



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 17: 22-34

"Easter For Philosophers"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth. Well, we're taking a break this morning from the Gospel of John and we're going to look at Acts chapter 17. And the context of the entire passage, really, would be verse 16 through verse 34; however I'm not going to read beginning with verse 16, but verse 22 where Paul begins his sermon to the philosophers. But he is in Athens and he spends some time looking through the city, exploring it, going down where the marketplace, the *agora*, was. (Still is, you can visit the agora today if you go to Athens.) And there they had all kinds of statues and idols—and it troubled him.

Well, he ends up having conversation with some of the philosophers. And they invite him to come to Mars' Hill and talk about this 'new god' that they are hearing about: "Anastasis"—which is the word for *resurrection*. So beginning with verse 22 we read,

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all

things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and ^lexist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." ³³ So Paul went out of their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Acts 17: 22-34

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of studying it together. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, what a privilege it is to be with Your people today on this Resurrection Sunday, this Easter Sunday. This is the day that traditionally we remember that great event. And yet, it's something we need to remember, and that every Sunday celebrates the resurrection. That's why the church began to meet on the first day of the week, rather than the last day of the week. It signifies that a new age has begun.

And yet, even Sunday is not the only day we celebrate the resurrection. We live, as believers in Jesus Christ, with resurrection life within us. Every day should be a remembrance of that great event when You conquered death, grave opened, and Your Son came forth alive—and glorified.

Father, that was the great, historical testimony that You have accepted His sacrifice for our sins. And that, as He said on the cross, "It is finished.", it certainly is and You have proven that by raising Him from the dead. There's nothing more we can do, nothing we can add to the work of Christ. It's all finished, it's been accomplished, and salvation is a certainty. We thank You for that. You've saved Your people from their sins and You're gathering them throughout the ages now: Throughout every year, every day, You're bringing people into Your fold, into Your family. And we pray that if there be someone here this morning who's not put his or her faith in Christ, You may bring them to the conviction that they need to do that; that they are lost and the way to be found is to put one's faith in Christ.

We thank You for Him, for His death for us. May He be magnified in this hour, but may our Triune God be magnified. We give praise and thanks to You for salvation because salvation is of the LORD.

And now LORD, bless us as we continue our service; and we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) In one of the early Greek plays by Aeschylus, the god Apollo stands in the court of Athens, the Areopagus, and declares, "Once a man dies, there is no resurrection." 400 years later the apostle Paul stood in the same court in Athens and declared, 'God raised a man from the dead.' (vs31). Two different messages—one of despair, one of hope; in the same place, in the same city, in Athens.

In Paul's day, Athens was past it's prime. It had long since lost political significance but it was still the center of culture in the ancient world. The city of Socrates and Plato, the adopted home of Aristotle, the birthplace of democracy, Athens was a city of great prestige—something like Paris today.

So when Paul visited Athens, he did what anyone of us would have done; he walked through the city to get his bearings and get his feel for it. And Luke writes, "...his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols." (vs16).

Athens was notorious for its idols. One Roman said, "It is easier to find a god than a man in Athens."

Paul had not come to Athens on a holiday. He was there on his second missionary journey and quickly saw his work before him: The men of Athens needed the Gospel. So he quickly got down to the business of his life, being a witness for Christ. He went to the synagogue, as he normally did, and began reasoning with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. And when he wasn't in the synagogue he was out on the street or he was in the marketplace, the center of Athenian life and activity, and there he spoke with whomever he could.

He reasoned with those who passed by. He asked questions, engaged them in discussion using a kind of Socratic method. He did this every day; he did the work of an evangelist. And when we do that, and do the things we're supposed to do as Christians, doors can open—unexpected opportunities may occur.

And they did for Paul. Some epicurean and stoic philosophers were in the marketplace and began talking with him. These were rival philosophies, and really, the two dominant philosophies of the Roman world.

The epicureans didn't deny the existence of the gods but they believed that if there were gods, they were detached from mankind and this world. They're gods: They're up there; they're busy with things far more important than what's occurring here. And so the gods, if they existed, took little or no interest in the affairs of men. Which means they, (*the epicureans*), were practical atheists; meaning they may believe in the gods but they live as though they don't exist.

The world was the product of chance; everything ended in death—there was no life to come, no judgment to come. This world and this life is all we get. And so they taught that men should pursue pleasure. And the highest pleasure was a life of tranquility: a life free of pain and passion and fear—a peaceful life.

The stoics were basically pantheistic: God is everything and everything is god. They spoke of god as 'the world's soul.' They believed in fate and taught that man is to

pursue his duty, be resigned to whatever happened to him, and develop individual self-sufficiency.

John Stott wrote that, "The epicureans emphasized chance, escape, and the enjoyment of pleasure. The stoics emphasized fatalism, submission, and endurance of pain."

Those were the main options in the ancient world; and F. F. Bruce wrote that, "Post-Christian paganism, which is modern man, has never been able to devise anything appreciably better." So really, that's the options that are open today: Live for pleasure or live for duty, but this life is all we've got—and at the end of it, all is over.

So Acts 17 is a very contemporary passage in thought, (or philosophy), and attitude. Some weren't at all impressed with Paul and what he said. They dismissed him as a "babblers", (Acts 17:18), a word that means, literally, '*seed picker*', like a bird that picks up little pieces of grain here and there—and that was their way of saying, 'He's an amateur. He's a dabbler, a dilettante who really doesn't make any sense.'

But others were curious about what he had been speaking about. They said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,—because", Luke explains, "he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." (*ibid*). But the word, "*resurrection*", was something they understood as 'a god'. The word for resurrection is *Anastasis*, and so they thought, 'Well, Paul is speaking about two gods; a god named Jesus and a god named Anastasis.' So they were curious. And since they were men of leisure, (and Luke describes them as this in verse 19 through 21, they "used to spend their time", he wrote, "in nothing other than telling or hearing something new."), they wanted to hear from him on this god, 'Anastasis.'

So they took Paul to the Areopagus. The literal meaning of that is 'the hill of Ares', the Greek god of war. We know it as *Mars' hill*. It is near the Acropolis and you can still visit this hill. It's steps are cut into the hill that lead up to the top where benches were hewn out of rock. This was the original meeting place of the court of Athens; and it

is an impressive place. It's a not only impressive place, but in this context, an intimidating place: Below the Acropolis in the shadow of Greek glory, among men who were like Oxford dons—while Paul, the Jew, was there alone.

His friends were in other places, coming down from Macedonia and were going to meet him soon in Corinth. But Paul was by himself, and so he stood there alone—kind of 'Paul against the world' here. But he had courage; he had courage in the LORD.

And he also had tact. He began by acknowledging that the Athenians were religious people. They had raised altars and statues to every god worshiped by men. He had observed them as he walked through the market. But he told them that the one altar that was there that really caught his attention, was the one inscribed, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD". (vs 23). And so he said, 'Since you've acknowledged your ignorance of Him, I want to tell you who this God is.' And then he reveals God to them in five points.

First, in verse 24, 'He is the creator of all things.' He didn't try to prove God's existence—I think that's interesting. It's interesting because they think it's a recognition that because men are created in the image of God, and God has revealed Himself, generally, in the creation, (His existence), and that revelation in the creation answers to the very nature of man—that he's created in the image of man, then he doesn't need to try to prove Him. And so he began his sermon to them the same way the Bible begins: Not trying to prove God, but with the recognition, the assumption, that 'God is'. He begins with the creator, just as Genesis 1 begins, with the creator.

"The God who made the world," he said, "and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands." (vs24). That was a bold statement. Paul was standing there in this august place, surrounded by temples, the pride of Athens. The Parthenon was above on the top of the Acropolis; he could see it from this hill where he was standing. The temple of Hephaestus, the god of fire, was down below. Not far from there was the great temple of Zeus—and many, many others. And in one sentence he sweeps all that away as foolish, 'God is too great to dwell in a little house. He is Spirit; He is omnipresent.'

And He's omnipotent. That's the second point that Paul makes. He sustains everything. "He is not served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things." (vs25). God is self-existent. He is independent of the universe. He doesn't need man.

How different that is from the idols. The prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, they mocked the idols and the idol makers and how they take a piece of wood—and half of it they turn into an idol, they carve a little image out of it; and the other half they use the wood to warm themselves. And what do they do then? They pick the idol up and they carry it wherever it goes. It's a god that has to be carried.

God is not like that. He's the one who carries everything. He needs nothing. Man needs Him, vitally: He gives life and breath and all things to us. 'The very breath in these men'; (to whom Paul was speaking), 'that breathed out their philosophies was given to them by God', he was saying. He gave them every moment of their existence. He was saying, 'You're able to sit here in this place and listen to me because God is holding you together and giving you every moment of your existence.'

He's also the ruler of all things. That's Paul's third point in verse 26, "...and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation."

Now that affirms the oneness of mankind: All the nations have a common origin. God created them from one man—which completely contradicted the Greek's elevated view of themselves. They believed that they were a unique people. All other people, those who didn't speak Greek, were barbarians; just as the Jews considered all other people to be heathens.

But Paul says, 'We're all alike.' We have a common ancestor. We have a common condition, sin, which doesn't leave room for any notion of racial superiority. And so the statement he made was a challenge to Greek pride—and particularly to Athenian pride. But it also challenged the fundamental beliefs of these philosophers. God's not detached

from the world as the epicureans believed. The world is not run by chance—nor is it controlled by arbitrary fate as the stoics believed.

God is in control; and He has a design and a purpose for the world and for the nations. The nations have been established by Him and He 'appointed their times'. He 'appointed their boundaries', (vs26)—which means He determined the place where they would exist, their place in history, their place on the globe. He's sovereign over the nations. He's running the universe His way. He determined that each would have their moment in history; when it would occur and when it would end.

He has a purpose in doing that. He blessed people with a time and a place in the world so, "that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him..." (vs27).

All people have an opportunity to consider God's general revelation; to see the heavens, they "declare the glory of God." (Ps 19:1). And they can see order and beauty in nature; and they can sense the providence of God, how things happen in such a timely way. And in all of this, as they consider these things, they can 'grope' for God, as it were, seek Him blindly, as it were.

The picture I think that Paul gives here of these nations, who have general revelation but no special revelation, is a picture of a man in a dark room. He can't see anything, but he can feel his way along the wall. And that's the natural man. That's the heathen. His mind is darkened. He is ignorant of God. Still, he has creation around him which reveals the existence of God and he has the obligation, 'to feel after God to try to find Him.' (vs27). And if people search for Him, they will find Him; God has promised that. He said, in Jeremiah 29, verse 13, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart."

Men don't find God, though. It's not because He is obscure or He is distant. It's because they don't search. 'He is not', Paul said, 'distant from us'. (vs27b). Rather He is close to us. We live and exist in Him. Can't get much closer than that. We exist within Him. God is Spirit. He is everywhere present. He is our creator and He is our sustainer. Were God to withdraw His power from us and His presence from us, we would cease

to exist in an instant. We do not live independently of Him. We have our origin and our present existence from Him and in Him by His sovereign will.

And that wasn't an altogether alien idea to these Greeks. In verse 28 Paul quotes some of their poets who said, "For we also are His children." That is Paul's fourth point. God is our parent in the sense that He created man in His own image. Now there's a big difference between being a child of God through faith and being a child of God by creation. Paul's point is simply that our life originates with Him. It's not independent—it originates with Him.

And that indicates something fundamental about God. Because life is intangible; life is immaterial. It's not physical, we can't catch it in a bottle and examine it. And since life originates from Him and depends on Him, as even their poets testified, it follows that life could not have come from something that men made out of gold or silver or stone. Life doesn't spring from non-life, from inanimate things. That's irrational—and it's very contemporary. So Paul told them they shouldn't think of God as being like those lifeless, dumb idols.

Then he gives them some good news in verse 30, 'The living God is also a patient God.' Gentiles have lived in ignorance of this God for centuries and God has 'overlooked their ignorance in the past'. But 'Things have changed' he says. 'Now they need to repent; the Savior has come; the Gospel is going out into the nations and they need to turn from their false gods and their wrong ideas about God to the living God. And the reason is because the day of judgment is coming.'

That's Paul's fifth point in verse 31. God who is the Creator, Sustainer, Ordainer and Parent of us, is also our Judge. And 'He has fixed a day,' Paul says, "in which He will judge the world in righteousness."

Well, the Greeks didn't have anything like that. They didn't have such an event as a day of judgment in their philosophies or in their religion. And so when he says this, it

must have been very strange to them—just as it's strange to people today to hear about a judgment day.

But that didn't prevent Paul from declaring this to them; 'A day of judgment has been fixed', he said. And he says, 'God has appointed a Man through whom He will judge the world.' He's even given firm proof of this Man who'll be the judge because, 'He raised Him from the dead. So now it is time to repent. So now it is time for them to turn from the foolishness of idols and the foolishness of their empty philosophical speculations and turn to the true God, while there is still opportunity.' He's saying to them, in effect, 'It's urgent! The day has been fixed, and it's coming!' It was their time to turn, as I say—their opportunity.

But at that moment, at the moment he begins to speak about the resurrection as, 'The proof that this Man is the Man that God has appointed to be the judge', at that moment their opportunity ended. The Greeks started laughing—and the meeting broke up. Now they realized what Paul meant when he spoke of "Anastasis". *Resurrection*; it wasn't some new deity at all: it is an act of God in raising a man from the dead! *Resurrection*; that's when they quickly lost interest and anything that Paul had to say.

The idea of a resurrection of the dead was the height of folly to the Greeks. Both the stoics and the epicureans agreed on that. Greeks considered the material world to be evil. Matter is evil and the body is bad. In fact, they thought of the human body as the prison house of the soul. They wanted to be rid of it. They wanted to be liberated from this body so they could be a free spirit—and resurrection would prevent that. Why would they want to leave this body and inhabit a new body?

So when they heard Paul say that, 'God raised a Man from the dead', they didn't get angry. They didn't tear their robes or throw rocks as the Jews might have done if they heard something that they disagreed with: very different from that, they just began to sneer and thought how ludicrous!

This is such a modern response, it seems to me. People today don't throw rocks at us if we preach the Gospel. Now sometimes they do; I don't want to say it never happens. It happened a lot when Whitefield was giving the Gospel in England. They'd throw all kinds of things at those men who were preaching the Gospel; rocks, dead cats, and things like that. So it can happen.

But I think primarily the way the world responds to us when we speak of the Gospel, and we speak of the Lord, and we speak of the day of judgment, is to scoff. They dismiss it as completely irrelevant, out of touch, ludicrous. 'This is modern day America. We don't talk about such things.'

And that was the response in Athens. Some were more polite: They didn't sneer, they just said, 'Well, we'll talk with you about this some other time.' (vs32). And they had no intention of doing that. It was a polite way of dismissing the apostle. They were done, and that was it.

Paul left the meeting at the court—and not long after left Athens and went to Corinth. But before he left, some did believe. Dionysius, who was a leading intellectual, he was a member of the Areopagus. Also a woman named Damaris and some others with them—all influential people. (vs32). But it's a small group.

Not many of these people believed. And so, you might ask, 'Well why so few, and why them, anyway?' Well one reason it's so few is because they didn't take Paul seriously. So many of them thought he was an idle "babbler"; thought he was a 'seed picker', an amateur. They weren't enamored of him at all. They were enamored of their own philosophies. They were enamored of themselves and their intellect. Both the epicureans and the stoics agreed with Aeschylus, "Once a man dies, there's no resurrection"—and to think differently is ridiculous. So it shut down further discussion right from that moment. There's no point in talking further if you believe that.

It's the same today. Men don't reject the resurrection of Christ because the preponderance of the evidence is against it, it's not. It's not a problem of proof, it's a

problem of philosophy. It's a problem of the way people think and the way they begin thinking. The resurrection doesn't fit the modern idea of naturalism, of a godless universe. Once a man dies, that's it. There's no resurrection. To believe differently is naïve—it's childish.

But what is naïve about it? How is it unreasonable that God exists? Why is that unreasonable? That life comes from Him rather than life comes from nothing. —That's rational? What is irrational about God sending His Son into the world? Why could He not do that and raise Him from the dead?

In fact, if Paul had continued with his sermon and they had sought some kind of scientific evidence, some proof of it, he could have verified the resurrection with eye witness accounts—his own being one of them. He went on to Corinth and then later he wrote to the Corinthians—and in chapter 15 he did just that. In verses 3 through 9 he gives the evidence, not only of his and that of the apostles but over 500 other people witnessed the resurrected Christ. And he says, 'Some of them, many of them, are still alive. You can go visit with them and talk to them about that.'

Why can't people see that this is rational? Well again, it's not because it is not rational, it's because it doesn't fit what they believe to be true. Whether it is stoicism or materialism, they see life through the eyes of unbelief. That's the case with every man, woman, and child outside of Christ. We're born dead, we're born blind, spiritually blind. Or as an apologist for the faith put it, "Everyone has colored glasses fixed to his or her face that can't be removed. In fact, they don't even know they've got them on. But as a result they see everything through the tinted lenses of unbelief. It colors everything. It shapes and distorts everything." Now that's the natural man. We shouldn't be surprised that the world rejects the clear message of the Gospel because it goes against everything they do believe. And as a consequence it is foolish to them.

So how is it that Dionysius and Damaris and a few others believed? They were epicureans or stoics and they had the same set of presuppositions and philosophy within

themselves. They heard the same sermon that the others heard. The others scoffed; 'Why didn't they?'

Well, I think it's as simple as this. God removed the colored glasses from their face. The God who gave life to the physical body of Jesus Christ to raise it from the dead, gave life, spiritual life, to the hearts of those people to be born again. —And as a result of that, the ability to understand the message that Paul had preached and then to believe; it is all of grace. And the same love of God that shined into their hearts enlightened your hearts and enabled you to understand and believe the Gospel; and that's why you're here. It suddenly made sense.

It may have made sense when you were a child. It may have made sense when you were a young adult or in old age. But suddenly, at God's time, light shined into your hearts; you were revived; you were resurrected spiritually—and you got a new pair of glasses to help you see clearly and believe.

Well, as I say, it's all of grace. And what you saw and what you believed, is not only reasonable, truly rational, and demonstrably historical, it's also the greatest message ever declared to the world. It's the message of hope. He is risen! A Man has defeated death and triumphed over the grave.

God's eternal Son entered the world as you and I did. He was born of a woman. He became a real Man with a true body and a reasonable soul. He lived a perfect life on this earth, offered Himself up on the cross as the final sacrifice for sins. And God proved that He had accepted His sacrifice by raising Him from the dead.

Now all who seek Him find Him, and they trust in Christ. And they're not only forgiven of their sins, they are made sons and daughters of God. Then they know God is not far from them. He's near. He walks with us. He hears our prayers always. He guides us and shields us always. He is our Father.

We are in Christ. We are united with Him. In fact, His Son is not only risen from the grave, but ascended into heaven and He is seated right now at the Father's right

hand, at the place of power, where He prays for us constantly, giving us His blessings—daily. We have a living Savior; and His resurrection guarantees that each of us who have joined ourselves to Him through faith, and faith alone, that we, too, will rise from the dead. There will be a resurrection day for us when He returns into this world. And that day is coming.

That too, was Paul's message to the philosophers. God has appointed Him to "judge the world in righteousness", and "He has fixed that day." (vs31). We don't know what that day is but we know it has been fixed, and it is certain. The philosophers didn't want to hear that; they scoffed. But he said it for their benefit. He didn't say it to be a threatening person, he said it to be a blessing to them, to give them the warning they needed, to give them the good news they needed: 'A Man has risen from the dead—and He's coming back! And now, today, is the day of salvation. Today is the day of opportunity. Come to Christ', is what he was saying. That was his plea to them; and that would be Paul's plea to you and to me, as well.

If you've not believed in Christ, don't scoff; there's nothing foolish here. It's all very serious. God has fixed a day of judgment; and the whole world will answer to Christ. But this same Jesus is also the Savior who died for sinners. On Him the judgment of God fell, fully and completely, so that all who believe in Him may escape that judgment and receive from Him forgiveness and everlasting life.

So if you're here without Christ, our invitation to you is, 'Come to Christ. Believe in Him.' And what a great day to do that, on Easter Sunday. May God help you to come to Him.

And help all of us who have, to rejoice in what we have: We have a risen Savior who is living for us and will raise us up some day; that is great news.

On behalf of the elders and the deacons of Believer's Chapel, we wish you a blessed Sunday, Resurrection Sunday, and let's close in a word of prayer.

Father, we do thank You for this time together—a time to reflect on this great event of history, the resurrection of Your Son and what it means for us. It's our hope as well, in Christ and because of Christ, and by Your grace. The grave is not the end. The graves will all be opened: We will come forth glorified to enter into a glorious kingdom and a world without end.

It's all Your grace and we give You praise and thanks for that, and for our Savior. Help us to think about Him this day. Let this be a day of remembrance of the resurrection and the sacrifice for it and the salvation we have in Him. We thank You for Him.

And now, the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In the name of Christ, Amen.

(End of Audio)