

THE GOSPEL IN A PAGAN SOCIETY
Acts 17:16-34

Intro: Every sincere at one time or another has wondered how to reach the people of his generation with the Gospel. People in our day seem to be tolerant, but at the same time they are indifferent and disinterested. And yet when you get down to the basics of the Gospel, you find that they are as resistant as people have always been.

How can they be reached? We are always trying to find the answer, but how many really turn to the Scriptures to see if the answer is there. Do we believe in the sufficiency of the Word of God, that God has, in fact, given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, as Peter said in 1 Pet. 1:3? Then, if we do, the most profitable thing that we can do to get people to listen to the Gospel is to search the Scriptures for the answer. At the same time we need to keep in mind the fact that all are not going to believe. It is not God's plan that all will believe. God's Word accomplishes God's purposes, not ours. And so, what we do we must do with our faith in Him, that He will use His Word as it pleases Himself.

One of the most interesting passages for the study of evangelizing a society like ours, a society which is essentially pagan, is the 17th chapter of the book of Acts. There was a lot of difference between ancient Athens and present-day Portland, and yet there are many similarities. They had idols that they worshipped; we do not see that in Portland. People do worship money and pleasure and sports and all that goes with these things. We are taught to be dissatisfied with what we have and to covet better things, on the assumption that happiness is to be found in what we have. But people do not want to think about death, or in what lies ahead of us after death. And so in some way we have to speak so that interest will be aroused, and some will believe. Cf. Acts 14:1. How can Paul's message on Mars' Hill help us?

I. THE ALTAR TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

The Athenians were a very religious people, and yet God-less. They had many idols, and yet there was no assurance. This particular altar existed as a confession that there was the feeling, perhaps, a fear, within their hearts, that they had, after all, missed the greatest of the gods, or the one true God, which they had!

This tells us something very important about the human heart. He has no security. He continues to seek for peace, and is always hopeful that the next thing that he turns to will end his search. But his heart is not really open to the truth. What a hopeless situation!

II. THE APOSTLE PAUL'S MESSAGE.

This begins with v. 22 and goes down through v. 31. He took the inscription on the altar as his subject. He knew the blindness and the perversity of their hearts, but he also knew how their hearts would be opened if they were by the grace of God to be opened. They must know something about this God which they confessed that they did not know.

Paul did not have a background of idolatry, as such. But he did know what had opened his heart to the truth: It was his personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. When he was confronted with the Lord, all of his resistance was gone and he was ready to hear and believe in that which he had, up to that moment, despised.

A. Paul began with GOD.

A good exercise for all of us would be to take the 10 verses in which we have Paul's message, and make a list of all of the attributes of God which Paul in one way or another referred to.

You see, Paul knew that, if people's eyes and hearts were to be opened to the message of salvation, they would be opened by learning about the very nature of God. Man's ignorance of God renders him incapable of understanding anything else the way he should.

What did he tell the Athenians about God?

1. He is the Creator (Acts 17:24).
2. He is Lord (and He alone)--absolutely sovereign (Acts 17:24).
3. He is infinite, transcendent (Acts 17:24). He does not dwell within the limitations of that which He has created. His majesty and glory are incomprehensible.
4. He is self-sufficient (Acts 17:25). He is not dependent upon us in any way.
5. Evidence of His providence is to be seen everywhere in every generation (Acts 17:26).
6. His omnipresence (Acts 17:27).
7. Referring back to God's creative work, Paul makes the application to man:
 - a. He made us (Acts 17:24).
 - b. He made us all of one blood (Acts 17:26).

This would mean that, although outwardly we might be Jews or Athenians, yet at heart, inwardly we are the same and have the same needs.

- c. He made us for Himself (Acts 17:27).
- d. He made us dependent upon Himself for our very existence (Acts 17:28).
- e. We are His offspring, i.e., made in His image (Acts 17:29).

Therefore, God cannot be like a stone, or like any of the images which the Athenians worshipped.

Therefore, Paul was teaching them that they can only understand themselves in the light of what God is. And what he was telling them about God was not a matter of human wisdom or speculation (such as they spent their time in doing), but it is a matter of divine revelation.

But notice the second thing that we see in Paul's message:

II. HE ARRIVED AT THE GRACE OF GOD (Acts 17:30).

"And at the times of this ignorance God winked at."

Cf. also Acts 14:16; Rom. 1:24; 3:25.

There had been 4,000 years of human history when Paul was speaking to the Athenians. During that time God's patience and grace had been exercised toward the Gentile world.

But NOW the command of God called for repentance, not speculation!

And then Paul reached his final point:

III. HE CONCLUDED WITH PROPHECY (Acts 17:31).

This shows why the Book of the Revelation can be looked upon as a Book which has evangelism as one of its main purposes--as chapter 22 indicates.

- A. God has appointed a day of judgment. But no one knows when it will be.
- B. God has appointed the Judge. His Name is Jesus Christ. See v. 18. When that Day comes there will be no time to prepare for the judgment. There is only one way to escape that judgment with all of its consequences and that is by turning in repentance to Christ now.

Concl: This may not have been all that the Apostle Paul said on that day, but this is the gist of his message, the heart of what he had to say.

What were the results? See vv. 32-34. There were three groups:

- 1) Some mocked.
- 2) Some procrastinated.
- 3) Some believed. "Clave" means that their faith was genuine. Lit. it means that they were glued to Paul. You could not get them away from him and the message he proclaimed. We have here the perseverance of those who believed.

The results are with God. We can pray for the effective ministry of the Word, but the fruit is up to God. Ours is the responsibility of preaching the message, making it clear.

Let me ask you a question: Who was the safer, those who procrastinated, or those who mocked?

What has your response been?