

Sunday, February 5, 2023

What Will This Babbler Say? (Acts 17:18)

Paul's Sermon On Mars' Hill – Part 1

Several weeks ago, one of our loved ones sent out an article that piqued my curiosity. The theme of the article was that the number of people claiming to be “Christian” in America has dropped precipitously in the last 30-35 years – even faster than it has in Europe. Of course, we know that most people claiming to be Christian are not, but I’m focused on the fact that even the pretense of being a Christian seems to be going away. [Note: I’d like to bid a fond adieu to these particular people and encourage all the other posers to follow suit.] Basically, what happens is that people are raised with some Biblical knowledge, they reject it, and then they raise the next generation of children to have zero Biblical knowledge. I’ve been noticing this trend anecdotally through the years. Early on, it seemed like you could have some fairly intelligent conversations with people about the Bible where they would at least know what you were talking about. But that is now a rarity. The article attempts to identify why this has been happening. We know that humans reject God because they hate God, but we also know that all things are directed by God, and He uses means. For example, in the following passage, we have a “ravenous bird from the east” as God’s means to bring His purpose to pass:

“Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.” (Isaiah 46:10-11)

So, right or wrong, the article identifies three of the means by which they believe this precipitous drop in “Christianity” has occurred:

1. The end of the cold war with the fall of the Soviet Union. The war had been couched in terms of godless communism vs. godly democracy. Once the war is gone, the impetus to fight against godlessness is gone.
2. September 11. People responded with “I don’t believe a good God could have been responsible for that.” As I recall, we were the lone voice in the wilderness saying that God is good, and yes, God did do that. A good God has the prerogative to punish evil nations as He sees fits, and to give adumbrations of further wrath to come.
3. The rise of the Internet. It gives perverse people an easy and convenient way to find other perverse people, and commiserate with them about their perversion. Birds of a feather flock together, and when your secret hatred of God is affirmed and celebrated

by your online community, it makes it more comfortable for your secret hatred to become an open hatred of God.

There's no question but that these things are monumental and have had deep impacts on this world. What I was shocked and a little bit disappointed to see missing here, though, was blaming us for this precipitous drop in the number of Christians. If there's one common theme I've heard for the last 30+ years, it's this: "when you tell people stuff that they don't want to hear about God's sovereignty and His wrath and His vengeance, you're going to turn them away from God!" And let me say, I am very happy being the catalyst for a person to reject God, as long as it's the result of being faithful to God (and not the result of my own sins):

**"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith."
(Hebrews 11:7)**

"And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." (Isa. 6:9-10)

As people are leaving so-called "Christianity," most are still saying that they believe in some god or "Higher Power"...just not the God of the Bible. You

Looking back through the history of this, it's an amazing thing that the Lord brought us on the scene at the time He did, and it was right around the time that these three momentous things mentioned in the article were taking shape. We didn't have any idea what we were doing or what we were getting ourselves into, but I do know that the Lord did. And I do know that He is the God of history, and He raises His people up **at** the appointed time, and **for** the appointed time. Here's a brief timeline to put things into perspective:

- May, 1991 - WBC starts public street preaching ministry
- August, 1991 - The following is posted on an electronic bulletin board by somebody from CERN: "The WWW project was started to allow high energy physicists to share data, news, and documentation. We are very interested in spreading the web to other areas, and having gateway servers for other data."
- December, 1991 - The first Internet server in America is put online (and we see how it's grown exponentially).
- December, 1991 – the Soviet Union collapses.
- February, 1993 – World Trade Center bombing, followed by the initial planning stages for the September 11, 2001, attacks.

may hear people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” You might hear them praying to “whatever gods may be.” You might hear lots of talk about the “universe” (“the universe must want me to do this...”, or “the universe has brought us together...”).

Whatever the labels are, whatever the language is, the fact is that the vast majority of people in this country say that they believe in God...but only on their own terms. It is always man-centered, therapeutic, psychological, self-help nonsense (i.e., it’s not about what is true, it’s not about what is right and wrong, it’s about how I feel). “I know that there’s a spiritual world out there, but I’m going to manufacture my own truth about it, because I don’t want to be boxed in.” They’ll look into their own hearts, and that’s what their god looks like (like Aaron said: “I cast [the gold] into the fire, and there came out this calf.” – Exodus 32:24). You have the kindly grandfather god, who might have some outdated ideas but will always look the other way. The bellhop god, who is there to carry your bags or run an errand for you when you need it. The copilot god, who will step in and take over the controls from time to time. The repairman god, who comes into your house to fix your problems but doesn’t really get too involved in your life. The cheerleader god, who stands on the sideline to give you a pep talk but doesn’t involve himself in the game. The personal cause god – if you’re an environmentalist, then he is; if you support same-sex marriage, he supports same-sex marriage; if you’re a patriot, then he’ll be waving the flag along with you.

If the God of the Bible has a few unpalatable attributes, or unreasonable expectations, then they’ll pluck out the parts they like, throw in a little Buddhism or other false religion, and then once they’ve composed the perfect Frankenstein’s monster, they’ll tell you about how spiritual they are. A lot of them even continue to say they’re Christian! Awhile back, I worked with a guy who said he was a Christian who kept the following on his desk: a picture of Catholic Jesus, a picture of the Hindu god Krishna, a Buddha statue, and a Koran. He was hedging his bets. I don’t think I need to keep beating this dead horse, but suffice it to say that each man has his own trivial version of god, and it all falls under the heading of “walk[ing] in the light of **your** fire, and in the sparks that **ye** have kindled” (Isaiah 50:11) or “my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” (Jeremiah 2:13). I’m telling you all this to suggest that the scene in America today is a lot like the scene in Athens that Paul came upon about 2,000 years ago. And Paul’s message to them was basically, “let me tell you a little bit about the one and only, true and living God.”

But first, I’d like to give a little background on how Paul ended up in Athens. I think a timeline of his life might be helpful.

Year (all approximate)	Event	Epistle	Scripture
5	Born in Tarsus as both an Israelite and Roman citizen		Acts 22:3; Phil. 3:5; Acts 22:28
15-30	Brought up at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem, becoming a Pharisee		Acts 22:3; Phil. 3:5
30	Jesus is crucified		Mt. 27; Mk. 15; Lk. 23; Jn. 19
30-34	Persecutes the church, binding and delivering to prison, compelling to blasphemy, testifying to put them to death		Acts 7:58, 8:1-3, 22:4-5; 26:9-12; Phil. 3:6; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; 1 Tim. 1:13
32	Consents to Stephen's death		Acts 7:58, 8:1
34	Conversion on the road to Damascus		Acts 9:1-9, 22:5-11, 26:12-18
34-37	Goes to Damascus, Arabia (where he is taught by God), back to Damascus, Jerusalem, and Tarsus		Acts 9:10-31, Gal. 1:17-18 "Then had the churches rest"
37-46	Dwells in Tarsus (most likely teaching at the church there)		
46	Barnabas fetches Paul from Tarsus to the church at Antioch to teach		Acts 11:25-26
47	Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem and return with John Mark		Acts 11:29-30, 12:25
48	Holy Ghost separates Paul and Barnabas out and they go on the first missionary journey, returning to report to the church of Antioch		Acts 13-14
49	Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem Council, and return to Antioch		Acts 15:1-35; Gal. 2:1, 11-14
49	Contention between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. Barnabas and Mark go to Cyprus		Acts 15:36-39
49-52	Paul and Silas go on second missionary journey, returning to Antioch.	Galatians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians	Acts 15:40-18:22
53-56	Paul's third missionary journey, ending in Jerusalem where he is arrested.	1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Romans	Acts 18:23-22:29

57-59	Paul appears before the Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus, Agrippa		Acts 22:30-26:32
59-60	Paul is sent to Rome		Acts 27:1-28:29
61-62	Paul preaches in Rome for 2 full years	Philemon Colossians Ephesians Philippians	Acts 28:30-31
62	Released from prison (?)		
62-65	Other missionary trips, possibly to Spain (?)	1 Timothy Titus	
66	Second imprisonment and execution under Nero (?)	Hebrews (?) 2 Timothy	

Just a few general points on this:

- Paul probably lived to be 60-70 years old.
- He spent the last 30 or so years of his life as a faithful servant to God.
- Whereas our public preaching experience has generally been a quick out-and-back, the scripture tells us of three long journeys that Paul went on, where he spent substantial amounts of time preaching in places where Christ had never been named, helping establish new local churches and visiting already-established churches. He also spent a substantial amount of time imprisoned.
- While there is a lot of overlap in our experiences and Paul's experiences, God had a specific purpose for Paul in his day and Paul went through experiences that were unique to him. The same is true for us in our day, all directed by the wisdom of God.
- Paul's journeys were done within the context and under the authority of the church at Antioch (as they were guided by the Holy Ghost) – not as an individual.

In this sermon, I'd like to focus on Paul's brief time in Athens. This happened during the so-called "second missionary journey" which involved Paul and Silas. They began by meeting Timothy in Lystra, who then joined them on the journey. The three went through Philippi (Lydia, Philippian jailer), Thessalonica (Jason), and then Berea. The violent Jews from Thessalonica followed them to Berea, and they decided to leave Silas and Timothy in Berea while Paul went to Athens alone. The three later met up in Corinth.

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because

he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)” (Acts 17:16-21)

Now, you must understand that Athens was the cultural center of the world at this time. These were the cultured, the intellectuals, the philosophers (or at least these were the ones who THOUGHT they were cultured, intellectual philosophers). You know the type – we deal with them on a regular basis. As you look at this passage, you might see that there’s a definite progression. First, his spirit is stirred. So, he disputes (or, reasons) with them. During that, the philosophers encounter him. And finally, the philosophers take him to Areopagus (aka Mars’ Hill). Like a chain reaction, one thing leads to the other. It starts with his spirit being stirred in him and ends with him being hauled up to Mars’ Hill.

His Spirit Was Stirred

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.” (Acts 17:16)

Athens would have been a very beautiful and bustling city – gorgeous architecture, landscaping, art, vegetation, etc., and an air of excitement and energy as people milled around. If any of that had any impact on Paul, the scripture is silent to that matter. What we do learn is that when Paul was in Athens, he saw idolatry. And not just a little bit of idolatry here and there – the city was wholly given to it! The original language uses a form of intensity that basically means “there’s idolatry...and then there’s **idolatry.**” Idolatry everywhere!

And for a man who loves God, to see unabashed idolatry going on around you is a vexing thing to behold. The passage says “his spirit was stirred in him.” It means he was angry! It’s where we get our English word “paroxysm,” meaning “a sudden, uncontrollable outburst.” It provoked him to anger to see his Father so maligned and abused. We tend to take it personally when our Father is attacked. Has your spirit ever been stirred in you when you’ve seen God mocked or dishonored in some way? Mine has! Remember, this is the same Paul who penned 1 Corinthians 13, where he tells us that charity “is not easily provoked.” (verse 5). That word “provoked” there is the exact same word as his spirit being “stirred” in him. I think this would fall under the category of “righteous indignation.” A lot of the time, we misuse that concept to justify a sinful anger – but what’s going on here in Athens is a righteous anger. It’s not an anger that’s the result of a short fuse or a hair trigger. It’s not a response to a personal attack on Paul or his ego being bruised or some other trivial matter. It’s an anger that is

justified. It's an anger that is consistent with charity. And you'll see here in a moment that Paul's reaction is not to go on some tirade or rant, but he redirects the anger to a rather well-measured and reasonable response.

He Disputed With Them

“Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.” (Acts 17:17)

His spirit being moved in him spurred him on to action. He disputed with them. Now, it appears that Paul did not have a very formidable physical presence. He reported that the Corinthians said that “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Gill quotes a source describing him thusly: *“he had a small and contracted body, somewhat crooked and bowed, a pale face, looked old, and had a little head; he had a sharp eye; his eyebrows hung downwards; his nose was beautifully bent, somewhat long; his beard thick and pretty long; and that, as the hair of his head, had a sprinkling of gray hairs.”* Another translation says, *“A man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.”* I dug into this a little bit, and the quote actually comes from the second-century, so whether the person was using some extant material to describe him or making it up out of whole cloth, I do not know. But I do know that the scripture says “his bodily presence is weak” so I conclude from that that Paul wasn't a very impressive figure, physically speaking.

But Paul didn't have to be physically imposing – he was a chosen vessel of God (Acts 9:15)! And when his spirit was stirred in him in Athens, He disputed. The Greek word is “*dialogomai*” and it's where we get our English word “dialogue.” Often (even earlier in this same chapter), the translators have translated the word as “reason.” I think that gets more at the heart of what he is doing here. He is reasoning with them. The definition of the word is “converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss.” And there are two places where he does this disputing:

1. The synagogue. There, he meets Jews and devout persons, as was his common practice. “Jews” here refers to those who are both ethnic Jews and who practice the religion of Judaism. “Devout persons” refers to Gentile proselytes to the religion of Judaism.
2. The market. The city of Athens had a huge open marketplace called the Agora. It was located about 400m to the north of the Acropolis (the high point of the city where the Parthenon was built to honor Athena/Minerva). To the southwest of the Agora was Mars' Hill (Areopagus). The Agora was originally created around 500BC and destroyed and rebuilt multiple times over the centuries, with the Romans finally destroying it in

87BC and then rebuilding their own version of it just to the east (called “The Market of Caesar and Augustus”). Just to give you an idea of the size of the whole complex, the archaeological site of the Agora today is approximately 121,000 square meters (22.6 football fields). The ancient Greek version was basically the town square – people from all classes of society would mingle and network. There was a senate, a mint, courts of law. It was where they held their elections, sporting events, awards ceremonies. This was the place where people like Socrates hung out and annoyed everyone by incessantly asking questions. By the time Paul came on the scene, it was much smaller (the Roman Agora was eclipsed in size by the ancient Greek Agora) but was still where the public gathered. It had primarily become a marketplace, bordered on all sides by colonnades and ornate buildings, with a beautiful fountain on the south side, landscaping, public restrooms, statues and monuments, a tower that told the time and helped to predict the weather. It was still the place to talk about business, politics, religion, philosophy, and this is where Paul spends a lot of time disputing, day after day. And who does he dispute with? He disputes with “them that met with him” which literally means “those who met him by chance” or “those who happened to be present.” I can relate to this. From God’s perspective, nothing happens by chance because He’s ordained it all. But from my perspective, when we set up shop to do some street preaching, there is always a certain group of people who just happen to be present. This Agora is the place where some philosophers just so happen to run into Paul.

The Philosophers Encountered Him

“Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” (Acts 17:18)

So, the Epicureans and the Stoics encounter him. These two philosophies had been around for several hundred years and were still popular at the time. Epicureanism was started by a guy named Epicurus (342-270BC), and Stoicism was started by a guy named Zeno (340-265BC). The philosophies were similar in that both focused only on this world and were interested in providing peace and happiness in this life. No concern for ultimate truth, no concern that there is a sovereign God, no concern that there will be a Judgment Day, no concern for Heaven and Hell. It’s up to you to get control of things in your own life – there’s no personal God out there to help you, or to punish you. It sounds very much like how most people in this country live today. I’m certainly no expert on these philosophies, but based on what I’ve read, there are a few characteristics that you might find interesting:

Epicureanism

- Moderate form of hedonism, which maximized pleasure and minimized pain. “If it feels good, then it must be good.” But they wanted to strike the right balance. This could be very practical, or very sinful. You want to eat? Then eat until you’re pleasantly full...but don’t be a glutton because gluttony has painful results. You want to fornicate? Then fornicate...but not too much, and make sure you don’t get an STD.
- There are gods out there...but they don’t care about what’s going on in the earth.
- Happiness comes from moderate food, comfort, peaceful relationships, good friends, and freedom from distress, anxiety, and fear of God.

Stoicism

- Fatalism - whatever is going to happen is going to happen by some mechanistic series of causes and effects, and you can’t do anything about it, but you can control how you’re going to react to it. So, adopt a mindset of “imperturbability.” Get a stiff upper lip. Stay cool. They called the natural law and order of the universe the “logos” and the closer you can align yourself with that in all things, the better off and more virtuous you’d be.
- Pantheistic – the universe is god, so everything is part of god. There is no personal God.
- Strong focus on logic and reasoning.

So, these are the guys who encountered Paul, and you can be guaranteed that given their philosophies, Paul has dropped a bombshell. What he says sounds perfectly good and reasonable to us – but to them, it would have been turning their whole world upside down. Preaching about a personal God who created the universe, who rules the universe, who sustains the universe moment by moment, who has ordained all things, who has given us our very being, who is not far from any of us, who requires us to repent, who has appointed a judgment day...and then add on top of that talk about the Son of God and what He did, and the resurrection...this is all so contrary to their worldview that Paul is causing quite a stir.

Some of them say, “what will this babbler say?” The word “babbler” means “seed-picker.” It’s a reference to a bird that flits around picking up seeds here and there. Metaphorically, it would be used to describe people who lounged around the marketplace, surviving off things that people dropped – so it would be in reference to beggars or parasitical people. The accusation is, “this guy isn’t an intellectual. He just goes around and picks up bits and pieces of information, and then tries to present that hodgepodge like it’s some kind of a coherent philosophy. He just wants to sound smart. Really, he’s ignorant. He’s just speaking nonsense. He needs to get some education.”

Others said, “He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods.” Why? “Because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” Yes, Paul plopped himself right into the middle of

Athens and told a bunch of people about Jesus (and all that entails), including how His work was ratified by His resurrection from the dead (and all that entails). Note the plural there – “setter forth of strange **gods**.” These Greeks would make a god out of almost any concept (violent death, prayer, folly, hardship, etc.). There are over 100 such gods and goddesses in Greek mythology. They probably thought that Paul was trying to add two more gods into the mix – Jesus and Resurrection (Greek – “Anastasis”, where we get the name “Anastasia”).

So, we have two major reactions from these philosophers, which we might be familiar with – mocking and intellectual interest, which leads us to our final passage today.

The Philosophers Took Him To Areopagus

**“And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)”
(Acts 17:19-21)**

So, “they took him,” which means they laid hands on him, but not necessarily in a violent way (it may have been out of urgency to hear out of him). And they brought him to Areopagus, which is the same as Mars’ Hill, Ares being the Greek god of war, and Mars being the equivalent Roman god. It isn’t so much a geographical location as it is a reference to a court that generally convened at that location. Call it a “court of ideas.” They convened, not because Paul was being charged with some criminal act, but to make judgments on the wisdom of what he was saying. As the passage says, people who were in Athens loved to tell or to hear some new thing. It’s interesting how cities or groups can have a collective personality. In Thessalonica, there was a violent uproar; in Berea, they searched the scriptures; in Athens, they want to hear and talk about new things. And of course, all this did was provide a much larger, captive audience to listen to what Paul had to say. Remember it all started with Paul’s spirit being stirred. Lord willing, we’ll continue with his sermon next time.

“Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)