

**PAUL ON MARS HILL**  
**(A GOSPEL OF THANKSGIVING)**  
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ACTS 17:15-34

AC 17:15 The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

AC 17:16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

AC 17:22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

AC 17:24 “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. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, We are his offspring.”

AC 17:29 “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. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

AC 17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

AC 18:1 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Chased out of Thessalonica and chased out of Berea, the Apostle Paul was escorted to Athens by the brethren and left there awaiting Silas and Timothy. But Paul was so full of the Gospel of God that he preached it in the Athens synagogue, and was so burdened by the idolatry of that great city that he preached the gospel in the marketplace every day. It was obvious that the philosophers, for which Athens was so famous, would hear Paul and would invite him to give his views on Mars Hill. After all, they wanted to hear ‘new views’ whenever they could.

On Mars Hill Paul preached the same Gospel he had always preached, but he preached it in a new way. The *Zondervan Reference Bible* tells us: <sup>22-23</sup> “Paul does not begin his address by referring to Jewish history or by quoting the Jewish Scriptures, as he did in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch (cf. 13:16-41). He knew it would be futile to refer to a history no one knew or argue from fulfillment of prophecy no one was interested in or quote from a book no one read or accepted as authoritative. Nor does he develop his argument from the God who gives rain and crops in their season and provides food for the stomach and joy for the heart, as he did at Lystra (cf. 14:15-17). Instead, he took for his point of contact with the council an altar he had seen in the city with the inscription *Agnosto Theo* (“To an Unknown God”).

When Paul finished his sermon some ‘sneered,’ some were mildly interested, but a few believed and were converted. Let us look at the audience to which Paul preached. These on Mars Hill, named after the god of war, in Greek Ares where we get the term Areopagus – there on Mars Hill Paul preached to a distinguished group of philosophers, and those who were devotees of philosophy. But he starts out with another group. You see, in the city itself, there were those who believed in and preached THE FALSE GOSPEL OF IDOLATRY. As a good Jew, Paul hated idolatry. In fact the first commandments forbade the worshipper of the God of Israel to have any kind of depiction of the Lord God. The God who created heaven and earth was a God who must be worshipped alone, and without an idol worship which was so common among Israel’s neighbors, the Canaanites. <sup>EX 20:4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

ISA 44:17 From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, “Save me; you are my god.”

ISA 44:18 They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

No wonder Paul was so distressed to see and hear those who preached ‘the gospel of idolatry.’ He would be just as distressed to see modern America, claiming to worship God, but worshipping material things, and whose god is the Franklin on the hundred dollar bill. Moreover, he would be just as distressed by anyone bowing down before idols in the cathedrals, and giving to any human being the significance that many give to popes and bishops and priests

and preachers, and even to the Saints and Mary. Indeed, Paul and Silas would not accept the designation of ‘gods,’ nor would Peter allow men to bow down and worship him. The people of Athens were so religious that they had idols everywhere; and even one to the Unknown God.  
**THE GOSPEL OF IDOLATRY IS A FALSE GOSPEL!**

There was also the FALSE GOSPEL OF STOICISM, or THE GOSPEL OF FATALISM. Paul knew that Gospel well. In fact, Paul’s writings have a little of the best of Stoicism in them. That probably resulted from the fact that Tarsus, Paul’s birthplace, was one of the major centers of Stoicism. Here is one definition of Stoicism:

Stoicism is essentially a system of ethics which, however, is guided by a logic as theory of method, and rests upon physics as foundation. Briefly, their notion of morality is stern, involving a life in accordance with nature and controlled by virtue. It is an ascetic system, teaching perfect indifference (apathea) to everything external, for nothing external could be either good or evil. Hence to the Stoics both pain and pleasure, poverty and riches, sickness and health, were supposed to be equally unimportant.

There is much good in the philosophy of Stoicism. I remember when I first read the great writings of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. I was fascinated by the close relationship between the strict views of Christianity that I held and the writings of these philosophers. I remembered what Paul had said, “I have learned in whatever state I am therewith to be content.” But Paul could be content in Christ, not in fatalism; and when I read these philosophers I was still attached to the fatalism I grew up with in Appalachia.

There are many Christians who, without realizing it, practice the Gospel of Stoicism. They seem unmoved by pleasure or pain. They are apathetic toward life, almost afraid to show any kind of emotion, any kind of joy, any kind of grief. They are the Christians with the ‘brave upper lip.’ But they are wrong. There is no place for apathy in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While it is true that suffering must come, we must realize that the joy of Jesus Christ overcomes all the suffering that comes to us.

RO 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

RO 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

RO 8:<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These words of Scripture give the lie to the false Gospel of Stoicism. We cannot be unmoved by joy or grief. We cannot calmly accept everything that happens to us as something good. But, in Christ, all things work together for good! In Christ I am not a victim but a VICTOR! In Christ I am not conquered by the whims of fate, I am a CONQUEROR!

There was THE FALSE GOSPEL OF IDOLATRY, THE FALSE GOSPEL OF STOICISM, and next, in Athens there was THE FALSE GOSPEL OF EPICUREANISM, OR, THE GOSPEL OF PLEASURE. One definition of Epicureanism is: “that pleasure is the supreme good and main goal of life. Intellectual pleasures are preferred to sensual ones, which tend to disturb peace of mind. True happiness, Epicurus taught, is the serenity resulting from the conquest of fear of the gods, of death and of the afterlife. The ultimate aim of all Epicurean speculation about nature is to rid men of such fears.”

The idea of Epicureanism is for the follower of that false gospel to do that which brings the maximum amount of pleasure and avoid that which brings pain. Avoid pain, exalt pleasure. Doesn't that sound a bit like the average college student? Avoid pain and exalt pleasure. Doesn't that sound a whole lot like your children? Avoid pain and exalt pleasure. Doesn't that sound a whole lot like you – and me?

When I taught philosophy at Alice Lloyd College I came up with a little rhyme to remind the students of what they should do. It was this:

*Seek pleasure without measure, But be sure it's pure!*

What I was trying to say to them was that pleasure in and of its self is good. God gave us the ability to enjoy that which we have and that which we see and that which we experience. But there are some things that are impure and wrong and sinful. While we might enjoy these things, we should avoid these things, not because they bring pain, but because they are wrong. One of the songs I really enjoyed was the song “You Light Up My Life.” The one thing I disagreed with in that song were the words, “How can it be wrong when it feels so right?” Many of the things from which we derive pleasure are okay, but some of the things from which we derive pleasure are wrong and should be avoided.

For example the *Bible* lists a number of sexual sins such as fornication, adultery and homosexuality. Obviously sexual relations in the context of marriage are right and good. But just because things feel good doesn't make them good. I am thinking of a preacher who left the ministry because he continued to have sexual relations with a member of his congregation despite the fact that he was committing adultery against God and breaking the sacred marriage contract that he had made, before God and witnesses, with his wife. I do not know how his situation is today; I do know that he needs to repent before God; and I do know that he needs to give up this impure liaison.

But that seems to be the problem with so many. They get into a sinful relationship and they think they are trapped, unable to give up the sinful and the impure. One of my friends counseled a businessman caught up in such a triangle. My pastor friend told me that the man was like someone in quicksand. He wanted out of the sinful relationship, but he seemed to mire up deeper when he tried to get out. I suppose he failed to realize that only God can save one from such a perversion. Listen to what the *Bible* says about our perversions:

RO 1:26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.<sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Let us remember what Paul tells us in Ephesians:

EPH 4:17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.<sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.<sup>19</sup> Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

To be certain, there are many more sins to those who follow THE FALSE GOSPEL OF PLEASURE. But such a gospel seems to be the major gospel today in America. As a consumer society we are bombarded from every side on the pleasurable merits of the products we are offered by advertisers. They hit all our senses with their manipulative devices. They are particularly good at hitting us at our basic instincts. But the FALSE GOSPEL OF PLEASURE is still the same gospel that Satan preached in Eden, and the same gospel he tried to preach to Jesus during our Lord's temptation in the wilderness. AND IT IS STILL A LIE!

Having looked at the preachings and practices of the Athenians, let us look at Paul's Gospel. It was THE TRUE GOSPEL, THE GOSPEL OF THANKSGIVING.

AC 17:22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

Matthew Henry writes, "Athens was famed for polite learning, philosophy, and the fine arts, but none are more childish and superstitious, more impious, or more credulous than some persons, deemed eminent for learning and ability." Paul reminds the Athenians that they are not so learned after all. They are extremely religious and very superstitious. They say God cannot be known, but WE DO KNOW HIM!

PAUL PREACHED THE GOSPEL OF THANKSGIVING, NAMELY THAT WE CAN KNOW GOD! How? "Just look around you," Paul seems to be saying to these intellectuals who are listening. "Just look around you and you cannot miss the evidence of God. He created everything around you. Moreover He created you. Further you live and move and have your

being in God, or because of God.” Paul told them that they were far too religious and far too superstitious. Such a remark must have stung these intellectuals who felt that Paul was something of an ‘idiot’, for in verse 18, the Epicureans and Stoics say, “This man doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” The word they use is translated ‘seedpicker.’ The idea is that Paul is a small minded man who picks up seeds of knowledge around him. Having read the Greek philosophers, and having read Paul, I think Paul was a giant among them intellectually. Paul told them, “I do know God and so should you. For the evidence of God is all around you, above your head in the heavens, and beneath your feet on the earth, and wherever you look the material world is proof sufficient of a Creator.”

But Paul also knew how and why he knew God: It was **THROUGH JESUS CHRIST** that Paul found the Living and True God.

RO 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

JN 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

How thankful we should be that we can **KNOW GOD**, and we can only **KNOW GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST**. That surprises some people, for they believe that anyone who is sincere in any religion can find God. Or, they believe with the philosophers that God can be found through logic or reason. As you perhaps know, Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic philosopher, taught that the two avenues to God are Faith and Reason. But the *Bible* clearly teaches that the mind of man cannot know God. The power of reason can only reach so far. The power of faith appropriates the truth as it is in Christ. Salvation comes from believing in Christ that He is the Only Begotten Son of God.

Paul’s message of thanksgiving was that **MAN CAN KNOW GOD**. So we find this in verse 18: <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul’s message was the Good News about Jesus. Jesus was God’s revelation of Himself to man in the form of a man. This man Jesus had power over diseases, power over unclean spirits, power over nature, and power over death itself. Moreover, He had power over Hell itself. He healed all the afflicted who came to Him. He cast out demons from Legion. He stilled a great storm that threatened the fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. He raised Lazarus by calling him from the cave of death. He called Himself Lord, saying, “The Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath.” He said to a man with the palsy, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The religious rulers said, “Who can forgive sins but God only.” Jesus called Himself the “**I AM.**” **I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. I AM THE LIVING WATER. I AM THE WAY THE TRUTH AND THE**

LIFE. I AM ALPHA AND OMEGA. I AM HE THAT WAS, THAT IS, THAT IS TO COME. Jesus knew that He was God in human form revealing Himself to man. What a THANKSGIVING MESSAGE this was: God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.

What is our Thanksgiving Message? OUR MESSAGE IS JESUS CHRIST—His Life, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection.

Specifically, to the Athenians, Paul's message was JESUS AND THE RESURRECTION. Paul was preaching to men who taught others that they knew the real way of life. Paul was saying to them: Religion is not the way of life, philosophy is not the way of life, superstition is not the way of life, the only WAY, the only TRUTH, the only LIFE is JESUS CHRIST. JESUS CHRIST IS THE REAL WAY OF LIFE.

Our Thanksgiving Message to you today is the same: We preach Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life! We preach that men everywhere need to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus and receive Him as their Life. But listen to God's Word by Paul:

<sup>AC 17:29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

<sup>AC 17:32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

Thank God today if you know Jesus! Thank God today that you have already been judged by the Eternal Word and accounted innocent by reason of accepting the payment that Jesus made for you when He died on the cross for your sin.

While others preached their false Gospels of Superstition, Fatalism and Pleasure, the Apostle Paul preached Jesus and the Resurrection and the judgment to come upon all who refuse this message. I am thankful to God for Jesus for now I know both the Father and the Son. My message to you this Thanksgiving Day is A MESSAGE OF THANKSGIVING. Jesus died for your sins! He arose! He lives!