

Acts 17.²²⁻³³

'By Royal Appointment'

Background

Paul's ministry in Athens has tended to be interpreted in two main ways.

Some view it as something of a failure: they see Paul's endeavour to match the Athenians at their own game through the vain use of his rhetorical skills as misguided and largely fruitless.

Those who argue along these lines point to the way Paul describes his subsequent ministry when he went on from Athens to Corinth ([Acts 18.1](#)): they refer to Paul's own statement that *"I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom .. for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* ([1 Cor.2.1f](#)). Paul, they argue, had learned a painful lesson in Athens and was resolved now not to adopt that approach again.

Others, of course, (myself included!) believe that such a view does Paul a great disservice, and that, by contrast, Paul's ministry at the Areopagus provides an enduring masterclass in 'apologetics' (or what's sometimes called '[persuasive evangelism](#)' – *if you have the time, the article is worth a read!*).

It's evident from the outset of his speaking that he starts with what was familiar to the people he was addressing – their city, their 'objects of worship', their authors (see [v.28](#)). And central to his argument is his statement in v.26. In many ways this is the pivotal statement in all that he says, and it articulates a hugely important perspective in relation to the theme of this present series – 'Jesus and the kingdoms of this world'.

Both the statement itself, spelled out in v.26, and then the way it is subsequently expanded, expounded and applied in the following verses, are very instructive and inform our view of 'the nations'.

How are we to understand the phenomenon of different nations?

Is that the way it was meant to be? And if so why?

And how does the distinctiveness of all the different nations play into the outworking of the purpose of God in Jesus Christ?

For all sorts of reasons 'nationhood' is a big issue in today's world – as, of course, it was back in Paul's time. And Paul's key assertion that *"from one man He made all the nations .."* provides him with the perfect platform, in the biblically illiterate marketplace of Athens, from which to speak about that other 'one man' (Jesus) from whom a whole new people is now being made comprising those from all the nations of the world.

'Days' (5, (6) and (7) are therefore the three 'days' on which to concentrate (and as ever you'll find additional questions there): but the previous 'days' are worth considering as well (if you have the time) as they give you a feel for the helpful background to what Paul was saying at the Areopagus.

1) Monday 6th June – revolutionary

Read [Acts 17.1-9](#)

“.. defying Caesar’s decrees, saying there is another King, one called Jesus” (Acts 17.7)

The message of the early church was revolutionary. Proclaiming Jesus as the one ‘Messiah’ the Scriptures had promised upset every religious applecart and disturbed the status quo. Radical regime change: not everyone was ready for it! Are you?

Paul ‘reasoned’ from the Scriptures: how ready are you to ‘give the reason for the hope that you have’ ([1 Pet.3.15](#))?

In what ways does your life demonstrate the kingship of Jesus?

Prayer: *Whenever I have the opportunity to speak to others of You, Lord, please give me the right words to say and the boldness to speak them fearlessly* ([Eph.6.19](#))

2) Tuesday 7th June – noble

Read [Acts 17.10-12](#)

“.. the Berean Jews were of more noble character ..” (Acts 17.11)

Nobility has little to do with your station in life – and everything to do with the honesty and integrity with which you study the life-giving message of the Bible. The Bereans were eager to receive the message and careful to examine what the Bible had to say.

How careful are you to study the Scriptures?

In what ways might you better and more fruitfully apply yourself to this discipline?

Prayer: *Grant me, Lord, a well-instructed tongue that I may know how to sustain the weary: waken me morning by morning with a listening and attentive ear.* ([Is.50.4](#))

3) Wednesday 8th June – sovereign

Read [Acts 17.13-15](#)

“.. Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens ..” (Acts 17.15)

Chased out of Thessalonica, and then chased out of Berea as well, it would have been easy to become despondent. But the chasing pack were used by the Lord to bring Paul to Athens. God works *all* circumstances in the lives of His people for good. Trust Him!

What instances have there been in your life of the Lord using seemingly adverse circumstances for good?

As Paul had Silas and Timothy as companions, who are your ‘companions’ in Christ?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for those who in Your kind providence look out for me, who take me out of harm's way and journey with me through the ups and down of life.

4) Thursday 9th June – hungry

Read [Acts 17.16-21](#)

“Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection ..” (Acts 17.18)

Paul observed what characterised the lives of the Athenians, and engaged with them wherever he found them. His talk was always about Jesus and the resurrection, the Person and the event; and people, hungry for meaning in life, wanted to know more.

What would be contemporary equivalents of the Areopagus, and what opportunities are there to share the good news of Jesus there?

How familiar are you with ‘the latest ideas’ in our culture today, and how able are you to challenge them if required?

Prayer: There's so much in today's society, Lord, which greatly distresses me. Give me compassion for the people of this land; help me to know when and what to speak.

5) Friday 10th June – life

Read [Acts 17.22-28](#)

“.. God did this so that they would seek Him ..” (Acts 17.27)

When and where you live is no accident! Nations similarly have their time and place in His story, a story overseen by the life-giving God whose desire is that His creatures should seek Him, reach out for Him and find Him. You don't have far to look!

What might be the contemporary equivalents in our society of the ‘objects of worship’ which Paul observed in Athens?

Has your family lineage and where you live been a help or a hindrance to your seeking after and finding the Lord?

What did Paul mean by declaring that God ‘marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands’?

In what ways (if at all) does that statement inform and shape your perspective on the conflict in Ukraine at present?

In what sense is God ‘not far from any one of us’?

Prayer: You have made me for Yourself, O Lord: You graciously draw me to Yourself and my heart is ever restless until it finds its rest in You. Draw near to me again today.

6) Saturday 11th June– repentance

Read [Acts 17.29-31](#)

“.. but now He commands all people everywhere to repent ..” (Acts 17.30)

His story has a terminal point! A day of accounting for each and every person is nearer now than ever – a solemn truth evidenced, the Scriptures insist, God’s having raised Jesus from the dead. Now is the time of God’s favour: repenting is a ‘now’ activity.

Because ‘nationhood’ is derivative, when it becomes the locus of our ultimate loyalty it becomes another ‘idol’: in what ways do you see this happening in society today?

Are there matters in your life of which you need to repent?

Justice remains a big concern today: how does the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead demonstrate that there *will be* a day when justice is dispensed?

Does the fact that God ‘marked out their times in history’ indicate that nations can come under the (temporal) judgment of God?

Prayer: *If You, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve You ([Ps.130.3f](#)). Thank You, Lord.*

7) Sunday 12th June – response

Read [Acts 17.32-34](#)

“.. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed ..” (Acts 17.34)

The good news about Jesus prompts a range of response. Some sneer: some weigh what they’ve heard and want to hear more: and some embrace the message, trust in the One of whom it speaks, and from the start become *disciples*, eager always to learn.

Was there something of this sort of ‘progression’ in your own response to Jesus?

The reference to those who ‘became followers of Paul and believed’ indicates that their faith found expression in a desire to be taught further by the apostle – what we call ‘consolidating the faith’ of believers in our ACTS acronym: how do we provide a good grounding for those who come to faith from little or no background in the gospel?

What are the dangers if a person’s becoming a follower of Jesus finds expression in their being a ‘follower’ of particular preachers or teachers?

Among your family and friends there will be a similar range of response to the message about Jesus: how are you praying for each?

Prayer: *May there be many today, O Lord, who hear about Jesus, Your risen Son, and who are moved by Your Spirit from a scornful disdain to a living and joyful faith.*