

# WITNESS

## *SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE*

By Steve Zeisler

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In August many millions of people all over the world are going to turn their attention to Athens for the Olympic Games. The Games are a bigger spectacle every time they are held, and Athens is being spruced up to look its best.

In our study in Acts 17 we'll travel to first-century Athens—a city that was in decline from a pinnacle of accomplishment, a place of foolish self-importance. It wrongly imagined itself worthy of the attention of the rest of the world.

There are three topics I'd like to consider in this study: the city of Athens itself, the apostle Paul as a solitary witness in Athens, and the message that he preached. Acts 17:16:

**While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.**

You will recall that Paul had been sent on alone so that his co-workers could stay behind in Berea. Verses 17-21:

**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 babbler 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.)**

### **A decaying city**

Athens was once the city of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pericles, and Demosthenes—the world leader in art, theater, philosophy, and education. As Greek culture spread throughout the Mediterranean world, the great ideas of Athens were carried abroad and its learning was admired everywhere.

But in the first century A.D., Athens was a mere shell of that glory. Its population was tremendously reduced. It had no economic or military importance. It traded on its reputation of greatness, and was still impressed with itself, but there was nothing great there anymore. The arrogance that accompanied the knowledge of what Athens had once been seemed to be everywhere in this city. You might think of Athens in this period as an aging movie star who needs layers of makeup and all the tricks of wardrobe and lighting to retain any suggestion of glamour. Or perhaps it was like a former athlete at a card show, overweight, wheezing, signing pictures of himself as a young man, when he could do great things on the field. Athens was something like that—trying to hold up an image of itself that was no longer true.

Let's consider some of the elements of the account we read. Stirred by what he saw, Paul began to speak in the first place he always did—a synagogue. In every other city, speaking of Jesus in a synagogue had two predictable results: some people would believe, fall in love with Christ, and begin a life of following him; and

some people would actively resist.

But in Athens, nothing happened when he spoke. The Jews were in as much decline as the rest of the city. By any evidence given us here, they were not engaged enough to believe or bothered enough to reject. In fact, at no point in Athens was anybody ever angry enough to resist anything. They were disdainful, sneering, and dismissive, but nothing of the message of God's love and of the coming of his judgment was considered important enough to take seriously.

Having left the synagogue, Paul went to the *agora*, the marketplace, and in verse 18 he was challenged by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. In our imaginations we can see this marketplace as the talk show of its day. Look how dismissive these spokesmen were: "What is this babbler trying to say?" "He seems to be proclaiming foreign gods." (If they aren't Athenian, what good are they? They're useless, contemptible.) The word "babblers" literally means seed-picker, and it was used of birds, like mouthy blue jays that squawk and busy themselves without amounting to anything, or parrots that say what other people once said but not as well and with no real meaning. These spokesmen acknowledged Paul, but they dismissed him as an empty squawker of unworthy things without listening to what he said.

Then in verse 19 it says they took him to the council of city leaders, the Areopagus, and there he was invited to speak. "May we know what this teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." It sounds as if perhaps there was some real interest here. But Luke makes very clear in verse 21 that they weren't willing to listen at all. The attitude in Athens was like that of a king who has jesters come into his court to entertain him. The Athenians were bored and wanted to hear something novel and new. "Entertain us, fellow! Say something that we haven't heard before."

At the end of this chapter a handful of people are recognized as believers in Christ, but there is no clear reference to the establishment of a church in this city. Though there was active opposition elsewhere, the ennui, self-importance, and phoniness of Athens kept it from ever hearing the gospel well, and prevented the gospel from having much of an influence there. Disdain is often a more powerful weapon against faith than hard opposition and anger.

## **Philosophy and idolatry**

Considering these things, we ought to remember that civilizations decline. People can be very proud of belief systems that once had authority and influence, and not realize how far gone they are. Silicon Valley is an influential place. Experts from our universities and our region are consulted all the time about events of the day. Though we boast of our accomplishments, we are not immune from self-deception—believing in an intellectual superiority that no longer exists. Civilizations rot from the inside before it becomes apparent on the outside. First-century Athens can serve as a warning about philosophies that claim significance but no longer have it.

Let me comment on the role of idolatry in this city. Verse 16 says Paul was greatly distressed to find that the city was full of idols. That phrase could well be translated "drowning in idols," or "swamped with idols." One contemporary historian of the day wrote that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a human being. But to understand how the Athenians interacted with their idols, we need to consider the content of Epicurean and Stoic philosophies.

The central idea of Epicureanism is that life has no meaning. Everything happens by chance. There is no predictability, no reason, no order, no direction. Nothing about you will live on when you die, so there is no meaning to be found in a life to come. Therefore the recommendation is this: take care of yourself, avoid pain, and maximize your pleasure, because there is nothing higher to live for. If the Epicureans had known about cars, they would have said you should own the best car you possibly can, with the most exquisite sound system, the most impressive appearance. They would have said you should take opulent vacations in places that cater to your every whim. They would have said that you should have a mistress who is young and beautiful (and

disease-free). We don't have to think very hard to find contemporary versions of Epicureanism. Materialists claim that there is no meaning to life, no life after death, no grand call to righteousness or goodness. We live in a random world, so we should take care of Number One, grab for all the gusto we can get. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

The central idea of Stoicism, on the other hand, is that everything is determined by an inexorable fate. You are just a drop in the ocean. There is no reason to value yourself particularly, because great forces in the world are grinding forward, and nothing you do or think or say or hope is going to change any of it. Your life is going to happen to you exactly as it has been determined. So the advice is to toughen up, grow strong, don't let anything knock you down, whatever blows or advantages life deals you. I know people today who are effectively Stoic in the way they look at life. Often they have been hurt. They had a good marriage and their partner died, or they loved their children and lost them, or they had a career that was meaningful to them and it was ruined. So effectively they said, "I got hurt, but I'm never going to get hurt again. I'm never going to love or trust anything again. I'm never going to be vulnerable ever again."

The problem with both the Epicurean and Stoic schools of thought is that in the long run, you can't live believing that everything you can do or say or be or hope is valueless. Deep down, there is something in every heart that says, "That can't be true! There has to be a reason I am here. There has to be someone who loves me. I am not as insignificant as these claims make me to be." Materialists and secularists inwardly resist what they claim to believe.

That is the reason the city of Athens was awash in idols. No matter how much you say about inexorable fate or random events, you want somebody to listen when you cry. You want something to hope for. So the idols grew more and more numerous in first-century Athens, and they grow more numerous in our time as well, don't they?

There is an old adage about the foolishness of the self-made man who worships his creator. It doesn't work. Think about the lostness, the cries for help that are on every street corner, in every work of art, every piece of literature, every movie. Consider the cries of people in this world for someone to notice or care, support them, some reason to love. We live in an age that is superstitious and addicted and desperate. People are pulling every lever, pressing every button, buying every promise that is made, trusting the next technology, adopting the latest fad, believing the last guarantee, living vicariously through today's celebrity. Idolatries bubble up all over the place in our culture.

Now let's turn our attention to Paul himself.

### **An angry and persuasive man**

He stood alone in the city of Athens and was "greatly distressed." This is the word from which we get the English word "paroxysm." It is an anger that stirs from a deep level; it even has the idea of jealousy in it. What stirred Paul to such anger? First, each one of these idols was taking from God the glory that was due him, and that stirred Paul's heart. Second, he was profoundly sorrowful at what all this idolatry was doing to the people, because where there are idols, there are broken hearts. Men and women who had erected a statue and written an inscription, invested their savings in it, were going to be crushed every time. They were hoping that someone would answer them, and no one would. Paul was angry at the deceiver who had so effectively spread lies and hopelessness.

However, Paul's anger didn't lead to preaching filled with denunciation and damnation. He took the time to look at the inscriptions on the shrines of the idols, to listen to their voices, to hear their hurts, to know their language. Then he was able to speak of Christ in ways that made sense to them. He never quotes the Bible directly in his speech to the Areopagus, because they didn't know the Bible. He quotes two Greek poets. He uses their terminology to say what they needed to hear.

The profound anger of Paul and his wise use of the language they spoke to persuade them, held together, is what makes this message so great. How can we care deeply enough and listen well enough to have something to say that is both passionate and persuasive?

Let's read Paul's speech. (This was almost certainly a longer speech that Luke has condensed.)

## Carefully chosen words

Verses 22-34:

**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.**

**"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.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'**

**"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."**

**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." 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.**

If Paul had come here and was reading our newspapers, looking at our inscriptions, he might say something like this: "I've looked at the kind of country you are, and I see that you are a great military and economic power with an enormous desire to do good. But you are so morally weak that you have very little to offer, and your influence is waning. Let me tell you how you can become what you want to be, the answer to what you are missing."

Or he might have said this: "I observe in your literature that you place a high value on equal inclusion and acceptance of everyone. But you don't act on your values. I know that because in the most popular entertainment in your culture, "reality TV," you humiliate people and laugh at those who get rejected. The way you entertain yourselves is destroying people. That tells me that you are missing something. Let me tell you about the God who can make you who you hope to be."

Paul looked at the Athenian culture, read its literature, and found a way to open the door to conversation. Then he said, "The fatalism of Epicureanism and Stoicism is killing you. You long for significance, and you think that you can serve deities by making them temples or statues. But God needs none of those things. He is the giver of life. We give nothing to him by these kinds of efforts. You have gotten lost groping for a way to know God. But I will tell you about him. He has made us. He has given us our very breath. He has established from one man all of mankind. He knows the history of each place and people. He is intimately acquainted with us. He has made us long for him, and he is near enough for us to find him. The things your idol worship is saying you hope for, I am telling you how to find! There is a God who is powerful and intimate and personal, and he is

reaching out to you. He can be known. You are significant. He cares for you. He knows you. He will listen to you if you call.”

Then Paul brought his teaching to a sharper point: “This God is moral. He establishes justice. And someday he will judge each of us on our choices—the choice to receive his love, the choice to act on his justice.”

The climax of Paul’s message is the Man whom God had raised from the dead. And surely in the full message he named the Lord Jesus Christ. Some believed, but most did not.

We have grown too used to living with idolatry, with the sorrow of our world, with its decay. We don’t care enough any more. Or if we do care, we don’t listen long enough to have something to say that is meaningful. I urge upon you the example of Paul, who for love’s sake cared enough to listen and speak.

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