

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to installment number 11 in our Summertime Scripture Story series. We are thinking about Bible stories. We are thinking about Bible stories all summer long. Some of these stories are famous. Some of these stories are not so famous. But all of these stories are God's way of uploading his wisdom in your mind.
- B. That's why we open our Bibles. It is the most foundational thing a church does.
- C. So, please think with me today about the story of Scoffers, Hesitaters, and Believers (pt 2)

II. Paul in Athens

- A. The time is a few years after Jesus' life on earth. Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven.
- B. The focus is this man named Paul. Paul is a Christian. But he only became a Christian after a very long time of resisting both Jesus Christ and the followers of Jesus Christ.
- C. The place is Athens. Athens was one of the greatest cities of its day.
- D. In many ways, Athens was the ground zero of culture and thinking for the world. The Romans borrowed from the Greeks, because art and architecture had reached a high point in Athens.
- E. Philosophy and rhetoric also reached a high point in Athens.
- F. And so also did the worship of idols. Athens was known for its idols. Thousands of them. Idols lined the streets. They were in every store, in every home, on every corner. You could not get away from idols.
- G. Paul of course sees all these idols.
  - 1. *Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. (Acts 17:16, NKJV)*
- H. To Paul, these idols represent something deeper. Paul knows what they mean.
  - 1. Every idol represents a wound, a scab, and an infection on the human heart.
  - 2. Every idol represents a lie, believed, embraced, and doing its damage.
  - 3. Wherever people embrace a lie deeply enough, a wound is opened. Wherever wound is opened, the powers of darkness gather like flies on a carcass.
- I. What Paul sees behind these idols is what I hope all of us can come to see.
  - 1. *Lesson 1: The idols of the world are not only incarnations of evil, they are expressions of pain, and a cause of compassion for those who know God's grace.*
- J. Paul's stomach tied in knots when he realized how broken the Athenian people were.
- K. And I hope it is the same for us. Not long ago, someone posted a picture of a 20-something guy on social media. He was a young man, maybe mid-20's. The reason they posted it was his appearance. His hair was spiked and green. His face was tattooed everywhere—forehead, neck, cheeks, everywhere. And his face was pierced everywhere too. Dozens of piercings in his nose, lips, tongue, eyebrows, cheeks...
- L. All of the comments were negative. Critical. Hateful even. What a loser. What a punk. How can this guy ever get a job. He's what's wrong with society. Pretty hateful comments.
- M. Many of these negative comments came from Christians.
- N. I looked at that picture and I felt sad. Here's a young man crying out for attention. He is desperate for meaning. He's anxious to put up walls and keep people at arm's length, and in my judgment. To me, he was a boy just aching for a father.
- O. The idols of the world are incarnations of pain. This is not to deny the evil behind them. It is not to say people are unaccountable for their actions or to blur the lines of morality.
- P. This is just to place each person in a broader context where you can see the how sin has ravaged their lives.
- Q. That is exactly what Paul does, back in Athens, when he sees a town lined with over 30,000 idols.

III. The Unknown God

- A. His heart overflows with compassion. He did not draw away from them. He went to meet with them. Because of a lesson from last time I want to put on the table today.
  - 1. *Lesson 2: The more deeply you encounter the grace of God, the more passionately you want everyone to find the treasure you found when you found Christ.*
- B. He was a man literally shocked by grace. And now, his heart aches for everyone else to know this grace as well.
- C. Paul started in the two places he could get a hearing. In the synagogue and in the marketplace. Day after day, Paul engaged anyone who would give him a hearing.
- D. Eventually the leading philosophers of his day brought him to a famous meeting place. This would be Mars Hill. Mars Hill was a large rock outcropping in Athens. It was a place for legal proceedings and for debate. The famous Greek philosophers hung out here, and now it is Paul's turn.
- E. As we saw last time, Paul eased into his subject. He did not criticize his hosts. Paul started by referring to an altar in town, one that caught his eye.
- F. The reason this altar caught his eye was its inscription. It was inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.
- G. As I said last time, it struck Paul—30,000 idols and it wasn't enough. They were still afraid they missed one. So they covered their bases by building an altar to an UNKNOWN GOD.

IV. *Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: (Acts 17:23)*

- A. Of all the tens of thousands of gods of the age, this is the God that did not have an idol. To build an idol is to reduce God. To build an altar is to worship him. This God, they could not reduce. They couldn't even name him.
- B. So this is Paul's opening.
- C. And the speech he gives is a monument to Paul's genius and God's grace.

- V. *"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."* (Acts 17:24, 25)
- A. He starts where they started.
  - B. They started with the premise that there is a God who cannot be reduced to an idol. They called him the Unknown God—he is about to name him Jesus Christ.
  - C. If there is a God who cannot be reduced to an idol, and if this God has created the world and everything in it, then he is Lord of all. He is the Sovereign God, the Supreme being, and the uncreated Creator.
  - D. If you grant the premise of an irreducible God, you must agree with these conclusions so far. Once you board this train, there's no getting off.
  - E. If he is God, he is creator. That is conclusion #1.
  - F. If he is Creator, he is Sovereign. That is conclusion #2. Sovereign means that he is the boss. There's no arguing with this. If he is Creator, he sets the ground rules of everything. Who can argue with this?
  - G. The logic is flawless. You cannot disagree with this so far and call yourself a rational, sane human being.
    - 1. If this logic is flawless, then why do so many people reduce God to idols?
    - 2. And if this logic is flawless, then why do so many people write God off as a myth?
      - a) *Lesson 3: The reason people reduce or eliminate God from their lives has less to do with their intellectual conclusions, and more to do with their cosmic authority problem.*
  - H. People don't want a God because they don't want to answer to a boss. On honest days, they will admit it. We will admit it. We all have an authority problem, and this one is on a cosmic level.
  - I. The real truth behind atheism... the real truth behind agnosticism... the real truth behind backsliding Christians... is a lot less intellectual and a lot more sinister than anybody admits.
  - J. Casting off God does not the end product of intellectual objections—it is the end product of outright rebellion.
  - K. The human heart is in a state of rebellion against God, but we rationalize it. We intellectualize it. We don't call it rebellion. We turn God into either a) a fairy tale, or b) a miniaturized edition called an idol, and we call this either a) philosophy, or b) idol worship.
  - L. It is inverting the polarities by in effect making ourselves Lord over the Lord of heaven and earth. A Cosmic Authority Problem.
  - M. But that is not the only polarity that gets reversed.
  - N. There is a logical chain reaction here, and each link is compelling. Meaning you can't deny it.
    - 1. If God exists, then he is the Creator.
    - 2. If he is the Creator, then he is Sovereign, meaning Lord and Master.
    - 3. And if he is Sovereign, then he....
- VI. *...does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."* (Acts 17:24, 25)
- A. The Athenians spent enormous amounts of energy, and time, and money, and effort to build a city full of shrines, and idols, and altars, and temples. They had armies of priests and prophets and temple workers. They performed never ending rounds of sacrifices and offerings and actions of contrition and worship for their innumerable god. They built houses for the gods. They sheltered the gods. They fed the gods. They placated the gods.
  - B. All the time. It was exhausting.
  - C. And Paul comes in, and in one sentence, demolishes their whole warped and logically self-refuting worldview.
  - D. Stay with me.
  - E. Paul basically says, If there is a God, and he is therefore Creator, and he is therefore the Sovereign, then in the relationship between humans and this God, who therefore is the needy one?
  - F. Before such a God, is God needy? No.
  - G. Before such a God, are we needy? Yes.
  - H. But don't you Athenians see that everything you do in your own religion acts as if God is the needy one. You act as if God is a homeless beggar always in need of a hand out.
  - I. Paul has just corrected their polarities. He did this by asking the one question that every human being has to answer.
    - 1. Question: In the equation between you and God, who is the giver and who is the receiver?
    - 2. Answer: God is the giver (he gives to all life, and breath, and all things), and we are the receiver.
  - J. Paul has just stood before a bunch of brilliant, hard thinking, hard working people, and utterly shattered their worldview.
  - K. And he shattered their worldview with a concept we call grace.
    - 1. It is not what you give God that matters, it is what he gives you.
    - 2. It is not what you do for God that matters, it is what he does for you.
    - 3. It is not your performance for God that matters, but his performance for you.
      - a) *Lesson 4: In all the history of religion and philosophy there is one and only one system of pure Grace: biblical Christianity.*
  - L. All the religions of the world, and all the philosophies of history, have people reaching up to God. There is only one that has God reaching down to us.
  - M. All religion is works. Only Christianity is grace. We have a corner on grace. Nobody else offers it.
  - N. All religion says Do. Christianity declares, Done!
  - O. Grace is the ultimate apologetic. Meaning, grace is the ultimate proof of Christianity.
    - 1. Grace proves Christianity by logic.
    - 2. Grace proves Christianity by beauty.

3. Grace proves Christianity by emotional health.
4. Grace proves Christianity by common sense.
5. Grace proves Christianity by nature and by natural theology.
- P. The chain reaction goes from God to Creator to Sovereign to Grace.
  1. Grace is unmerited favor.
  2. Grace is a gift you don't earn and don't deserve.
  3. Grace is the love of God flowing because of who and what God is, not because of who and what you are.
  4. Grace is God being infinitely more committed to you than you will ever be to him.
    - a) Religion/legalism pounds you on the head with your commitment.
    - b) Grace calls you in the heart with God's commitment.
      - (1) It's exactly backwards of what we naturally think.
- Q. It was backwards for the Athenians. Paul now moves his argument from God to humans, and how we interface with God.
- VII. **"And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; (Acts 17:26, 27)**
  - A. Paul states the unity of the whole human race. We are all one, he says. We are one blood, one life, one human race.
  - B. This would be the first offensive thing to the Athenians. They thought of themselves as intellectually superior. They thought of themselves as physically more beautiful. They thought they were awesome and everyone else was a barbarian.
  - C. So along comes Paul to say Your breath smells as bad as everyone else's, and we are all the same, we all share the same status before this God of Grace, who is Sovereign, who is Creator, who is Supreme.
  - D. The reason for this is going to be grace.
  - E. Because under grace, we don't start with what we bring to the table.
  - F. Under grace, we start with us not bringing anything to the table but our sins. Even if you're smart. Even if you're rich. Even if you're moral. Even if you're beautiful. Even if you're Athenian or anything.
    1. *For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all. (Romans 11:32, KJV)*
      - a) Because the starting premise of grace is that our hands are empty when we come to God.
        - (1) Empty of worthiness.
        - (2) Empty of ritual.
        - (3) Empty of rights.
        - (4) Empty of righteousness.
          - (a) Grace presupposes unworthiness and sin.
          - (b) And the very minute you begin presupposing worthiness and human goodness, you immediately make us unequal.
          - (c) Some are more worthy, some are less worthy.
          - (d) Some possess personhood, some who are weak are not classified as persons.
          - (e) And now we begin to feel superior to others.
        - (5) Modernism doesn't make people equal... because it teaches survival of the fittest.
        - (6) Postmodernism doesn't make people equal... because it teaches that some are more "woke" than others.
        - (7) Culture doesn't make people equal... because some are hot and some are not.
        - (8) Religion doesn't make people equal... because some are inside and some are outside.
        - (9) But not with grace. Grace wipes all of this off the table, and says, you're all in unbelief. You're all the same. There is no difference. You all need a Savior. And once you have the Savior, you are all equally saints.
      2. *Lesson 5: If you want a belief-system that makes us all equal, then Christ and his grace is your only real option.*
    - G. But Paul doesn't just say that God made us all one. It also says he appointed when we would live. And he appointed where we would live.
    - H. You being here now is no accident. Me being here now is no accident.
    - I. If you're watching on YouTube, or Roku, or listening in the car, no matter where you are, no matter when you are hearing this talk, God has been working behind the scenes.
    - J. What is his goal? "So that they should seek the Lord."
      1. *Lesson 6: God places every person in history at the best possible place and time for them to seek and find the Lord.*
    - K. When you are, and where you are is a gift from God. Based on your personality, your preferences, and who you are, God set you up in the best possible conditions to be saved. He does this for everyone.
    - L. But you say, what about people who are in the middle of nowhere with nobody who knows about Jesus?
    - M. Good question! But do you really think that would be a problem for God?
    - N. Wherever and whenever a person may live, when they follow God's calling card written across the sky, and when they seek a God of Grace without reducing him to idols, God will bring that person the gospel message of Jesus Christ.
      1. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)
      2. God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)
        - a) *Lesson 7: There is no barrier of place, or time, or culture that can stop God from bringing the gospel message to those who seek him in humility and truth.*
    - O. He is not far from each one of us. This is the Scriptural view of history. It is the Scriptural view of the spread of the gospel.
    - P. You are hearing me speak today, or you are reading these words somehow today.

- Q. One day, a hundred years from now, in heaven, ask God to show you how he orchestrated your life and your world to bring my words to you in this way.
- R. Because that is what God is always doing for everybody, if they will only listen and believe.
- S. And it is what he did for the Athenians, and neither Paul, nor even a single of his listeners was there by accident.
- VIII. *"For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'" (Acts 17:28)*
- A. Paul, speaking to Greek philosophers, quotes a Greek philosopher.
- B. He quotes a philosopher named Arastus. Arastus wrote that we are all God's offspring. How did Paul know the writings of this Greek philosopher?
- C. Arastus lived 300 years before Paul. Arastus wrote these words in a poem about astronomy. Arastus was famous for his writing. And, it might interest you to know where Arastus lived and studied and wrote. Arastus was from a city called Tarsus.
- D. Would anybody like to guess where Paul grew up? Tarsus.
1. Sometimes it looks like Somebody has everything under control.
- E. So now, Paul is convicting his listeners. In a very gentle way he is charging them with being inconsistent. They are not following through on what they say they believe.
- IX. *"For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising." (Acts 17:28, 29, NKJV).*
- A. Paul is now using a philosophical argument. It is called the Anthropological Argument. It called anthropological, because the argument uses human nature as its starting point.
- B. If there is a God... if this God is the cause of our existence... and if this God is the continued ground of our existence...
- C. Then God has to be bigger than us and better than us. That is the anthropological argument in a nutshell.
- D. Idols can't see. Can't think. Can't hear. Can't reason. You make an idol in the morning, and worship it in the afternoon.
- E. That doesn't make any sense at all.
1. What if the very intellect by which you question whether or not there is a God is conclusive proof that there is a God who made that intellect?
2. If there had been no God, there could be no being capable of questioning whether there is a God.
- F. Dear philosophers on Mars Hill, and dear thinking person today... how is it possible that you get to make your own god, when you are claiming that God has made you?
- G. If we are all his offspring, then how is he our offspring?
1. *Lesson 8: Every system of religion or thought that does not have the Supreme, Creator, Sovereign, Gracious God at its core, always has internal contradictions at its core that make the system fall apart.*
- H. In the end, they are incoherent. In the end, whatever map they draw of the world is too small, and you keep falling off the edge of their world views. This is what's wrong with our culture. This is what's wrong with our society. This is why we are fractured and polarized and at each other's throats.
1. Sin is irrational. You can't explain it. Don't even try.
- I. The Athenians understood this point very well, and they didn't like it.
- J. Paul has now cleared the way for his real message. Now, they are about to be offended.
- X. *"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:30, 31)*
- A. His real message is, you are all thinking about this wrong, and you are going to be judged for it.
- B. You need to repent. This means you need a new operating system. You need the Grace operating system, or else you will be judged.
- C. And the reason you will be judged is because of all the truths that have been staring you in the face that you just don't want to deal with.
- D. Once again, you have a cosmic authority problem, and that is the heart of your troubles. Repent. Change your thinking, and change your faith.
- E. This is an incredible blend of tenderness and severity. It is an assurance of forgiveness and the threatening of judgment. It is the beginning of the proclamation of the name of Jesus.
- F. The whole argument has been on their logic. No Bible verses. No Bible stories. Just using their logic, and even quoting their poet, Paul brings them face to face with Jesus.
1. *Lesson 9: The sum of all philosophy, science, art, religion, and thought will always bring a person face to face with Jesus if honestly followed through.*
- G. In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
- XI. *And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34)*
- A. There are three responses.
- B. Some were skeptics.
- C. Some were hesitaters.
- D. Some were believers.
- E. I think I can safely leave it right there.