

The Bible in One Year Week 26: To the Ends of the Earth (Acts Pt. 4)

(Acts 13:1-5, 17:16-34)

• **Causing a Stir**

- A 20th century Anglican bishop once remarked, *“When Paul preached, there were riots; when I preach, they serve me tea.”* Kind of sums things up, doesn't it?
- Here's what N.T. Wright says about this section of Acts we're exploring today: *“Many Christians in the Western world today simply can't bear to think of confrontation... There really isn't such a thing as serious wickedness, so they think, or if there is it's confined to a small number of truly evil people, while everyone else just gets on and should be accepted and affirmed as they stand. Christian mission then consists of helping people to do a little bit better where they already are, rather than the radical transformation of life that... was happening all around the place in the early chapters of Acts. And so, when we come to this great turning-point in Luke's story, the start of the extraordinary triple [mission] journey... [of] Paul... we would much prefer the story to be one of gentle persuasion rather than confrontation. We would have liked it better if Paul had gone about telling people the simple message of Jesus and finding that many people were happy to accept it and live by it. But life is seldom that straightforward, and people who try to pretend it is often end up simply pulling the wool over their own eyes... What's the point in trying to swim with one foot on the bottom of the pool? You're either up for the real thing or you might as well pack it all in. And Saul and Barnabas were up for the real thing. They had to be, after that send-off.”*
- And so, here we are in the last section of Acts, which we'll spend two weeks in. Chapters 13-24 tell the story of Paul's “triple journey” that would take him across Turkey and Greece and back, and then all over again, and finally right into Rome itself.
 - As we've seen so far, there are a lot of wild and wonderful stories about the ministry of the early Church that, if we take time to really dwell on, can shake us awake from our apathy, rekindle a passion for Christ's mission, and give us wisdom for really living as *disciples* and *witnesses*. Today we'll focus on one particular part, Acts 17, with this famous speech Paul gives to the philosophical and intellectual elites of the *Areopagus*, also called *Mars Hill*.
 - Some call Paul's message here to the philosophers of Athens a “masterclass in evangelism.” So, we're going to break down the story and find wisdom for our walk today. Whether you're a follower of Jesus or you're still trying to figure it out, this story has great insights that can help us see what the Gospel really is and how it engages with culture.

• **From Marketplace to Mars Hill**

- So, you heard the story, you heard Paul's speech in the Areopagus. Here are just three insights.
- **1) The Gospel Engages Everyone** – the insiders, the outsiders, the high, the low, and everyone in between. Remember from last week, Paul was a Jewish Pharisee, he ran with the same crowd that put Jesus to death, and he was a zealous persecutor of the church. But, in one of the most unlikely and influential conversions in all history, Paul encountered the risen Jesus, had his life turned upside-down, and was commissioned as *the* Gospel ambassador to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world. The rest of Acts is about this mission. This time in Athens is an iconic moment in his ministry.
 - So far, we've seen Paul engage all sorts of people: his practice was to start in the Synagogues, with the “insiders,” the heirs of God's promises, who already had a starting point. Then he would often go to the marketplace, as a leather-worker, and he'd dialogue with all sorts of people in the Greco-Roman world: uneducated, down-and-out, working-class, and people of prominence, too.
 - Here in Athens, we see the Gospel really come in contact with the *philosophical* realm of their culture—which was very significant. You see, in the Roman Empire, the city of Rome was the *political* center, but because Rome took over what was left of the Greek Empire and absorbed all that legacy, Athens was arguably the *cultural, intellectual* center of the Empire. So, it's amazing to watch Paul boldly proclaim the Good News *here*.
 - Immediately, he talks to the Jews in the Synagogue and the Gentiles in the marketplace—debating, teaching, evangelizing. And while that's happening, Acts 17 says, *“A group of*

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.'...They took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus..." It's about to get really interesting!

- The Epicureans and the Stoics were the leading philosophical schools of the day, they had a huge impact on the Greco-Roman Empire and actually on Western civilization as a whole. Athens was a colorful place where all the latest ideas were discussed and debated.
 - They brought Paul to the Areopagus, which the Romans called Mars Hill, because according to their mythology, the god Mars (or Ares to the Greeks) was put on trial there by the gods. This was at one time the highest court for Greece; in fact, it was the same place where 400 years earlier, the philosopher Socrates himself was tried and sentenced to death. Now they met there to debate and discuss ideas. So, Paul was not just coming to give a Ted Talk, but kind of put on trial. The hill sat right across from the majestic Acropolis, the Parthenon, a wonder of the ancient world—a huge temple built for the goddess Athena, the greatest monument of idol worship in the Empire. And here Paul stands to give a message that *denounces* idolatry.
 - But to come back to the first point, this Gospel engages *all people*. When Paul opens his mouth to address this group, it becomes clear he's not just "babbling," but he's skilled in rhetoric, he's knowledgeable about culture, history, and philosophy, and he's bold and resolved in his faith. His views may be strange to them, but intellectually *he's not out of place*. It's really something to consider that this proclamation of the Good News Paul carries across the Empire has a place in the Synagogues with faithful Jews, in the Marketplace with common people of all sorts, and even in the pinnacles of intellect and culture. And Paul, God's chosen instrument, knows how to adapt the message to the context, ever so skillfully.
 - The Gospel is still relevant for *everyone*, high and low and in between. It can stand on its own among the greatest intellectual minds and the simplest souls. It has something to say to children, to politicians, to fishermen, and philosophers. That's pretty amazing. There's a popular notion among the more ardent sceptics and atheists today that Christianity, biblical faith, or just faith in general is a bygone product of superstition, from darker times, which has no serious place in the modern era, for the rational thinker—as if there were no intelligent thinkers in the era when the church began, as if we today are the only truly enlightened ones. It's the fallacy that faith is anti-intellectual, that you have to dumb yourself down to be a believer. People who say this *haven't read enough*. They don't actually know what they're talking about. Many of the greatest minds, the most influential thinkers of the Western world, real geniuses, *have been devout Christians* and it was precisely because of the deep explanatory power and compelling vision of Christian faith that they devoted their lives to Christ.
 - There's been a great exodus of young people from the Church in recent times, largely because I think we've dumbed it down too much. They haven't been given the intellectual resources to reconcile their faith with everything else they're learning in society. The sad thing is, the Christian tradition has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to this! From the beginning, the greatest minds have grappled with faith and life to make sense of the world and deepen our understanding of the revelation of God in Christ. From Paul, to Augustine, to Thomas Aquinas, to Blaise Pascal, to Karl Barth, to C.S. Lewis. Those were theologians, how about scientists? Blaise Pascal again, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, George Mendel, Charles Townes, Francis Collins. Let me put it bluntly: Christianity is for smart people as much as it is for dumb people. It's for everyone, even though not everyone believes. If you have an active mind, use it to learn, explore some of the great Christian thinkers and engage with culture, it might open doors. And if you're not a big thinker, don't be intimidated when narrow-minded people who think they're smarter than you try to say there's only one way to view the world.
- **2) The Gospel Compliments, Critiques, and Confronts Culture**
- The Epicureans had a view that god or the gods were distant and disinterested in humankind; there isn't much we can really know about them so the best we can do is...try to do our best, seek contentment, live a quiet and happy life. The Stoics, on the other hand, had a pantheistic view—which essentially means that god is in *everything*, divinity lies *within* the present world not

beyond it, and although it's not personal, we can get in touch with it and harness it and live according to this divine "rationality." So, on the one hand you have agnosticism, or a kind of cold deism, and on the other hand you have idolatry. It says that when Paul came into the city he was deeply troubled by all the idolatry he found there. Now, he's taken to the pinnacle of the city amongst the philosophers there, with their various understandings of truth and divinity, and in full view of the temple to the goddess Athena, he says, that's not the way.

- But he leads off by trying to relate to them, he *compliments* them. God created the whole earth; even though this world is fallen, you can find seeds of God's goodness in every culture. Paul says, look I see that you're very devout, you even have this shrine to an *unknown God*; well, let me tell you about this unknown God. He says, your own poets have said this and this, that's not far off. Here's what you're missing, God is not to be found in the created things, he's not like a stone or gold idol. But he's also not so distant from any of us, *in him we live and move and have our being*. And then he hits them with the bold proclamation of Christ died, risen, and reigning. So, his message boils down to: God is both greater *and* closer than you've imagined, and he's acted decisively in history to show us who he is—and it demands a response! *Compliment, critique, confront*. What was the response? That's the last point.
- **3) The Gospel Causes a Stir** – So far, this might have been the greatest platform Paul had, the cultural center of the Empire. You have to wonder what he felt like when, basically, a lot of them laughed him off, and only a few became followers and believed. Do you think he went back to wherever he was staying and wondered, "Gosh, did I blow that one? Is there any hope here?" Whatever he might have felt, it didn't stop him from giving everything to this mission. We shouldn't be discouraged when the message of Christ is met with ridicule and the response seems miniscule. God can do incredible things with small seeds. The Gospel has always been and always will sound *strange*, challenging, and crazy to this world. But it's *true*. It's the proclamation of something that *actually happened*, Jesus rose, he reigns, he's coming again. And it changes everything. If we're totally resolved to trust him, we don't have to worry about the reception or the outcomes, we just have to be faithful with the planting it in God's hands. The work Paul did may have been an uphill battle, but he was planting seeds that would literally impact *the ends of the earth*. *It's why we're here today!* God can do great things with little seeds.
- All of this is important for us today if we want to continue that mission, because we need to recognize the way culture impacts how we proclaim the Gospel: there was a time in this nation when witnessing to Christ might have looked more like Paul going to share in the synagogues. We were speaking to people who had some basic understanding, some starting point with God, and trying to connect the dots. But the truth is, sharing the Good News in our culture today looks more like Paul sharing on Mars hill: there is no common starting point, there's a pantheon of ideas and idols and plenty of ridicule. We need to *love* this culture if we want to reach this culture: and that means we have to be willing to compliment, critique, and confront with this Gospel—which Paul said is a stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who believe, *it's the power of God*.
- So, how about you? Where are you at in this story? The answer in all of these complexities is found in the Lord and Messiah, the Word made flesh, the Center of it all, *Jesus Christ*, who really lived, died, rose, and is coming again. It's simply Jesus. Amen.