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## Witness in Athens

### Acts 17:16-34

**Intro:** In **ch16**, Paul received the “Macedonia Call.” While waiting in Troas for direction from the Holy Spirit, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling out to him to come over and help them. This was the divine direction he and his team could respond to with confidence. They set out for the European continent and landed in Greece and their first stop for ministry was in the city of Philippi. After much excitement and quite a bit of witnessing, they had established the nucleus of a church before being run out of town.

In **ch17**, Paul visits 3 more Greek cities and the response to the gospel is different in each. In Thessalonica, there was initially a great response to the gospel with many accepting Jesus but then a determined opposition was raised by the Jews who rejected Paul’s message. Actually, they were resisting the Word of God. They instigated a riot that forced Paul to leave the city. In Berea, the response was quite the opposite as both Jews and Gentiles received the Word gladly. They listened to Paul’s message and instead of taking him at face value they studied the Scriptures themselves to see if what he preached stood up to biblical scrutiny. When they were satisfied that his teaching was scripturally accurate, many of them accepted Jesus as well.

Next, Paul finds himself in Athens: the most famous of Greek cities, the epicenter of Greek culture and education. In Athens, the response to Paul’s message will not be a rejection or a reception of the Word. The city was wholly given over to a cultured paganism that valued its own beliefs. Paul’s message will fall on highly educated ears, ears that have been saturated with the illustrious philosophies of the age, and age that believed they knew better. In the end, these ears will turn to ridicule the message of the gospel but only after Paul presents it in a masterful way.

**16-17**— Paul had been to many cities but Athens was the greatest of them all. At one time, centuries before, Athens represented the height of world power. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Athens experienced a golden age that few cities or even countries have equaled in splendor. It was an age of security,

with enough military power to ensure it. It was an age of architecture, both physical and civil. Grand temples were constructed in the city, the Parthenon being the greatest. The also became the first example of democracy in human history. It was an age of literature, philosophy and art but all of that had passed away. Though it had lost most of its former glory, Athens was still a beautiful city and the intellectual capitol of the ancient world.

As Paul entered the city, Athens was still a glorious city, having the best that Greek sculptors and architects could offer but it wasn't the beauty and magnificence of the city that impressed him. He saw the glorious buildings but he also saw that all that beauty did not honor God, so it didn't impress him. What did impress him was the magnitude of the idolatry in the city. The Greek religion was simply the deification of human attributes and the power of nature. It lent itself to art and amusement but was completely devoid of moral power. Paul saw that the Athenians were wholly given over to idolatry and it broke his heart. With all their culture and wisdom, the Greeks didn't know the true God.

Paul's spirit was stirred but this reality and he immediately threw himself into ministering the gospel. Paul's habit was to preach wherever he could get an audience so he used what opportunities where available to share the gospel. Again, we see he reasoned (dialogued) with the Jews in the synagogues and he also witnessed to the Greeks in the marketplace. Anyone who was willing to talk and listen was welcomed by Paul in his daily Bible study class.

**18-21**— Earlier, I said that Athens was a city given over to a cultured paganism. This paganism was nourished by the extensive idolatry of the city but it was also nourished and supported by a love of philosophy and novelty. Novelty was the chief pursuit of both citizens and visitors. Most leisure time was spent either telling or hearing "some new thing." This describes an insatiable desire for information. Someone once said, "the fear of becoming a 'has been' keeps some people from becoming anything." The one who constantly chases the new and ignores the old is easily swayed into error, having no deep roots in the truth. Besides, nothing is really new, we just have short memories.

The Athenians love of philosophy also contributed to their cultured

paganism. This was the birth place of Aristotle, Socrates and a host of other thinkers who are still read and studied today. Now, one modern thinker has defined philosophy as: “unintelligible answers to insoluble problems” but the Greeks would have disagreed. They were committed to philosophy as “the science which considers truth.” Paul had to confront 2 opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens; those of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Epicureans were materialist and atheist. They valued the pleasure of a peaceful life free from pain, disturbing passions and superstitious fears. Their motto would be: “This life is all there is; you only go around once. So if it feels good, do it. If it doesn’t feel good, stay away from it. Avoid what hurts.” Does this sound familiar? The Stoics were just the opposite. Their emphasis of life was on personal discipline and self-control. To them, pleasure wasn’t good and pain wasn’t evil. Theirs was the grin and bear it approach to life. They said, “I can’t control what’s going on around me and things are going to happen to me that I won’t like. But I’m still in charge of myself. So, I’m going to stand tall, stick out my chin, and take it—whatever comes.” These were both faulty philosophies.

It wasn’t long before these philosophers heard about the “new thing” that was going on in the market and they came and listened to Paul and probably debated with him as well. As they listened, there were 2 different responses to Paul’s teaching. One group ridiculed Paul, calling him a babbler. The word literally means “birds picking up seed” and refers to someone who collects various ideas and teaches these secondhand thoughts as his own. It wasn’t a very flattering description of the greatest missionary and theologian of the church. The 2<sup>nd</sup> group was confused but still interested in hearing what Paul had to share. So they invited him to speak at the Areopagus – the council responsible for overseeing both the religion and the education of the city of Athens.

**22-23** – Paul’s message here is a masterpiece of communication. He starts right where these people are by referring to their altar dedicated to the unknown god. He then goes on to explain who this God is and what He is like.

Paul opens his address with a compliment (22) noting that they were very religious. They were so religious; they even erected an altar to a god they

were unaware of, just so this benevolent deity wouldn't feel neglected. But here's the problem with that idea: if they didn't know this god, how could they worship him? Or, for that matter, how could this god help them? It was a sticky predicament (religious conundrum) and Paul wanted to help them out of it.

Now, Paul doesn't say why the true God was unknown to them, though we know the answer from his teaching in **Rom 1**. The reason the Athenians and people today don't know God is because they don't want to know Him. God has revealed Himself to man but man rejects the revelation. They don't like the God who is there. Paul doesn't explain this here. Instead, he merely cites their ignorance, proposing to correct it by his proclamation of this God.

**24-29** – the 1<sup>st</sup> truth Paul proclaims points to the greatness of God: He's Creator of all things (**24**). Every thinking person asks, "Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?" Science attempts to answer the 1<sup>st</sup> question, philosophy wrestles with the 2<sup>nd</sup> but only Christianity has a satisfactory answer for all 3. Paul boldly affirms that God made the world and everything in it and He is Lord of all He has made. He is not a distant God, divorced from His creation; nor is He an imprisoned God, locked in creation. He's too great to be contained in man-made temples but not too great to be concerned with man's needs.

The doctrine of creation means that God has not left Himself without a witness! It's true that not all peoples have had the Scriptures. Before the time of Christ, God gave His Word only to the Jews. But, all people at all times have had a witness of God in creation – in the heavens and on earth. No one can claim utter ignorance of the true God. Paul recognized that these philosophers had to change their ideas about God. They had to move from their own personal opinions to an understanding of who God is according to what He tells us about Himself in nature and in the Bible.

Next, Paul proclaims the goodness of God: He's the Provider of all things. Men pride themselves in serving God but it's God who serves man. If God is God then He's self-sufficient and doesn't need anything man can provide. Not only do the temples not contain God; the services in the temples add nothing to God! Paul completely wipes out the entire religious system of Greece in 2 brief statements!

3rd, Paul proclaims the government of God: He's the Ruler of all things. The Greek gods were distant beings who were unconcerned with the problems and needs of men. But the God of creation is also the God of history and geography! He created all of humanity from one man, meaning all nations are made of the same stuff and have the same blood. The Greeks believed they were a special race, distinct from other nations. Paul says otherwise. Even their precious land that they revered was a gift from God. It's not the power of man but the government of God that determines the rise and fall of nations.

Theologians refer to this guidance of the affairs of men as the hidden counsels of God. They're hidden because God has not revealed these eternal counsels to us in Scripture as He has other things. So we don't know the future, we don't know what God has determined to do in national affairs. All we know is that God's in control of what happens! He's made plans and has already determined what will come to pass. This is the true God, not a weak God, not a God we must beg or appease to get Him to change His mind. He has determined that Greeks would be Greeks; Athenians would be Athenians; and Americans, Americans. None of these things are accidental.

Now, since God has revealed Himself in creation and since He provide for creation (including us) and since God has determined the bounds of our lives and our future; it follows that we have an obligation to seek God out and find Him.

Paul uses a word here for "grope [or 'feeling after']" that came from a well-known story of Greek literature. The giant Cyclops had captured Odysseus and his men, and Odysseus had gotten him drunk and then blinded him. They then tried to sneak out of the cave where they were being held. It wasn't easy because the Cyclops was groping around, feeling after them so he could find them and kill them. Paul's saying: In our sin we're as blind as the Cyclops. But, since creation is still there, we have an obligation to feel after God and find Him, even though we can't see Him.

God is not a distant deity so men ought to seek Him and come to know Him in truth. Paul even quotes from 3 of their own poets (28). Paul's not saying all people are the spiritual children of God; sinners only become God's children by faith in Jesus. Paul was just affirming the Fatherhood of God in a natural sense: that we're created in God's image. This truth can only lead to 1 logical conclusion: if God has made us in His image, it's foolish for us to

make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and temple rituals but the folly of all idolatry!

**30-31** – In his conclusion, Paul calls for repentance. This may seem slightly odd since Paul hasn't mentioned the gross immorality of the Athenians, though he could have. He also hasn't mentioned the intellectual arrogance of the philosophers, though he could have. There was a sense in which the Athenians were ignorant in these areas. Not so with the revelation of God in nature. In this area they did know better, just as men today do, despite their disclaimers. Thus, being guilty in this area, the Athenians needed to repent of their sin and turn from it.

In his conclusion, Paul doesn't just call for the Athenians to repent – he offers them 3 very good reasons to do so. 1) God has been patient, overlooking their ignorance for a season (30). God's patience should encourage us as much as the Athenians. Our world is as corrupt as theirs and we've known the gospel for hundreds of years, they hadn't. Yet God hasn't destroyed America for its sins. Why? It's because God is patient. He's also been patient with you. He's overlooked your ignorance for a time. Pay attention, and let God's patience lead you to repentance.

2) God commands repentance. Repentance is not just a good idea. It's not just the way to salvation. We are actually commanded by God to repent. If God tells us to do something, we had better do it. It's no small matter. If we neglect to obey God in this area, we will be doubly guilty: of our sins in general and of our obstinate rebellion against His clear command. 3) God has appointed a final day of reckoning when Jesus shall be the final judge. Either of these 3 would serve as an adequate inducement for repentance but God has given all 3 to us.

In just a few verses, Paul went from knowing who God is (Creator, Provider, Ruler), to who we are (His offspring), to our responsibility before Him (to understand Him and worship Him in truth), to our accountability if we dishonor Him (judgment). Paul didn't preach a soft gospel here. He boldly confronted the wrong ideas the Athenians had about God and confronted them with the reality of coming judgment. Paul's first mention of Jesus is that of a righteous judge. I'm sure Paul never meant to imply that Jesus was

only a righteous judge. He was probably about to launch into a dissertation of the person and work of Jesus on behalf of the Athenians but was stopped short by his mention of the resurrection.

To the Greeks, the body was only a prison and the sooner a person left their body, the happier they would be. Why raise a dead body and live in it again? Why would God bother with personal judgment of each man? All of Paul's teaching was incompatible with Greek philosophy. They believed in immortality, just not resurrection. Yet, Paul seems to be unable to preach the gospel without mentioning the resurrection. For him, none of the Christian life made sense without the triumph of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, Paul saw the resurrection as the indisputable proof that Jesus will one day judge all men. It showed that Jesus Himself, His teachings and His work were all perfectly approved by the Father.

**32-34** – What were the results? Some mocked because they didn't believe in or even want a resurrection. But, there were others who wanted to hear more. Still, there were a few who actually believed what Paul had said and they stuck with Paul and learned more from him. Some commentators declare Paul's ministry in Athens to be a failure, falling far short of his visits to other cities but is that true? He wasn't run out of town on a rail so he could continue to preach the gospel and teach new converts as long as he was there and I'm sure he did just that.

Sure, some laughed at his message so Paul didn't waste precious time trying to convince them. He had shared the truth to all and some rejected it but many others didn't and he devoted his time to reaching those who had a desire to learn more about God. He wanted to make the unknown God known to them. There is a fine line between carrying the gospel to all the world and casting your pearls before swine. No one is beneath your best efforts but when your best efforts are rejected, move on because the time grows short and the consequences are eternal.

Paul's sermon on Mars Hill is a lesson on how to deal with people who are blind to Christian truth. Sometimes people have intellectual questions about the gospel and those questions should have due thoughtful answers. Peter tells us we should always be ready to give a defense (answer) to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you (**1 Pt 3:15**). We need to be able to do that. But usually the problem's not with our ability to reason or

explain but in the rebellion of the human heart. The problem is the hearer. Paul's solution is proclamation. It's declaring who God is and what He's done and allowing God to bless the declaration. God then takes the truth of His Word and by the power of His Holy Spirit carries it to the heart and brings conviction.

We need this message of repentance for our generation too, because we are far guiltier than the Greeks. You need it for yourself, if you haven't yet repented. Christianity doesn't start by saying, "You're a good egg" and "everything's will be fine for you if you'll just get in touch with God." Christianity says, "You have failed to seek after God. You have gone your own way. You are willfully ignorant. Therefore, God commands that you repent of that ignorance." As we repent, God holds out the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. 😊