

HEAD FOR THE HILL

ACTS 17:16-34 SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

The book of Acts is such an enthralling book. To see these astounding things happening, against all odds, with powers and empires trying to hold back God's work, yet the Gospel keeps spreading and transforming lives. Saving people who seem unsavable. Reaching places that seem unreachable.

If you're like me, it's easy to start thinking of these stories as if they belong in a superhero comic or *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*. That they're the fantastic exploits of larger-than-life champions, a sort of Christian mythology, far removed from the kind of spiritual life I should expect. It's a mistake for us to think that way. When we look at these Christian examples found in the book we discover that they *assumed* others would also experience the filling of the Spirit, that they would be used, that God's work would continue, not only through Apostles, but through 'average' Christians. Paul thought that of Timothy and Titus and, really, *all* the Christians he wrote epistles to. So did Peter, who wrote to all of us in his letters that he expected our faith to be strong and genuine, that we be ready for action and that the angels of heaven are eagerly watching God unfold His work through us, much in the same way we eagerly watch Him do so in the stories of Acts. It's a mistake for us to separate out those ancient Christians from ourselves, as if we're in a lower weight class.

But there's also a tendency to treat the book of Acts like a *recipe* book. That if we simply copy the methods of the first century church, then that will "unlock" the dynamic power of God. First of all, we see that there were all sorts of different methods depending on what was going on. Second, these examples are not formulaic. They're a historic testimony of an ongoing effort. Luke says in the very first verse that his books are a record of what Jesus *began* to do and to teach. For over 2,000 years Jesus has still been doing and teaching through His Body here on the earth, that's you and me.

So, if Acts isn't a comic book and if it isn't a recipe book, what is it? Just a history book? We know it's more than that. It may help to think of it as a book more in the warfare theory category. After all, the New Testament says that we are engaged in a spiritual war. Sent out with armor to demolish strongholds, to conquer, to rescue captives. Books about the practice of war will, naturally, have a historical bent, but will be more than that. They show us principles of battle science. They tell tales that not only stir our hearts but have real world application, that is, *if* you plan on going to war yourself. But, when learning from them, you wouldn't say, "Ok, here's what Napoleon did to defeat the armies of Austria, so I just need to copy him and I'll win, no problem."

What's the point of all this? We've come to one of the more celebrated passages of Acts - Paul on Mars Hill - and I would submit to you that for *us*, this is one of the most relatable stories in the entire book. Of course, *all* of it has application and value. But for the relatively unpersecuted, 21st century Christian, we can see ourselves in *this* scene much more easily than locked in a 3rd world dungeon, or being beaten in the city square, or being brought before a Church council. In other parts of the world and in other times in history, those other scenes have been more comparable to what Christians regularly experience. But Paul, speaking to a diverse group of people, each with their own philosophy and perspective, that's a lot like what we encounter. You may not find yourself in the Areopagus, but is the water cooler at work all that different? Maybe not.

So let's take a look at this famous story and see what sort of principles we can gather about God's heart, His work and how it might apply to us and through us.

We're picking up in verse 16 in the city of Athens, where Paul had fled to escape danger in Berea.

Acts 17:16 - ¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols.

What was so different about *this* pagan city compared to every *other* pagan city he had visited? All these Gentile places were full of idolatry and heathen temples and all sorts of outright polytheism. So why did Paul have this sharp reaction? Well, first of all, Athens was well known for being incredibly idolatrous. Pausanias, who lived shortly after Paul's time, is known for writing a book called *Description of Greece*.¹ He said, "there were more images in Athens than in all Greece besides."²

We would also say that Paul was particularly moved by the Spirit in response to what he was seeing. He didn't normally have a casual opinion of sin, but as he looked around and saw the saturation of idolatry, his heart was stirred. Perhaps it was even more stinging because Athens was supposed to be the center of study and learning. "A city...thought to be more enlightened than any other... [where] learning and arts were carried to greater perfection than anywhere else in the world."³ And what did it produce? Lie after lie. Snare after snare. Spiritual ruin. No wonder it distressed a man who knew the Living Savior.

There's a principle of application for us here. Paul was *waiting* and as he took a look around, he had a spiritual perspective and saw spiritual needs. *We* are waiting. Waiting for the Lord's return. While you're waiting, take a look around and get busy furthering God's work.

Acts 17:17 - ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

One spiritual truth that comes out of this situation is that everyone who isn't born again needs salvation equally. The Jews needed it just as much as the idol worshipers. The Stoics just as much as the Epicureans. The idle troublemakers in the marketplace just as much as the shopkeeper. All are in need of God and all are *loved* by God.

A point of application here is: Paul wasn't *only* distressed, he walked onto the field and got involved. There's a lot out there to upset us, especially as God-loving, moral people. Let's not just be upset, but to take our concern and put some legs on it and get to the Lord's business however we can.

Acts 17:18 - ¹⁸Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, "What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?" Others replied, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities"—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

We don't need to get too deep into what it meant to be a Stoic or an Epicurean. Suffice it to say, they were different philosophies about how a person should live. Some of these people believed that the gods were too far removed to have anything to do with humankind. Sort of agnostics. Others thought that the highest value of man was to live a good life and relate well to friends. Some were pantheists - thinking there *is* no actual, personal God. Others, I'm sure, didn't care about religion as much as they just wanted to make a buck and mind their own business.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pausanias_\(geographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pausanias_(geographer))

² Joseph Benson *Commentary Of The Old And New Testaments*

³ *ibid.*

And this is the situation we find ourselves in today. There are a lot of people with a lot of different ideas. You come across them all the time at work or in school or in the donut shop. The internet has made junior philosophers of everybody. There are some people who fashion their lives after a Jordan Peterson video or do whatever Joe Rogan or Oprah Winfrey says. There are other people deep into Critical Race Theory. I've got a friend from college who has decided he doesn't want to be a Christian anymore, he's watched some stuff on YouTube and now he doesn't think human beings have a free will. Not in a theological sense, in a philosophical sense.

So, on any given day, you and I might encounter a modern day "Epicurean" or "Stoic" or a scoffer or just people who don't quite understand what you're all about as a Christian. Paul examples to us here that, no matter who you're talking about, the target goal is the same: Tell them the *GOOD* news about Jesus Christ. How He lived and died and rose again and what that means for each and every person on the earth.

We note that some called him an "ignorant show-off," or a "babbling." Your translation may even render it "seed picker." Which shows that even though there wasn't *violent* hostility in Athens, there was still hostility. And we should expect there to be levels of hostility to rear up when we live out or speak out our faith in Christ.

Acts 17:19-20 - ¹⁹They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, "May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? ²⁰Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean."

The Areopagus was a prestigious place, this was quite an opportunity, but the setting is somewhat casual. Paul's not on trial. There's no riot or commotion. There was a group of people interested in hearing him. In that sense, it's like when your supervisor at work suddenly says, "You go to church, right?" That moment can feel intimidating, because in many cases such an opportunity is somewhat rare. Or maybe you're at some training and they're doing a Q&A time or want input and suddenly the focus is on you and you've got these professionals or experts and you get the chance to speak. Maybe you're in a classroom setting or even just on the family text thread and that non-Christian sister-in-law with a Masters degree opens a door for you to say something about what you believe.

In that moment we want to react quickly, take the opportunity that is presented. We'll see Paul doesn't have *much* time, but he uses what time he has. And we want to realize that the things we say might sound new and strange to a lot of people. Our perspective on what matters in life, our perspective on suffering or generosity or truth and ethics, these are things that many people not only don't understand but are confused by.

What we'll find is that, *in* this moment, Paul is *not* going to present them a "teaching" as much as he is going to present to them a *Person*. And that is a very important principle when it comes to living as witnesses for the Lord. Christianity is *not* a system. It's *not* a philosophy. It is a *relationship* with the Living God, our Creator, our Savior, who then *does* take our lives and give us a worldview and way of living, but it's the *Person* we want to present, not a philosophy.

Acts 17:21 - ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

Luke gives us an editorial comment here, but it can encourage us. Some of the people around us are *not* on a genuine search for spiritual truth. The Philippian Jailer, *that* guy's in crisis. He is genuinely looking for answers. Same with the Ethiopian Eunuch. *These* folks, some were probably earnest, but a lot were just going about their business without any real interest in Paul's God. Even so, God's word and the Holy Spirit are powerful enough to break into hearts and make a difference.

Acts 17:22 - ²²Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect.

It's not a good thing to be "religious in every respect." Religion is a deadly thing. Look at what intense "religiosity" did in the Bible, whether it was the Athenian flavor or that of the Pharisees. We relate to God on the *heart* level, not the legal, ritualistic level.

Acts 17:23 - ²³For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Now, remember, Athens was supposed to be this pinnacle of thought and learning and spirituality. But think for a moment about how silly this really is. In Greek mythology the gods would sometimes come down and mingle with the people. Imagine some god, the unknown god, showed up one day, and said, "I'm here. I'm powerful. I want to know if you worship me." Their response was, "Oh yeah, we put a little shrine over there. That one can be yours."

"Well, did you search for me or honor me or try to obey me?"

"Like I said, there's a placeholder shrine over there...we're hoping that would cover it..."

That's the *pinnacle* of human philosophy. The best man can do is make gods for himself, fashioning them according to his own imagination and frailties and insufficiencies.

Luckily, we no longer need to live in ignorance, because the one true God has revealed Himself.

Acts 17:24-25 - ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

God is not only *Maker*, He is *Master* and He is the *Maintainer* of all things. Breathing hasn't been quite so easy the last weeks with the fires, but let's be reminded that every breath is literally a gift from God. He does so, not because He needs us but because He *loves*. He is a *Giver* and a *Sustainer* and, Christian, He will sustain you now and forevermore.

Acts 17:26-27 - ²⁶From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. ²⁷He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

There's so much talk about ethnicity and race these days. We don't want to be callous or without tact, but boiled all the way down, the Bible declares there is *one* race - the human race. Interestingly,

the reason why mankind has split off into national groups is, according to Paul, so that God could work out His loving providence and draw all men to Himself. How can that be?

Well, we remember the first great division of people at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. There they were, working together to reject God, and God said, “For their own good we need to split them up, because if we let them continue on this path, they’re going to be lost.” So in *love* God confused our language. And here Paul reveals that God scatters people throughout the world and throughout the generations so that they will always be as close as possible to connecting with Him if they will turn in repentance and faith.

On a practical level, this means that God has scattered you into this time and this place for a particular, loving and spiritual reason. This is why we need to be very careful about tinkering with the movements of our lives. We don’t want to spend time in Philistine territory like David did. We want to be where God wants us to be because He wants us there *on purpose*.

We also learn here that any person, in any condition, can reach out for God and immediately lay hold of Him. There is no one too far gone. Whether you’re the prodigal in the pig pen or the king in the palace, God our Savior is immediately within reach and He is, in fact, reaching out to each of us.

Acts 17:28-29 - ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ ²⁹Since, then, we are God’s offspring, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

When you think about nonChristian religious ideas which try to answer the questions of how we get to heaven or how to live a meaningful life, they’re pretty sad. About as sad as carving a little image and calling that a deity. People in our day-to-day lives will often say things like “I’m a good person.” Ok, but that’s not anything. That’s like saying, “I’d like to be awarded the Nobel peace prize, please.” “Ok, on what basis?” “Well, I didn’t commit genocide today.” That’s not how it works.

Now imagine a thrice Holy God who gave you life and breath and help and a way to be saved. And you stand before Him and say, “I wasn’t AS bad as I could’ve been.” “Ok. Well, did you love Me? Did you try to know Me? Did you listen when I spoke to you?” “No, I made you this carving.”

Paul highlights the fact that even unbelievers have an innate understanding that there is a God and that we owe our lives to Him. “Some of your own poets have said...” As Christians we need to preach and live out the truth that our lives are not our own. They belong to God. A *gracious* God, full of love and kindness. But our lives are His, for His glory, for His use.

Acts 17:30-31 - ³⁰“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

No more excuses. If a person wants salvation, if they want a life of meaning, if they want to be saved from hell and be made right, they must turn toward God from whatever other idol they serve or philosophy they follow. It is commanded. And *that* is the first step for the unbeliever. Not some method or program or formula. Repent! And it’s urgent they do so, because each passing moment, each breath they take is one closer to that final judgment, where they will stand before a perfect God

and have to answer this question: Are you righteous? There is *none* righteous, no not one. Only Jesus Christ passes inspection. And only those who are in His hand will escape judgment and the penalty for their sin. Christ is that Man appointed by God, He is the GodMan, who will judge the world in righteousness. And we know it's true because He was raised from the dead.

Acts 17:32-34 - ³²When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." ³³So Paul left their presence. ³⁴However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

It would've been an intimidating crowd and a not-altogether friendly one, but Paul didn't shy away from really delivering them the truth. They asked some questions, he directed them to Jesus and for their need to repent and be saved. Some people mocked him, some were shook but weren't ready to decide, others were born again. And that's going to be our experience as well. The encouragement is that, when we share the Gospel, the *reaction* is not our responsibility. There will be a whole range, like we're seeing here. Our responsibility is the message, so let's be sure to deliver it in full. That doesn't mean we have to narrate the entire Bible, but we can give a presentation of the truth in telegram length, if necessary. God is real. You're a sinner. God wants to save you. Jesus Christ is the only way. Repent and believe.

What Acts demonstrates is that, just as God has scattered people throughout the world on purpose, He has also put *you* in certain places on purpose so that you can further His work and testify on His behalf. We can do so with force and boldness, like Paul, but also with grace and tact, like Paul. He didn't get into a shouting match with the scoffers. When it was time, he left peaceably.

As the chapter closes, Luke records 2 of the converts. I find this to be a very interesting post script to the scene. Dionysius was an "Areopagite," meaning he was probably one of the judges in this prestigious institution. He would've been at least 60 years old,⁴ and he was named for a Greek god also known as Bacchus, as in the god of drunken revelry. Among other things, he was also the god of insanity and ritual madness.⁵ But, he was *also* a god who had, supposedly, died and risen again.⁶ So here we have this man, long steeped in paganism, an exemplar of Satan's counterfeit and ruin of man. And *even he* could be reached by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Tradition tells us that he would ultimately become the Bishop of Athens.⁷ What a great end after so many wasted years.

So, when you and I find ourselves in some intimidating conversation, take heart, take the opportunity and remember that we are part of the continuing work of God on the earth. And our God can overcome any lie of the Devil, our truth is enough to impact the smartest guy in the room, and no life is too far gone. Even old Areopagites might be brought from darkness to light and used by God.

We may not find ourselves in Philippian dungeons, but we probably will find ourselves on a Mars Hill or two at some point. Head for the hill and know that you are in good company and have a good God standing with you, filling your heart and using you for His glory.

⁴ *Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers*

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dying-and-rising_deity

⁷ *Gill's Exposition Of The Entire Bible*