

The World Is Searching

Bible Glossary, People & Places

Apostle Paul

Sermon Reference

Apostle Paul conveys the message of the unknown God to the people of Athens.

Background Context

Apostle Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus before his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, is one of the most influential figures in the New Testament. Initially a persecutor of Christians, Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ (Acts 9) transformed him into one of Christianity's earliest and most fervent evangelists. Paul is responsible for writing many books of the New Testament, letters that were addressed to various early Christian communities across the Roman Empire. His epistles include Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, First and Second Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

Paul's missionary journeys took him far and wide across the Mediterranean world, spreading the gospel message and establishing churches. His Roman citizenship afforded him certain protections and the ability to appeal directly to Caesar. It was during his second missionary journey that Paul found himself in Athens, as mentioned in Acts 17, where he delivered his famous sermon on Mars Hill (Areopagus). Here he engaged with the Greek philosophers and spoke of 'the God who made the world and everything in it,' pointing away from their worship of idols and toward the Creator.

In his ministry, Paul faced enormous challenges including shipwrecks, imprisonment, beatings, and ultimately martyrdom. His theological insights, particularly regarding justification by faith and the role of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, were foundational in the establishment of Christian doctrine. Paul's vision of a Christianity that was open to Gentiles as well as Jews without the requirement for circumcision was a watershed moment in the history of the Church.

The extent of Paul's influence is profound, with his writings laying out much of the theological framework for Christian faith and practice. His teachings covered a wide array of topics from redemption, the nature of the church, Christian living, and the return of Christ. Paul's life exemplifies transformation through Christ, and his legacy continues through the centuries not only within Christian Scripture but also through the many lives touched by his message.

Importance in the Bible

Paul is a central figure in the New Testament whose conversion, missionary journeys, and theological teachings have significantly shaped Christian doctrine and practice. His life and epistles continue to inspire and instruct believers worldwide, emphasizing a salvation that is available to all through faith in Jesus Christ.

Athens (specifically Mars Hill/Areopagus)

Sermon Reference

Paul's speech at the Areopagus, as recounted in Acts 17, is a pivotal moment where he speaks to the Athenian philosophers about 'the God who made the world and everything in it.'

Background Context

Athens, at the time of Paul's visit, was a center of learning and philosophy, renowned for its intellectual and cultural achievements. While it wasn't the political powerhouse it had been in previous centuries, Athens remained a significant city for the exchange of ideas. Mars Hill, or the Areopagus, was a place of assembly where matters of the law, philosophy, and governance were discussed by prominent Athenian citizens. This rocky outcrop near the Acropolis served as a court where important issues were adjudicated.

It was here that the Apostle Paul delivered his address to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers after observing the plethora of idols and altars throughout the city, including one to an 'unknown god.' Seeking to connect with his learned audience, Paul referenced their objects of worship and even quoted their poets to introduce the concept of the one true God, who does not dwell in temples made with hands and is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Paul's time in Athens was a significant moment in his missionary work. The intellectual engagement at the Areopagus demonstrated his ability to contextualize the Christian message for a non-Jewish audience. By using a point of connection within Greek culture, he sought to reveal the identity of the 'unknown god' as the true Creator God of the Bible. This method of apologetics, engaging with existing cultural understanding to present the gospel, is an example followed by Christian missionaries through the ages.

The outcome of Paul's presentation at the Areopagus was mixed. Some mocked the idea of the resurrection, but others, including a man named Dionysius, who was a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris, believed and adhered to Paul's teaching (Acts 17:34). The event at Mars Hill is emblematic of the spread of Christianity into the Greco-Roman world and the challenges faced in conveying the gospel to an audience steeped in polytheism and philosophy.

Importance in the Bible

Athens, specifically Mars Hill, represents a critical engagement of the Christian gospel with the intellectual and cultural heart of the Greco-Roman world. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus is a

profound demonstration of the contextualization of the Christian message, standing as a model for evangelism and apologetics, and illustrating that the Christian faith is not confined to Jewish heritage but is relevant to all cultures and philosophies.

Epicureans and Stoics

Sermon Reference

Paul met with two groups of philosophers, the Epicureans and Stoics, in the marketplace before being invited to speak at the Areopagus.

Background Context

The Epicureans followed the teachings of Epicurus, who founded his school in Athens around 307 BC. The Epicureans believed that the purpose of life was the pursuit of happiness, which they equated with pleasure and the absence of pain. They taught that the gods were indifferent to human affairs and that there was no afterlife. They emphasized the importance of personal tranquility and reasoned that fear, particularly of the gods and death, was the source of unhappiness. Epicureanism as a philosophy advocated for moderate enjoyment of life and the pursuit of wisdom to attain a state of ataraxia, or inner peace.

The Stoics, on the other hand, were followers of Zeno of Citium who taught in Athens from about 300 BC. Stoicism was a philosophy of personal ethics informed by a system of logic and views of the natural world. Stoics believed that virtue, the highest good, is based on knowledge; that the wise live in harmony with the divine reason (also identified as fate or providence) that governs nature; and that they are indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune and to pleasure and pain. Stoicism placed great emphasis on virtue and self-control, teaching that a life of virtue was in accordance with nature.

When Paul encountered these philosophers, he was met with curiosity and skepticism. The very concept of a bodily resurrection was absurd to the Greeks, who saw it as a weakness, contrary to their philosophical understanding of the spiritual and material realms. For the Epicureans, the idea of an afterlife was nonsensical, while the Stoics found the notion of a divine intervention in human affairs to be incompatible with their belief in the rational order of the cosmos.

The encounter between Paul and these philosophers reflects the cultural and intellectual fabric of the day, showcasing the diversity of thought present in Athens. Their invitation to Paul to speak at the Areopagus was a significant opportunity to present the Christian worldview to an audience grappling with existential questions. The interactions Paul had with the Epicureans and Stoics highlight the early Christian engagement with contemporary philosophical ideas and the challenge of articulating faith in a pluralistic society.

Importance in the Bible

The Epicureans and Stoics represent the diversity of philosophical thought in ancient Athens and the broader Hellenistic world. Paul's engagement with these philosophers illustrates the early Christian effort to communicate the gospel in a way that both confronted and utilized the

prevalent ideas of the day. This encounter underscores the enduring Christian challenge to address and integrate the gospel with the philosophical and ethical systems across different cultures and times.

Samaritan Woman

Sermon Reference

The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at Jacob's well serves as an example of an individual who ends her search for meaning and fulfillment upon meeting Christ.

Background Context

The Samaritan woman, as recounted in the Gospel of John chapter 4, meets Jesus at Jacob's Well near the town of Sychar. Samaritans, who were of mixed Jewish-Gentile ancestry, had a strained relationship with Jews, who considered them ethnically impure and religiously heretical due to their mixed worship practices. This problematic history intensified the surprise and scandal of Jesus's interactive approach with the Samaritan woman, as it was uncommon for Jewish men, especially rabbis, to converse with women openly, and even more so with a Samaritan woman.

During their conversation, Jesus broke social norms by asking the woman for a drink and then offered her 'living water' leading to eternal life. In this dialogue, Jesus revealed his knowledge of her past, including her five previous husbands and her current living situation, which was likely a source of social stigma. This encounter becomes a turning point in her life, revealing Jesus as the promised Messiah who offers salvation not only to Jews but also to the despised Samaritans.

The Samaritan woman's response is transformative; she leaves her water jar, runs back to her town, and tells everyone about Jesus. Her testimony leads to many Samaritans believing in Jesus as the Savior of the world. This significant event underscores the universal offer of the gospel and underscores Jesus' role in bridging cultural, religious, and gender divides.

Her story is a powerful demonstration of how an encounter with Jesus can dramatically alter a person's life course, moving from an existence marked by searching and societal rejection to becoming a herald of hope for her community. The interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a profound example of personal evangelism and the life-changing power of Christ's acceptance and truth.

Importance in the Bible

The Samaritan woman's story is foundational for understanding the inclusive nature of Jesus's ministry. It highlights the theme of living water that Jesus offers to all people, regardless of their background or past, and serves as a model for witnessing and personal transformation. Her narrative also illustrates the shift from a physical location of worship to a spiritual one, in spirit and truth, thereby redefining the concept of worship within the Christian faith.

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