

February 8, 2009  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Paul's Grand Speech

Acts 17:16-34

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In the Book of Acts Paul and his teammates go from city to city in the Mediterranean world. Last week we heard of Paul's journey from Troas to Philippi, his experience in the Philippian jail and the beginning of the Philippian Church.

From there, they went to Thessaloniki, the capital of the province of Macedonia. And then from there, Paul is taken by his friends to Athens. Two of them stayed behind, and he waits for them at Athens.

Athens is a city of schools with students from the whole Mediterranean world. Shrines for each of the Greek-Roman mystery cult religion gods of the first century world crowd the marketplace. They probably have a shrine to Artemis, the Ephesian god. They would have one for Aesculapius. They would have one for Isis from Egypt. They would have all these represented in shrines that would be appropriate for them.

And then, evidently, there was one shrine that caught the eye of Paul, and that was the shrine that was dedicated to the unknown god, perhaps a catch-all, empty shrine, in case there was a god the city had missed. Paul goes to the synagogue first; he always does that when he travels in the Medi-

terranean world, and he scolds them in the synagogue. He says, "Why aren't you making a better case for the Torah and a better case for Yahweh?" The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers seek him out in the marketplace, and they are intrigued by him. So they bring him to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is an outcropping of rock. Actually, it is now polished from the thousands and thousands of people that have now stood upon the Areopagus. It's just underneath the Acropolis, underneath the great Parthenon. And if you go there today, the Greek government has put a bronze plaque on that outcropping of rock, which has, in the Greek language, the speech from Acts chapter 17 that Paul spoke on that day:

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went throughout the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hand, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things, From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places

where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead,”

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” (Acts 17: 16-34).

Areopagus means, “The Hill of War,” because Ares is the Greek god of war. The Romans would call it “Mars’ Hill” because the Romans borrowed the Greek gods and they call the god of war, Mars. At this hill, people would be brought to have dialogue, to talk, to argue, and so they bring Paul there. We want to hear because it seems that he is a teacher of foreign divinities, the NRSV text says, “What will this babblers have to say?” Actually, the Greek word that’s used there is the word “stormcrow.” What will this stormcrow have to say? A stormcrow that picks up little pieces of things and then passes them around. J.R.R Tolkien wrote the incredible novels, *The Lord of the Rings*; you may know that J.R.R. Tolkien, when he created Middle Earth portrays as one of the control players in Middle Earth the great character, Gandalf, the Wizard.

Gandalf comes to King Theoden’s palace in *The Two Towers*,<sup>1</sup> the second of *The Lord of the Rings* novels; the prime minister of King Theoden is a conspirator against the king, a man named Wormtongue. When Wormtongue sees Gandalf show up at the door, he says, “What will this Stormcrow have to say?” I believe that Tolkien puts that line in *The Two Towers* because he

knows that that is what St. Paul was called. He was called Stormcrow. I think that is deliberate on J.R.R. Tolkien's part because Gandalf is a little bit like St. Paul. He's a bringer of a new message. Paul is called a stormcrow, picker-up of ideas. I can't resist reading again Luke's comment. Luke is a doctor, a very practical man. He is concerned about healing people. He is there as the companion who travels with Paul. Luke makes a comment, as an aside, "Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." Athens is a philosophical town, and that's probably why they were interested in Paul. They bring him up to the Areopagus where Paul makes his speech.

The speech of St. Paul is very interesting. He starts by noting what he observed. He said, "I can see that you are intrigued with ideas, that you are '*hyper* religious' (that is the word in the Greek text). You have many shrines." And, "I saw the unknown god shrine. I want to tell you about the unknown god, the god you don't know about." He alludes to the fact that they're wandering around, wandering and yearning, trying to find out what god might be there. Is that why they have the shrine for the unknown god in case they've missed a god? Paul compliments his listeners: "I've seen this wanderlust. I've seen this inquisitiveness in your spirit. Let me tell you about the unknown god you are wondering about." He quotes two philosophers, Socrates and Epicurus, to establish their historical search.

Then he narrated for them the message of Jesus Christ; and he affirmed the concrete victory of Jesus Christ over death. That's how Luke describes it. He told them about Jesus Christ and the resurrection. And when he tells this to them, they're shocked and many are baffled. In fact, the text says some mocked him when he told about this, but then others said, "We will hear more about it." Let us try to understand Paul's speech. Luke does compress narratives in his Book of Acts accounts, and we need to understand the compression moments in Luke's accounts, especially here.

For instance, in Acts chapter 2, Luke narrates for us the speech of St. Peter on the day of Pentecost. If we read that speech in the second chapter of Acts, from Luke's account, it takes us two minutes to read the speech. It takes only three minutes--a little less than three minutes to read this speech on Mars' Hill. You just heard it, but we know that Peter spoke longer than



two minutes. We know first century speeches would go a long time. Remember, in one speech when Paul was speaking, a boy fell asleep in the window and fell out the window. So people spoke a long time. Therefore, what do we do with the text? In Peter's speech where Luke narrates it, he tells us that Peter told them about Jesus, "this Jesus who is attested to you by mighty works and who died in the cross, and yet death could not hold him." Right there, we could insert the Book of Mark because when Peter preached, and since Mark was his disciple, he traveled with Peter throughout the Mediterranean world and heard Peter preach over and over again. Peter's preaching is best found in the Book of Mark, a very rapid-fire narrative of the life of Christ. That is the preaching of the early church; they told the life of Christ. Remember when we were looking at Antioch, they went to Antioch and told about Jesus the Lord? Right there, you could insert the Book of Mark. Insert those narratives of the life of Jesus.

Now, here, on Mars' Hill, Paul probably spoke for several hours. We know that's the tradition of the Areopagus. And right where it says that he told about Jesus and the resurrection, at that point, in my view, you can insert the Book of Luke. Luke is Paul's companion, the beloved physician who traveled with Paul throughout the Mediterranean world. He heard Paul preach over and over again. And if you read the Book of Luke, you'll see that the Book of Luke is aimed at the Greek audience, the audience that doesn't understand Jewish tradition and themes so that Luke is careful to explain these Jewish traditions to the Greek audience; and that's what Paul did. Paul felt his message was to the Gentiles. So if we want to understand what Paul said on Mars' Hill, as he narrated the life of Christ, probably Luke's gospel is a good example.

Notice, a little longer than the Book of Mark; Paul would speak longer than Peter. What happened? Some people mocked it. After all, it was a shock to what Greeks were looking forward to. They tended to be highly spiritualized and yet this message is focused upon the concrete person, the man who came among us, the one who died on the cross in our behalf, and won concretely a victory over death. This is a shock, it's a shock to what the Greek world would look forward to from Plato onward. They tend to have a more idealized and spiritualized understanding of reality.

For the Greek world of thought and the ideal Christ would be totally spiritual not physical. But the New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus Christ was a real man. Jesus a real person who came among us and who died on the cross and he really died. Then on the third day it's a real victory. And Paul preached that and it was a shock to his listeners; and yet notice in the text, there were those who believed it. "Now when they heard this about the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ, some mocked but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So, Paul went out from among them, but some men joined him and believed among them Dionysius the Areopagite." Don't let that slip by. The man who was in charge of the Areopagus, the man who had heard more speeches on the Areopagus than anybody had. He had heard all the philosophers. He'd probably arranged for the philosophers to debate and when he heard Paul, he becomes a believer. And then Luke also tells us, "And also a woman named Damaris and then others with them."

Luke is very interested in the fact that Paul had an amazing ministry to women like Lydia as well as men. So we meet Damaris and others. Why? Why did they believe? The Athenians are self described intellectuals of the first century world, and they have so much to be proud of, so much that they can boast about in that very city of Athens itself. Think of it. Paul is standing in the Areopagus, and if he looks up from the Areopagus, a winding pathway that heads to the Acropolis summit. In that winding path about midway is the "Winged Victory of Samothrace" which is now in the Louvre museum, unfortunately.

This amazing "Winged Victory," and then further up, a great temple on the left and then further to the middle of the Acropolis is the greatest building ever built, the Parthenon, built 400 years before Christ. It's a marvel of architecture. It had the great Elgin Marbles up at the top which are now in the British Museum (they should be returned.) Inside was the statue of Athena, the city god of Athens, gilded with gold. They said that when sailors came in from the sea and the sun was shining, they could see that great statue of Athena glowing.

This amazing temple, there is no temple like it. I say to people, if you're

going to the Middle East go to Athens last because when you see the Parthenon; it will downgrade every other temple you see in the ancient world. Why? Because the architect of the Parthenon was a genius. And when it was built with 17 pillars on one side and 8 pillars on the other side, each 34 feet high, and then the capital on top and then the roof, he realized that if each of the pillars were parallel (which they are in most of the other temples in the ancient world), then when you put the capital on the top, it would make the temple look like it was bulging. And so, what he designed and built is a temple in which every column should be apparently parallel but actually should tilt inward. And so, every one of those columns in the Parthenon are tilted inward and then there's the capital on top; and therefore, that one building does not look like it bulges. It looks pure, because the pillars all tilt inward. I once put it this way: it means that about 75 miles in the sky they converge.

And so, when Paul is standing at the Areopagus he is pointing to the most beautiful building ever built. Maybe the Taj Mahal is a close second; the greatest building ever built, every architect will tell you, is the Parthenon. And Paul boldly—I love this he doesn't patronize the intellectuals of Athens. He boldly points to that shrine and says, "I have something to share with you. The God who made everything in heaven and earth and everywhere does not dwell in shrines made by man." And I wonder if he pointed to the Parthenon.

And you know what they said? "You're right." They were already disillusioned with their own gods. They were already disillusioned with their own temples. As great as that temple is, it cannot hold God. God must speak for Himself. He's not captive to any temple. He's not captive in this temple, to this church, to that building or any building. He speaks for Himself, and that's what Paul then proceeded to tell them. He told of the amazing moment in history when God spoke for Himself in Jesus Christ and made Himself known. And I've tried to think, why were the intellectuals of Athens... why are intellectuals today open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And you know what it is? It's the sheer vastness of the message. It's the vastness of Paul's gospel. It's not small. It's not patronizing. It's powerful. It's challenging. It takes your breath away. And I think that's why the Areopagite became

a believer.

Finally, I hear something that takes my breath away. The grace of God is able to heal. The Savior is the Lord Jesus Christ who can save anyone. His lordship that is vast is able to make sense out of life and make sense out of our lives. And they saw it.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you for the vastness of the Gospel that it's right here and that St. Paul preached it. He did it boldly. He did it underneath the greatest building in the world, and it made sense. It still does. Lord, may we be caught up and discover how huge is this message about Jesus of Nazareth. The man who died on the cross and who conquered death in our behalf. Lord, thank you for that and may we experience that vastness ourselves. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

1 Tolkein, J.R.R., *The Two Towers*. Copyright © 1954, 1965, 1966 by J.R.R. Tolkein. *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary One-Volume Edition*. Great Britain: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004.

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