

Let's open our Bibles tonight to chapter 17 of Acts, verse 15.

As we've mentioned to you in the weeks that we've been going through this book, it is a narrative report which means it is written as someone who walks along with the action. It isn't really filled with doctrine, although it supports doctrinal positions because of its practices. It is thirty years of history of the early church; that's what we're given by the Holy Spirit through the pen of Dr. Luke. It is the report of the function of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers as the church began with the outpouring of God's Spirit, the saving of the soul and all. And then you find, in this young church, passion and drive and a love for the lost. We brought it up a lot going through Acts; it's a great book to say to yourself, "Who will God use?" and "What kind of church should we be?" because it should line up with the narrative that God gives to us as the report. He could have given to us lots of information, but this is the information that He's given us to learn from.

We are currently traveling with Paul and his mission team on the second (and the longest) missionary journey. I guess it's up here (on the screen). Yeah, if you can see it. If you can't, we have the maps in the back (please grab yourself one) for all of the trips. Paul took his first missionary journey in about 46-47 A.D., spent a couple of years mostly in the Galatia area. On the second trip that he went out on, he would travel 2700 miles and spend six years out on the road, out of Antioch. (The details are found in chapter 15 through chapter 18:22). But for the last four weeks or so, if you've been with us on Wednesday night, we have accompanied Paul and Barnabas as they traveled in reverse order to what they did on the first trip; they went back to all the Galatian churches where God had planted them. They had Timothy join them in a place called Derbe or Lystra; and it does appear that Timothy got saved as Paul came through the first time. In Troas, on the border, if you will, as they ran out of room, they met Dr. Luke who joined them there. You can see the change in chapter 16:10 of the personal pronouns; he wrote the book, so he says "they" and "them" until he's involved with them, then he said "we" and "us." And we will see him picked up again, actually, later in the story as well.

After they visited all of these familiar places that God had blessed, though they were hard places of work, Paul didn't know where to go. We talked a lot about

them hanging around for what could be months in no-man's land, kind of headed, if you will, west but not really knowing where to go. They tried to go south, they tried to go north. Both places the Lord will send Paul in the third journey that he takes. But this time, the Holy Spirit stopped every attempt to go north or south. We don't know how; we're not told at all. Just that they were very well aware of the fact that God said, "That's not where you're headed." When they got to Troas on the coast, the Lord gave Paul a vision of a man standing in Macedonia in Europe, saying, "Bring the gospel to us," and so they were excited to finally get the direction.

They got to Philippi, the first city in Europe. The Bible gives us three very prominent conversions there. One, a very wealthy and successful businesswoman, a Jewish woman from Lydda, and she's called Lydia. And she got saved. Eventually her household came to know the Lord as well. And it became Paul and the boys' operation - her home - in that city. The second conversion was of a young demon-possessed girl who was owned by some really wicked men who used her to tell fortunes and just used her for their own personal gain. But God, over a couple of days, spoke to Paul, who turned and dealt with this demon. The Lord delivered her, but it caused Paul and Silas to be in great distress because her owners cried out what they had done, and they were arrested. Her owners were angry. There was a riot. They dragged Paul and Silas to the judge, who ordered them beaten and imprisoned. And, in jail at midnight, these bloody men began to worship, and it led to the salvation of the third man, the jailer. And eventually he would take Paul and Silas to his own home during the night, cleaned their wounds, fed them, had them share with his family, and they also came to know the Lord. By morning, they were back in prison. The magistrates had sent a word to them, "You can go now. Hope you've learned your lesson. Don't mess around here." And Paul and Silas decided at that point to reveal that they were Roman citizens, which frightened the magistrates because you couldn't beat a Roman citizen or throw them in jail without a trial. And so Paul said, "You can come let us out yourselves." And they did, and they apologized, and Paul, it seemed, to buy some time for this young church as they began to grow. They leave Dr. Luke there. So by the time you get to the end of chapter 16, you will read "they" and "them" again, and Luke will stay here in Philippi until Paul comes around for his third missionary journey and passes by the area.

For now, Paul, Silas and Timothy head for Thessalonica, about 100 miles or so away. They were there for three weeks. In fact, Paul's ministry was always going to the

larger cities first - letting the churches reach out around them, which is, I think, a smart tactic to take. Thessalonica was by far the largest city there on the Roman road, on the Via Egnatia. And Luke doesn't tell us about the couple of towns that they just passed through. But Paul, for three weeks, went to the synagogue as was his practice; found some fruit. Some Gentile converts to Judaism came to the Lord. Several women who were chief women of the city - God spoke to. And it looked like it was going to be a profitable place to minister, at least early on. But, in a matter of three weeks, lines were drawn: the believers were believing, the unbelievers were angry. And so they caused a riot. They went to the house of a man named Jason, who was keeping Paul and them. They arrested him. They couldn't find Paul and Silas. They made him a deal that, "Hey, if you get them out of town, then we'll just drop the charges." And so the boys were ushered out of town for their own safety. And amazingly, and it's a great lesson for later, in those three weeks, this Thessalonian church is planted, and it turns out to be a very healthy and strong and lasting fellowship that would support Paul for years to come. Just being there for three weeks. I know we like to always just plan things out and help God out, but truly there was nothing Paul could have done except just to go. And he went, and then he just left it with the Lord.

They travel 50 miles down the road to a place called Berea. They find, in Berea, very open-hearted people. They weren't gullible; they didn't believe everything they heard, but they were willing to check anything out. And so Paul was very excited, I think, to be there. They were noble kind of people. They searched the Scriptures daily to find out what Paul was teaching them was true. There was a lot of fruit that was gathered there, and it seemed like a time of tremendous strengthening, if you will. But eventually, from 50 miles away in Thessalonica, the angry people found out they were in Berea, and they came and made the same trouble there as they had in their town. And Paul is taken by some of those believers and taken out of the area. Paul leaves Silas and Timothy behind with orders to come and join him whenever they could, as quickly as they could; and he gets on a boat, and he sails 250 miles to Athens - without his ministry friends, without their support, headed for the big city all alone, and that's where we pick up the story tonight. I just want to get you up to date. I said to Pastor Gerard (we were talking today), "I don't think I can do twenty-eight chapters like this." But we'll try to....I think it's important that you see the layout. It helps me tremendously to think along with these guys as they go.

So verse 15 says, "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." So they sailed the Aegean. And, by the way, when we take our group on the "Footsteps of Paul" tour, we sail part of this Aegean Sea, from Greece to Turkey; beautiful place. But it certainly comes alive with thinking how Paul was here. I will tell you, and we won't read too much about it tonight but for the weeks to come, Paul is very discouraged. He has been beaten in almost every place that he has gone; nothing has gone easy. There's some fruit, but it doesn't seem to last very long - three weeks in Thessalonica, three converts in Philippi, then a little while in Berea seemed pretty good, and then they were chased out of town. Now he's by himself. He's had to leave Luke in one place and the other two boys in the other place, and now he's 250 miles away; and then he's got to tell the guys that took him down there, "Hey, go back and tell them to hurry up and catch me." It's going to be months of being really on his own.

But he comes to Athens, the foremost city of Greece. Since 500 B.C., it was the cultural center of the world. Mathematics was developed here under Pythagoras. Remember that Pythagorean formula? You guys take that one? Philosophy developed under Aristotle and Plato. Biology, ethics, political science - all came out of the Greek culture. Socrates was here. Herodias was here. Euripides was here. Demosthenes was here. Homer called this home. I mean, as far as the smartness and the life of the world, you would find it here; it was a city that was unbelievably advanced in architectural design, in painting, in sculpture. It left an impression on Pausanias, who wrote in 175 A.D. a six-volume work entitled "Description of Greece." And he never got outside of Athens - he was supposed to write about the whole country; he spent six volumes just writing about this one city. It was a place of tremendous influence. It was the center of worship in the known world at that time, there. Every possible god had a place, an altar, a temple here. If sex was your thing, then you go to Aphrodite's temple. If you liked to get drunk, you went to Bacchus' - they had a drunken temple for you. If you liked violence, you've got to go to the Zeus place, hang out over there. The Zeus Club at night. Then you have Hermes and Jupiter and Venus and Mercury and Diana and all the gods at Olympus. The saying was you could more easily find a god in the streets of Athens than a man. The Parthenon is there; it was built for Athena in about 440 or so B.C. If you've ever gone to Athens, the Parthenon is built up on a hill, very high up, and the walls are tilted in so that, from the ground, it looks straight. I mean, they just really knew what they were doing, if you will. The Areopagus was there - the place where the courts and the judges would sit. Mars Hill was there. The agora was

there. The Athens city was there. It's an amazing, amazing place. So, think of 800 years of Greek mythology and 500 years of Greek philosophy. And then you find this city which has to offer the best that man has, but they don't have anything to do with any god in particular - they're just idolaters; the whole place is just filled with ridiculous kinds of fanciful hopes. And Paul ends up there with a track record that says, "Gosh, it's just been so hard." And now he's by himself, and he sailed for days and weeks, and he's going to be there for weeks or longer, and he's frustrated.

There are two major philosophies in Athens. There are the Epicureans, and there are the Stoics. Those were the two really main thoughts. Epicureans were founded by a guy named Epicurus; that might not surprise you. He died in 270 B.C. They were pantheists; they believed in lots of gods, but they didn't believe that any god was interested in man. So the gods just leave you alone. Their moniker, "Eat, drink, and be merry. Tomorrow you might die." They didn't believe in an afterlife or judgment. They believed that seeking pleasure was their ultimate goal. Their operative word was indulgence. The Epicureans. And then there were the Stoics, founded by Zeno, a guy that died five years before the Epicurean guy. He believed that fate drove life. In fact, they didn't believe in an afterlife or judgment either; they believed in all kinds of different gods. But to them, the whole key to life was to be unemotionally involved, to be detached from your feelings; they were stoics. And so they would brave whatever without any kind of a face.

Well, those were the two philosophies that dominated Athens when Paul showed up. An amazing city but a very pagan city. The gospel had not been preached here. Man was on his own, in his sin, driven by his blindness, bound to the enemy. I'll tell you what - Athens today hasn't changed much. There is still as much idolatry there as ever. They refused God then, in Paul's day; there are, for the most part, refusing God today. But it is a beautiful place. It's just morally decayed, and it's spiritually dead, and it was at the center of civilization. And then you look at Paul and go, "How is Paul going to react to all of this?" So I just wanted to look at a few verses (down to verse 34 or so - the end of the chapter), but I want to point out to you Paul's reaction. Because, again, this is a narrative. We want God to teach us what we should learn as His people, and I think the best way we can probably learn from this story is to see how Paul, the apostle, reacts to the life that is being lived in this city because you're kind of living in a similar place. Right? We're in the world, and there's a lot of weirdness goin' on, and it gets worse by the

day. And you live in the weirdest state in the union - the most liberal. People vote for things here that would never get away with it in the Midwest. So, how should we react to the Athens we live in?

And I want to point out five things from Paul and just have you think about them yourself. Beginning in verse 16, where we read this, "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." Point one - what Paul saw. If you were anybody but Paul, you would have seen the most magnificent city you'd ever hoped to see. Your view would be, "Man, what a place!" The streets, the discussions, the wisdom, the insights, the magnificent, exquisite buildings, the amazing handiwork, the Acropolis. I mean, the place is phenomenal, even in its ruined state today. You can just imagine how you may have reacted. But I want you to notice something from Paul, the example to us from the narrative of the book of Acts - Paul saw none of that. Paul, in his heart, just with his spiritual eyes, saw that all he could understand was the blasphemy and idolatry that was happening to a city filled with people; in fact, a city that was wholly given over to her idols. The word in Greek for "wholly given over" means to be smothered by. It's kind of like you couldn't get up off the ground. Xenophon, who was a writer of Paul's day, wrote, "Athens is one great altar offering one large sacrifice." That's how the culture was viewed. It was a city submerged in the worship of false gods. And with Paul's Christian eyes and godly heart and heavenly view, he saw a place that was just overrun. He didn't see it superficially as you can fall in love with the world; he saw it for all of its failures. And it moved him. Notice it says in verse 16, while he was waiting there, "his spirit was provoked within him."

If you ask first what he saw, the second question would be - how did he feel as a result? And Paul was provoked. His heart was stirred within him. "*Paroxuno*" is a word that means to be angered or to be exasperated. It is a word in the Greek Old Testament, in the Septuagint, and when it is used it is always applied to God only and only as God looks at idolatry in His people. So, Paul looked around and went, "Oh, man. I can't stand this. I can't take this." It wasn't bad enough that he was having such a hard time; he now got stuck in the middle of the world's city that had everything except what it needed - the things of God. Sometimes this word is translated "jealousy." The LORD said (Exodus 34:14), "Have no gods before Me, for I, the LORD, am Jealous. And I'm a jealous God." That's the word that is used here. Jealousy is the resentment of others to rival you. And jealousy can be good or bad depending on whether the rival has any business being your rival or not. Let

me say that again. Jealousy can only be good or bad depending on whether your rival has any business being your rival. For example, if you are jealous of someone's fame or their looks or their success, you have no right to be jealous of that. You can't be that rival. So that's a sinful jealousy. If, as a husband, you are jealous over your wife's love, that's a good thing because you have every right to have that kind of a desire, and you don't want any rivals in that area. So God says to us - about worshipping other gods, "I'm jealous of your love, of your attention" because He has every right to have exclusive allegiance from us. So, the LORD said through Elijah (1 Kings 19:10), "I've been very zealous for the LORD of hosts." He wanted the people to walk with God. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians (this group we'll get to next time), he was very jealous over the people "with a godly jealousy" (2 Corinthians 11:2). He wanted them to be faithful to the Lord that he had introduced them to. So when Paul comes, he sees the world and, in particular, this beautiful place for exactly what it is - a place overrun, submersed in and choked out with idolatry, and he was repulsed in his heart. It broke his heart. This was the devil at work in the life of the world. How do you feel about the world in which you live tonight? Because God, it seems, uses those who are moved by the sadness around them and the need to preach Christ. And it moved Paul. He saw idolatry. He felt provoked or stirred within himself.

So, thirdly then, what did Paul do about it? We read, in verse 17, "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (we know those guys now) "encountered him. And some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,' because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection." Negatively and internally, Paul was steaming, heartbroken, angry, upset. He didn't despair. He doesn't throw up his anger and talk about the world goin' to hell in a handbasket. He doesn't proclaim that, "All is lost. The city is too large. The sin is too great. The work is over my head. How can I make a difference?" You don't find any of that with Paul even though he is having a hard time. Instead he is determined to make a difference. And the way that he goes about doing that is to go speak to the religious people with their Bibles and to the marketplace with their false gods. In other words, he put himself wherever people would listen to him. And his message was pretty simple, "I want to talk about Jesus, and I want to talk about the resurrection. I want to talk about what God has done for you." And wherever he would get an audience, wherever people would listen, that's where he went. Even the folks who weren't wanting to listen very

much, who seemed to be just kind of sloughing him off - whether it was in the synagogue or the marketplace - he was willing to go and share. I appreciate those of you who show up on Easter to go door-to-door with flyers and just leave them on people's porches. I know a lot of you avoid that because you're afraid someone's going to open the door. Don't fear. They won't bite. And you have a message that they need to hear. Or those that go up and down the parade route at Christmas, just inviting people to come to church or hear about the Lord. This is a really good verse for you. He did the same thing here. He went to the synagogue. He was comfortable there. He was a Jew. He knew how it worked. He wanted to prove to people who had a Bible from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Messiah. He didn't just speak to the Jews; he spoke to those who had been converted to Judaism - the Gentile worshippers. Then he would go off to the agora, to the marketplace, to the streets, to the center of Athenian life. He would witness to anyone who would stop and talk to him. His message was very simple, very direct, and it doesn't seem that it took very long before he drew a crowd. Now, this is a tough crowd. This is far different than most of the crowds you'd run into. These are people whose whole life is spent talking about philosophy and developing theories, aligning themselves with teachers. These are folks who live in their heads, you know? It's a tougher crowd than the people you'd meet at the beach, I'll tell you that. But yet Paul wanted to just go and share. He engaged the Epicureans, those who lived for pleasure. He confronted the Stoic philosophers who had a stiff upper lip. The collective wisdom of the society was cynical at best. They called Paul a "babbler." The word in Greek is "*spermologos*," seed picker. It literally means an intellectual magpie who kind of goes around and takes a little bit of that, takes a little of that, and comes up with a new theory. "This guy's just all over the place." Right? Some weird mixture. It was at least an insult. And Paul wasn't a guy to walk away, but he wasn't discouraged either. So though they kind of poked fun at him, he was going to continue on.

"And they took him," verse 19, "and brought him to the Areopagus," (the place of discussion, where the council would meet, down below the Parthenon there, on Mars Hill) "saying," (as the philosophers sat around) " 'May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.' " And then Luke gives us this description, verse 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." Who are the seed pickers, really? So the philosophers took Paul to a place that was then called the "stone of impudence," which was a meeting place on the side of

the Hill, down below the Parthenon, over the agora - the marketplace, up above the city where they would just sit around and talk. If you go to Mars Hill today, in Athens, you'll find a plaque up on the wall (in the granite) in Greek, of this entire chapter and where they think that Paul probably met with them because this was a well-known place of speaking to one another. "You have a new doctrine. It's freaking us out. We don't really know what you're talking about. Could you tell us what's going on?" And so they're used to this. Paul gets an audience. At least he's got a bunch of people sitting, to listen to him. They're brain candy people. They won't learn anything; they just want to be enticed. There're a lot of people like this today. They want to talk to you about the latest theory or movement or discovery. "They're ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). "They heap up for themselves teachers, having itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3). That's pretty much the way Athens was. But in need, "Paul, tell us." What Paul did, he began to speak wherever he was heard.

Fourthly, here's what Paul said, and it's probably the longest portion of what we're given. He addresses the Areopagus, the formal meeting of men of renown - the judges, the wise men. Verse 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.' " Paul is now given a chance to speak to Pantheists; Pantheists means people that have gods in every place. There's a god for your dog, there's a god for your chariot, there's a god that your hair'll grow back, there's a god that supplies meat to your table. There's a god for everything. It's an amazing concept. But now he has to speak to people who have virtually no Bible knowledge. They're Greeks. They've grown up with Greek philosophy. If you go to Japan today - we have a couple churches that we work with in Japan; had a chance with Pastor Gerard to go and do a pastors' conference there - in Japan, the Bible is a Western book. The history they have is different. So it's hard to start anywhere with a Bible that they don't believe in. That's where Paul finds himself. So, he says (and I think it's important that you kind of - here's what the Lord gives us to kind of walk along with Paul), Paul says the first thing to them, "You're very religious people. I perceive that that's so. Just walking around here, I get that feeling." It's a very long word in Greek. It means to be superstitious. There were 3,000 temples in Athens. So I think that's a fair bet. And it would attest to the fact that at least the people in the city had a hunger for, or a search for, God. And Paul will say (when we get to verse 27 or so) that every man's heart has been created by God with a desire to know God. In other words, in the DNA of man - because of creation, God gives us that hunt, that quest to want to know Him. It's God's creative work. Right? And I

think he got a lot of attention. People went, "Oh, thank you. We are a pretty religious group."

He then says to them, verse 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.' " Again, Pausanias (the fellow who wrote "Description of Greece") mentions a lot of these altars; even mentions that this UNKNOWN GOD altar, according to historical standards, was built 500 years earlier by some folks in Athens when there was a great plague that had killed a lot of people, and they were pretty sure - with all of the gods they were worshipping - they'd left this guy out. So, "We're going to make this your - if you're the plague god, we love you. And we just want to get rid of the plague." So, "You would submit," Paul says in a kind way, "that you don't know everything about every god, though you are very interested in knowing God. But I'd like to talk to you about the God you don't know, that I know." And Paul takes it personally. And I think, in your witnessing, share what God has taught you. It matters to you, it'll matter to them. And so Paul draws them in, "I want to talk to you about the God that you're ignorantly worshipping. I know you're wanting to worship Him, but I know Him personally. So I'll give you a heads-up about this God."

He says, in verse 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. Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.' " He said to them, "The God that I know is the Creator of everything. Not how things happened by chance," (that's what the Epicureans taught) "not as all gods contributed to the world" (as the Stoics believed). "Everything was created by a singular great God who is responsible for it all. And you should know this God is not at all interested in your church buildings, in your temples, in your altars, in your elaborate decorations. He's not moved at all by manmade things." In fact, by the way, Stephen, when he was preaching (in Acts 7:48), said to them these exact same things. And I thought it was interesting that Paul, who at one time was willing to stone him or at least stand by, is now quoting him. He's picked up on his message, which is how far you can come when the Lord gets ahold of you. So, "This is the God that's not worshipped by the work of your hands. Whatever you're building here, whatever you're constructing, He's not moved by that. And here's why: He's the Provider. He provides everything to you - your life, your breath, the animals, the trees, the fields, the stars in the sky. One

God is responsible for all of this. So He hardly needs what you're putting together. He can't be worshipped with man's hands as though He needed anything." You might hear on the radio, if you listen to Christian radio, especially around the holidays, "God needs your financial help at this time." Please do me a favor. Turn off that channel. Because they don't know the God of the Bible. He doesn't need our help at all. He's not waitin' for you to come around so things can really get better. He's not sittin' in heaven with His fingers crossed, "I know you can do it." He owns everything! He can do everything! He doesn't need anything! We need Him! He doesn't need us. He just wants your love. We read that in Psalm 116:12, a couple of weeks ago on a Sunday morning, about, "What can I render the LORD for all of His benefits? I'll just take the cup of salvation, and I'll call on the name of the LORD and pay my vows now in the presence of all of His people." So, God treasures your love, your worship. But, look, He doesn't need you. He wants you, but He doesn't need you. He doesn't depend upon you.

Then Paul says to these very lost idolaters, who think they're very smart, verse 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, 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.' " He is not only the Provider and the Sustainer of life, He's the Lord over all, and He has a master plan. Paul says, in verse 26, "He sets the boundaries of man's life, the length of his occupation upon the earth; every person alive came from one man, one creation, every nation from one man, from one blood - from Adam. All men came from the same work of God. Man is needful. Man is sinful." There's no master race, by the way, and the Greeks taught that there was, and they were it. No. We're all alike. "We're all created by God. We all are made with a desire to know Him." There's a homing device in our hearts, notice verse 27, " 'so that they should seek the Lord.' " He knows about us, He's created us. He's made us in such a way that we " 'might grope for Him and find Him.' " He's close, but in our hearts, until we know Him, we're not aware of that at all. So, here's the God that I know. You can see, I think, verse 27. Just look around. There are churches of every denomination and persuasion around the earth. People do the craziest things in the name of a God they don't know. They are never satisfied until they meet Jesus. And then you rest, don't you? Then you enter into His rest. But until then, you're forever striving to measure up. Until then, verse 23, worship is in ignorance; you worship what you don't know. It's wasted. Right? It goes astray. You can't really

use it, if you will. But there's no assurance at all until you come to Jesus, and then your search is over.

We are told in verse 28, and at the end of verse 27, " 'God is not far from each one of us; 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." ' " In other words, "God's not in hiding. This God I know wants you to know Him. He actively cares about you. He gives you the breath to call upon His name." There are plenty of people, even in our city tonight, that live their entire lives and miss the nearness of God. They don't know Him. You should tell them about Him. When Daniel spoke to Belshazzar (in Daniel 5:23), and it was the last day of the Babylonian kingdom - they were about to fall for good - one of the last things Daniel said to this drunken man and his drunken party was, "You have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see, which cannot hear, which do not know. And yet the God who holds your very breath in His hand and owns your ways, you won't glorify Him. You made the wrong choice." Right? And here, he says the same thing as well. "God is not very far from us. In Him, we live and move and have our being. The very things in our life that we depend upon, God provides." It's an amazing God that would give you your next breath that you would use to blaspheme Him. "Here, breathe in. Okay, curse again. There you go." And God provides even that platform for you and for me. And yet Paul comes along in Romans 10 and, talking about getting saved, he says this, "Just call upon the name of the Lord. You'll be saved. Just open your mouth." Right? "Don't say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven or who will bring Christ down or who will descend in the abyss to bring Him up?' This is the Word of God. It is near you, even in your mouth that the word of faith, which is preached - you can just call upon His name, He'll come." That's the simplicity of the gospel. I would say to you tonight if you're not saved, you're just one word away from being saved. You call Jesus' name, He'll come running. You do it from a pure heart, you admit your sin, there's nothing else that you need to do because that's the God of the Bible. Right? That's the One who created you with a hole in your heart that longs to be filled. So, so close. And Paul saw their groping for God and their religious ways and all of their idolatry, crying out to the Creator, the Sustainer, the Provider, who loved them and wanted them to know Him, and so he says that to them. He proclaimed in verse 18, remember, Jesus and the resurrection; that's been his message. He mentions in verse 28 that even their own poets said "we are His offspring," and that's true by creation. We are all made by God. Spiritually that is not true because of sin; sin separates us from God. We are a part of God's family in the sense that man was created by

God. But because of sin, we need to be born into God's family to become His children. We are His offspring, but we aren't His children until we come to His Son and find forgiveness.

Paul goes on, and he talks to them about, verse 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.' " So, here's his argument. "God is not gold or silver. He's for real. And yet, when you make god, you make him out of gold and silver which is much less than you are. Gold can't talk, silver can't think. Now all of a sudden, your god is made in the likeness of precious metals but having no sensibility to walk, to talk, to think, to reason. Even the world should see this is pretty clear. This can't be a god. This is a god of your own making."

So he says, in verse 30, this, " 'Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,' " to turn from their sins, to walk with God. He's calling on men to repent. From these sins, God has winked at. In "ignorance." He has "overlooked." I think the King James says, "He has winked at." It's a perfect translation. Now the time has come to come to Christ. So, "Now that you know the truth," Paul says, "now you're responsible for it. You've got to repent. You've got to turn from your ways to His ways."

In fact, he goes on and he says, in verse 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.' " "I can tell you that there's a day coming when you're going to stand before the Lord and answer; and though God has overlooked your ignorance up to this point, now that you hear His wants and you heard who He is and why He has come, now you're responsible to Him. And if you want any proof, the resurrection should prove that He's telling the truth." It becomes the greatest argument for your faith. Right? "No other god of the world has ever risen from the dead; but ours has. He rose from the dead." So, that's his presentation. That's his entire argument. What he saw, what he felt, what he did about it, what he said.

We then read, in conclusion, verse 32, "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, 'We will hear you again on this matter.' So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them." So, the response in this very philosophical city was pretty poor.

In fact, it'll be the reason why Paul (in chapter 18) will travel 50 more miles to Corinth and just decide he's not going to preach anymore. He'll beat around the bush, he'll sit in the synagogue and just kind of talk vaguely about faith, but he's not in a position at this point where he wants to open his mouth and say anything. He either thinks that he's going to be rejected or he's going to be beaten. That's pretty much what's in Paul's mind, and he's been here for months by himself. And what a horrible place to be months by yourself in this kind of debauched city. And Corinth is the worst. To "Corinthianize" meant to fornicate. It's a word that was created by a city. Can you imagine? So Paul is like, "I'm not gonna say a word." And until his buddies finally show up in Corinth, he doesn't say a word, really; he's very vague. When they come, he gets more excited because now he's got help again. Because ministry is always done better with others. Right? And Jesus even comes to Paul (in verse 9 of the next chapter) and says to him, "Don't be afraid to speak out here. I've got a lot of souls I want to reach here. No one's going to hurt you." And for the next year and a half, Paul is going to sit in one place - in Corinth - protected by the government, protected by the Spirit of God, protected by the promises of God, and he's going to reap huge spiritual benefits. But I want you to see Paul for where he's at because this has not been a good trip so far, and he doesn't have much to show for the scars that he's bearing. And even when he goes to the philosophical cities, he said everything right, but the result (in verse 34) is fairly pathetic. There are people who disagree. There are other people who want to talk about it some more. Paul is not sticking around. He's going down the road. There's one guy that believes and one woman that believes, and there're a couple of others, but that's pretty much it.

Which leads me to the fifth point - we are called by God to tell others about our faith as well. Paul preached the right message. He stuck with Jesus - who He was - and the resurrection; why He came, what God is all about, who He is, His love. And yet most people put it off. Some of them said, "Look, could we talk about this again?" You don't always get the chance to talk about it again. Paul didn't stick around. He didn't say, "Let's meet next week." He just said, "I'm gettin' out of here. I can't stay anymore." Many people mocked. That'll still happen to you. I think Noah spent 120 years building a boat; people mocked him. "Where's the rain, dude?" That's hard to hear on year 37.....year 86. "Hey, dude. You're gonna die before.....it's a beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky." There weren't any showers to encourage them. They told Noah he was all wet. And then they missed the boat. So here, just a few people believed. That was my point. And even if only a few believe, you're not wasting your time sharing your faith. People want to put it

off, they want to decide, they want to talk about it some other time. Whether the crowd is responsive, whether they're small or negligible, or just one soul gets saved, it's all very important to Christ. So take comfort. I know you read some of these stories and actually go, "Man, if I could preach like that - the whole city gets saved - then I'd do it!" Yeah, well try Paul in Athens, or try Paul, for a while, in Corinth when he's there by himself. We have to tell what we know. And Paul always, it seemed to me, left groups (when he left them) divided. Having to make choices about Jesus. If nothing else, he put before them the truth so that they could make a decision. The pressure of the truth of God's Word was forcing these people to receive or to refuse. Paul had no further word for those in Athens. He would go to Corinth.

In fact, let me say this to you just because we're reading the narrative. Athens is literally the first place where there was no real persecution, and Paul didn't want to stay. They left him alone. "He's just another guy singin' a song. There're a lot of songs in town. Everybody's got a story. He's one of them." No persecution. He could have stayed for weeks; nobody would've bothered with him. They might have thought he was crazy, but they'd think that of each other anyway. This was the first time that there was absolutely no hard persecution because intellectual pride and love of discussion and Stoic indifference had hardened the hearts of the people. There was no way to get through to them. And yet God's Word was able to reach some. So, don't be discouraged when your ministry of sharing the Lord doesn't go fast, doesn't grow exponentially. "Look, a thousand people I led to the Lord!" Well, just share and be faithful where God puts you, and don't let the results, I think, dominate your obedience.

So Paul leaves this place, really, at the end of himself. He is broken, he's defeated, he's close to giving up, he's alone. He's going to be in this filthy city of Corinth. He's going to need a visit from the Lord to restore his hope and his boldness. He needs his friends to show up in the worst way. But he's been faithful even in the worst of times. And so should we be.

So read ahead, and we will pick up the story next time in Corinth. Don't miss it, man. Corinth is just too cool - what God does there. Shall we pray?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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