

SERIES: Easter 2007

SERMON: **The Scandal of the Resurrection**

SCRIPTURE: Acts 17:15-34

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If and when you have the opportunity to visit one of the great cities of the world, what is it that excites you? What do you remember? What do you talk about afterwards to friends back home? I've had the privilege of visiting many world-class cities, usually during ministry or missionary trips, but I have always managed a few days of vacation to see the sights and enjoy the culture. When one of these cities comes up in conversation I immediately find myself thinking and talking about the great museums, churches, and monuments I remember. In Chicago it's the Natural History Museum; in London, St. Paul's Cathedral; in Berlin, the Brandenburg Gate; in Vienna, the Schonbrun Palace; in Munich, the Dachau memorial; in Jerusalem, the Wailing Wall.

In our Scripture text today, Acts 17, we have the record of the Apostle Paul's first and only visit to the greatest city of the ancient world, Athens. This visit represents a break in his busy schedule, for according to verses 15 and 16 he is just waiting for his companions Silas and Timothy to join him so he can resume his journey. What a perfect opportunity to visit the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Agora, Mars Hill, the Stoa of Attalus, or the Dionysius Theatre. After all, this is where western civilization began. These are the very streets on which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle walked 400-500 years before. Here are some of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. Who would blame him if he took a few days for sight-seeing?

No one, of course (not even God, in my estimation). But I find it curious that when Paul visited Athens, he made no comment whatever concerning his reaction to the architecture, the monuments, the universities, the museums, the culture, or the art. Rather it says in verse 16 of Acts 17 that "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." The Jerusalem Bible translates it, "his whole soul was revolted." The Greek word is a term actually brought right into the English language as "paroxysm," meaning, "a fit of rage." Paul is experiencing culture shock in Athens.

Paul experiences culture shock in Athens. (16-21)

The Apostle couldn't enjoy the sights or savor the history or admire the aesthetics of Athens because here, more than any other place he ever preached, he encountered a culture that was antithetical to Christianity to its very core.

Last Lord's Day we examined the "scandal" of the Cross. We saw that the intelligentsia (even the religious intelligentsia) have always viewed the Cross as a stumbling block and foolishness. The very thought of a Savior hanging in abject humility and apparent helplessness insults human pride. What we now find here in Athens is that the resurrection, too, is viewed as a "scandal", a stumbling block to faith. As we observe how Paul approaches the people of Athens, hopefully

we will learn something about relating our faith to our culture, which is no more friendly to Christianity than was ancient Athens.

As we read the account of Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17, I want you to notice particularly what happens when he mentions the resurrection(Acts 17:16-34):

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"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 man's 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. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

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." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."

No sooner does Paul arrive in Athens than we find him sharing his faith in the synagogue and the marketplace.

He shares the Good News about the resurrected Christ to three different groups of people. (17, 18) The first group is relatively familiar to Paul.

1. God-fearers. They include Jews and God-fearing Greeks (probably proselytes or converts to Judaism). “God-fearing” doesn’t mean they are Christians; but at least they are monotheists who share both a faith in God and a commitment to His moral law. He reasons with them because he is convinced they need to know the Messiah in order to be saved. You see, Paul didn’t share the notion so common in our day that there are many roads to God, and as long as people are sincere they will go to heaven. So, he is committed to telling them about Jesus, the Only Way to God.

2. Pagans. These are people who have no concept of an infinite, personal God. Day after day, we are told in verse 17, Paul goes to the market place, the Agora—not to shop but to reason with whomever happens to be present. This is cold-turkey evangelism! The vast majority of these ordinary citizens are undoubtedly idol-worshippers, for there are idols everywhere. At the gate of the city is an image of Poseidon seated on horseback. From the Agora Paul has a full view of the Parthenon on top of the Acropolis, where the famous statue of Athena, reaching forty feet from floor to roof, glitters in lavish ivory and gold. On Mars Hill between the Agora and the Acropolis is the Temple of Mars, and around the Acropolis is a series of little sanctuaries, shrines to Bacchus, Venus, and Ceres. In fact, cramming the streets and public buildings are an estimated 30,000 gods!

In addition to the God-fearers and pagans, Paul also encounters a number of philosophers.

3. Philosophers. And these become the focus of his attention. For some five centuries Athens had been the center of intellectual and philosophical thought for the ancient world. Socrates engaged the men of Athens in discussion in this same market place in the fifth century B.C., and this same tribunal, the Areopagus, put him on trial for corrupting the youth and teaching strange gods. After Socrates took his own life, his pupil Plato developed an Academy destined to be the intellectual center of Greece for 900 years. And Aristotle, probably aided by funds from his famous pupil, Alexander the Great, opened his Lyceum in one of the most elegant of Athens’ gymnasiums in the 4th century B.C.

But it is two later schools of philosophy which capture Paul's attention—the Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans were deistic in their view of God, and they emphasized pleasure as the chief end of human existence—an idea that suited the Greek temperament well. Their founder, Epicurus, aimed to free men from fear—more than anything else the fear of the gods. He did so by teaching that the gods are remote and don't care about human behavior, so worry and concern about what they think is of little use.

The founder of the Stoics, Zeno, lost a fortune while sailing to Athens, but once there he discovered something he prized much more highly—philosophy. He taught a pantheistic view of God that emphasized duty and discipline in the face of unalterable fate. William Henley's famous poem, "Invictus," is really a modern expression of Stoicism:

*Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods may be*

For my unconquerable soul.

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced, nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll.
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

Paul opens up a dialogue with these philosophers. (18-21) They discover him preaching the Good News about Jesus and the resurrection in the marketplace (verse 18) and engage him in debate. Two major reactions to his ideas are recorded.

1. They seem to dismiss him as “a seedpicker” and an advocate of foreign gods. The term used in the NIV is “babbling” in verse 18, but the word in Greek means literally, “a seed-picker.” It signifies someone who scavenges for any bits of knowledge he can find, like a bird ready to pounce on a stray scrap of food. In accusing him of advocating foreign gods, they in effect acknowledge there is no one like Jesus among the pantheon of gods in Athens.

2. Yet due to his intellectual ability and their curiosity, they grant him a hearing. Paul must have made an impression on them, for the decision is made to bring him to the Areopagus, a gathering of leading intellectuals who serve as a panel to challenge and investigate new ideas. He doesn't shy away from these skeptics and their hard questions, and in that he reminds me of modern voices like Francis Schaeffer, Josh McDowell, R. C. Sproul, and Charles Colson—bold apologists who do not fear confronting the culture with truth.

Paul confronts the culture with truth.

He doesn't confront like Fred Phelps, or even like many of the shrill evangelical voices we hear today denouncing everyone who disagrees with them. Instead, . . .

He searches for and finds common ground, a connecting point, with their pagan culture: the unknown God. (22-23) They have a shrine to an unknown god. They worship this god, I suppose, in order to cover their bases. If there is a god they haven't discovered yet, they want him to know how devout they are! But Paul informs them that he *knows* who that God is. Imagine their surprise!

As you read his brief speech beginning in verse 24 it becomes immediately apparent that Paul starts his presentation of the Gospel with the nature and character of almighty God.

This is unusual, for generally Paul focused his full attention on Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. But his approach here on Mars Hill is a valuable example of how to share the Gospel with people who are not even monotheists. Paul demonstrates a truth we tend to forget—namely that the concept of God as the creator and sustainer of the universe is a prerequisite to understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Gospel starts with the fact that there is but one God and He has been offended by human sin.

He presents God as transcendent (beyond us). (24-26) Verse 24: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.”

1. He is the creator. The Greeks believed the physical universe is eternal, but Paul clearly states in verses 24 & 25 that it is not. God created everything and gives life to all.

2. He is infinite. (24) The Greeks believed every entity, every planet, every force of nature was a different god. Zeus was the greatest, but even he had to fight for his uneasy supremacy. Further, the Greeks believed their gods to be localized. Some lived in the Parthenon; others lived in the theater; still others lived in little shrines along the road. But here is the Apostle proclaiming that God is “Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.” He transcends by an infinite degree the power and greatness of all other gods. And no human temple—not even the great Parthenon—can contain Him.

3. He is self-sufficient. (25) The ancient pagans fed their gods, built fantastic monuments to them, and tried to appease them. But Paul says all such external actions are irrelevant and worthless when one is dealing with the God of heaven. Verse 25: “He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” He doesn't need to be fed; in fact, He doesn't even need to be served. His interest in His creatures arises from His sovereign good pleasure, not from any need these creatures can supply. When He requests their service, it is not because He needs them but because their service to Him enhances them.

Listen to A. W. Tozer speak of the self-sufficiency of God:

Were every man on earth to become an atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what He is in Himself without regard to any other. To believe in Him adds nothing to His perfections, to doubt Him takes nothing away God is not greater for our being, nor would He be less if we did not exist. That we do exist is altogether of God's free determination, not because (we deserve to exist or because God was under some compulsion to create us).¹

Sometimes when people are confronted with the self-sufficiency of God for the first time they feel it demeans them and turns them into meaningless blobs in the universe. On the contrary, a

proper understanding of the self-sufficiency of God gives to us a true sense of our value. The God who doesn't need me, nevertheless loves me and has stooped to work by and through me. Though He needs no one, He will work through anyone.

4. He is sovereign. (26) The Greeks domesticated their gods, assigned them to different tasks—one was the god of the sea, another of the harvest, another of the storms. But Paul shows how foolish that is in the face of God's sovereignty (26): "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." Sovereignty means final authority. God is supreme, He's autonomous, He has undisputed supremacy, He's in control of this universe. There are no loose ends awaiting some celestial battle between supernatural adversaries.

All of these characteristics of God we have looked at so far emphasize that He is transcendent (above and beyond us). However, there is another set of characteristics that are just as true of God which emphasize the fact that He is immanent.

He presents God as immanent (with us) (27-31). That is, He is intimately involved in the human condition.

1. He is knowable. So consumed are the Athenians by their polytheism that they have to assure themselves that even the unknown gods are mollified. But Paul says, "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." The reason they don't know God is they are spiritually blind and have failed to read His revelation in either nature or the Scriptures.

2. He is involved in our lives. (27, 28) The gods of the Greeks, at least according to the Epicureans, were too remote to take any kind of personal interest in mankind, but not so the God Paul worships. His God is not an absentee landlord, but rather (verse 2) "He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being." All life is a gift from Him and if it weren't for His sustaining power this whole universe would immediately dissolve into total chaos.

The fact that God is not far from each of us is mentioned for a very important purpose, also found in verse 27: It should cause people to seek Him and reach out for Him so that they might find Him. God is not hiding. He is not playing hard to get. His fingerprints are all over the universe. And He is available to those who seek Him.

3. He is alive. (28, 29) Now this point would not have to be made but for the fact that the Athenians had idols of metal and stone everywhere. Paul reasons back from man's nature to God's: if man is alive, and if he is created by God (which even one of their own poets acknowledged, verse 28), then surely "we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill." In other words, the very idea of idolatry is foolish and self-contradictory. Man is creating gods in his own image rather than acknowledging that he is made in God's image.

4. He commands all people everywhere to repent (30, 31). “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.” With one fell swoop Paul sweeps away five centuries of Greek culture by calling it “ignorance” and demanding repentance. He admits that in the past God was not as harsh with the wicked as He might have been, giving them one opportunity after another to mend their ways.

But now that the person of Christ has come and the truth of the Gospel has been made clear, God’s patience is running thin. The time for repentance is now. Judgment day is sure and certain, and the only way to escape it is to repent and believe in the One God has appointed to judge the world with justice. And this brings us to the crux of Paul’s message:

He boldly claims that God raised Jesus from the dead. If God has appointed Someone to judge the world with justice, how do we know who that Someone is? Well, says Paul, God furnished proof to everyone by raising him, i.e. Jesus Christ, from the dead. He is the One they must deal with!

Now up to this point in the dialogue the Athenians have been polite, intrigued, perhaps even amused. But . . .

When Paul mentions the resurrection, the culture reacts. (32-34)

Everything changes. No longer are they interested in polite dialogue. Verse 32 tells us that when they hear of the resurrection, . . .

Some (I suspect *most*) sneer. The Greeks generally did not believe in immortality; the human body was viewed as evil or neutral at best, and death was viewed as the cessation of existence. The very idea of a dead person coming back to life introduces a concept for which they have no categories. They realize that any God who can raise the dead requires more than philosophical reflection—He demands to be reckoned with. So they stop Paul before he can talk any further about the resurrected Christ. They are being pressed beyond the realm of ideas into a confrontation with the Living God! The Spirit of God is closing in on them and they want nothing of it.

Frankly, I believe much of the opposition true Christianity receives in the public sector today is related directly to the fact that we believe in a God who makes ethical demands on people. Why do you think government, the media, and the public schools can accept almost any viewpoint except a Christian one? They welcome atheism, agnosticism, humanism, pluralism, postmodernism, even witchcraft; they welcome anything and everything that enables them to remain autonomous. But they cannot tolerate faith in a God who intervenes in human culture, who raises the dead, and who calls upon people everywhere to repent.

Others postpone judgment. (32) They are quoted in verse 32, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” These are the truly broad minded, those who would never openly oppose

truth but at the same time don't want to make a snap judgment; they just want to wait and see. They want to dialogue a little more. They want to talk the issues to death.

Paul apparently discerns that they are brushing him off, so he leaves the Council, and a short time later leaves the city. Had he felt there was a genuine desire to hear more, he would doubtless have stayed longer in the city. Whether these people ever have another chance to hear the Gospel we do not know, but Paul never again returns to Athens.

To most observers it might appear Paul's evangelistic mission on Mars Hill was an abject failure. But, almost as an aside, the last verse of our chapter tells us there was a different response from a few.

A few believe. It says in verse 34, "A few became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others." There are always some, rarely many, almost never a majority, who respond positively to the message of the crucified and risen Savior. When they do, they learn that God desires to transform culture, not by targeting the great institutions of art and literature and government and business, but on a small scale, starting with individuals who know they need a great Physician—not for cosmetic surgery but for a heart transplant. Through the power of His resurrection Jesus can make all things new for everyone who believes.

The details about how Dionysius' life was changed or Damaris' or the others are not given for us in this text, but there are more than enough examples elsewhere in Scripture to establish the fact that when one believes in Jesus Christ he gains a new birth, a new perspective, new relationships, new hope, new goals, new priorities, new power.

Conclusion: The late Dr. Charles Berry once told of the inadequate Gospel he preached at the beginning of his ministry. Like many other young men with a liberal theological training, in his early years he minimized the importance and supernatural nature of Christ's death and resurrection and looked upon Christianity essentially as a way of becoming a good person. During his first pastorate in England, he was sitting in his study late one night when he heard a knock on the door. Opening it he found a little girl with a shawl over her head and clogs on her feet. "Are you a minister?" she asked. Getting an affirmative answer, she went on anxiously, "You must come with me quickly; I want you to get my mother in."

Imagining that it was a case of some drunken woman out on the streets, Berry said, "You must go and get a policeman." "No," insisted the girl, "my mother is dying, and you must come with me and get her in—to heaven." The young minister dressed and followed her through the lonely streets on a journey of a mile and a half. Led into the woman's room, he knelt beside her and began to describe the kindness of Jesus, explaining that He had come to show us how to live unselfishly. Suddenly the desperate woman cut him off. "Mister," she cried, "that's no use for the likes of me. I am a sinner. I have lived my life. I have no more time. Can't you tell me of someone who can have mercy upon me and save my poor soul?"

“I stood there,” said Dr. Berry, “in the presence of a dying woman, and I had nothing to tell her. In the midst of sin and death, I had no message. In order to bring something to that dying woman, I leaped back to my mother's knee, to my cradle faith, and told her the story of the cross and the resurrection, and how Jesus was able to save the worst of people because He conquered sin and death—(sin at the cross and death at the resurrection).” Tears began running over the cheeks of the eager woman. “Now you are getting there,” she said. “Now you are helping me.” And the preacher, concluding the story, said, “I got her in, and blessed be God, I got in myself.”

That's it! That's what the Gospel is all about. Do you believe it? Have you received Jesus Christ into your life by an act of faith? Let's pray.

i. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 39-40.