Jesus Christ, who has risen from the dead. He is Lord over all.

And that's how it ended. Some scoffed at that. They turned away. And others said, ah, we want to hear a bit more. And then there were others, it says here at the end of our reading, who actually followed the Lord Jesus.

They put their faith in him as well. And I want to say that it is all because of this precious gift of the gospel that Paul was bringing with him. The gospel of the Lord Jesus.

This is the one, Jesus, who is worth devoting your life to. Because he is the only one who can give you life. True purpose and true love.

He is the one who brings us to know the God who created you. Turn to him because he is close to you. May God fill our hearts with his grace and glory and love.

[29 : 22] So that you make known to people in your life the greatest gift that you can give. The good news of Jesus Christ died for us, risen for us, and for our salvation.

To him belong praise and honor and glory and thanksgiving now and forever. Amen.