

Time to Turn Around

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Acts 17:21-34 NIV

(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

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. 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.

“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 is 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 times 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. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“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 God 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. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

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.” At that, Paul left the Council. 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.

John 14:11-21 NIV

“Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

“If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”

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 God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:29-30).

Delbert Smerdley of Des Moines, Iowa, coasted to a stop at his neighborhood gas station. His car needed fuel, and he needed directions. Aunt Bertha and Uncle Ned in Joliet, Illinois, had been after Delbert for months to come and visit them. Delbert’s plant had closed for retooling, and he finally had a few free days. It was time to make that trip. But Delbert had never been to Joliet.

“It’s easy,” said the man at the gas station. “You just get on Interstate 80 and head east. Follow the signs for Chicago, and then Toledo. But don’t get off I-80. All you have to do is stay on the same road, and you’ll go right to Joliet.”

Delbert paid for his gas, hopped back in the car and headed up the ramp for I-80 East. He cruised along for a few hours, and everything seemed to be going well. He crossed the Mississippi just east of the Quad Cities, then sped over the I-88 interchange.

“I’m in Illinois now,” said Delbert to himself. “It can’t be too much further to Joliet.” But the midday sun was in his eyes. He was actually headed south. He checked the highway markers. Yes, he was still

on I-80 going east. Nothing to worry about. What was it the guy said? “All you have to do is stay on the same road, and you’ll go right to Joliet.” He put the car back on cruise and turned on his CD player. “Nothing to this — it’s a piece of cake.”

About 25 minutes later Delbert began to get a little anxious. For some reason, he was still headed south. Shouldn’t he be going east by now? What’s more, he began to see some signs he didn’t expect to see. Galesburg, Peoria, Indianapolis — were these places on the way to Joliet, Chicago, or even Toledo? Then he noticed the Interstate highway marker. He wasn’t on I-80 any longer. He was on I-74, and getting further from Joliet with each mile he drove.

It wasn’t till he pulled off at the Woodhull Plaza and checked the map that Delbert Smerdley realized his mistake. “Stay on the same road,” the guy had said — and that’s what Delbert had done. But the guy hadn’t warned him about that tricky interchange near East Moline, where I-74 comes from the west and then goes south, and I-80 comes from the north and then goes east. If you want to stay on I-80, you have to take the exit ramp. If you go straight, you’ll wind up on I-74. That’s what Shirley and I do when we go to Hamilton — we go straight through and change from I-80 to I-74.

But Delbert Smerdley shouldn’t have driven straight through. He should have followed the signs, not the road. After a while, he realized his error. Delbert knew he had to *turn around*, because he saw he was going the wrong way!

The apostle Paul met some folks in Athens who were going the wrong way. Unlike our friend Delbert, however, they hadn’t realized it yet. They still thought they were headed in the right direction. After all, weren’t they the intellectuals, the cream of the crop, the great thinkers of their day and age? The Areopagus of Athens was the gathering place of the philosophers, who came to hear and debate whatever new ideas were stirring about, the latest ideological fads, the current “buzz words” of the cultural elite.

Now here comes another newfangled idea from the mouth of this guy Paul from Tarsus. Well, he must be educated — isn’t Tarsus the home of a famous university? Let’s go hear what he has to say. Let’s go see if we can poke holes in *his* idea, the same way we do to everyone else. Oh, you say he’s talking about gods? Some god called Jesus and a goddess called Anastasis, or is it “resurrection”? Well, why should we bother with this Paul — don’t we already have enough gods and goddesses around here? Why, we even have our “insurance policy” god — the altar to the “unknown god,” just in case something comes up that the gods we know about don’t cover! So what’s one more god when we have so many? Besides, what can the gods do for us when we’re so smart ourselves? Ho hum, big deal. Very interesting, Paul, thanks for coming, but now what’s tomorrow’s hot topic?

Delbert Smerdley woke up to the fact that he was headed in the wrong direction, and he had sense enough to turn around. The Athenian intellectuals, however, didn’t see that they had long since passed through that tricky interchange and were on the wrong road — if, indeed, they had ever been on the right one in the first place. Paul showed them the right road — the way they needed to go if they were truly to know the “unknown god” to whom their altar bore witness. But they sneered and laughed it off as the fancy of just another ignorant preacher.

Paul’s message, you see, was too unsophisticated for these self-appointed arbiters of truth. It boiled down to one thing: A time of judgment is coming; therefore, get with God’s program, and *repent!* This is what Paul told the intellectuals on the Areopagus:

Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. . . . 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 God 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. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:23b, 29-31).

Paul’s message was too simplistic, and also too specific, for the Athenian elite. It was too *simplistic* because it lumped everybody into the same category: “You people are the offspring of God, but ignorant of his true nature and his true purpose.” As Paul would write to the Romans, “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). There’s no nuance here, no fine lines of distinction between some who are totally ignorant, some who understand God pretty well, and some who fall in the midrange. Paul makes no allowance for these Athenian intellectuals, this cultural elite who think they’re

superior to the *hoi polloi* because they can debate the latest philosophical fads. In their great learning they're still ignorant. As Paul says in Romans,

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen (Romans 1:22-25).

And Paul's message was also too *specific* for these sophisticated thinkers. It didn't deal in generalities: think deep thoughts, develop comprehensive theories, lead a decent life, be a nice person, throw in a little spirituality for good measure and tip your hat, once in a while, to the "unknown god." No, Paul's message focused on *one man* who's the key to a favorable verdict on our life, a man whose position in this key role was verified when God raised him from the dead — a man named Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. What Paul had to say in Athens partook of what theologians call the "scandal of particularity" — the idea, unacceptable to people who deal in universal theories and abstract generalities, that the truth about God and our relation to him comes down to one person, a *certain man* who appeared in a particular time and place in world history. Not only this, but that history itself is going somewhere — toward a day of reckoning, in which each person will have to answer to that same Jesus. These things weren't what the Athenians wanted to hear. They liked to debate all the newest ideas and theories, never committing themselves to any one of them. But if God's truth is bound up with one flesh-and-blood man who died and lives again, and is coming for judgment — *that* requires a down-to-earth personal commitment they didn't want to make.

It's no wonder Paul made only a few converts on the Areopagus — so few, in fact, that Luke, the author of Acts, even mentions a couple of them by name: Dionysius, and a woman named Damaris. What happened to all those other high-powered intellectuals? I guess they just went on with their lives, worshipping what Paul called "an image made by man's design and skill." And, truly, the image these people worshiped wasn't actually this "unknown god" that Paul passed by in the city square. What they really worshiped was their own intellectual sophistication. What they really bowed down to was their own "design and skill" that rendered their nicely nuanced thinking seemingly so superior to the simplistic, over-specific proclamation by this Jewish preacher from Tarsus. They didn't understand that their very sophistication was hiding the truth from them. Life often presents us with complicated problems, and these philosophers were trying to solve them with complicated answers. But *a complicated problem calls for a simple solution*, because part of the problem is the complexity. Paul offered them the simple solution: Quit heading away from God, turn around, trust in Jesus to see you through the judgment to come.

We're talking about repentance here. The Bible has two main words for repentance. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word is *shuv*, which means to "turn around" or "turn back." In the New Testament, the Greek word is *metanoia*, which means a "change of mind," coming to a different way of thinking. These ideas go together. Delbert Smerdley thought he was headed in the right direction, till he saw the signs that clued him in to the fact that he was on the wrong road. He *changed his mind* about his situation. He saw his need for a new direction. Then he acted on his discovery. He *turned around*, and went on to where he was supposed to go. That's *repentance*.

Confronted with the gospel of Jesus and the resurrection, each of us will make a choice. Either we'll blow it off, as the Athenians did, thinking we're too sophisticated for something so simple and so specific, so tied down to one person who walked the earth two millennia ago. Or we'll change our mind about who we are, realize that we stand under judgment, and get to know the Judge *now* so that when the day comes he'll recognize us. Like Delbert Smerdley, we'll start paying attention to the signs that tell us we're on the wrong road. When life begins to have problems for us, that's one of the signs that we need to turn around. We don't turn to the Lord because we *reason* our way to him, but because we run into trouble and we need his help. And we can also read the signs in God's Word, those precepts of Scripture that show us how God expects his human family to behave. When we find ourselves, or people around us, living in ways that don't conform to his pattern for life, then we know it's time to repent, time to turn around, time to reconcile ourselves with our Maker and our Judge and receive the new life he has for us.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading, says, “Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:19b-21). We don’t have to wait till the Day of Judgment to meet Jesus. We meet him now, when we read and meditate on the Holy Scriptures. We meet him now, when we repent of our thoughts and our actions that may be contrary to the Word of God, and ask for the mind of Christ. We meet him now, when we turn from ourselves and place our lives under his control. We meet him now, in the fellowship of brothers and sisters who love Jesus and encourage us in the Christian life. We meet him as we turn to him in heartfelt prayer, and lift up his name in praise and worship. We meet him here at this Table, as we gather to receive the bread and the cup, the signs of his presence with us in the new covenant.

If you’re here today and you’ve never really met this Jesus, this “man whom God has appointed” as our Savior and Judge, this might be the day you would hear him saying, “My son, my daughter, my friend — it’s time to turn around.”

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