

The Aristocratic Athenians

The nature of the one true God

Acts 17.16–34

Don Ruhl • Savage Street, Grants Pass, Oregon • March 30, In the year of our Lord, 2014

Scripture Reader and Reading: Carl Peugh – Isaiah 44.12–17

Song Leader and Song Suggestions: Phil Joseph – There Is a God

Prelude:

I. Athens was such a great city,

A. that although it no longer has political dominion,

B. it still influences

1. art (especially sculpture),

2. philosophy,

3. literature,

4. sports

a) (anyone ever hear of

b) the Olympics and the Marathon), and

5. oratory. [Lincoln's Gettysburg Address]

a) You can see this in the first century, and

b) even Acts 17 gives a hint of these things.

C. Our current form of government has some basis in ancient Greece.

II. When you open your Bible to Acts 17,

A. you see the most famous apostle in the city of Athens,

B. after fleeing persecution in Thessalonica, he went to Berea, then

1. Acts 17 shows that he had to flee Berea also to escape persecution.

2. The brethren took him to Athens,

14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to

come to him with all speed, they departed (Acts 17.14–15).

III. The Jews persecuted Paul in Thessalonica and Berea, but at least

- A. they believed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and
- B. they believed in Yahweh God,
 - 1. although they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and
 - 2. believing Him to be a fraud they persecuted Paul for preaching Jesus.
- C. When Paul arrived in Athens,
 - 1. he found a very different atmosphere,
 - 2. likely one that he had never seen before.

IV. Did a city full of idols stop this preacher of the Good News of Jesus Christ?

- A. No, he made some adjustments in
- B. his message and method, and
 - 1. went to work telling the Athenians about Jesus,
 - 2. just like Paul did everywhere he went.

Persuasion:

I. **Acts 17.16–21 – Idols and Idlers**

- A. Paul, a believer in the one true and living God,
 - 1. walked into a city full of idols,
 - 16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was *given over* to idols (Acts 17.16).
 - 2. Of course, this provoked Paul, for
 - 3. he knew Satan had established a stronghold there.
 - a) Paul knew the true God, and
 - b) He was not anything like what Paul saw in Athens.

B. First, he sought a sympathetic audience,

17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there (Acts 17.17).

1. Jews and Gentile converts should have been interested in Paul's message.
2. However, he also went out into the city.
 - a) Perhaps the apostle could find an open heart there!
 - b) We do know that people were talking about him, as we see next.

C. The professed intellectuals discovered Paul,

18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?" (Acts 17.18–19).

1. At the Areopagus, Mars Hill, they would judge his doctrine.
 - a) They had no idea how much this preacher would change their world.
 - b) Greece had a profound influence on the world, but
 - (1) its influence did not, and does not,
 - (2) touch what Paul brought to their world.
2. Epicurus (431 BC – 270 BC) founded the Epicureans,
 - a) believing the supreme good to be pleasure and happiness, and
 - b) His followers used his philosophy for fleshly indulgence.
3. The Stoics believed in pantheism, the belief that everything is God.

D. It is not surprising then to see their view of Paul.

1. They saw him as a Babblers, or as the Greek text says "seed picker."
 - a) Like the noisy sparrows near by,

- b) they saw him as sorting through the trash bin of useless wisdom.
- 2. They thought he set forth strange gods!
 - a) Of course, theirs were very logical!
 - b) Paul would show who is logical and who is strange.
- 3. Paul seemed inferior to them, because
 - a) he only had one God.
 - b) They were superior by believing in many gods,
 - (1) leading them to scoff at Paul's brotherhood of man, because
 - (2) Greeks were superior.
- 4. Moreover, the bodily resurrection and judgment repulsed them, because
 - a) that meant accountability, and
 - b) it meant a miracle beyond anything they ever could have believed.
- E. These lovers of idols were also themselves idle,

20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing (Acts 17.20–21).

- 1. How easy it is to talk or just listen instead of act.
 - a) You can seem intellectual,
 - (1) like you are looking for the truth,
 - (2) excusing yourself from living a virtuous life in the process.
 - b) Indeed we must talk and listen as preliminaries, but
 - (1) they do not excuse lack of activity,
 - (2) rather they should lead to action.
- 2. Mere mental gymnastics and
 - a) worshiping the god of novelty

b) makes no improvement in man.

(1) Does reading and studying about exercise make you physically fit?

(2) Nor does mere contemplation of ideas improve us.

II. Acts 17.22–31 – Proclaiming the Unknown God

A. Paul acknowledged their religious inclination,

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you...” (Acts 17.22–23).

1. A historian said,

“It was easier to find a god at Athens than a man.”

2. They even wanted to honor a god they may have left out.

a) Paul charged them with ignorance,

b) without calling them ignorant,

(1) though they were sincere,

(2) they were dangerously ignorant.

B. Then Paul explained God’s connection with the world,

1. including with the Athenians,

24 “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17.24–25).

a) A mere temple cannot house such a God. [As Solomon said]

- (1) Paul declared our God to be the supreme God.
- (2) His exaltation over man
 - (a) is obvious from God being Lord of heaven and Earth,
 - (b) something man does not even come close to imitating,
 - i) nor did the Greeks and Athenians have a god
 - ii) who had such dominance!

b) Moreover, He is self-sufficient,

10 “For every beast of the forest is Mine,
And the cattle on a thousand hills.
11 I know all the birds of the mountains,
And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.
12 If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.
13 Will I eat the flesh of bulls,
Or drink the blood of goats?
14 Offer to God thanksgiving,
And pay your vows to the Most High.”
(Psa 50.10–14)

C. If those things are true of God, then the following is true of man.

1. We are of one origin,

26 “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings” (Acts 17.26).

- a) Here Paul connected every human with every other human.
- b) The one God started with one man and one woman,
 - (1) populating all the nations with their descendants, and
 - (2) as Lord over the Earth,
 - (a) He determined the duration of every nation, and
 - (b) He determined the boundaries of every nation.

- i) Right there, Paul connected the Greeks with all others,
 - ii) showing they were just like other people and nations, and
 - (1) he also explained
 - (a) why Greece had shrunk and
 - (b) why Greece no longer dominated.
 - (2) The Greeks were under the same God as the Jews.
 - c) These things being true, here is the next logical step.
2. We should seek God,

27 “so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring’” (Acts 17.27–28).

- a) God set eternity in our hearts,
 - 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end (Ecc 3.11).
 - b) God set things up
 - (1) that we might seek Him, and
 - (2) that we might find Him.
 - (a) We can seek and find Him, because
 - (b) He is not far from any of us, since
 - i) we have our daily existence in Him,
 - ii) something that even a Greek poet acknowledged.
3. We are God’s offspring,

29 “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by

art and man's devising" (Acts 17.29).

a) As the psalmist declared,

3 Know that the Lord, He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
(Psa 100.3)

b) We are not gold, silver, or stone.

c) We are not something shaped by artists and craftsmen.

(1) We are the offspring of God.

(2) Therefore, if we are not gold, silver, or stone, He is not.

D. However, there is more than just knowing He exists,

30 "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17.30–31).

1. If He created us, and

a) created our nation, and

(1) if we live in Him daily,

(2) we should live as He intends!

b) That means we have some serious changing to do.

2. If He created us,

a) He will want an accounting of our lives sometime in the future.

b) We know this day approaches because He raised Jesus from the dead.

(1) He raised Jesus from the dead,

(2) showing that He shall raise us from the dead.

- (a) He will raise us from the dead
- (b) that we might meet Him at the Judgment.

III. Acts 17.32–34 – Mockery, Time, and Belief

A. Some of the Athenians mocked Paul and some wanted more time,

32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter” (Acts 17.32).

1. It amazes me

- a) that men can mock the idea of the resurrection of the dead, but then
- b) embrace wild ideas like life coming from non-life!

2. It is amazing what men will believe so long as it is not in the Bible.

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, *the world through wisdom did not know God*, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1Co 1.21).

B. Some people need more time.

- 1. They need to investigate more.
- 2. For some people, right now is not convenient.
- 3. Others just do not want to give the commitment.

C. However, for some people, Paul’s message made sense,

33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them (Acts 17.33–34).

Exhortation:

I. **Does Paul’s message make sense to you?**

- A. If not, why not?
- B. What questions do you have?

II. Do the things of God bring some strange things to your ears?

- A. Do you want to know what these things mean?
- B. I want you to know
 - 1. that the God who made the world seeks to dwell in your heart, and
 - 2. that He does not need anything from you, but
 - a) He gives all things to you, and
 - b) He wants you to find Him.
 - (1) He is not far from you, and
 - (2) He wants you to prepare for the meeting you shall have with Him.

III. How do you respond to this message?

- A. With mockery?
- B. With procrastination?
- C. With investigation?
- D. With belief and obedience?