

Paul Speaks at the Areopagus

Paul delivers a masterful sermon to Athenian philosophers at Mars Hill, proclaiming the unknown God and calling them to repentance.

Acts 17:16-34

CHARACTERS: Paul, Athenian Philosophers, Dionysius, Damaris

THEMES: Evangelism, Truth, Idolatry, Resurrection

WHILE PAUL WAITED at Athens for Silas and Timothy, his spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Athens, the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient world, was filled with temples, shrines, and statues to countless gods. Paul disputed in the synagogue with the Jews and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him, engaging whoever would listen in discussion about Jesus and the resurrection.

Certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoicks encountered him. The Epicureans sought pleasure and tranquility, denying divine intervention in human affairs. The Stoicks believed in fate and living according to reason and nature. Some said, 'What will this babbler say?' dismissing him as a collector of scraps of knowledge. Others said, 'He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods,' because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection. They took him and brought him unto Areopagus, or Mars Hill, the council that dealt with religious and philosophical matters in Athens.

They asked, '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.' Luke notes that all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing

else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing. Their intellectual curiosity provided Paul with an opportunity to present the gospel in terms they could engage with.

Paul stood in the midst of Mars Hill and began his address: 'Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.' He had observed an altar with the inscription, 'TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.' He declared, 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.' Paul then proclaimed the one true God: 'God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.' He dismantled their idolatrous conceptions, showing that the Creator needs nothing from His creatures.

Paul continued, explaining that God made all nations from one blood and determined their times and boundaries, 'That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being.' He even quoted their own poets: 'For we are also his offspring.' Then Paul applied this truth: 'Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.' Their idols were inadequate representations of the divine.

Paul reached his climax: 'The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.' When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, 'We will hear thee again of this matter.' Some men joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the council, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. Paul's Mars Hill sermon demonstrated

how to engage thoughtfully with philosophical minds while faithfully proclaiming Christ crucified and risen.

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