

Changing Mission (Acts 17:16-34)

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Preacher: Johan Linder

[0 : 00] So we're reading from Acts 17, 16-34, and I am reading from the NLT version.

Okay. So Paul preaches in Athens. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.

He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there. He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

He told them about Jesus and his resurrection. They said, What is this blabber trying to say with these strange ideas he's picked up? Others said, He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.

Then they took him to the high council of the city. Come and tell us about this new teaching, they said. You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about.

[1 : 04] It should be explained that the Athenians, as well as the foreigners in Athens, seemed to spend their time discussing the latest ideas. So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as it follows.

Men of Athens, I noticed that you are very religious in every way. For as I was walking along, I saw your many shrines, and one of your altars had this inscription on it, to an unknown God.

This God whom you worship without knowing is the one I'm telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is the Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs, for he has no needs.

He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth.

He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. His purpose for the nations was to seek after God, and perhaps feel their way toward him, and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

[2 : 19] For in him we live, and move, and exist. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idle design by craftsmen from gold, or silver, or stone.

God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone, everywhere, to repent of their sins, and turn to him.

For he has set a day for judging the world of justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who was this by raising him from the dead.

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in content, but others said, we want to hear more about this later. That ended Paul's discussion with them.

But some joined him, and became believers. Among them were Dynasius, a member of a council, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. And that is the word of God.

[3 : 17] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Hi, everyone. It's great to be here again.

It's really good to be with you, and it's also really good to hear you pray for the Thai people. I actually went to a Thai Lao camp yesterday, full of about 60, 70 Thai people, and it was great to spend time with them.

I'm passionate about reaching Thai people, not because I love the food, or because I love the language, although I do, but because there are so many Thai people who don't know about the creator God.

And that's why I've, you know, devoted many years to, and Debbie as well, to learning the language and understanding the culture, and hopefully through our lives, we're able to communicate the love

of God to them.

You know, God's love is something that's changed my life and has transformed me, and so because of that, I want everybody else to experience that as well.

[4 : 27] And, you know, the Bible tells me that this is the reason why we were born, and that's what we just heard. You know, God has placed all of us in where we are right now for a specific purpose, and that is that we might know him in a personal way.

You know, God wants to change us. He wants to transform our lives from being self-centered, selfish, power-hungry people, to become the kind of people that he wants us to be, and I believe that that's the whole picture of the book of the Bible, from the beginning right through to the end. It's a book about mission. It's a book about God's mission to the world. God doesn't need anything from us. He's self-contained, but out of his love and out of his great experience of living in the Trinity, of being in a community, he created us to know him and to love him and to have the privilege of being part of who he is, his character, his love, and experiencing that in a personal relationship.

But we all turn our backs on him. You know, for all of us in our hearts, there is something that says, no, I don't want that. I want to do things my way.

I want to walk in my own shoes. I want to decide for myself. But, you know, all throughout history, the Bible history, we see God at work to restore a people for himself.

[6 : 05] Not just one tribe or nation, not just the Jewish people, not just the Chinese people, not just European people, but all people coming to know and to love him.

And that is the good news that we have to share. And the way that he does that is to use people like us who follow Jesus to show his love to other people. Now, you might think, well, that's not a very good way of doing it.

He uses, you know, weak, sinful people like us, but that's the way he chose to do it. That's his means. That's his method for him to go about that. And, you know, things have changed a lot since the time that the Bible was written, but this passage that we just read is very relevant to us and has a lot to teach us about how we can share the good news of Jesus with people around us today. And so we're going to have a look at that. We're going to dive into it. Paul gives us a really good model for us to follow. Paul actually wrote almost half of the New Testament and he was serious about reaching out to people, not as a program, but it was obviously something that came from a passion in his heart, a burning desire that other people should come to know God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so when he came to Athens, it wasn't by a particular plan or strategy. It was basically because he had to leave because of the riot that was created in the previous city that he ended up there.

[7 : 35] And so it seems like Paul was focused on the Jewish centers originally in the synagogue. So because he was a Jew, he would first of all go to the Jewish synagogue and he would start sharing the good news about Jesus there because that was a good place to start.

There was a cultural affinity there. He knew exactly how the synagogue worked and he was able to communicate well there. But Athens didn't seem to be part of the plan. And this led to his greatest opportunity.

You know, you have to understand that where he spoke at the Areopagus is kind of like giving a TED Talk. You know, being invited to give a TED Talk with a very, very wide audience and talking about the latest ideas.

And so he was invited to do that. And these verses are some of my favorite verses because they have so much to teach us. They teach us about how Paul changes the mode of the way that he does mission.

And so what I want to do today is as we look at this passage, I want to look at some of the things that change and some of the things that should not change and some of the things that never change at all.

[8 : 47] Okay, so it's really all about change because the good news, when it comes into our lives, it changes us. But also, in the book of Acts, as the gospel moves from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth, which is your theme, we also see some changes.

And we're going to look at some of those today. So first of all, I want to look at one thing that really should always be up for grabs. They should always change. When we think about sharing the gospel, when we think about mission, when we think about other people coming to know Jesus.

And that is our strategy. Here, in this passage, we see Paul using a new strategy that he's never used before. You know, before he went to the synagogue and he stayed with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles.

And this often brought a response and led many to believe. Now, if you look at chapter 17, chapter 17, if you look at the two places he went to before, where did he go?

He went to Thessalonica, where there was a riot, and he went to Berea, where there was also a riot eventually. And where did he go? He went to...

[10:06] I've already told you, so you should be with me. He went to where? No. When he in Thessalonica and Berea, what strategy did he use?

He went to... the synagogue. That's right. The Jewish place of worship. Okay? That's where he started. All right? And... But, in Athens, he does the same thing, goes to the synagogue, but then, where does he go after that?

He does something new that he hasn't done before. He changes his strategy. Okay? Anybody got it yet?

Verse 17. He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks and the marketplace. Yes! Okay? So, he gets out of the synagogue and he goes into the marketplace. Okay? Now, why? We don't really know exactly why he did that. Maybe the synagogue was too small of an audience. Maybe he just felt that the Jews were too inbound.

[11:15] They didn't have the ability to really take the good news into the general population. Okay? But, regardless of what it was, he decided, I need to get out of the synagogue.

I need to go into the marketplace and I need to start interacting with the mainstream philosophers of our age. And the mainstream philosophers were the what?

Did you read it? Okay? It was the Epicureans and it was the Stoics. Okay? Now, they're actually quite, they're very different. So, the Jews spend a lot of time thinking about how do we get the most out of life?

You know? How do we live our lives to the fullest? Well, the Epicureans had an answer. They said, well, what you need to do is you need to take pleasure in the life that you have.

And that means that you live quietly, you enjoy what you have and you basically live for the pleasures, simple pleasures of life. Eating good food.

[12:16] I think we use Epicurean as a way of relating to food these days. So, the word has actually evolved. And, you know, just enjoying what life has to give you.

You know? Your marriage, your relationships, sexual pleasure. You know? These are the things that give you good things in life. That was Epicurean philosophy.

The other one was the Stoic philosophy. Now, we use the word Stoic. What do we mean by that? Yep.

Resilient, facing up. And so, Stoicism was very different. Stoicism wasn't about focusing on the pleasures. Stoicism was about standing strong and being able to resist certain temptations that come your way, showing the greatest virtue is through bravery and self-restraint and justice.

And this is how you actually move forward in life, by perseverance. I think Chinese culture, you know, could relate to that, to Stoicism.

[13:28] I think there's a lot of Stoistic thought in Chinese culture because, you know, they tend to really value perseverance and hard work and bravery.

And so, you probably lean a little bit more that way, whereas Western culture might lean a little bit towards the Epicurean side. Okay? So, they're the philosophies that he interacted with.

And so, Paul thought carefully about his philosophy about reaching people and interacting with people in a way that would bring results. And he didn't do it just because he's always done it.

He didn't think, oh, I always go to the synagogues, that's the way I do it, and I'm not going to think about other ways of doing it. He thought, okay, I need to get out there. I need to talk to people about Jesus, and this is where I need to do it.

I need to go to the marketplace. And so, he was prepared to change his strategy depending on the situation. So, you know, there's been PhDs written about Paul's strategy.

[14:32] I don't think that here that he particularly, you know, thought about a strategy and wrote it all down on paper and shared it and said, now, this is the way I'm going to do it. I think it just came from the heart.

He might have had a general strategy of thinking, okay, I'm going to go to all of these cities and I'm going to, you know, try and share the gospel in Thessalonica and Berea and Athens and then I want to go to Spain as well.

That was his desire, but in this particular situation, he just responded out of his passion to share the gospel. You'll see too in verse, in the next chapter, he was even prepared to go into tent making and to get himself a job so that he could support himself and he could be close to Priscilla and Aquila as well as they moved forward in mission together.

And so that was another. So, you know, we're living in a changing world and our strategies always need to be re-evaluated and Paul shows us how that can be done. You know, we also are living in a changing world and mission strategies need to change.

We just told you that Thailand is an open country and you can go as a full-time missionary supported from your local church working as a full-time Christian worker in Thailand.

[15:48] That's very possible. We have lots of visa slots to do that and there's a big need. There's also a big need in Japan and you can go full-time as a missionary to Japan to share the gospel there.

Easy. But, in all the countries that OMF works, 85% of all those people work in countries where missionaries are not welcome.

And so that forces us, we have to think about new strategies. How do we send people to those countries? Well, the only way that we can really send people is for people to use their profession. Doctors, business people, accountants, you know, English teachers. All of those people can gain access into some of those countries where we find it really hard to be sending workers and missionaries into those countries.

but we have to adapt. We have to be prepared to change and think in a very new way about how to do mission depending on the strategy that we choose to adopt and the needs that there are at the moment.

[16:59] So that's the first thing that needs to be always changing and evaluated. What is our strategy in reaching people for Jesus? What is your strategy for reaching people for Jesus around you where you are?

Where God has placed you? In your workplace? In your family? Where? In your friendship circle? You know, how are you seeking to engage your people around you in the space where he's put you to be engaging with them about Jesus?

Another thing that we really see changing here is the presentation. Now, I'm going to give you a question and I want you to discuss this.

So I'm going to give you two other speeches in Acts or actually three other speeches. Chapter 2 verses 14 to 36 Chapter 3 11 to 26 and chapter 7 1 to 53.

Now, it's a very long passage so I don't want you to read it through in detail. I just want you to skim it very briefly and just actually we might split it up so it's easier.

[18:04] You guys here I'm going to ask you to split it into small groups and just to discuss it Chapter 2 verses 14 to 36 This middle section Chapter 3 verses 11 to 26 and this section over here Chapter 7 verses 1 to 53 and just talk amongst yourself in small groups three or four people just say what is different about Paul's speech here to that speech back there?

Okay I'm going to give you three or four minutes just to talk about it First of all read it through very quickly just skim it and say what is different about those speeches compared to Paul's speech here?

So the other speeches first of all the first the first difference is that the other speeches were not given by Paul they were given by other people Peter or Stephen okay but they're still very different I want you to look at the content and say what's different about it Okay now I don't expect you to have complete answers but hopefully just some ideas about what's different about this particular talk compared to the previous talks that we see in Acts okay what do you see?

Just one thing it doesn't have to be stressful yes yes yep yep very good yes so all three of them are actually so all of those three speeches are firmly rooted in the Old Testament and talk goes right back and gives a whole history lesson and say this is what the prophet said this is what Abraham Isaac Jacob you know and giving basically a whole history overview and then pointing the finger and saying you bad unbelievers you know turn and turn or burn basically but Paul doesn't do that here okay that's one big difference in fact he compliments them doesn't he he actually says you know I see that you're very religious and that's a good thing and I'm going to tell you now what it is

that you're missing out on okay anything else that you notice up here anything doesn't matter if you're wrong don't be shy what about over here yeah good so it's more complimentary yeah very good okay thank you that's very good anything else you guys on this side anybody here on this first section anybody want to say anything

I'm looking more up the back here because you're avoiding my eyes all right nothing blank okay all right okay so we've covered some of it so notice how he starts with a compliment so he connects with the audience right whereas the other guys don't have to do that because they're already Jewish so they're already kind of connected and they don't need to do that but here he works hard at connecting with them and starting with something they know you know he was really upset about all the idols in Athens you know really bothered him but he didn't say you know you terrible people you know you're worshipping idols you're stupid you're ignorant he did call them ignorant but he did it in a nice way okay and said now I'm going to show you something else okay in the past he excused such ignorance but now he's calling all people to repent and so so he does it in a very positive way he quotes from their philosophers did you notice that so he says as as your own philosophers have said we are his offspring now that's a quote from a stoic philosopher who lived apparently my books tell me that it was about the third century his name was a philosopher called Aretas a stoic philosopher and so he speaks that they can understand you know he doesn't just preach but you also saw when he went into the marketplace he was involved in a discussion a dialogue so this is obviously the TED talk where he summarises everything that he wants to say but before that he also interacted with the philosophers and listened to them and interacted with them and tried to convince them that the good news about Jesus was actually true you know as Christians we can we can get out of touch we can get out of touch with the world around us because we live just in our Christian bubble and we have to be careful about that you know sometimes when we try and share the gospel it doesn't really make sense to the people that we're trying to reach and so we have to work really hard at presenting it in a way that people can take it on board and understand it and that's what Paul shows here and that's what we should be doing too not just individually but also as a church as we work together to share the gospel and the good news about Jesus with the world around us we have to think about how can we really make that understandable so that people can take it on board

[23 : 43] I'll give you a few examples of what I mean so at our church that we've just started joining they're running alpha courses now alpha courses are great because they use some of the weaknesses of other ways of sharing the good news they recognise it's really important for people to get together around a meal and to have discussion and dialogue and to build friendships with people now alpha is really good for that so there's been thousands of people come to believe in Jesus through alpha courses all around the world and they've been promoted as the way of sharing the good news about Jesus so when I was in Bangkok and I've been working with Thai people for about 14 years we had a guy come from America and he said I'm bringing alpha courses into Thailand because we want to use alpha to share the good news of Jesus with Thai people and I've been through an alpha course because I wanted to find out what it was like so I know what it is but alpha is great for western people but it has a huge weakness when it comes to sharing the good news with Thai people

I don't know about Chinese I'm not going to speak about that but when it comes to Thai people they don't understand about the creator God that we believe that there is a God who made the whole world and everything in it just like Paul says here and that he has come into our world in through Jesus Christ and it's through Jesus that we know this creator God that made the whole world alpha course doesn't talk about that it just goes straight into Jesus and assumes that the people who do the alpha course understand that Jesus is God and that's what we're talking about and so as a content the content is really lacking when you are trying to plug alpha into Thai Buddhist culture it just doesn't work and so it needs a whole reworking I had a friend of mine he sat down and he did like an alpha course with Thai people in Bangkok and of course he started with creation so he reworked it they called it alpha but it wasn't really alpha it was changing the content and so they worked through the creation account and one lady in the group who wasn't a Christian said what's the point of all this they looked at the whole of creation account and talked about how God is the creator of the world for her it didn't click that if God is the creator of the world he owns us and he has the right to rule over our lives so it takes a long time for a Thai Buddhist person to make that connection so that they can then go on and say oh Jesus is that God that made the whole world so

often we assume too much from the people that we tried to share with so we've got to be careful about our strategy and our presentation when we share the gospel but what doesn't change? well what doesn't change is God's plan and purpose and that is what Paul is talking about here and that's the whole thing that he gives at the Arabiopagus he said the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands and he's not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else from one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us what a great summary of you know the whole of the Bible story why did he you know why did he make us?

we exist for him God made us for him he created you in this time in this place in this era in this church so that you would seek out and reach out for him and find him because he's not far from each one of you that's why you are here today he determined where you should live he determined how long you will live where you were born how will you respond to that? why did God put you in your family? why did God put you in your family? thank you why did you why did he put you in this church?

[28 : 42] why are you at your school or your university? why did he give you the opportunities that he did the skills that he's given you? what are you doing with what he's given you?

do you know him? good then what are you going to do about getting that message out to others just like Paul did God's plan and purpose doesn't change it's always been the same from the beginning of creation right to the end you know if you want to summarize you can summarize the list God's purpose is always the same God is building his people he wants them to be in his place under his rule that doesn't necessarily include the whole world but he is building his people and he wants his people to be in his place under his rule and that's we where we are all going to be one day so what shouldn't change?

so there's some of the things that you know does not change at all and what should not change but can change well our passion for God you know Paul was deeply troubled by what he saw in verse 16 and often people people's idols can hit us hard when we see them for the first time we've had lots of short term teams come to Thailand and one of the things they're often shocked about is seeing people worshipping idols because there's idols everywhere every home has an idol every school has an idol every city has an idol they're just everywhere and people go to them and they worship in front of them and they burn incense and they give food and they bow down to them and they pray and that can often be quite shocking for people who see it for the first time but what about our own idols in our own culture sometimes they can be a bit more subtle and we get used to it in Thailand we just got used to people worshipping idols all the time so to the point where it's just like well this is what people do here but in our own culture we can also become blind to our own culture when our friends are studying 80 hours a week or working all the time and worshipping the idol of career or higher education does that disturb you when people around us make their houses and their fancy car into what defines their lives does that bother us when our friends spend thousands of dollars on overseas holidays and they stay in a resort that looks exactly like the resorts here in New Zealand you know but instead they spend thousands travelling to some exotic location and live in exactly the same place and probably watch the same TV programs and eat much the same food does that bother us does that kind of emptiness make you sad our western idols might be more subtle than those in Athens but they're not any less real but you know when we have a passion for God and the things of God it changes things it changes our direction it fills our lives with purpose and direction it empowers us because we can use what God has given us to glorify him and my education you know many of you probably have a higher education well how are you going to use that for God's glory how can you use that to get into countries and nations that have absolutely no idea that God even exists my son has my son's an electrical engineer and he's got a job with a huge international company called

Schneider and I said this is fantastic you can use that to get into countries that you know have never heard about the good news of Jesus before what an opportunity you know all you have to do is get a transfer with your company and you can work in one of these least reached countries in the whole world it's amazing how can I use my education to count for the kingdom of God how can my house glorify God how can I use my money and my holiday time to make a significant impact for the

good news of Jesus these are questions that we all need to ask ourselves and it shouldn't change our passion shouldn't change just because we've finished uni now and we're in a job and it seems a bit humdrum well that's an opportunity for you to unleash your passion and to take it to a whole new level and using your career for something that is really going to count for the kingdom of God our message shouldn't change and Paul's message it didn't really change when you look at what he actually says he's still telling them to repent he's still telling them prepare for judgment verse 29 have a look at it let's read it therefore since we are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by man's design and skill in the past [34 : 26] God has overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed and he's given proof of all this of this to all men by raising him from the dead ultimately all people will be held accountable for the way that they've lived their lives for God or not for God and if you look at what he actually says he doesn't water the message down he changes the message so that they can understand it yes but he doesn't water it down he's still telling them that they will be held accountable he calls them ignorant he calls them to repent he tells them that they are going to be judged one day he tells them that Jesus has risen from the dead and that he's still alive he's still with us he's all around us he sees everything that we do and nothing is hidden from his sight how are you going to respond to that the council was quite mixed obviously this is the first time they've ever heard of all this

Christians weren't well known and nobody would have really been prepared for what they heard some of them mocked which is not surprising because it's actually quite a confrontational message especially for people who've spent their whole lives developing their own philosophy and thinking it's okay you can just invent your own philosophy and live however you want that's alright if you want to be stoic that's fine if you want to be epicurean that's okay too and if it doesn't work for you then just switch very much like our age everyone's free you know you're free to think up your own ideas about life and spirituality so we can expect the same reaction too we're not always going to find that people are going to be responsive or are you going to be in the other camp you're going to be one who says tell me more I want to know more about this how can I know God how can I live a life that pleases him something that goes beyond just myself to live a life for a deeper purpose something that will answer life's deepest questions and give me a hope that will last so when we share Jesus with people you know the strategy and the presentation that we use can change we need to think about how we're really engaging people with the message of Jesus and our passion to share that message should never change because God's plan and purpose his message to man doesn't change regardless of their age and era and how are we going to respond about that do you think about your strategy in reaching out to people people you know one of my hopes coming to Auckland for the first time is how do I reach men you know so I decided I was going to play table tennis on Monday nights as competition because I thought that kind of fits you know lots of Asian men play table tennis as well so I can connect with Asian men that sounds like a really good idea and I'm pretty good at table tennis well when I started playing table tennis I realised that I'm not as good as I thought I was I'm actually one of the worst and so I end up on the bottom tables it's a competition so if you win you move up the tables and that's where all the men are on the top half and the bottom half of the tables they're all women so I haven't actually been able to connect with many men yet so I have to improve my table tennis so I can actually engage with non-Christian men and have the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with them our presentation we need to think about how we're presenting our presentation you know and how are we actually connecting with the people we're trying to connect with and our passion you know how is our passion are we passionate about sharing the good news of

Jesus with people is that something that still really drives us and moves us and engages us so I'm going to give you a little bit of time just to turn to your friends and just to pray about that I'm going to give you a couple of minutes if you just want to sit on your own that's fine too and just reflect and pray and then I'm going to finish off with prayer after that and I'll and say as as as as as as Thank you.

Thank you.

[40 : 05] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. And we pray, Father, that you will help us to take that to heart, to really accept the plan that Paul talks about, that you created all nations, that you've determined the exact places where we should be, where we should live.

And, Father, that you put us here so that we may reach out to you and find you and to have a relationship with you and to know you and then to have the great privilege of sharing your love and your grace with others.

[41 : 51] We ask, Father, that you will help us to know how we can apply that to our own lives, to share the love and the grace that you've shown us with our friends, with our family, with workers around us, in a way that they can really understand and take it on board and see that we are different because we have you, because we belong to you, because we know you.

We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.