

LITTLE THOUGHTS ABOUT OUR BIG MISSION
A Devotional Theology of Mission part 8
Acts 17:14-34

1. Mission Involves Long Journeys.

¹⁴Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens

Paul's been on the road. He's gone from Philippi to Thessaloniki (just under 100 miles). He went from Thessaloniki to Berea (45 miles west). It's about a 200 mile trek south from Berea to the famous city of Athens.

There's a sense in which mission literally involves long distance travel. (Lani Miller 7,686 miles to Gurgaon, India. JD/October outreach team 5,026 miles to Dundee. Amanda/CF teams 5,255 to Wadebridge Campo Mourao, Brazil 6,227 miles. Curitiba, Brazil 6,437). Those long geographical journeys were preceded by long spiritual journeys, time spent walking with Jesus — every step of those journeys building and preparing for mission. leading up to those geographical distances. Whether it's the distance involved in being a part of the mission of God in building a community of believers or traveling around the world to preach the Gospel and build up the Body of Christ, geographical distance is NEVER the deal breaker when it comes to living in the mission of God.

But there's another kind of long journey. A whole lot of mission happens in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our geographical community. Where we live in West Roseville there's no straight path to anywhere. But we're still only talking about a 15 minute drive over well kept roads. That said — mission can involve LONG journeys just to open Gospel conversations. Think about how far you you've traveled to get to someone's heart. Think about how far you've traveled from first meeting someone — walking through weeks, months and years with them. Maybe days, weeks, months or years walking with them as they've traveled through some hard, heartbreaking seasons in life. If there was an odometer for the miles of road traveled getting into a person's heart — how many miles would you

go to get the point where you can BEGIN to talk about Jesus. How far would you be willing to go to once you've had that conversation with them. One of the most AMAZING examples of this is in the book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*. Nabeel Qureshi was a devout Muslim. He was led to Jesus by a guy named David Wood who he met on a forensic debate team his first year in college. They became best friends. From the beginning of their friendship Nabeel began to challenge David's faith in Jesus. It was a four year journey together on the same college campus that led to Nabeel meeting Jesus on August 24, 2005, at three o'clock in the morning.

By the way — the longer our journey with Jesus the more willing we are to go the extra mile with someone on life's road — or literal miles to bring the Gospel to someone.

1. Mission Involves Some Long Journeys.

2. Mission = A Passion to See People Rescued from Idols

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Athens was the most famous city in Greece. It was the center of literature, art, politics, and philosophy (Athens was home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle). When the average person thinks of Greece they think of Athens, they think of the **Acropolis** (the fortified stronghold situated on a hill) and the **Parthenon** (a temple on the Athenian Acropolis).

Athens was literally a city of idols! At the time of [Acts 17](#) the population of Athens was around **10,000**. Pliny (the Roman author and philosopher) states that in the time of Nero, Athens had over 30,000 public statues besides countless idols in private homes. Every gateway or porch had its protecting god. Idols were etched into public buildings; they lined the streets and were worshipped in shrines and temples.

Petronius (Roman historian) said, *"In Athens it was easier to find a god than a man."* Pausanias (Greek geographer and historian) said, *"Athens had more images than all Greece put together."* Xenophon (Greek writer) calls Athens *"one great altar, one great offering to the gods."*

Acts 17:16 (The Message)The city was a junkyard of idols.

What does that 1st century **city of idols** have to do with living in the mission of God in 21st century America? Where are the statues, the images etched into public buildings, the shrines and temples?

What does that 1st century **city of idols** have to do with living in Roseville, Rocklin, Granite Bay, Citrus Heights, Loomis, Newcastle? The answer is: LOTS!

When Luke wrote that Paul **saw** that the city was full of idols he didn't use the Greek word that means to simply "look at". Our English word "theorize" comes from the word he used. He looked at the idols with clear perception.

Paul understood that those idols were more than carved or sculpted images. Paul was wrecked by what he saw. He saw and he felt! It was a powerful response and reaction. He was **provoked** — "his heart was eating him" — "his stomach was hot"¹ because he understood that those idols influenced EVERYTHING and EVERYONE in Athens. He understood that those idols influenced all of the art, all of the business, all of the education and government.

Timothy Keller put it like this: Paul understood that the real problem with the world is not the bad things but the good things that have become the best things.²

Let's get back to **the city of idols** and do the math. Population: 10,000 — Number of idols: 30,000. That is at least **three idols** for every person! **Three created things** that have taken the place of the True and Living God in the life of every individual in Athens. **Three broken, created things** from which every individual in Athens was trying to derive life from, apart from God.

¹ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972). *A handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (p. 335). New York: United Bible Societies.

² Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

Sounds like the average American. Sounds like the average home in America! There are three idols common to nearly every unbelieving household in Western Culture: Comfort, Success, and Recognition. Not one of those idols beat down the door and forced their way into those lives and homes. Instead they sneak past our brains and put down roots in a corner of our heart and begin to grow. We don't notice them because we fall in love with them. Without a riot they take the place of God in our hearts, take the love that belongs to Him as creator and redeemer.

Idols are sneaky because they aren't necessarily bad things. Good things like family, success, acceptance, money, your plans, can become **god-things**; "**little g**" **god-things** that actually take the place that belongs to God alone in your life. They become the thing or things that drive us and provide us with fleeting moments of false glory and fading happiness.

Think about this: Athens was home to men and women who had 800 years of Greek Mythology and 500 years of philosophy — and they were **still** searching! Nothing has changed since Athens in Acts 17.

Paul had a passion to see people rescued from idolatry. Paul had a passion to see those men and women worship the God who alone is worthy of worship.

We need to **know** the people we desire to **reach**. We will never know how to reach our cities until we get to know them. We need to pay attention to our cities. Here's a list of helpful questions we should be asking about our cities:

- What's happening in my city?
- Who's moving into my city?
- What buildings are going up in my city?
- What buildings are coming down in my city?
- How many schools are there in my city?
- How many people are here in my city?
- What is the crime rate like in my city?
- What are the goals of my city?

- What are the values of my city?
- What are the beliefs of my city?
- What is the history of my city?
- How long has my city been a city?
- At what times and days does everything come alive in my city?
- What do the people in my city love about my city?
- What do people despise about my city?
- What's the media saying about my city?
- What do people in my city put their hope in?
- Who's hurting in my city?
- Who's succeeding and thriving in my city?

If you want to know the answers to those questions don't isolate yourself from your city — engage it. Your neighbors are a microcosm of your city — watch and engage!

The teller at your bank, the person ringing you up or bagging your groceries at your grocery store, your hair stylist, will tell you a whole lot about your city because they **are** the city; they're in it, they know what's going on in it.

I think that it's safe to say that if **we** aren't **provoked** by what we see, we probably aren't seeing our cities like Paul saw Athens — we aren't things through the lens of the Gospel.

3. Mission = Going Public with Jesus

¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Verse 17 begins with the word, **SO**. Paul saw the idolatry that drove culture and was **provoked** to tell men and women about the true and living God — **so** he went to

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons

He went to the one place that was removed from the kind of idolatry that plagued the city — the synagogue. But the synagogue was not an idol free zone! They needed to be rescued from the idol of religion.

QUOTE: G.K. Beale; *We Become What We Worship* — “The Jewish nation took pride in the fact that they were not like the nations who bowed down to stone and wooden images. Israel worshiped their dead tradition rather than the living God according to his living Word”.

There are plenty of churchgoers who think that believing there is only one God changes the reality of your sin — makes you more righteous in the eyes of God than the man or woman who worships multiple gods. That was exactly what the orthodox Jews were thinking who rejected Jesus. You can also be monotheistic and think that you can reach the One, True and Living God on the basis of works.

¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Paul didn’t just talk about Jesus on the Sabbath in the synagogue. (For us: On Sunday at church). Paul took Jesus to the streets everyday! Paul went public with the Gospel. *The marketplace* is literally, the agora. Some believe this was the market northwest of the Acropolis, where pottery was sold, and which was the center of Athenian life and trade. ³ In their commentary on *Acts*, Newman and Nida read it as, “*talked with the people who happened to come by and would listen to him.*”

HERE’S THE POINT — Jesus is not just for **Sunday** and church. Jesus is for everyday. He’s for the workplace and the marketplace. He’s for the classroom or the break room at work. He’s for where you hang out and where you work out. The everyday and the mundane are in reality the context for divine appointments.

It didn’t take long for the local philosophers to hear about what was going on in the *agora*. They came and listened to Paul and probably debated with him.

³ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972). *A handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*. UBS Handbook Series (335–336). New York: United Bible Societies.

4. Mission Has Full Bandwidth

¹⁸Some of the **Epicurean** and **Stoic** philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” —because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

The **Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** were polar opposites on the Greek philosophical spectrum.

The Epicureans — were followers of Epicurus (who lived 400 years earlier). The Epicureans held pleasure as the main purpose of man’s existence. Their philosophy is summed up in the words — “Eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” They also believed that their pagan gods lived in perfect happiness, far removed from all earthly things. Paul was provoked to tell these men about Jesus — God who is near; God who stepped into the world to be with us.

The Stoics — were followers of Zeno (who lived 300 years earlier). The Stoics were pantheists — they believed everything is God and God is everything. The emphasis of Stoicism was on reason, personal discipline and self-control. They believed that reason trumped feelings. Wiersbe summarized them by saying *The Epicureans said “Enjoy life!” and the Stoics said “Endure life!”*⁴

The mission of God is not about reaching one end of the worldview spectrum. God loves the Epicurean and the Stoic and everyone in between!

5. Mission = Facing Contempt

And some said, “What does this **babbler** wish to say?”

The Greek word translated **babbler** was originally used of a small bird that went around picking up grain. Over time it was used to describe the person who picked up the odd bit of information here and there and was not

⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Ac 17:16). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

capable of connecting the information. Moffat translates it as “fellow with his scraps of learning.” Barclay reads it as “fellow with his ill-digested scraps of knowledge.” R.J. Utley (in his book *Luke The Historian*) cites *The Revised Standard Version Interlinear* reading it as “ignorant plagiarist” and the New Jerusalem Bible reading it as “parrot.”⁵

Arrogant contempt is an understatement. Yet Paul was *provoked, urged on, stimulated*⁶ to talk to them!

HUGE — When we face contempt we are actually sharing in the deep pattern of God’s salvation. Jesus saved through rejection, weakness, and sacrifice.

¹⁹And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying,

Many believe this is Mars Hill, named after the Roman god of war.

“May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Paul responds

There are some great lessons for us on how to communicate in our own city of idols.

6. Mission does not open with a declaration of war.

²²So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

⁵ Utley, R. J. (2003). *Vol. Volume 3B: Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*. Study Guide Commentary Series (206). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International.

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (780). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

He doesn't begin by calling them a bunch of pagan idolaters! Back in [verse 16](#) we're told that he *reasoned with them*. Here he says — *"I can't help but notice that you guys are very religious."* He would let the very person and nature of God shape the tone and the content of what he was going to say.

7. Mission Meets People Right Where They Are

²³For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He used something very **familiar** to introduce them to something that was very **unfamiliar** to them. **I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'** They were so terrified of the gods as they perceived them that they made an altar to one they didn't know, just in case they made him mad. So, Paul worked forward from *that* familiar point of reference. He began to explain that the God they wanted to know, but didn't know, was knowable and had made Himself known. This is the beauty of the God of the Bible; though the true and living God is incomprehensible — He is Knowable! By the way — Charles Spurgeon said this about the average church goer. *"I believe a very large majority of churchgoers are merely **unthinking, slumbering worshipers of an unknown God.**"¹¹*

In [verse 27](#) he acknowledges that they're trying to feel their way towards the God they don't know — and the reason they're doing it is because God made them so they might know Him. These are not the words of a hostile adversary.

8. Mission Involves Building Bridges by Understanding Culture

²⁸for "In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring.'

Paul familiarized himself with the sayings, the teachers, the poets, the authors, the gods, and the idols of the day. That's a must for living in the mission of God! Paul's understanding of their culture enabled him to

reference two of their own Poets. *For in Him we live and move and have our being* was a quote from Epimenides the Cretan [600 BC]. Paul actually quotes him again in [Titus 1:12](#) . *For we are also His offspring* is a quote from Aratus [310 BC].

Paul referenced how their own culture believed in a very present creator-god. Paul didn't quote these men because they were prophets or because all their teaching was of God. **He quoted them because** these specific words reflected a Biblical truth, and by using them he could build a bridge for his pagan audience to the truth.

HERE'S THE POINT — We need to know something about fallen culture. We need to know *who* is speaking and *what* they are saying. We can use those references as springboards for Gospel truth.

EXAMPLE: Even fallen Culture admits how broken and bad the world is. Its literature, theater and screenplays are filled with “super hero” themes. Culture tells and retells stories of how dark and evil forces pose an existential threat to humanity and how humanity is powerless to save itself. In the face of such threats a humble super-hero (savior) comes along. The super hero puts his life on the line so that evil can be defeated and people can be liberated to live in peace. Even the Zombie genre is a pulling back the curtain on the eschatology of those who are creating culture.

9. Mission Always Creates Response

³²Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul had faithfully declared

The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24).

The goodness of God; He is Provider (v. 25).

The government of God: He is Ruler (vv. 26–29).

The judgment of God (vv. 30–34).

Those truths ALWAYS provoke a response!

SOME MOCK! ([verse 32a](#)) Have you been in the room when someone was mocking you — but they didn't know you were right there? You respond by saying, “You know, I **am** right here!” It is impossible to talk about God behind his back because He is omnipresent ([in Him we live and move and have our being](#)). In reality, this response is done with God in the room

SOME DELAY! ([verse 32b](#)) They're like the shopper who says “Can you hold this for me — when they have no intention of coming back to get it. Or at best, they interested in hearing them again — but merely because it's what they do — they talk, they debate — with no desire to reach a conclusion or making a decision.

SOME BELIEVE! ([verse 34](#)). God is so gracious — so desirous to save idol worshippers in the city of idols.

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