

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL CREATING PEOPLE WHO SEEK HIM

Acts 17:16-34

INTRODUCTION

This passage has been one of the most influential parts of the Bible in my life. The first sermon I preached at the first public worship service for our church on September 13, 1998 was an exposition of this passage. I have preached on this passage at least a dozen times since then in various settings outside our church. Whenever I share the gospel with someone, this is the passage with which I begin. This passage is the pre-eminent example in the NT of how we should share the gospel with most of the people living around us who are outside of the church and of how missionaries in foreign cultures should do evangelism. But the main reason this passage is so important to me is because understanding the main point of this passage is the reason that I am standing before you as a Christian and a pastor in spite of the fact that my oldest son suffered a traumatic brain injury in an accident in 2002. It is in this passage that God, through Luke's recording of Paul's encounter with the intellectual elites of his day, informs us as to the purpose of life and shows us why we ought to adopt God's purpose as our own.

Every human being has a purpose for living, whether they can explain it or not. Actually all humans have multiple purposes for which they are living. Whenever you talk about purpose you are talking about the reasons behind your actions. Take for example the simple question I might ask you: why do you go to work each day? You might answer: to get a paycheck. This is a purpose but it is not the ultimate purpose for going to work but a lesser or subordinate purpose. If I ask you why do you want a paycheck, then you will explain to me one or more of your higher purposes, perhaps even your ultimate purpose for going to work. You might say, "I'm saving money so I can buy a house." Or, "I need to pay the bills so that my family and I can continue to enjoy the lifestyle to which we've become accustomed." Another person might say, "So I can go on a vacation to Europe." Any one of these might be your ultimate purpose for working. Here is the biggest problem with our purposes, our reasons for doing what we do. We often make a subordinate purpose our ultimate purpose. If you make a subordinate purpose your ultimate purpose, life will not go well. To use a silly example: if you make getting a paycheck the ultimate purpose of going to work and so deposit the check but never spend the money, what will happen? You will die of hunger and exposure. So making a subordinate purpose your ultimate purpose can destroy your life.

In our passage today we are told the ultimate purpose for everything. In Paul's encounter with the intellectual elites of his day the many wrong purposes that humans adopt are exposed and we are told the ultimate purpose for which all things exist. Most people, including most Christian people, are usually perplexed and confused by the complexity and apparent contradictions that exist in their lives. Many are regularly distraught and dismayed by the seeming incoherence of their lives. I can tell you that if you truly embrace what we are told in this passage you will find clarity and hope that cannot be taken from you.

MAIN POINT

The Triune God of the Bible ought to be your chief obsession in life because...

I. All other obsessions are immoral and ignorant (vv. 16-23)

The apostle Paul is by himself in Athens, Greece after being run out of Thessalonica and Berea by the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica. His traveling companions and fellow-workers in the gospel, Silas and Timothy have remained behind at Berea to help establish the Christians there in the faith. In v. 16 we are told that while he waits in Athens for them to rejoin him "his spirit is provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." Luke, by using that word "provoked" informs us of God's view of the situation in Athens. That word is used over 25 times in the Greek translation of the OT and in almost every case refers to God's

anger with people for their disobedience to his laws but especially he is provoked by humans engaging in the false worship of idols. Listen to this one example from Isaiah 65:3, “This is the people that provoke me continually to my face; they offer sacrifices in gardens, and burn incense on bricks to demons, which exist not.” Paul is responding to the idolatry of the Greek people with the same emotion that God feels when he witnesses idolatry and every other form of disobedience. Before we examine why idolatry provokes God let me point out that Paul responded to the wickedness he saw not in angry denunciation, not in fomenting rebellion to overthrow these evil institutions and government but by preaching the gospel, by teaching the people about Jesus and the resurrection. Let me just encourage you that the next time you are provoked by the evil you see in our culture, that you go share the good news of Jesus with one of those evil people because that is how Christians respond to the evil we observe in the world.

In addition to the rampant idolatry that exists in this city Paul also encounters adherents to two of the main philosophical traditions that existed in Greek society. The Epicureans were atheists. They did not believe that anything existed beyond this world of matter and energy. There is no “god” or “gods” to whom humans must give an account. They taught that the purpose of life was to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Stoic’s were pantheists. That is they believed that everything is a part of god and god is part of everything. They taught that the purpose of life was to live virtuously. They followed the traditional Greek teaching on the virtues and aimed to exhibit them in life, no matter what happened to them. These two groups of philosophers do not think very highly of Paul and his teaching about Jesus. They call him a “babblers” and a preacher of strange deities. Both of these are derogatory phrases. They are not sure that such a person should be allowed to freely teach in their city and so they take him to the Areopagus which is like the city council of Athens. It is responsible not only for the civil life of the city but also for the religious/philosophical life. The disdain and intellectual arrogance of these people is revealed in how they address Paul. They say, “Are we able to understand what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing bewildering things to our ears and we want to understand what they mean.” You can almost hear them adding, under their breath, “That is if we can understand such foolishness.” In other words this is not a friendly crowd that Paul addresses.

Paul stands up in the midst of this skeptical crowd and proceeds to explain to them his message about Jesus and the resurrection. Notice that he begins with something he has observed since coming to Athens. He acknowledges that they are a very religious people; so religious in fact that they have an altar to “an unknown god.” Why would the people in this city which is full of idols and temples and altars to the pantheon of gods have an altar to an unknown god? To answer that let’s think about idolatry for a moment. We know that in Athens there were altars to all the Greek gods. There is a place to worship Aries, the god of war and a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and to Poseidon the god of the oceans and to Zeus, the god of thunder. When would a person be most interested in having Aries, the god of war on their team? If you were a soldier going to war or your country was in a war you would want to make sure that Aries liked you and so you would offer sacrifices and prayers to keep him happy. When would you want to have Aphrodite on your side? If your marriage was in trouble or you were seeking to win the heart of some young woman or young man you would want the goddess of love on your side. Therefore, do the people who worship and pray to these gods, love the gods or what the gods can do for them? Obviously the people love what the gods can do for them. They are obsessed with success in love and war and family and friendship and business and health, indeed with all the pleasures of creation. The entire system is aimed to manipulate the gods to give what humans love. In other words, the purpose of life for idolaters is obtaining those things which each person has determined in necessary for a happy, successful life. The gods are there to give you your best life or to make you a better you, to borrow a phrase. The reason they have an altar to an unknown god is because they want to make sure they cover all their bases. Just in case there is a god who controls some other part of creation that they are unaware of they want a place where they can offer sacrifices and prayers to make sure the unknown god gives them the good things he or she is in charge of. It is creation they love, not the Creator. As Paul says in vv. 23 & 30, they are ignorant of the true and living God. This altar to an unknown god is evidence of their ignorance about the nature of ultimate reality and the ultimate purpose in life.

Paul's being provoked by this rampant idolatry and false teaching about the nature of reality and his calling their worship "ignorant" show God's evaluation of all worship and teaching about reality that is not in accord with the Bible. But it is not only idolaters who provoke God. Hopefully you can recognize yourself in these people. We all are obsessed with God's gifts, not God. Humans naturally love all the pleasures and gifts of creation and are masters of creating systems through which we aim to manipulate the deity or deities into giving us what we truly love. Or, like the Epicureans we create systems of thought and belief that relieve us of any obligation to God in order that we can pursue pleasure on our own terms without being troubled by ultimate questions of meaning and purpose.

The Triune God of the Bible ought to be your chief obsession in life because...

- *All other obsessions are immoral and ignorant*
- *And because...*

II. He is the source of everything (vv. 24-26)

Paul in essence is saying to these people, "In building this altar to an unknown god you are quite correct. There is a God about whom you are completely ignorant and I am going to tell you about him." Then Paul, without quoting any verse of the OT gives a complete description of the true and living God as he is revealed in the OT. Virtually every word of Luke's summary of Paul's speech can be traced back to dozens of OT statements about God and his nature. In addition, virtually everything he says is true of God is in contradiction to the claims that the Greeks would make about their gods and about the nature of the universe in which we live.

The first thing that Paul says about the true God is that he is the creator of everything and thus the master over everything. There is one God who has made everything. There are not numerous gods who have made the various components of creation. The universe is not the product of random chance or merely natural forces, as the Epicureans claim. God is distinct and separate from his creation, not part of it like the Stoics claim. This one God is Lord over all that he has made. There are not numerous gods in charge of various parts of creation. He does not, like the idols, live in temples built by human beings. There are no "sacred" places on this earth where God is more present than in any other place. Associating God's presence and power with particular geographical locations or buildings is no part of biblical religion but always a feature of superstitious religion. This Creator and Sovereign Lord of all creation is not served by human hands. This is a breath-taking statement about God. He does not need you and he does not need me. There is nothing you or I have that he wants or needs. Therefore you have nothing to barter with. There is nothing you can offer him to gain his favor or get his attention. We are, in the words of Jesus, "poor in spirit," that is, poverty stricken with regard to God. Or as God says in Psalm 50, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." We cannot give to God anything he needs because he already owns everything.

While God does not need you and me for anything, we need him for everything. That is what Paul says next. God gives to every human being, "life and breath and everything else." Everyone in here who decided to be born please raise your hand. Surely there is someone here who assisted in their birth? There is no one in here who gave themselves life? You were given life. You did nothing to earn it or deserve it or cause it. You were born and God is the one who caused you to be born. He gave you life. But not only did he give you life, he right now and every moment of your entire existence is giving you breath. Right now pay attention to the fact that you are breathing. When was the last time you thought about breathing? How many of you think about breathing? How many of you keep yourself breathing? There is someone who is thinking about every breath you take and that every other one of the 6.2 billion people on planet earth takes. God not only thinks about every breath of every human being but he gives every breath to every human being, every moment of every day. When God decides you should no longer breath, that is when your breathing will stop. Not only life and breath but everything that every human being has is a gift from God. Food, clothing, intelligence, work ethic, job, family, shelter, education, everything you have is a gift from this great creator God, who is the Triune God of the NT, not Zeus or Aries or Aphrodite or Allah or Buddha or any of the millions of Hindu or Shinto gods and not by your own skill and strength.

Finally, Paul says that this God made every race of human beings from one human being. This means no race of human beings is superior to any other race of human beings. This is because we all have descended from the same human ancestor whom God created out of the dust of the ground. In addition God has caused the human race to cover the face of planet earth and he is the one who decided which race of people should live on which part of the planet and for how long each should occupy that dwelling place. God is the ruler of all history. He is the one who placed the Tarahumara people in northern Mexico and the Logamai people in Papua New Guinea and the Aborigines in central Australia and you in the USA. Nations rise and fall at his command. The USA came into existence at God's command and it will cease to exist when he decides. Everything exists by his command and everything happens according to his will. Why has God created all things and given life to human beings and ruled over all of human history? That's the next point.

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III. He made you to seek him (vv. 27-29)

It is in v. 27 that Paul explains why God has done all that he has done. This is why he made the universe and why he made you. Why did he give to each of us life? Why is he at this very moment causing you to breath? Why has he given you the family he has given you and the job he has given you and why has he placed you in the USA and the state of Wisconsin? He has done all that he has done "that you and I will seek him, that is, that we will feel our way toward him and find him." This is the purpose of life. This is why you are taking up space on planet earth. God is not giving me breath so that I can be a pastor or a Christian husband or dad. He did not put me in Janesville, WI so I can have a beautiful house and yard. He did not give me children so that I can have grandchildren to play with. He has done all that he has done for me so that I will seek him.

What does it mean to seek someone or something? My son Jordan right now is seeking a degree in Civil Engineering from UW-Madison. What does that mean about Jordan? The last Sunday in October for the last 10 years Jordan has gone with me and Paul and Scott Martin and my brothers to our cabin in northern WI to hunt grouse. Paul and Scott and I went north this last week but Jordan did not go. Why not? He had a Physics exam on Monday and so he had to stay home and study and take the test. Why did he forgo the pleasure of going with us to Minong? So that he could obtain the greater pleasure of a degree in Civil Engineering from UW Madison. He believes that obtaining the degree will be worth the short term displeasure of not going hunting. Right now his life is ordered by this purpose which he believes is a good purpose. This is the reason everyone seeks whatever it is they are seeking: because they believe that obtaining that which they seek will make them happy. All humans regularly deny themselves certain pleasures in order to obtain what they perceive to be a greater pleasure. No one seeks things or persons that they believe will make them unhappy. All seek those things that they believe will make them happy.

Therefore, God made you and I so that we would believe that having him, being in right relation to him is the best and highest happiness that can be obtained; that finding God, being in right relation to him would be our chief obsession. Now notice what Paul says next. Finding this God ought not to be very difficult because he is not far from each one of us. He is as close as your breath because he is the one giving it to you. That is the point of v.28. Paul quotes one of their own poets who, in speaking about Zeus, says that "in him we live and move and have our being." And then he quotes another of their poets who also is writing about Zeus and says, "For we are indeed his offspring."

The point Paul is making by quoting these pagan poets is not that Zeus is Yahweh by another name. Rather, the point he is making is similar to the point he made by referring to their altar to an unknown god. Even while

engaging in false worship they cannot help making true statements about the true God. It is true, as the OT Scriptures affirm, that every human lives in and moves in and exists in God. So the pagan poet condemns himself by seeing that this is true but then saying it is true of the false god Zeus. In the same way it is true that all humans are made in God's image and the pagan's know this because they admit it in their poem but in error they ascribe this to the false god Zeus, rather than to the true, Creator God. Paul quotes their poets to prove they know the truth even while they live contrary to it. These quotes prove what Paul says is true of all men in Romans 1:20-23, "For (God's) invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." All humans know that there is a glorious Creator God who deserves all honor and gratitude but not a single human being gives him the glory or thanks he deserves but all of us by nature give the glory due to him to created things. We are impressed with homes and families and hunting and buying stuff and sex and computers and being loved and accepted by other humans and football but not God.

Some humans make idols, physical images of the imaginary deities we create in our own minds. But all humans, whether or not we make idols, by nature are obsessed with created things rather than the creator. Yet, God has done everything for us so that we will seek him. The question then is: how do we seek God?

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IV. He has sent Christ and raised him from the dead (vv. 30-34)

Paul tells these Athenians that up to this point in human history God has ignored or overlooked the vast number of human cultures and individuals who are immersed in the outright worship of fabricated gods. However, something has happened that has now changed God's dealings with the nations of the world. In the past he called one nation to repent, the nation Israel. But now, having sent his son into the world he is paying attention to all human societies and calling all human beings to repent of being obsessed with the creation and creating systems of religion and philosophy that justify human love for creation rather than the creator. The reason Paul says that all should repent is because God has set a day when he will call every human being to give an account as to how we each have responded to the overwhelming kindness of this great creator God who has given us everything so we will seek him. God has entrusted this judgment into the hands of a human being that he has chosen. The proof that what Paul is saying is true is that God has raised this man from the dead. Paul ends his speech at this point.

Commentators are divided over whether Paul was done or whether he was interrupted by the crowd, some of whom sneered and mocked him when mentioning the resurrection of Jesus. The reason for the sneers was that every Greek person knew that there is no resurrection of the dead. It is only the soul which goes on after death, not the body. Some, like the Epicureans believed that once you died you were just dead. Therefore, physical resurrection was, to the Greeks an impossibility. Whether Paul intended to end here or not we can see where he is heading as we have numerous examples of what more Paul would have said in his 13 letters. He aims to answer the question as to how humans who are obsessed with everything but the God who made them can become obsessed with God. How do you live a life of seeking God and not seeking creation gifts?

The God who is provoked by human obsession with creation pleasures is willing to forgive us for not seeking him and to enable us to seek him. The proof of this willingness and this power is to be found in the coming of

Jesus into the world. Jesus, from conception, was obsessed with God the Father while he enjoyed the legitimate creation pleasures as gifts from his Father and therefore to the glory of God. This perfect Jesus then took upon himself the wrath which our perverted obsessions provoked in God when he died on that cross. The evidence that his death was in our place is to be seen in the fact of his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to the right hand of God. He now is waiting for that day when he will return as the judge of the living and the dead. But now, while he waits for that day, he commands all human beings to acknowledge our sinfulness, the perversion of our desires and to turn away from pursuing as the purpose of our lives, the obtaining of these pleasures. We are to openly and freely confess that God has not been the treasure for which we have sought. We have treated him lightly, as if he is of no account. We must turn from making the obtaining of creation pleasures the purpose of our lives and accept of God his free pardon through Christ.

Whenever God tells us to repent he also means that we are to trust in Christ and whenever God commands us to trust in Christ he also means for us to repent of trusting in everyone and everything else. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have repentance without faith and you cannot have faith without repentance. So right now, what are you seeking? What must you have to be happy? If the answer to that question is not God himself, then I, in the name of Jesus command you to repent and to turn to Christ, trusting him as the one who took God's anger against you upon himself. This is how you seek God every day. Every day we confess to God our sins; the specific ways in which we have pursued our joy in things other than God and then we turn to Christ and trust in him and all that he has done for us as the only grounds upon which God will receive us. Then in Christ we live in the joy of being loved by God in spite of our many indiscretions. We seek him by resting in Christ throughout the course of each day, knowing that our half-hearted attempts to love God and not the creation are acceptable to God because of Christ and not because of us. We look forward to that day when the resurrected Jesus will judge the living and the dead because in that day we will be liberated from this "body of death" and brought into that glorious freedom where we will want only God and will receive all the gifts of creation as gifts from our heavenly Father and enjoy them as gifts, not as though our life depends upon them.

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