

## Paul's Sermon on Mars Hill

This sermon is found in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. Paul has been escorted by unnamed believers from Berea to Athens, largely to escape the Jews of Thessalonica who had tracked him to Berea.

Luke informs us that Paul was upset by all the idol worship going on in Athens. He was meeting and reasoning with Jews in the synagogue and with anyone who came along in the marketplace. It was apparently there that he began to talk to some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Unsurprisingly, his message was met with mixed reactions. Still, the Athenians, and their visitors, enjoyed a good philosophical debate, so they took Paul to the Aeropagus. That is Greek for "Hill of Ares". Ares was the Greek god of war, known as "Mars" by the Romans, hence we get both "Mars Hill" and "Aeropagus", the same hill in Athens.

From the original language it's actually unclear if they went to the geographic location or to the Council of Aeropagus, a group of scholars that comprised one of the courts. This notion is supported by the use of the word "midst" used in verses 22 and 33. That word is usually meant to be within a group of people rather than at a physical location. Since the Council met on the hill the distinction only serves to pose the question of whether Paul was addressing a governmental institution, or an accidental assortment of the curious. In verse 34 we are told that one who believed due to Paul's address was Dionysius the Areopagite, that being the title of the judges who sat on the Council.

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.

17 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.

18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would a this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

19 And they a took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"

20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."

21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers a visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

The "them" in verse 16 refers to Silas and Timothy who stayed behind in Berea.

This sermon is remarkable for the confluence of scope and brevity. It's actually quite a short sermon, but Paul packed an astonishing wealth of theism and philosophy into a sermon that may have lasted only a few seconds.

Paul began his oration with something of a left-handed compliment.

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of a Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

23 "For while I was passing through and examining the a objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

This would have been a cheeky thing to say to the Aeropagites, the Council. One of their roles was to ensure that no one introduced any new deities into the already crowded pantheon of Greek gods. The word here translated "ignorance" (agnoeo) is closely related to the word "unknown" (agnostos), so it may not have had the sting, however, it did have the same connotation. The root of the word, like the

root of the english word “ignorance” is “ignore”. Paul is essentially saying that what he is about to tell them is something they should have known all along.

Let’s unpack the meat of the sermon as I’m sure the Aeropagites would have.

4 “The a God who made the world and all things in it...

Paul pulls no punches. The greek understanding was that Gaia, the goddess of the earth created the world, the oceans by Hydros and the sky by Uranus, all of whom (the primordials) sprang from Chaos spontaneously. A single Creator of all things would have been a very foreign concept. But Paul doesn’t stop there.

...since He is Lord of heaven and earth...

The greeks were accustomed to a pantheon of gods, each of whom had a limited domain. But the Lord of Heaven has no such constraints. He is omnipotent. That idea was unfathomable to the greeks. It’s a bit tough to grasp for Americans as well. This is reminiscent of Daniel’s admonition of Belshazzar son of Nebuchadnezzar.

Dan 5:22 “Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this,  
Dan 5:23 but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified.

We humans prefer gods that we can manipulate, gods that we can mold or carve to our liking. It is human nature. Even the Hebrews that walked on dry ground between the waters of the Red Sea and remembered the ten plagues chose to mold their own deity out of gold.

The first sin was not eating the fruit. The first (recorded) sin was the lie, the temptation:

Gen 3:5 “...for God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...”

We don’t really want a deity, we want to be a deity. Beware of any that would tempt you with the same temptation.

does not dwell in temples made with hands

Athens was famous for it’s temples, Greece was replete with them, and the people took great pride in the majesty and beauty of those structures. Many had huge statues, carved in marble, of whichever god the temple was devoted to. In fact, Mars Hill is very near the acropolis where the Parthenon and the temple of Athena were located. The one true God is simply too big to be contained in any building that man can create. But that doesn’t keep us from trying.

So how does this square with the fact that there was a temple to God standing in Jerusalem? That was said to be the house of God.

Pss 5:7 But as for me, by Your abundant lovingkindness I will enter Your house, At Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You.

In another psalm David distinguishes between a house dedicated to God, and His dwelling place.

Pss 11:4 The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.

...nor is He served by human hands...

But do we not serve God with our hands? In a sense we do, but generally God isn't directly enriched or improved by our service, rather it is those whom He cares about that benefit. He calls us to this, but not for Himself. He really doesn't need anything.

...as though He needed anything...

Our service is for Him, but not to Him. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

...since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...

How can we really serve Him who provided all that we are, all that we have, our very existence. This concept was also quite foreign to the Greeks. We don't really have a good handle on this today either. We like to talk about what we have built, invented, discovered. We don't really think in terms of God giving us those things, we accomplished it. All by ourselves.

It's a bit unnerving to think that Paul may have been able to get this point across to Greek pagans that we "modern" Christians fail to grasp.

26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth

All the diversity in skin tone, stature, features, hair color from one man? I have no idea how this assertion sounded to the Greeks, but it boggles my mind. I am pleased to live in an era, and a country, where we "hold that all men are created equal". That was certainly not true in ancient Greece. And the idea that all people groups had the same origin, was no doubt unpalatable.

...having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation...

In the Roman letter Paul reminds us of the fact that God ordains nations and rulers. This is a hard teaching, we understand that we need to subject ourselves to the government for conscience' sake, but leaders can be so very evil, associating God with their activities grates on our sensibilities. The Greeks would likely have been more accepting of that idea, but they also believed that each city had one god that was their particular sponsor, Athenis for Athens in particular. A single god that establishes all nations was Paul's overarching point.

Rom 13:3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;

Rom 13:4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

Rom 13:5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

Rom 13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

Paul elaborated on why God would bother with such mundane affairs as earthly governments. The Greeks would have found this foreign as well, their notion of the pagan gods was of arrogant and egoistic beings. Concern for the citizens they sponsored was not commonplace.

27 that they would seek God

This simple clause is as profound an idea as any that the greek philosophers might ever have conjured. God did all this just so we would want to seek Him. Their view was that the gods were mercurial and capricious. The idea of a god that wants more than worship and sacrifice, that wants an actual relationship was not their expectation.

...if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him...

We aren't expected to be particularly adroit in our searching, we grope around like all the lights are out and we need to find a lantern. These philosophers thought themselves to be enlightened, educated, erudite, sophisticated minds that explored the mysteries of life. Paul wanted them to see themselves as they really were, fumbling around in the dark.

...though He is not far from each one of us...

So all of our groping and searching is senseless, He is right there. The problem is not that He is ephemeral or distant. The problem is our blindness.

28 for in Him we live and move and exist...

How is it that we struggle so mightily to find the very core of our own existence? This should be all but automatic. But God knows why it is so.

Deut 29:4 "Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.

Jesus echoed this many times in His teaching.

...as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.

So rather than fumbling and groping, we should have simply recognized our Father. We should have seen, heard and known. So why don't we? What is the underlying problem?

29 "Being then the children 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.

The problem is simply that we insist on looking in the wrong place at the wrong time for the wrong thing. For the ancient greek it was looking to what they had built, what they had discovered, what they had invented. These were in fact significant, but then they placed their trust in what they had created, and forgot how to trust the Creator. It's hard not to trust in our own understanding, our own sense of righteousness. It's human nature.

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

The Aerogapus Council was a group of intellectual elites with substantial governmental authority and hundreds of years of history as one of the most influential courts in Athens. To reduce all of that to "times of ignorance" was a bold statement. Greeks did not take kindly to having their ignorance put on display, and they weren't big fans of being told they needed to repent. This is to be contrasted with

modern humans that do not take kindly to having their ignorance put on display, and aren't big fans of being told they needed to repent.

31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness...

Repentance is not just an exercise in humility, though it does take great strength of character. No, the point is to change our minds about how we go about life and agree that He actually does know better. And decide to follow His edicts. We are not at liberty to opine on what is right and good, He has given us that, we are only at liberty to decide whether or not we will trust Him with that.

...through a Man whom He has appointed...

Paul has taken a rather round-about path to introduce the Solution to the problems he has exposed. And this is where Paul loses some of the crowd. This is always where the crowd is thinned. People will hear about God, but balk at believing in Jesus and all that He has done--and earned.

...having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

Paul has covered every major theological point, saving the most significant for last. All that God has done throughout history, all His plans and all of our needs are summed up in this. The Resurrection is the reason for it all.

32 Now when they heard of a the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."

As with many, perhaps most, that hear the gospel, the resurrection is the sticking point. But if God had not raised Him, there would be no guarantee that He can raise us. It's the single most essential part of God's plan. And the hardest for non-believers to accept.

33 So Paul went out of their midst.

34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Verse 34 is the chief reason to think that Paul was addressing the Council rather than just preaching a sermon on a hill. We know that at least one member of the Council heard him and believed.

There are recurring accounts of women in the New Testament that were believers, sponsors, financial supporters and friends of Jesus or the Apostles. We have no other information about Damaris, but Luke likely mentioned her name knowing that some of his readers would recognize her.