

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (14-11-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 17:16-34

Paul in Athens

Introduction

After Berea, Paul went to the greatest city of all, Athens, the cultural capital of the ancient world. It is in the late afternoon of her glory now, but still a wonderful city. For hundreds of years it has been the home of great artists, sculptors, orators, writers, poets, dramatists and philosophers. Here democracy was born. Here the Greek language – the most perfect instrument for human expression – was born and was perfected. It is now a leading university city.

In 52AD, the Apostle Paul, a bond slave of Christ, with the love of Christ in his heart and Gospel on his lips, looked around this great city. He was on his own, awaiting the arrival of Timothy and Silas. Many of the things he would have looked at are still there for the visitor to see today, though now in ruins.

Paul's reaction to all he saw in Athens

Paul was greatly distressed at a city so full of idols (v16). He even saw one altar to an unknown god, for fear they had left one out who might be offended (v23). Wherever he went, in the houses he visited, in the streets where he walked, he saw idols and statues of gods in wood and stone. There were more idols in Athens than in the rest of Greece put together. In the time of Nero, there were 30,000 public statues besides the countless numbers of private houses. According to Petronius, it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.

This most learned, civilized, cultured and artistic of cities was full of religion devoid of truth, spirituality and power. The result was the shameless life-style to which idolatry led. A group of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers disputed with Paul (v18). Epicurean philosophy said that everything happened by chance. Death was the end, so eat, drink and be merry. If there was a God like the one Paul spoke of, He wouldn't be interested in people and the world, so you could forget Him. The Stoic philosophers claimed there is a bit of God in every one of us, and life is ruled by fate, so we might as well be calm and unmoved. They advocated suicide as an easy way out.

These philosophers were dark and ignorant of the really important things which concerned God, salvation and life after death. **The world through its wisdom did not know God** (1 Corinthians 1:21). Human knowledge and wisdom have their place, but they are useless when it comes to the things of God. There is a need for divine revelation. God has to disclose Himself. It is a blow to human pride that man is in total darkness apart from the Word of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It is a blow to a world with its stress on knowledge and scientific achievement.

Paul was deeply distressed, and stirred to the depths. He saw it as a tragedy that such gifts and talents produced idols. He was indignant that the Devil had blinded men's

eyes. He was full of compassion because these men were without God and without hope in the world and on the broad way to destruction. He was full of zeal for God's glory.

Men who walk with God have their priorities right and are concerned with the spiritual state of others. **Lot, a righteous man, was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men** (2 Peter 2:7). **As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it** (Luke 19:41). Paul said, **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race** (Romans 9:2,3).

Compassion and concern are the keys to evangelism. People can be lectured and told their duty, but it will be in vain if the evangelist is not telling them in love and compassion. In R.M.McCheyne's diary he recounts, "As I walked through fields, a thought came over me with almost overwhelming power. Everyone of my flock will soon be in heaven or hell. I visited all the sick and the dying of the congregation on Saturday afternoon, because I felt that before I preach on Sunday I would like to look over the verge."

#### Paul's answer to man's need

Paul was not only moved, but also determined to do something about it. Although he was alone, he was not cowed to silence. We need never be afraid of being on our own if we are with God. God can do much through one man (e.g. John Wycliffe against the church; Martin Luther against the ecclesiastical court).

Paul was taken to a court called the Areopagus on Mars Hill, and he uttered his speech proclaiming God's answer to man's darkness and ignorance. (You can still go to Mars Hill today, where a plaque contains Paul's speech in Greek.) Paul quoted from three of the Greek poets, and led the listeners from the little they knew to Christ, the light of the world. His argument was that we can never find out about God from our own reasoning and intellect. God has made Himself known through revelation. God has revealed Himself in three ways – through nature, then history, then finally and supremely through Christ.

- In nature. Paul tells them to look at the earth, sea, sky, flowers, animals, and man. Paul's answer to the Epicurean belief that these all came about by chance was that the source of all these things was the true and living God. The world mirrors His power and wisdom and greatness, from the loftiest mountain to the tiniest insect. He is the Creator and Lord of all, the Lord of heaven and earth. He owns it all. We need to remember that we own nothing. Everything belongs to the Lord, and we are only stewards. One day we will have to give account. He is a great and glorious God and we cannot confine Him to a body. He does not depend on us for anything. He is all sufficient and independent, whereas we need Him. He gives us life and breath and all things – food, clothes, family, shelter, money, power to get money. How grateful we ought to be.
- In history. God made the human race. We are all equal before the Creator. And he made all the nations, arranged where they should live, their migrations, their rise and fall. This is also true of us as individuals – He

determined the date and place of our birth. He appointed all that concerns us – movements, changes, work, prosperity and adversity. So much is strange to us, like looking at a piece of patterned cloth on the wrong side, with the knots and joins exposed. God sees the right side, and from His perspective there is a perfect pattern He is weaving day by day. One day we shall see the right side and shall confess that He has done all things well. He is not far from any of us because in Him we live and move and have our being. He is near to all who call on Him. We are His offspring, and he feeds and provides for us. This is a breath-taking picture of God – being everywhere, knowing everything, all-powerful, forever the same. We need to think great thoughts of God. (C.f. book by J.B.Phillips, *Your God is too small*)

- In Christ. Here is God’s supreme revelation. We can learn much from nature and history, but it is in Christ we see Him personally. **If you have seen me, you have seen the Father** (John 14:9). The full light has dawned. **Give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:6). **In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son** (Hebrews 1:1,2). Jesus is the final and full disclosure. God revealed His purpose to save through death on the Cross, and offer us full and free salvation. If we want to see what God is like, we can look at the Son, listen to the Son, know the Son. In Christ we find the answer to all our needs. He forgives sins. He gives our life purpose. He gives us strength in all the trials and burdens of life. Paul made it clear to all these wonderful thinkers and artists in the city of Athens that all their skills and abilities had their place – but they still needed Christ for salvation.

#### Paul’s appeal to the audience to respond

The listeners needed to do something. Paul had explained to them about God, so now they were without excuse. God had taken steps to disclose Himself to them – so it was their turn to respond to Him. The Day of Judgment is fixed, the day when the world will be judged by Jesus Christ. They would all face the one who loved them and died for them. Would they be able to look Him in the eye? Would they be able to say that His death had not been in vain?

We can be absolutely sure of this judgement day because the judge is alive. He has been raised from the dead. We are called to repent. This is what God commands of all men everywhere. We all have to turn and forsake our old way of living, go for Christ, seek forgiveness, and live under His rule as Lord and Master.

There were three reactions among Paul’s audience. Some mocked and sneered (Acts 17:18,32). He was heckled as a “babbler”, a gutter sparrow picking up scraps in the market place. He was uncultured, and his message was nonsense.

Others procrastinated – they said they would be willing to hear Paul speak again on the subject (v32). They were not ready to face the moral challenge, but would give it a second chance at a later date. There might be something in it. Whether the response was “no” or “not yet”, the result was the same – these two groups of people remained unsaved.

But the third group responded and believed and joined Paul (v33). They were only a few. One was a member of the Areopagus council, one of twelve judges. Some of the believers were women, including Damaris. Only a few, but the result was salvation for these few. So the work had started, and we do not know how many more followed. There was no epistle to the Athenians, but we do know the candle had been lit, from which other candles no doubt caught light and set Greece ablaze.

Paul's concern and compassion at what he found in Athens caused him to point men to Christ, the one who was their creator at the beginning and would be their judge at the end. The call went out for them to make Him their Saviour in the present.

He is not far from anyone of us. This great God can be called just whenever we want. He will hear us, and He will save us. **Your many sins have been forgiven** (Luke 7:47).