

Searching for Purpose

Introduction:

In a world where people everywhere are searching for purpose and meaning in their lives, the empty philosophies of the world are leaving people more broken, confused, and alone than ever before. Many of these philosophies have their roots in teachings which sprang forth from ancient Greece, particularly Athens. During the course of his second missionary journey the apostle Paul comes face-to-face with philosophers of 2 of these groups, the Epicureans and the Stoics. We will see that these philosophies of antiquity which Paul encounters in the 1st Century A.D. are alive and well in the 21st Century and are leaving people searching for purpose. In Paul's well know sermon delivered on Mars' Hill, he refutes the hedonistic worldview of the Epicureans as well as the deterministic fatalism of the Stoics by declaring the person and nature of the One True and Living God and our need to repent and believe in His Son Jesus Christ.

Contextual Information:

During Paul's second missionary journey he received the Macedonia Call to preach the gospel for the first time on European soil. Paul accompanied by Silas, Timothy, and Luke sailed from Troas across the Aegean Sea, stopping on the island of Samothrace, and arriving in Neapolis the following day where they continued on to Philippi (Acts 16:6-12).



Events at Philippi: (Acts 16:13-40)

- Salvation Experience and baptism of Lydia and her household.
- The healing of the demonic girl which led to the imprisonment of Paul and Silas.
- The salvation and baptism of the Roman jailor and his household.

Once Paul and Silas are released from prison they departed Philippi heading towards Thessalonica (seemingly without Luke).

Events at Thessalonica: (Acts 17:1-9)

- Paul reasoned with the people from the scriptures in the Jewish synagogue, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘this Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”
- Many Jews, Greeks, and leading women believed and joined with Paul and Silas.
- Attack on the house of Jason by a Jewish mob who declared that these men were “turning the world upside down” and “saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

Jason and the other brothers are released after paying a security (bond), Paul and Silas leave during the night hours to Berea.

Events at Berea: (Acts 17:10-15)

- Encountered people who were receptive of the gospel. “They received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”
- Many believed.
- Jews from Thessalonica heard of the preaching of Paul in Berea and came down to stir up trouble.

Paul was immediately rushed off to the sea by the brethren where he would depart Berea, while Silas and Timothy remained. Paul was brought to Athens where he would wait for Silas and Timothy to join him.

Athens

Names such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had come years before and had established Athens as the center of learning and the philosophical pursuit of truth. The city was built around a 520 foot high rocky plateau called the Acropolis where many great architectural wonders had been constructed over the years, the most famous being the Parthenon.



To the north of the Acropolis was the Agora which was the civic center and Market Place where Paul spent time evangelizing. To the northwest, extending out from the Acropolis was the Areopagus or Mars' Hill where the councils and the High Court met. This is where Paul was brought by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers to tell them about, in their words, “new teaching” about a “strange god.”



Events at Athens: Acts 17:16-34

Paul's Reaction to Athens:

“His spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.” (vs 16)

I can only imagine what that moment was like for the apostle. Having come from three confrontational yet successful missionary campaigns in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea and now stepping ashore on the banks of Athens his eyes were wide and his spirit was stirring within him. He was gripped to his core by what lay before him. No, it was not because of the picturesque shoreline, the majestic Acropolis rising above the horizon, or the architectural wonder of the Parthenon; it was because men, women, and children had completely given their admiration, love, and reverence to strange gods. The throne of preeminence that was rightfully the One True God of Israel's had been given to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and a myriad of other gods including themselves. I wonder if God's word from Exodus 20:1-5 came to Paul's mind,

“And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God..” – Exodus 20:1-5

Paul gets to work:

“Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons.” (vs 17)

Paul's first stop was in the synagogue. This seems to be his pattern as he had first gone to the Jewish synagogues in both Thessalonica and Berea and had success. Here, he is said to reason with the “Jews and the devout persons.” The devout persons would be Jewish proselytes,

converted gentiles. This group would have had an understanding of scripture as well as a belief in the one true and living God, thus he reasoned with them about Jesus Christ and his resurrection, attempting to prove to them that Jesus was the Messiah.

“and in the market daily with them that met with him.” (vs 17)

Secondly, and daily, Paul went into the marketplace, the bustling city center of Athens and evangelized the gospel of Jesus Christ and his resurrection with those he encountered. As Athens was a center of learning and the philosophical pursuit of truth, there was plenty of opportunity to enter into a marketplace discussion. During the course of these conversations Paul encounters two groups of philosophers that were prominent at that time in Athens, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

“Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him.” (vs 18)

The philosophers were confused but intrigued by the apostle’s teachings in the marketplace.

“And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods.” (vs 18)

While the message was strange to them, there was a fascination amongst the people living in Athens to tell or hear about “new” things. They brought Paul to the Areopagus (Mar’s Hill) and asked him to explain his “new teaching.”

Paul's Sermon on Mars' Hill

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” (vs 22)

The greek word *deisidaimonesteros* translated in the KJV as too superstitious, means to be more religious than others and an alternate translation of this verse would be, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” Although Paul is about to show them the emptiness of their religion, I don't think this comment would have been taken negatively by the listeners but positively as to their piousness.

I want to stop for a moment from the narrative recorded for us in Acts and try to understand more about the religious philosophies of these men that brought Paul to the Mar's Hill. What were their views of God or gods, where the world and mankind came from, what's our purpose in being created, and where do we go when we die? I think understanding these ideas in comparison to Paul's sermon will help to understand the importance and purpose of the truths Paul is about to share and the meaning they had for the Epicureans and Stoics there that day, as well as to our lives today.

Summary of Epicurean Philosophy

Epicurus is one of the major philosophers in the Hellenistic period, the three centuries following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. Epicurus' gospel of freedom from fear proved to be quite popular, and communities of Epicureans flourished for centuries after his death.

- Nothing comes into existence from nothing. The universe has no beginning, but has always existed, and will always exist.
- The gods are unaware of our existence thus have no concern for us.
- The only thing that is intrinsically valuable is one's own pleasure.
- Pleasure was obtained by limiting one's desires and by banishing the fear of the gods and of death.
- Death is annihilation. Epicurus believed that understanding this would remove the anxiety that came with fears of an unpleasant afterlife.
- “I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care” Epicurean epitaph inscribed on many of their gravestones.

Summary of Stoic Philosophy

“The term "Stoicism" derives from the Greek word "stoa," referring to a colonnade. Zeno of Citium taught in the stoa poikile in Athens, and his adherents accordingly obtained the name of Stoics. Zeno was followed by Cleanthes, and then by Chrysippus, as leaders of the school. The school attracted many adherents, and flourished for centuries.

- Nothing incorporeal exists. Thus, all things, even the soul, even God himself, are material.
- The original material in which all other material came from is a primordial fire, and all things are composed of fire.
- This fire is God or Nature
- “The world-process is circular. God changes the fiery substance of himself first into air, then water, then earth. So the world arises. But it will be ended by a conflagration in which all things will return into the primal fire. Thereafter, at a pre-ordained time, God will again change himself into a world. This second, and every subsequent, world, will be identical in every way with the course taken by the first world. The process goes on forever, and nothing new ever happens. The history of each successive world is the same as that of all the others down to the minutest details.”
- Everything is subject to the laws of Fate (the development of events beyond a person's control, regarded as determined by a supernatural power)
- Stoic morality consisted of a life in accordance with nature and controlled by virtue. It is a system of extreme self-control, which taught perfect indifference to everything external. Where one is not disturbed by passions or emotions.
- The wise man consciously subordinates his life to the life of the whole universe, and recognizes himself as a cog in the great machine.

The Divine Truths of Christianity

As presented by the apostle Paul in Acts 17: 22-31

“God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;” (vs 24,25)

- God is Eternal and self-existent. He neither needs nor depends on anything. He is the first cause of all things.
- God created everything from nothing.
- God is Lord of heaven and earth. Completely sovereign over his creation!
- God made man unlike anything else he created, He made us in His image, rational, moral and with a purpose to glorify Him and enjoy his presence forever.

“...bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; *even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.*” – Isaiah 43:6,7

“This fact guarantees that our lives are significant. When we first realize that God did not need to create us and does not need us for anything, we could conclude that our lives have no importance at all. But scripture tells us that we were created to glorify God, indicating that we are important to God himself. This is the final definition of genuine importance or significance to our lives: If we are truly important to God for all eternity then what greater measure of importance or significance could we want?” (Grudem)

“And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their

habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us” (vs 26,27)

Paul refutes Epicureanism’s view that “the gods have no concern for us. In fact they are unaware of our existence...” by declaring the sovereignty of God in that he “determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” and simultaneously refutes the stoics deterministic and fatalistic views of fate by showing their human responsibility to “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him.” God’s providential hand is at work in our lives. He has not created the world and stepped back from it to allow it to operate on its own but is personally involved in every aspect of our lives. Even to the point that he has determined the timing and placement of our existence, and the purpose in this placement was so that you would seek him and find him.

“...but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (30,31)

Having laid the foundation of the nature of who God is, Paul now declares to them the gospel, God’s plan of Salvation in his son, Jesus Christ. God commands his creation, man, to repent! For there is a fixed day of judgment awaiting us where we will be judged in righteousness by Jesus Christ, who will return, not as Savior, but as Judge. Our claims of righteousness will not stand on that day for “our righteousness is as filthy rags” but only those who have the righteousness of Jesus Christ accredited to them will stand holy, blameless, and above reproach that day.

“For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself;

by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight” – Col 1: 19-22

Jesus showed to all of us that He is the Messiah, the Christ in that He had the power to lay His life down and the power to take it up again. The apostle knew this reality 1st hand! As a persecutor of the Church of God himself, it was in a moment of seeing the risen Christ that would change him forever!

“And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” – 1 Cor 15:8-10

Conclusion:

Athens was a city that was perceived to be a center for learning and the philosophical pursuit of truth, yet they forgot a simple but profound certainty;

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.” - Prov 9:10

Foundations are everything! What Epicureanism and Stoicism were, was man’s wisdom in the absence of the fear and knowledge of God. It should be evident to us that these ancient philosophies are alive and strong today in the 21st century, and it’s clear to see the parallels of Athens and our modern centers of learning and wisdom. So the question arises, what should we do? We can learn from the apostle Paul. First, the Triune God of scripture, God, Jesus, and The Holy Spirit must have preeminence in our own hearts. To the degree that our “spirits are stirred within us” when we see ourselves or others given to idolatry. Second, there are people searching for truth. Let’s tell them about it! God has providentially put people in your life; your family, classmates, co-workers, strangers. They need to hear that they haven’t come into being due to billions of years and unfathomable chance, but that God, the Lord of heaven and Earth, has personally given us life for his glory. That we aren’t merely riding the waves of fate but God has placed us where we are today that we might seek him and find him. That there is coming a day of judgment and the wages of sin is death, yet Christ defeated death and sin by rising victorious from the grave and we too can defeat death in Him! Lastly, when we share the good news with those in our lives we can expect the same response Paul received in Athens.

“Some mocked” (vs 32)

“Others said, we will hear thee again of this matter” (vs 32)

“Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed” (vs 34)

Many will mock, many will question, but praise God some believe!