

THE LORD OF THE NATIONS

by Steve Zeisler

I have a picture of the Parthenon on the wall of my study. I count on the picture to remind me of three things as I look over at it periodically. It reminds me first of the golden age of Greece, the fifth-century B.C., when Athens was the most remarkable city in the world, and when the Parthenon was built. Athens then was home to some of the greatest minds who ever lived; some of the most influential philosophers, poets and statesmen in history. Demosthenes, Pericles, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were only a handful of those who lived in Athens during its golden age. It was for Athena, the goddess of wisdom, that the Parthenon was built, and she gave her name to the city of Athens.

We in this church live in a similar time and place. We are neighbors with a great university. We live in Silicon Valley, known all over the world for the technical prowess of the companies that are located here. We live in a place that worships the goddess of the intellect in many respects. My picture of the Parthenon reminds me of the kind of community ours is, the kinds of people who live here, and the kinds of concerns they have.

Secondly, I observe that today the Parthenon is a ruins. There are great boulders strewn around the base of this ancient temple. The columns are cracked and chipped and falling down. The Parthenon is still a thing of beauty. But I am reminded that whenever a civilization is built to glorify what humans can accomplish apart from faith in God, it has ended up in ruins. From the Tower of Babel to the present, what human beings can accomplish lasts only for a season and then fades.

The third thing I'm reminded of by the picture is what took place in Acts 17, beginning at verse 16. It was in the shadow of the Parthenon that the apostle Paul preached one of the greatest messages ever preached. Paul cared for the people who lived in first century Athens and spoke penetrating truth to them. His preaching in that community has been an important model for me.

The book of Acts records three speeches by Paul, and in some ways this one is the most remarkable. In chapter 13 is a message preached at a synagogue in Psidian Antioch arguing from the scripture that Jesus is the Christ. But it is not significantly dissimilar from the speech of Stephen in Acts 7 or from Peter's preaching in Acts 2 and 3. In Acts 20 Paul teaches the elders of the church of Ephesus about what it means to be a leader for Christ's sake, the importance of the church, and the need for shepherds in the church; truths that Paul also teaches in his epistles. This message in Acts 17 stands out because it was preached to skeptics without being based on the text of Scripture, but actually on the text of ancient poets who didn't know God at all. It is Paul's penetration of an unbelieving community with truth it needed to hear. I hope we'll be blessed by hearing it.

Let me mention some background to start. First, there are some elements in the account of the ministry at Athens that we haven't seen before quite the way we see them here. One of them is that Paul was alone. All the rest of the time on this journey that we've been following, ministry has taken place as a team of people traveled together.

Another difference we'll see in this passage is that Paul was provoked. This is a very strong term in Greek. Paul was powerfully stirred, angered by what he saw. In previous cities, it was those who reacted against the gospel who were stirred by deep emotions. Remember the jealousy described in Thessalonica, and the anger of the businessmen in Philippi whose demonic source of making a living dried up before their eyes. They stirred up crowds, and there was a great emotion in reaction against the gospel. But here it is the apostle himself who was stirred; the people he spoke to were apathetic, haughty, and shallow.

Finally, this is the one city mentioned in the account of second missionary journey in which no church remained after ministry.

Another way to describe Athens is this: Paul was most welcome to speak. They listened to him with a degree

of politeness, and dismissed him. In other places he was often rejected and harassed, and yet those who believed did so at a depth. The gospel calls for serious response; those who resist it should resist it because they understand its challenge, and those who believe it should believe it with all their hearts. But the arrogance of the city of Athens, based on the pride of its once-great history, permitted no kind of serious reaction at all.

Let's begin reading at verses 16-21, and then we'll talk a bit more about the scene we encounter before we hear this message from the apostle. Remember that Paul had been sent away by himself, and Silas and Timothy had stayed in Macedonia and were planning to meet him later. He was waiting for them alone:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Hollow intellectual tradition

These events took place in about 50 A.D. The Athens of four hundred years earlier had been at its zenith. Now it was shrunken, hollow. Its great intellectual tradition had become a haughty, self-reliant, self-impressed shallowness. It was smaller than it once had been---only about ten thousand people resided in Athens at the time that Paul went there.

I want you to put yourself in Paul's sandals for a moment. Think about what you know of this man. He was born in Tarsus, one of the three great university cities of the Roman world, the other two being Athens and Alexandria in Egypt. Paul himself had been trained as a Jew at the feet of the greatest rabbis in Jerusalem. He was a man of incredible intellect, unsurpassed in his ability to reason with the mind that God gave him.

Paul quoted two of the Greek poets. He knew the great writings of the golden age of Greece. He must have anticipated coming to this city with delight and eagerness to engage profound thinkers, using the intellect God had given him to speak of Christ in such an environment. But what he found was a disappointment. He found people who didn't want to think anymore, preferring to dabble in novelty than to engage the truth. "What will this idle babbling contribute to us? Is there anything new, anything stimulating, anything of interest?" They didn't care about the content, but were more concerned with the appearance of things.

We might imagine by analogy a child who had looked up to a great sports hero, but when he finally met him years later he realized that his hero was a boor and a fool. We might imagine a young person whose mind had been opened by the great poems or marvelous prose of a great prize-winning author whom they had long idolized, only to discover on meeting the author that he was now decrepit and drunk, repeating empty phrases and slurring his speech.

Anger at the suffering of idolaters

What are we to make of Paul's reaction? It says that he was provoked, stirred, distressed at a city that had become dominated by idols. Commentators differ in their explanations of why Paul was so profoundly angered and upset by what he saw. Some commentaries take us back to the prophets who preached against Israel's idolatry. They were angry that the glory that belonged to the Lord God was being offered to that which was fashioned by the hands of people. These commentators say that a similar reaction accounts for Paul's anger here.

But I don't believe that's the explanation. Luke uses an interesting term here; he refers to a city "full of idols."

That term could be translated "drowning in idols." The population of Athens was estimated to be about ten thousand, and contemporary historians say that at this time there were more than thirty thousand idols in the city. The place was awash in idols. I believe Paul's provocation is anger at the sorrow of people who were living in the darkness of idolatry. He was brokenhearted for them, brokenhearted that the devil had been allowed to ruin what had once been beautiful and hopeful, to destroy even the humanist grand history of Athens and offer nothing in its place. He was looking at people whose lives were a shambles.

Remember what Jesus said when he looked at Jerusalem from a hillside, anticipating going there to die. He cried out in his sorrow, wishing he could gather his children to him as a mother hen draws her chicks under her wings to protect them. It broke his heart that they were sheep without a shepherd. Their lives were in sorrow and ruins and he wanted to help them.

Remember what Paul said in Romans 9: He had "great sorrow and unceasing grief" in his heart, wishing the Jews would come to Christ. He said farther on in Romans 10 that these sad and lost people had a "zeal for God, but it was not in accordance with knowledge."

I believe that what provoked Paul was not the anger of a prophet, but the heart of a pastor. He looked at the people in a city full of idols, and he was angry that they should suffer so. Consider the response that he makes. If it was prophetic anger that caused his great distress, then surely he would have gone into the agora, the marketplace, or up to the meeting of the Areopagus, and denounced them: "This idolatry is an affront! There is one God in heaven!" He would have suffered the consequences, but he was used to that. But the text doesn't say that. It says that he went into the synagogue, into the agora, to the common people, to the intellectuals, to everybody, and he preached the good news of Jesus and the resurrection. These were the people who needed good news, who were lost, who needed to be cared for.

Philosophies that rob people of significance

Again, looking at the scene carefully before we hear the preaching, let's think a bit about the philosophy of the Epicureans and the Stoics who are identified here, and a bit about the nature of idolatry. In English the word "epicure" describes someone who loves sensuality, who is committed to refined experiences of pleasure, a gourmet, a traveler who takes only the most exotic trips to the finest places. The word "stoic," in modern parlance, describes someone who can bear up under the most difficult circumstances. The modern use of these terms mirrors well the ancient use of them as well. Epicureans in 50 A.D., when Paul encountered this philosophy, were people who essentially believed that all of life is random, that everything that happens to a person happens completely without reason or purpose. Therefore, there is no reason to analyze events and experiences in life as good or bad. There is no such thing as good or bad. There's no predicting or changing of things. For that reason, you are best off if you "grab for the gusto" in life, do what you can to pamper yourself, extract delicacies from life, experience as much pleasure as possible, fan self-interest, take care of number one, choose what's best for you.

Stoics also believed that life had no meaning. Rather than considering life to be random and unpredictable, they believed in an unchangeable fate set in motion by distant powers. What will happen to you will happen inexorably; it can't be changed. Therefore, the wise person is strong, able to be dealt terrible blows and suffer significant pain, able to bear up under good and bad and never raise an eyebrow, able to steel themselves against every contingency. They are never fooled by anything, and never allow their hopes to be raised by anything. The stoic is the essence of grin-and-bear-it toughness.

The trouble with both of these philosophies is that they do not allow for human significance. We are either the victims of chance or the victims of fate. We will choose to either drop out and serve ourselves or stand up under all that life throws at us, but in either case we are not personally valuable. The things that we believe, hope, dream of, and long for, the relationships we have, and the choices we make all get washed away by impersonal forces. But humans weren't created for insignificance. We are made in the image of God. There is something inside every one of us that says, "Wait a minute, this can't be true. I know that I matter. It must make a difference if I do what is right or wrong. My hopes for achievement must count for something."

Because we are constitutionally unable to believe that we are insignificant, yet we are taught to believe so in

places like the ancient city of Athens and the modern Silicon Valley, we rail against insignificance by turning to idols. "Maybe if I build a gold statue, there will be a god or goddess somewhere who will be pleased enough with what I made in her honor that she will bestow on me some good fortune and security. Maybe I'll matter to somebody." So the philosophies that call for human insignificance create an environment of superstition and idolatry. That is the experience that Paul ran into in Athens.

In the Athens-like time and place in which we live, Darwinists have claimed the heart of the university and its teachings. Those who declare that chance alone accounts for everything have destroyed the possibility that modern men and women can be significant. And because the intellectual tradition of our day is destroying the possibility that human hearts and souls and relationships matter, we live amidst an idolatrous culture, for the exact same reason: People cannot stand to be insignificant, and they reach out for something.

I read about a tower that was built in Las Vegas recently that has some distinction of great height and great expense. It's supposed to attract people who come to places like Las Vegas because they hope for luck or status or excitement. Like the Tower of Babel or the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens, these buildings are built by the hands of human beings as a plea to some invisible god or goddess for life and significance.

You hear a lot of discussion in the major cities of this country and of the world that sports and the temples built to house athletic teams are what make a city or region "big-league" or not. These temples are becoming more glittery, more impressive, more filled with electronic gadgetry. If their team wins, then somehow the community of people imagines that by sitting in the stands cheering for the team, they have achieved something significant: "We're victorious! We count, we matter." The question is never asked, "What has been won?" It's only a game, but the feeling is that they're valuable or significant. Human beings who have been robbed of their significance by their philosophy build idols in order to try to win back some sense that they make a difference.

Consider the computer chip industry. More and more data is crowded onto tinier and tinier pieces of silicon. Controlling vast amounts of data feels powerful. I have the power to do things that generations before could not, therefore my life must have value. It's a form of idolatry, and it's a lie. I believe that if the apostle were to walk into modern Silicon Valley as he did in ancient Athens, he would be angry for exactly the same reasons. We live in an idolatrous culture, robbed of our significance by things we believe. We're longing to be given it back by the things that we do.

A word for those who are not satisfied

Let's read Paul's message. Remember, in the previous paragraph Luke says that he went to the agora, to the synagogue, and to the Areopagus, and he preached good news: Jesus and the resurrection. Jesus---incarnation---God became human. Paul preached that human beings have always mattered to God, that he so loved the world he gave his only Son; born to be one of us.

And Paul preached the resurrection. We will be raised with Christ. Our life will not diminish into nothingness or evaporate into thin air; we will last forever, raised with a new body. The choices we make do make a difference. Your life and mine are worth something, a truth testified to by both incarnation and resurrection. Verses 22-23:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Twice, in verses 22 and 23, he used the term "to look intently at." He has paid attention to their world. He has regarded their religiosity. He connected with them in an area that he was going to speak to them about, but he didn't judge them, rail at them, or express anger at their foolishness. He was saying, "I know you want truth, you're hoping for something, you're not satisfied. I found a statue that was erected to a god who doesn't have a name. I'll tell you his name."

The God we ought to know

He continues on in verses 24-28:

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' [This is a quote from one of the Greek poets.] As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

The Lord is personal and concerned about us. He is not the agent of inexorable fate, but the Sovereign of heaven and earth. The Lord who created all that exists cares about all that exists. Creation is not a random colliding of atoms or a march of fate with no purpose. He is the Lord of history. All human beings go back to the same place; we are all made of the same material, we have all the same need. Even their own poets had anticipated some of this and had said that we are made for God, we are made like God, we exist in his presence, and we ought to know him.

So quoting from their own background, Paul spoke of a personal God and said it was foolish to think that such a God as this would care about their statue. He was saying, "If you want significance, you need to know this God. But you're not going to buy him off with a statue, or a Parthenon, or ten of them. We gain nothing by appealing to God with the work of our hands. Nations rise and fall because he says they should, not because they are the victims of fate. We are born, we grow, and we die with his awareness of us. We were made to inhabit the earth, we were made to seek after God. Deep in your hearts you even know that it's true yourselves."

Judgment is good news

Verse 29:

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone---an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

This God who is Lord of heaven and earth will be answered to. He will judge the human race by the one he appointed. Here Paul began to speak of Jesus. He may have said more that isn't recorded here. Preaching judgment is a direct denial that human individuals are insignificant. They mattered so much that their life was going to be judged; they were going to be examined someday by their Creator. And they needed to answer for the choices they had made. He was saying, "Pampering yourself and serving your appetites is a choice. The Stoic hardness that accepts what happens but doesn't do anything about it is a choice. There is Somebody someday who is going to look at these things. You do matter." By talking about judgment he was talking about significance. Judgment is actually good news, as little as we tend to think in these terms. Only people who matter have to answer for their actions. And Paul claimed that Jesus was Lord of life from the dead and preached his resurrection. He pointed to Christ, although obliquely here, as the answer. So the time for ignorance was over; they had an opportunity to change their minds, listen to him, and believe.

There is a very sad pair of responses in verse 32:

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

Some were too haughty, too impressed with themselves, too much in love with their own past, too committed

to protecting the shell, too unwilling to see their shallowness. So they sneered. Others wanted to hear him again, but even that was an inadequate response, because Paul had just said that the time for ignorance was over, and they needed to repent. They were putting it off with the idea that there would always be an opportunity in the future to reflect on these matters. Putting off what God says should be attended to now is a very grave mistake.

Do we see, and do we care?

Verses 33-34:

At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Let me offer you some thoughts of application as we conclude. I've mentioned that we live in an Athenian place in Athenian times. If Paul were to stride into Silicon Valley, he would be provoked for the same reason he was provoked in Athens. Lives are being ruined by idolatry, and people are idolatrous because they are hopeless. They are hopeless because they have been taught to believe that they don't make any difference, and there is no personal God to whom they can appeal.

The problem is that we ourselves are not visitors to Silicon Valley. This is too much our home, we're used to the idolatry. It feels comfortable. The question we need to ask ourselves is, why are we not provoked--stirred, involved, caring--to the same degree that Paul was provoked in Athens? Probably, we don't see what he saw. In verse 16 when Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, he didn't intend to minister. He was just going to wait there, to be a tourist. That's when this whole thing got started. He was distressed to see a city full of idols. Perhaps we don't see the idols because we're too idolatrous. We're too inclined to believe the priests of materialism that say that money is the answer to everything. We don't see idolatry because we're too close to it.

There is another reason that perhaps we aren't provoked as Paul was. We see the idolatry, but we don't love people enough. Paul was provoked because what he saw was destroying people. We may not care enough to get involved. But both of those are sub-Christian responses. I hope that by the grace of God we can be challenged to see and care by observing this great preacher who preached in the Areopagus, in the shadow of the Parthenon. This marvelous treatment of Paul's challenging that world can be helpful to us.

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Acts 17:16-34
Fifth Message
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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