

Acts Chapter 17

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Preacher: Marvin Wiseman

[0 : 00] Well, let's take a scripture sheet, if we may. In fact, you'll probably need for just a moment the one right before this one, and I suspect that you have it. But we are in Acts chapter 17, and this is our last Thursday for the month of February, and spring is right around the corner.

So let's just keep thinking spring, okay? Anyway, we are looking at a very, very important chapter where the Apostle Paul completely changed his methodology when he went to Mars Hill. Let me remind you just briefly that when we have opportunity to give the gospel message, we have to deal with the person to whom we are speaking in terms of where they are and what their background is, and that causes us to adjust our message.

We do not adjust the centrality of the message, of course, which is Christ died for our sins. But you have to take a different approach, even as Paul did, because whenever he went into the synagogue, he would preach to the Jews who had a background, who had information, had commonality, because they were very familiar with the Old Testament scriptures.

And be reminded that when Paul was preaching his gospel, the Old Testament scriptures was all that existed. And yet, that's more than sufficient to bring forth the person and work of Christ, because he's scattered all through the Old Testament.

[1 : 30] So when you know that people have a background and a frame of reference for what you're saying, you can go ahead and say it. And that's what Paul did when he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ being the Messiah, died for the sins of the world, etc., to a Jewish audience.

But when he went to Athens, which is purely pagan territory, these people have zero confidence in and knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures.

So Paul did not have a common base of talking to them, because they didn't have the advantage of the Old Testament. He had to approach them in a different way.

And he did. So you will find one message preached to the Jews, and a different kind of message preached to the Gentiles or the pagans. However, Jesus Christ is the focal point of both of those messages.

He just had to go about it in a different way. And I well remember Francis Schaeffer, and this was 40 years ago, when I heard him. He was speaking in Indianapolis at the time.

[2 : 35] And he made this observation, and it really impacted me. And he said, here in America, years ago, and he was talking about, then he was talking about the 40s and 50s.

He said, you could approach someone on the basis of Jesus Christ being the Son of God, etc. And everybody pretty much had a frame of reference about it, because they were at least vaguely familiar with the Bible and what the Bible taught.

They accepted the Bible as authoritative. They knew that Christ was revealed in the Bible, death, burial, and resurrection, and all of that. And you had a commonality of speaking with them, and they could understand what you're talking about.

You could give them John 3.16, and they might even know it or have heard it before. But today, and he was talking about when he was giving the message. Like I said, this was in the 60s and 70s.

You can't do that. Because the generation then, and even more so the generation now, in 2000 plus, people don't have a biblical frame of reference.

[3 : 41] And you cannot just jump in with John 3.16 and give them the gospel, because they can't relate to that. Where do you have to start? You have to start with Genesis.

You have to go all the way back and bring them up to where we are today. So it's an entirely different approach that we take today. And when you give somebody a scripture reference, and you say that's in the Bible, they may very well come back with, so the Bible is just a book of old writings, just a bunch of old guys who gave their opinion of life years and years ago.

What's that have to do with me? They don't have the authoritative view of the scriptures that generations before had. And let me give you an illustration of that.

When I was in Alaska, stationed there for two years, back in the 50s when I was in the army, and at night, cold winter nights, especially near the end of the month when everybody was broke, bumming cigarettes off of each other, we didn't have money to go anywhere, couldn't go into town, into Anchorage or anything, so we would just sit around and play music and read and stuff like that. Every once in a while, we'd get out our little Gideon New Testament. The Gideons gave us when we enlisted in the army. Everybody got a Gideon New Testament.

[5 : 01] And here we were in the barracks, maybe 12 or 14 of us guys, most of whom had no real knowledge of the Bible at all. Some of them spent some time in Sunday school.

Some of them had been to church or were church members. Most of us were nothing. And there were even a couple of Jewish fellows there. And they were Catholic, and there were this all over the map, you know, guys from all over the country.

And we would sit around on our bunks, sit on our foot lockers, etc., in a circle, and we would read from the New Testament, particularly in the book of Revelation. And none of us had a clue as to what it meant.

But I was really struck with one thing. Here we were in like 1955, and there wasn't a guy among us who disputed that the Bible was true and was the Word of God.

Nobody questioned that. It was an assumption. Everybody made. Well, this is God's Word. And we never had to make the case for it. Nobody ever asked the question, you know, I don't know if I believe this.

[6 : 08] I think this Bible might be a bunch of baloney. Nobody ever said that. And here were guys from all of these diverse backgrounds, and not a one of us, even questioned, I don't recall anybody, even raising the question as to whether or not what we were reading was actually true.

That would not be so today. That would not be so today. Let me just say this. This is really important. Hope you never forget it. Authority is the issue.

It always has been. It always will be. What do you accept, believe, as your final authority for truth and for information?

What is it? For most people today, it's the ability of their own intellect. That's what they accept as authoritative.

And in a practical way, oh yeah, they'll accept the cop on the corner as authoritative, and the judge, etc. But so far as an ultimate authority is concerned, most consider themselves to be that.

[7 : 18] Radically different from years ago. What do you accept as authoritative? What do you accept as being in a position with the right and ability to hold you accountable?

You would be surprised. Most people do not have that central kind of authority today as they did have a generation or two ago. So authority is what really matters.

What do you accept as authority? We're here this morning because we accept this Bible as God's word, as our authority. Do we understand everything in it?

No. Do we all agree about everything in it? No. But let me tell you this. The things that God considers most important are the things about which he has spoken most clearly and most frequently in the Bible so as to leave no room for misunderstanding.

Yes, there are ambiguities in some places. Yes, there are troubling passages and perplexing texts. But by and large, this is a book that communicates. It is intended to be understood.

[8 : 33] The Bible is intelligible. That means it is capable of being understood and it is intended to be understood.

Otherwise, the whole purpose of revelation is defeated. So let's keep that in mind continually as we come to the text again.

Now we're in Acts chapter 17 and Paul is wrapping up his message on Mars Hill. He has addressed this issue of their worshipping this unknown God and he tells them that it is this God that you don't know, you Athenian philosophers, that I have come to tell you about.

And this one became a man, died on the cross, was raised from the dead and because of the reality of that, he is the one through whom God is going to judge and evaluate everyone.

And we find that in verse 31 where Paul says, because God has fixed a day, there is a set point that is already in existence in the mind of God.

[9 : 48] We just don't know when it is, but he has fixed a day in which he will judge, evaluate, assess, call to question the world in righteousness through a man whom he has appointed.

And that one, of course, is Yeshua HaMashiach, Jesus the Messiah, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead. So, everything is changed with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Those who lived before that time are under a different standard. Those are they to whom God winked or overlooked in that time past.

But now, but now, he commands all men everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day. So, that means, fellas, there is a time of accounting that is going to come.

There will be a great size. There will be a day of judgment and all of us as individuals will give an account to God. And that's the message that Paul, see, what he's saying here too is history is going somewhere.

[11 : 01] It is linear. It's not cyclical. It is linear. There is a point of beginning, Genesis. There is a point of conclusion. And we are somewhere in between the beginning and the end.

And the conclusion, of course, is in the revelation. The beginning is in Genesis. And he's saying that God has something in mind. We are going somewhere. We aren't going around in circles.

And he has appointed this man having furnished proof to all by raising him from the dead. And this, of course, is the essence of Christianity is because Christ lives, we too shall live.

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, mock, ridicule. But others said, we shall hear you again concerning this.

What's going on here? If I can just toss out a suspicion, I wouldn't be surprised if the sun wasn't setting and it was getting dark and these guys want to get home to dinner and they need to conclude this some other time.

[12 : 04] So they're saying, hey, let's break this up and down. We'll hear you again. They didn't appoint a time, but they said, we'd like to hear more of this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed.

They had heard enough. You see, when these fellows sit around, these Athenian philosophers, and we're told earlier in the chapter that these guys gather together here in this place on Mars Hill, which is the highest elevation in the area, and they would sit around and swap philosophy and talk about deep things that a lot of people couldn't even understand, and yet they were always short of some kind of focal point for it all.

They never were able to arrive at a concise or a cohesive thing or person or idea that would put everything together.

They were always hitting all around, but never a bullseye. And what Paul is saying is, I've got the bullseye. And he is Jesus Christ, God's son.

He is the focal point. He is the center of it. He is the one that will allow you to connect the dots. Because in him, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge consist.

[13 : 38] And he is before all things, and by him all things were made. He that I'm speaking to you about is this unknown God that you don't know. He is the one who gives reason and value and purpose to everything.

Well, that's something that they had never heard before. They had never been able to connect that. And understandably, some of them, as Paul was talking and teaching about the person of Christ, some of them were already connecting the dots in their mind.

And they are saying to themselves, you know what? This fits. This answers a lot of questions. So that's what this is all about.

And as a result, they came to a conclusion. Connecting those dots, processing the information, the light bulb came on. And some of these guys were saying, that's it.

Eureka! That fits! This guy has got something. And the one he's talking about is the one that causes it all to come together. And as a result, some men joined him and believed.

[14 : 55] They believed with their will. They believed with their volition. This, like I said, this light came on and they were coming to a conclusion about something that they'd never heard of before, but it really struck a chord with them.

It connected. It grabbed them. And they believed. And by the way, it is interesting to note that within just the last, I guess it was in about 19, I guess it was in the 1980s, archaeologists unearthed some stone writings on which the name of this Dionysius, the Areopagite, was written.

And of course, the conclusion was that this was the same guy. And he obviously lived there in that area, there in Athens. So, the archaeological discoveries goes on and who knows what is yet out there waiting to be unearthed that will get more information.

So, before we leave this chapter, are there questions or comments that you'd like to have? Okay, Dan first. He was speaking to the Greeks. Right? Okay, the Greeks, from my understanding, were very, very intellectual scholars.

Oh, yeah. So, they were less active to buy into something that was presented to them like this. They would want to process it and break it through before they would arrive at any kind of conclusion. Oh, yeah. I think these people of whom we were speaking had probably the finest minds on the planet that existed at the time.

[16:42] And yet, as I pointed out to you before, intellectual capability is no guarantee for reaching truth. And here is a perfect example.

These were really smart guys, IQ-wise. But, when you're talking about spiritual truth and spiritual information that God has revealed, it takes more than mere intellect to believe.

And yet, well, someone has said that even a child, five-year-old child, can understand the concept of the gospel and believe and how much intellect is required there.

Not very much. So, if you want a commentary on this, read the first couple of chapters of 1 Corinthians where Paul talks about the foolishness of men and the wisdom of God and they contrast them.

Because, spiritual truth is not appropriated simply through the intellect. Because, if it were, then the greater intellect a person has, the more spiritual they would be.

[17:44] But we know that isn't true. There are some people who have towering intellects, IQs that you can't hardly measure. And yet, they have little or no appreciation for spiritual truth.

So, there is a huge difference there. Don't? Well, that's true.

But on the other hand, he left these guys. He left Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. They were believers, believers, and he had a limited amount of time to give them the information that he did.

But there is seed that is sown there in the person of these people. Yeah.

That's true. That's true. That's true. Well, I'm sure that they would have had some... I can't help but believe. I can't help but believe.

[18:52] The text doesn't say anything about this. But when Paul preached to these Athenian philosophers, he did not use the Old Testament. He used something that they were very familiar with.

He used human logic. And let me put it this way. You cannot come to know the God that is just through mere human logic alone.

But human logic applied to the truth will mesh with it. And it is capable of doing that. If you're limited to human logic and that's all you have, then you're pretty well up the creek.

But when you've got divine information with it, it's not going to contradict the truth. Yes. John?

When Paul visited these cities and established believers, he sent letters back to them afterwards.

True. Did he send letters back to Athens? We do not know. Certainly it's not in the text. We know he sent letters back to Corinth. And he sent letters to Philippi.

[19:58] He sent a letter to Philippi. And it is entirely possible, in fact, it's very likely, that Paul wrote numerous other letters that are not in the Bible.

And they are not in the Bible because they were not inspired and put into the Bible. For instance, if you read 1 Corinthians, I don't know where it's at now. It escapes me. As I get older, these passages move around.

But in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he mentions a letter he had written to them previously.

Well, where is that? We don't know. It isn't in the text. It isn't in the Bible. But when you read 1 Corinthians, you recognize that in reality it has to be at least 2 Corinthians, and then 2 Corinthians would be 3 Corinthians.

And he may have written even more. But it was the Spirit of God and his determination as to what was inspired, what was breathed of God, and what was not.

[21:04] So it is safe to say that Paul wrote a whole lot of letters that are not in the Bible. And yet, those that we have are those that the Spirit of God wants us to have. Now, curiosity, of course, really, really gets to us, and we say, man, I'd give my left arm up to here to know what was in that

first letter to the Corinthians.

We don't have it. As far as we know, it doesn't exist anywhere. But he wrote it, and he wrote other things, too, but not all of it is in the Bible. And that doesn't mean that the Bible is lacking. It just means that the Spirit of God selected what he wanted in the Scriptures. Let me put it this way. The Bible doesn't give us all the information we want about hardly anything, but it does give us all of the information that God deemed necessary for us to have.

So we content ourselves with that, but you can't help wonder about things that aren't in there. Did somebody else have a comment or question? Roger, do you? The Areopagite?

Well, I think the Areopagite is not a title. It's just a location from where he lived, like Joseph of Arimathea, I think.

[22 : 27] Yeah. Mars Hill, well, the Areopagite, where they were on Mars Hill is called the Areopagite.

That means it just means a place of high elevation. The word refers to like our word, aeroplane. It has to do with being up in the air, elevated. And that's why this was called, one of the names was Mars Hill. The other name for it was Areopagite, which meant it was the high point of elevation of the city.

And this guy may very well have been the official, or maybe the overseer of that area. He may very well have been a public official. But if that's the case, then he would have probably had some connections.

He would have been a person of stature or a person of means. Yeah. start reading reading. I wouldn't doubt that.

[23 : 52] I'm sure that the apostle Paul engaged in some very late night Bible classes. No doubt about it. He tried to make the most of the time that he had. And you know, these people in particular who believed, one of the chief characteristics of a new believer.

In fact, I dealt with this on my last CD. It was number 11. One of the almost automatic things that takes place in the mind and heart of a new Christian is they've got a ton of questions.

They've got all kinds of things that pop into their mind that they never even thought of before. Maybe had no interest in before. But now that they have become a believer, there are all kinds of questions they have.

And that's what I tried to answer on that CD, keeping in mind a new believer, because they do have a ton of questions. I remember myself, shortly after I became a believer and we got off of our honeymoon, I had this incredible hunger for information.

And boy, I started reading the Bible, didn't understand much of what I read, but I just read voraciously, and I was wondering about this and that, and I needed somebody to talk to who had some answers.

[25 : 10] And my wife had a lot more answers than I did, because she had been a believer for several years. And I remember my thirst for knowledge and my inquisitiveness about things that I wasn't even interested in before.

But now, as a new believer, I had all kinds of interest and really was searching and grouping. And I'm sure that these people had a ton of questions for Paul. What about this? What about that? And he was just giving them all the information he could in as short a time as possible. No doubt about it. Other comments or questions? Yeah. Larry? Larry? It's got will that all men can be saved, but it's got square.

It's good for them. It's not that they are not good. It's not good. It's not good.

Yeah. Well, the scriptures make it clear that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. And to demonstrate that, to demonstrate God's unwillingness for any to perish, he sent a Savior.

[26 : 20] And this Savior died for the sins of the world. And in doing that, he made every person savable.

Savable. Not saved, but savable. So that no one's sin could be so great, but what he could out-sin the grace of God.

That cannot be. There is no one who ever lived who could not be saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. but God planted within each of us a volition or a will, and that means we do have the power of choice.

And that's a significant issue in and of itself, and it's one that theologians have argued about for centuries, and continue to argue about the Calvinist and Arminian debate, and so on.

So what God did to demonstrate his willingness for man to be saved is he provided a way out. He provided a Savior. But he does not make people believe.

[27 : 27] He provides them with the opportunity and the power to exercise their own volition. Good point. Other questions? Comments? Anyone? I'm sorry, repeat that?

We say that one little sin is all it takes to keep you in the house and the house and the house and the house and the house and the house and the house and the house and the house and the house right, right.

That's a good point. One little sin keep you out of the presence of God. Of course, of course, we don't even know how to characterize one little sin.

We tend to characterize sins as like small, medium, and large. But God sees sin as sin. And keep in mind, fellas, this is a really, really important point. It is not, it is not the quantity of your righteousness that matters with God.

It is the quality of your righteousness. It isn't, it isn't a matter of, of, how shall I say, it isn't a matter of trying to see how many good things you can do.

[28 : 48] It is a question of your official, legal position. Because, in Christ, in Christ, and this is so important, and this is why Paul uses this phrase over and over and over again.

In Christ, in Christ, in Christ, you read his epistles. And what that means is, if you are in Christ, you possess Christ's righteousness.

righteousness, that's talking about the quality of righteousness, not the quantity. It isn't how much righteousness you have, it's what kind of righteousness you have.

It is a blanket proposition. And if you have Christ's righteousness, then you do not have one single solitary sin accounted to your name.

The slate is completely clean. because it is the righteousness of Christ that cleanses. That's such an important point, because people are always thinking in terms of how good do you have to be?

[30 : 00] Well, you have to be perfect. But in Christ, you have his perfection given to you as a gift, a free gift.

And you receive that, and you receive Christ's righteousness, you receive Christ's life, you receive Christ's forgiveness, that's your official standing. And that's amazing.

That's why it's called amazing grace. It's all on the basis of God's grace. Richard. Richard. I'm sorry, repeat that again.

Yes. Well, it's both. Yeah, it's both. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

That's true. And that's in Galatians 2.20. I'm crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live, I live through the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[31 : 34] Joe. There's arguments, you've said many times where the Calvinist argument, where God knows ahead, he knows you're going to be saved, but you're not.

Yeah. You don't have a free will, really. God's making a choice. Here's an analogy. You put a piece of candy or a cookie and spinach next to your child.

You have a child there, I'm the father, I'm the father of this child, I know what he's going to pick.

That child is always going to pick the cookie. He's not going to pick the spinach.

He's got a choice, but he still has to make that choice though. It's not done until that child actually makes a choice. You can't say that he doesn't have a free will.

That child can choose the spinach and we know the father of that child, he's going to pick the cookie. We know ahead of time what he's going to do.

[32 : 28] I'd pick the cookie. and the volition that God has given us is the very basis for our accountability.

It is not possible for a righteous judge to hold us to an account when we had no ability to do otherwise than what we did. So we do have that ability and that's the basis for judgment.

Yes. But can we not say that the Bible teaches both. It's not one or the other that's both. We would ask them to let our whole passage change.

He quit them. Then we do use our religion. Yeah. But I think the Bible is very true. I think he's both. Yeah.

Well, P.B. Fitzwater, who taught theology at Moody Bible Institute for like 50 years, used to use the analogy. He said, when you get to heaven and you look on the portal outside, you look on the portal outside, he said, it's as if there's big letters across it and it says, whosoever will may come. [33 : 52] And you get on the inside and look back at it and it says, the elect of God. So, we're talking about things that we don't understand.

I guess you realize that, don't you? But God does and that should be our comfort. He knows. So, thank you guys for being here this morning. Enjoy your breakfast.