

# Paul Before Areopagus in Athens

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[ 0 : 00 ] To study the passage of scripture that we read earlier.! This account in Acts 17 of Paul's time in Athens.

! Listening to half of a telephone call.

You know when you're in a room and someone's on the phone and you can hear what they say, but you don't know what the person at the other end is saying, and you have to somehow imagine what's being said.

When we get to Paul's speech before the council here, the Areopagus, that's the approach we'll be taking. We'll hear what Paul says, but then we'll also realise why he says it.

Because we get a chance to listen in to the other end of the phone call. But we need a bit of background first. Paul is here in Athens, and as far as we know it's the first time he's ever been there.

[ 1 : 17 ] He's on his second missionary journey, and if we wind back, Paul, as a young man, probably never expected that this is what he would be doing.

Never expected it. He was someone who was zealous, absolutely zealous, for the upholding of the faith of the Old Testament.

And when Jesus appeared, claiming to be the Messiah, that was an anathema to someone like Paul. And although he comes into the story after Jesus' death and resurrection, he was someone who wanted to crush the church wherever he could find it.

And one of the saddest references we have is at the end of Acts chapter 7, when Stephen is speaking before the Sanhedrin, and is then stoned to death.

And in the book of Acts chapter 8, it says that Saul approved of his execution. And then, by his own writings later we know, Saul went after other people, saved people, believers, and had them not just put in prison, but put to death.

[ 2 : 49 ] And the big change for Saul, as he was then known, was on the road to Damascus, where he met the risen Lord Jesus, where his life completely changed.

And a man called Ananias was sent to Paul. And it's interesting to read what he was told by Jesus about Paul, because this in a way became Paul's recurrent theme in life, ever after.

Jesus said to Ananias, Go, for he Paul is a chosen instrument of mine, to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So, in learning that, in Damascus after his conversion, there were two aspects.

One was, he was going to bring the good news, the good news of Jesus, not just to the children of Israel, but right across the Gentile world, to non-Jewish people, and to those in authority, to those who were kings.

[ 4 : 13 ] So, he was going to, as Jesus put it, carry my name. But there would be more than that. In doing this, he would suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus.

And how that has been the same for Christians down the centuries. The two things go together. To carry the name of Jesus, and to suffer for the name of Jesus.

So, this, what I would say is, whenever you read about Paul, always remember these words.

Because these are the words that stayed with him, all through his life.

And were the confirmation to him, about what his purpose was, in God's sight. So, in Athens, we find him on his second missionary journey.

He's traveled a long way. He'd been in Jerusalem, he'd been in Antioch, but he's heading west. And he fully expected to go to Rome.

[ 5 : 22 ] But, as we read in chapter 18, the Emperor Claudius had caused all Jews, no matter who they were, to leave Rome and get completely out of the country.

And this, we hear at other times in Paul's writings, how he was blocked from going to Rome at this time. But, eventually, he did go.

He did go under different circumstances. And we know from the end of the book of Acts, he preached the good news of Jesus in Rome.

And that even those of Caesar's household heard the message and believed. The thing is, Paul also knew that he was an apostle to the Gentiles.

And he tells us that in Romans 11, verse 13. And he declares, I am an apostle to the Gentiles. The thing is, in terms of the Gentile world at that time, with the way the book of Acts is written, God has obviously inspired Luke, the writer, to make sure that the major population centers of the Gentile world are visited.

[ 6 : 52 ] That the visits there are mentioned. There are other visits that we know must have happened that Paul went to Crete, the island of Crete, but it's not mentioned in the book of Acts.

It doesn't mean it didn't happen. It did. But, the whole way the book of Acts is written is to show any reader that the gospel spread, starting at Jerusalem, as Jesus had originally said, and then to all the ends of the earth.

And the significant places the gospel had to reach, first the political center, Rome. And as I've said, that eventually does happen.

But also, Athens. Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman world. So, here is Paul in Athens. And we're going to focus now on his dealings with people in the marketplace, and then also being taken to the council called the Areopagus.

[ 8 : 02 ] And, for those who know this from the authorized version, what's called Mars Hill. Because the translators at that time put things into what they regarded as a classical language, which was Latin.

So, Mars Hill. And now is the time when we listen to half of the phone call, but we can then be told what's being said at the other end.

The first thing to look at is that Jesus and the resurrection are Paul's message. And it happens twice.

Once in the marketplace, and once when he speaks to the Areopagus. So, we should be alert. If there's a pattern developing, why is that?

And, in fact, he gets people rather confused. They say, the philosophers say, he's speaking about foreign divinities, meaning foreign gods, plural.

[ 9 : 12 ] Because they were hearing a name, Jesus, and they were hearing another word, which in Greek for resurrection is Anastasis. And they were hearing Jesus and Anastasis.

And that word, Anastasis, can be mistaken for a name. In fact, in the modern world, the woman's name Anastasia actually comes from this.

So, Anastasis, Anastasia, means resurrection. And Paul is deliberately doing this.

So, I won't tell you what the other side of the conversation is, of the telephone conversation on this one, until we get to it again when he's in front of the council.

But hold that thought. He speaks of Jesus and the resurrection. And strangely, not Jesus and the cross, which is what he would normally do when he spoke in the synagogue.

[ 10 : 17 ] So, Jesus and the resurrection. So, hold that thought. We're going to come back to it. The next thing of interest that Paul says is in verse 26, when he speaks about all mankind is made from one man.

That God had done this. All mankind from one man. Now, from those of us who know the scriptures, we know that that is true. From Adam. But why did he say it so explicitly here?

This is when we get a chance to hear what's happening at the other end of the telephone call. It came down to how the people of Athens looked at themselves.

They believed that they were very special. More special than all the other races of the world. So, they didn't condescend to being descended from someone common.

They believed they were descended from someone very special. And that it was all the other nations of the world who were descended from one man.

[ 11 : 40 ] And Paul knows that. Paul knows that. So, he deliberately goes out to provoke them. And if there's one other thing to say about people in Athens, they were very arrogant.

Very arrogant. They looked down on anyone else. In fact, they did this to Paul in the marketplace. When they talk about him as a babbler, it's extremely condescending. There's nothing of respect there. They're doing him down. Now, Paul doesn't mind that. He is going to tell them the whole truth.

And he is going out to demolish their views, their beliefs, and tell them about Jesus. So, the conversation on where is descent from, the Athenians, the men of Athens, believed that they were so special, that they were not descended from the same common ancestor as the rest of mankind. The next thing to look at in Paul's speech, there are two quotes here. One of them, which we often use in our prayers, is, In him we live and move and have our being.

[13:04] And then the next one is, For we are indeed his offspring. Now, a brief reading of scripture, a quick reading, You might assume that those come from the Old Testament.

But they don't. If you've got an ESV Bible in your hand, Look at the footnotes, and it tells you where those quotes come from. They actually come from Greek literature.

So, a bit unusual here. Paul is not quoting the Old Testament as he normally would in the synagogue. He is actually quoting Greek literature.

The first quote, In him we live and move and have our being, comes from a writer called Epimenides, who lived in Crete 600 years earlier.

And then the second one, actually two poets said it. One is Cleanthes and the other Aratus, and they lived about the same time.

[14:13] For we are indeed his offspring. Now when Aratus, when we look at this man called Aratus, he came from exactly the same city, Tarsus, that Paul came from.

So here we have Paul quoting Greek literature to Greeks. And one of those sayings was actually from a poet in his own city, from about 200 years before.

And Luke, who writes this, is very clever. When you look at what it says, just above it's, as even some of your own poets have said, which implies that it's plural.

Two different poets have said this. And Paul confirms that. The people listening knew that. And they're saying, who's this chap who knows this?

The thing is, Paul again knows that these are the things that this audience need to hear. This is how he's going to make contact with them.

[15:38] And then the final thing he says to the Areopagus. It's about God judging the world in righteousness, and by one man, that's Jesus, giving assurance by raising him from the dead.

That this is a historical fact. That's when people begin mocking. That's when the meeting comes to an end. And this is where we're on the telephone call again.

We hear this side of the phone call. But what's the other side? What did Greek people of that time understand?

It comes down to the court that Paul is speaking in. He's been forced to come. He's probably had some sort of written citation, a summons to come.

It's a very formal setting. But Paul knew something about all the people who are listening to him. There's one core belief that they have to have if they sit as a council member there.

[16:58] And that goes back to 500 BC. So 500 years earlier. We actually have the foundational writings about this council, the Areopagus.

And there was one belief they had to have. And that was that a resurrection of the human body was impossible. All of them, if they were going to be accepted into membership on this council, had to state that they did not believe in a resurrection.

And Paul knows that. So he deliberately provokes them with it. He did that in the marketplace. And he's doing it again now in the council.

And it leads to the meeting actually breaking up in disorder. But the curious thing is, even for this one talk, one of the council members called Dionysius believes.

Believes in Jesus. It says other men did as well. And then a woman named Amaris. The very fact that she's named tells us something about Greek society.

[18:14] She was someone who was very highly regarded. She had high status. And she believes, as did others. And so people sometimes say that Paul was a failure in Athens.

But just think about these things over the next few days. See what Paul did. See what he did. And see the effect that one talk in this high power council led to these conversions.

And people coming to a saving faith in Jesus. Shall we summarise as we come to the end of our meeting.

Let's look at Paul. Here he is the apostle to the Gentiles. And he displays a profound understanding of the Greek world in which he has been sent to as that apostle.

He reveals an education in Greek life to a very high level. And then God takes that and uses it.

[ 19 : 24 ] He uses it now in Athens and he uses it again and again. Another thing to notice. Paul's use of Greek is at the highest level.

He's someone who is used to debating with university professors. Not just in Hebrew, but here in Greek. The experts tell us that he wrote superb Greek.

The Greek of Paul's letters is second to none. And that's what opened doors. If you look at a map of the world at that time.

The main language right across the Middle East was Greek. Which may come as a surprise. Where Arabic is spoken now, it used to be Greek.

In places like Baghdad, it was Greek. In fact, I said Paul was not able to go to Rome at this time. Greek would have got him by in Rome as well.

[ 20 : 35 ] And even to this day, there are some villages in southern Italy where they still speak Greek. If Paul had turned round from facing west towards Rome, where he is in Athens, and looked east.

And he posed the question, how far could Paul have got speaking Greek? How far could he have got? He could have gone 4,000 miles.

4,000 miles to what is now Delhi in India. The province of the Punjab in India. And all of that was because of, in the time between the Testaments, a ruler was raised up.

Alexander the Great. In the Greek speaking world. And he went and conquered right through what is now Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India.

And what he left behind were Greek speaking communities. So, Paul could have been used right across the Middle East.

[ 21 : 51 ] From the furthest west in Rome, to the furthest east in Delhi. And it's strange to think places like Kabul, Greek was spoken.

And in fact, in the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan, there are wall carvings written in the same Greek as the New Testament.

In Kandahar, where British troops served, they have found Greek tablets with, again, the same Greek of the New Testament.

And it was all for God to use. So, in Paul's case, he had his education. God used it. He had the language. God used it.

And then, the final thing about Paul is what we said at the beginning. We got a surprise when we read about Paul in Philippi.

[ 22 : 51 ] We discover he's a Roman citizen. We discover later in Acts, he was born as a Roman citizen. It wasn't something he bought.

It was inherited from his parents. And apparently, that was because Caesar Augustus gave every resident in Tarsus Roman citizenship for supporting him in a civil war.

So, Paul has this honor. But citizenship should be seen more as an honor. It wasn't something that everyone else had. So, it's more akin to an MBE or an OBE in modern life.

But it opened doors. And God used that. So, God used his education. He used his language. And he used his citizenship.

And notice the times. Paul used that citizenship. Very, very astutely. Now, what about us? Each of us who have come to a saving faith in Christ Jesus, we're in his service.

[ 24 : 04 ] In the same way as Paul at his conversion entered Jesus' service, so did we. Not, perhaps, on the same scale as Paul.

But the same things that apply to Paul apply to us. We have been chosen. We have been chosen to carry Jesus' name before those around us.

We also are not promised an easy life. There may be suffering along the way. But we, in prayer, can walk along in the same footsteps as Paul.

We can speak to others around us about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection. We can let them know how Jesus can really change their lives.

And in this modern world with so much misery, we have got the most wonderful message to tell people. And the thing maybe to see individually, in the same way that Jesus used so many things about Paul's past, gifts he'd been given like Roman citizenship, each of us probably have attributes. [ 25 : 35 ] If we look closely, we'll realize Jesus will use those, and is using those, for us to carry his name before those around us. Amen.

And may God bless those few thoughts as we studied his word.