

'HAS NOT GOD MADE FOOLISH THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD?'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

I have visited the city of Athens, Greece, on three occasions. The first time I went there as a tourist; the second time I was a guide; and the third time I went as a teacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. During my last trip to the city, one of my hosts, a Greek Christian man, took me to a service at a Greek Orthodox Church, the state church of the country. I was overwhelmed by the ceremonial atmosphere. The inside of the church building was covered with icons; the air was thick with incense; the service itself was carried out by several priests. Despite all this ceremony, however, it seemed to me that the congregation had spiritual death written on their faces. My own spirit was provoked at the emptiness of the ritual that was being offered in the name of Jesus Christ.

When the service ended, I walked out into the streets of Athens once again, mingling with the throngs of people in a society dedicated to preserving the glories of the past. Tourists listened intently as guides related what a particular beautiful ruined building used to look like in the days of old.

Later that same afternoon I was invited to worship in an underground church with a group of men and women who had dedicated their lives to Christ. What a contrast between the official state church and this little group of believers! Their service was filled with life and joy; the people had a look of hope and expectancy on their faces. They manifested life and vitality, the kind of life that is found only in Jesus Christ, a life that cannot be gained through empty ritual and ceremony.

That visit to Greece convinced me more than ever of the relevance of what the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, some two thousand years ago,

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness...

Whether it be state religion, national philosophy, or personal wisdom, the word of the cross is "foolishness," says Paul, because the cross is a judgment on the wisdom of men; it condemns self-righteousness and shatters human pride.

...but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...

It has the power to save men from their sin and replace it with wholeness, peace and joy.

...For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

The "message" is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried, and that he arose again according to the Scriptures; thus he is able to set men free from the penalty, the power and, one day, the presence of sin.

In this series we are studying the life of the apostle Paul. As we have already seen, this is the message which Paul was occupied in preaching since the day he first encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road. We have come to the time when Paul was involved in his second missionary journey, establishing churches in the Greek

cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Persecution of Paul and his message, however, forced the apostle to flee to Athens, leaving his fellow ministers, Silas, Luke and Timothy, to minister in the cities where churches had been established.

To the Greek world of Paul's day, the word of the gospel seemed to be nothing but foolishness. The same could be said of our own world today. The gospel message is sneered at because it seems foolish. But that did not deter Paul, nor should it deter us. The gospel will always seem foolish unless the Holy Spirit is working in the hearts of those to whom it is being preached. I confess I have often felt foolish myself for preaching it. I have sometimes wondered how it could possibly penetrate hardened hearts. But that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job as Christians is to proclaim the good news.

And that is what Paul did as he walked the streets of Athens two thousand years ago, challenging the idolatry and vain philosophies of the Greeks with the foolishness of the gospel. Let us see from Acts 17 how and where the apostle preached the gospel in that city.

I. The Foolishness of the Gospel in the Market Place, Acts 17:16-21

Now while Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean." (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting them used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

Athens was named for Athena, the virgin goddess who was enshrined in the beautiful Parthenon of the Acropolis. It was a university city, where in former years students would gather to sit at the feet of the philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The three ideals, "Honor your god," "Help your friends," and "Adorn your city," were held in high esteem by the Athenians. But the Romans had attacked the city in 86 B.C., and many of the beautiful buildings for which it was famous were destroyed.

At the time of Paul's arrival in Athens, in 51 A.D., the city was vainly trying to regain the former glory of its philosophy and arts. As the apostle walked the streets, "his spirit was being provoked within him as he beheld the city filled with idols." He went about this city of the living dead and was confronted with idols everywhere he walked. Historians have recorded that there were more than thirty thousand idols within the city proper. One man wrote, "It was easier to find a god in Athens than to find a man." The apostle was well aware, however, that behind the art, the beauty, gold, silver and marble, lurked idolatry, immorality and captivity." A commentator says, "The gods of Athens provided man no moral code, only a reason for the whims of his fate. The gods offered no reward for virtue, and shrugged at sin. But the gods reacted furiously to presumptuous pride, so the Greek sought to woo the gods' favor toward oaths, marriage and business by ritual and sacrifice." Paul saw behind the idolatry to the hunger of men for worship, but it was false and futile worship.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle later identified the error of man's worship, in these words,

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures (Rom.1:21)

The apostle would later write and identify for the Corinthians that what they were worshiping was demons. The Athenians similarly were worshiping demons. No wonder his heart was provoked within him as he toured the city. These people had bought a lie, and in so doing they were experiencing the wrath of God. Paul's heart was broken because he knew that God had given them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity, depraved passions and depraved minds. That is how God viewed Athens, despite all its outward trappings of glory.

A couple of years ago I used to jog for exercise with a number of our interns. On one occasion we jogged to a nearby hilltop where we had a view of several cities in the San Francisco Bay Area. I asked one of the interns to describe what she saw. "I see a beautiful view of the Bay Area," she replied. "Don't you see the people?" I asked. She said, "Yes, I see some cars and sail boats that have people in them." I said, "Do you realize that everything you are now looking at will one day be destroyed by fire, and that only the people have any value at all in this scene we are looking at? And furthermore, the majority of the people we can see from here are rebelling against God because they are held captive by the evil one." No, she said, she did not see that. A week later we jogged up to the same point and again I asked her, "What do you see?" She said she saw a beautiful scene which would one day disappear; and she saw a number of people who were perishing without Jesus Christ. "Do you see any possibility that God is willing to redeem those people?" I asked her. She replied that she hadn't thought about that. The following week I again asked her what she saw from that hilltop. "I see a beautiful scene that one day is going to be burned up. I see a lot of people who are rebelling against God. But I see that God has done something about it by sending his Son Jesus Christ to die for them; and that God has sent us into the world to be part of his plan of redemption in the Age of the Spirit." I said to her, "Now you are looking at this scene the way God wants you and me to look at it."

We need eyes to see our cities, our countrysides and our neighborhoods in the same way Jesus looked at Jerusalem when he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How many times I would have taken you under my wings like a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not listen to me." We need to see our cities the way Paul saw the city of Athens--as given over to the worship of demons which were holding the people in bondage, fear and immorality.

Paul had to choose whether to remain provoked at what he saw, or move out in a spirit of trust in the Living God to lead the Athenians to forsake demon worship and instead worship the one God of the universe, Jesus Christ. The apostle chose to move out in three areas. First, he began to "reason in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles," sharing the same truths he had been sharing in the Greek cities he had already visited. According to the text, there was no reaction in the synagogue to Paul's "...explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'"

The second location for Paul's sharing of the gospel was the market place. One reason I love to visit Europe is that there are sidewalk cafes and restaurants in every city where it is easy to get involved in table conversations on just about any subject. In that respect Athens today is no different than it was in Paul's day.

The third location for the apostle's preaching was the porches and gardens of the city. There he met two different groups, the Epicureans and the Stoics. In this instance the apostle's Hellenistic education placed him on an equal footing with these philosophers.

The Epicureans were the spiritual fathers of all our modern-day self-help and self-realization groups. Their philosophy was to avoid pain at all costs. They did not care to think about a God who would judge them for their evil ways so they erased all thought of that out of their minds. For them, truth came through experience. Today's Epicureans would agree and say, "If it feels good, do it," or, "All truth comes from within." That philosophy insinuates itself into the church also: "I know what the scriptures say, but I have had this experience." The Stoics were pantheists; they covered every base. They were proud, arrogant, independent and very selfish. They taught that all truth was objective; they observed from a distance everything that occurred, and refused to get involved. If they determined objectively, without participating, that something was truth, then it was so, regardless of evidence that it might not be true. But Paul was able to face these different philosophies head-on, not using subjective or objective truth, but revealed truth--truth which God himself had revealed. This is the truth which Jesus Christ revealed about himself when he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me."

Paul's remarks met with the sarcastic response: "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" As the philosophers sat in the gardens and debated, little sparrows would gather around to pick at the crumbs that fell from their food. They compared Paul to one of those sparrows, asking, "What does this crumb-picker have to say?" But some were curious. They said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities" (they meant demons) because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. He seems to have had a revelation, they felt. That is exactly what the apostle had, of course, as he would share with the Colossians,

I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to his saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col.1:25).

Paul did indeed receive the message he was preaching by means of a revelation from God. It was truth that could not be discerned on a merely human level.

As we study this passage we should ask ourselves what are the idols we ourselves worship today. The Athenians worshiped Athena, the goddess of love, and gave themselves over to promiscuous sexual conduct. Modern society is just as promiscuous; nothing has changed. They worshiped Zeus, the god of power. We too worship power and influence, and check on who's making it by reading Fortune magazine. Athens had idols to shame and to rumor, but our world bows to the same idols by reading the National Enquirer and People magazine. It's easy to point the finger at these ancient societies and criticize their morals, but when we take a closer look at our own world we can see that we are worshipping the same idols--only we are calling them by different, more respectable names.

The third result of Paul's sharing the gospel in the porches and gardens of Athens was an invitation to the Areopagus, located on the Hill of Mars. Here the apostle would have opportunity to teach before the city fathers, the supreme court of Athens, around whom the life of the city revolved.

II. The Foolishness of the Gospel on Mars Hill, Acts 17:22, 23

And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 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.' What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Paul begins by observing that the Athenians "are very religious in all respects." That they were religious was obvious from the thousands of statues all over the city. But their various religious philosophies only instilled fear. That is why they had created a sacrificial system to placate and woo their gods.

Then the apostle goes on to observe that these religious Greeks even had an altar with the inscription, "To An Unknown God." Six hundred years earlier, a plague had struck Athens. Epimenides, the Cretan poet, suggested that a flock of black and white sheep be released at Mars Hill, and each time a sheep stopped in front of an idol, that sheep was to be slain and the god worshiped. But if there was no idol at the place where a sheep sat down, the people were to erect an altar to an unknown god, and then slay the sheep. Paul dramatically identifies who the "Unknown God" is by saying, "What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you." Their search for the "unknown God" was over.

What a wonderful way the apostle had of relating to these people whom he loved at first sight. He would identify for them the Lord Jesus Christ as the God who would deliver them from captivity and spiritual death and make them new creatures. How sensitively Paul starts out, basing his opening remarks on a religious theme, thereby moving them into a position where they would be open to hearing the gospel.

The apostle then proceeds, in verses 24 through 28, to identify for the assembled supreme court of Athens four attributes of this "Unknown God" whom he has preached. First, says Paul, God is the Creator. Verses 24,25:

"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; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things;

God is above his creation, declares Paul; he is outside of heaven and earth. "This God is Lord over all, and all come under his authority," says the apostle, "in contrast to your thousands of gods." Then, as he is making these remarks in the sight of various temples, Paul says that this God whom he worships cannot be contained in any man-made shrine or temple. And third, this God requires nothing from those whom he has created. The psalmist writes, "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine" (Psalm 50:9-12). God is the One who supplies all the needs of the Athenians, not themselves. God is a giver, not a taker. They had come up with a pantheon of gods whom they then had to appease, but they had missed the point. God does not want to be appeased, rather he wants to give life to his creation who then in joy and thankfulness worship him in return. The religions of that day were based on what people could do to please their gods. Similarly, that is the basis of all man-made religions in our own day. But Paul's word to the Athenians cuts across all the philosophies and religions of that first century day, as it does our modern world.

The second attribute of God which Paul highlights is that God is sovereign. Verse 26:

...and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation...

The Greeks took pride in what they considered their natural superiority to all other races--and the Athenians considered themselves a cut above the rest of the Greek nation. But Paul demolishes that pride by saying that God began the human race with one man, Adam. From him came all the nations of earth--the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans--and each nation was given a boundary by the sovereign God of the earth.

Third, says Paul, God is redemptive. Here the apostle tells his audience why they were given their time on earth and why they were given their national boundary. Verse 27:

"...that they should seek God if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...

All mankind sinned in Adam, but God had made it possible for every generation of man to come into fellowship with him. Our responsibility is to seek him. "He is not far from each one of us," says Paul, "for in Him we live and move and exist." Here again Paul quotes the poet Epimenides, who wrote this poem to Zeus, "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O high and holy one, the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest forever; for in thee we live and move and have our being." Paul quotes one of their own poets, but gives his words a biblical context.

Have you ever asked yourselves why you were born into this generation and why you are living in this area? It is so that you might find God. Why weren't you born during the Crusades, or during the Holocaust? It is because you were born at this particular time and place so that you might find God. It is no accident that you are alive today in this place. In a television documentary which I saw recently on life in a monastery, the monks said that their reason for leaving the world for the solitude of the monastery was that they were seeking God. Though they were sincere, and though that was a good answer, their method of seeking God could be challenged, for Paul declares, "God is not far from each one of us."

Fourth, Paul says to the Athenians, God is our Father. Verse 28:

"...and even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring.' Being then the offspring 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.

Here Paul quotes another Greek poet, Aratus, who taught that all mankind were the offspring of Zeus, the supreme being of Stoic philosophy. But again Paul uses this poet's words to direct his hearers back to the Living God, Yahweh. Man is created in the image of God and he is incomplete until God fills him with himself. Man's personality, intelligence, creativity, desire for companionship and desire to relate to God all spring from God himself. This God, says Paul, is not man's imagination. He cannot be contained in an image. He is beyond heaven and earth, beyond anything man can think of.

Paul concludes his remarks by giving an invitation. Verses 30,31:

"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, 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."

There was a time of ignorance, says Paul, which God was willing to overlook. That was when, as the apostle stated in Lystra, "God allowed all the nations to follow their own ways." But that time had now ended because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. "I am here as God's messenger," says Paul, "to tell you that God wants you to repent of your sins. God loves you, but he is a righteous Judge. He has appointed a Man, his Son Jesus, not a god of silver or stone, but a Man who walked this earth who died for your sins. And this same Man will one day come and judge all who have not repented of their sin and come in faith to this God. You Athenians do not have to face Jesus as your Judge if you place your faith now in this Man whom God raised from the dead. There is salvation in no other god."

As I was studying this passage on Thursday last, an insurance man came by my house to do some surveying. When he had finished he asked me what kind of work I did. I told him I was a pastor, and he said to me, "Oh, a man of the cloth. Let me share with you my religious philosophy." He went on to quote a passage from Plato, saying that was his basis for living. "That's really nice," I said, "but I have just spent much of this week studying the Greek philosophers myself and I have to tell you that, based on the Scriptures, you are going the wrong way." Then I asked him if he was Catholic (his name is Duffy) and he said he was. "How are you and the Lord doing?" I asked him. He replied, "The devil has more influence over me than the Lord." Having been presented with an open door, I went on to share with him the gospel.

What resulted from Paul's sharing the foolishness of the gospel in the market place and on Mars Hill?

III. The Fruit of Foolishness, Acts 17:32-34

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

Some sneered at Paul's remarks, saying, "We'll hear you again," while others, a judge, a woman and some men, believed. Church history records that some of the great leaders of the faith during the next four hundred years came from the church which was established that day in Athens. "The word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believed." The truth had been proclaimed in Athens, and the power of the Holy Spirit had broken through the idolatry and vain philosophies of that place.

We are living in the age of the Spirit, and God has empowered believers through his Spirit to break down the

strongholds of idolatry and vain philosophies resident in our own lives and in society all around us. Paul saw beyond the beauty, art and culture of Athens to a place where men and women were being held captive by their sin. That is why he eagerly accepted opportunities and invitations to share the truth that would enable them to become new creatures in Christ. God has similarly called you and me to confront the strongholds of evil we encounter in our daily lives with the "foolishness of the cross," and thus lead others to faith in Christ. Notice that Paul was provoked at the idolatry he encountered in Athens, not at the victims of that idolatry. He was willing to meet people where they were: he preached the scriptures to the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles; he revealed the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus to the philosophers; he revealed the identity of the "Unknown God" to the supreme court of Athens. In the past few years, five of my personal friends who worshiped power, position and money all went under in times of crisis. Their gods could nor answer them when they cried out for help in the fearful night. Our message, which seemed foolish at the time, was that Jesus was the only One who could answer them if they would cry out to him. "...He is not far from each one of us..."

Our Father, thank you for the foolishness of the message of Jesus Christ. Give us the desire and the courage to share that message with those whom you bring into our lives. Help us meet them where they are, and with patience and love share with them who you are and who you want them to be. Thank you for placing us in this place, in this time, so that we and others might come to know you through your Son Jesus. For we ask in His name. Amen.

Catalog No. 4056
Acts 17:16-34
Thirteenth Message
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September 6, 1987

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