GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

The Good News about Jesus is Radically Inclusive

Acts 13-20

Although Luke only wrote two of the New Testament's books (Luke and Acts), his pair occupies as much space as Paul's thirteen letters. Luke explains the reason for his extensive writing at the beginning of his Gospel: he wrote so that Theophilus might have certainty concerning the things he had been taught about Jesus (Luke 1:1–4). Luke's purpose means that his writings offer insight into both the meaning and the application of the gospel (the Greek word *euangelion*, translated "good news").

As we have moved through Luke's writings, we have examined major sections and the insights they offer into the Good News:

- Luke 1–2: **The Good News is about Jesus' kingdom and rule.**
- Luke 3–9a: **The Good News about Jesus is for everyone.**
- Luke 9b–19: **The rejection of the Good News of Jesus' kingdom and rule.**
- Luke 19:41–23:56: **The Good News of Jesus' kingdom and rule focuses on His death.**
- Luke 24: **The Good News of Jesus' resurrection launches His kingdom and changes everything.**
- Acts 1–7: **The Good News reveals that Jesus exercises His kingdom and rule through faithful people.**
- Acts 8–12: **The Good News shows that Jesus' kingdom and rule unites divided people.**

Today, we consider the next major section of Acts: **Acts 13–20**. This section records the outward movement of the Good News into the wider Gentile world. This section forces readers to ask a critical question: *What does 'to the ends of the earth' actually mean?* Luke answers that question by slowing the narrative down in Acts 17, where Paul encounters the city of Athens. This scene reveals that the Good News of Jesus' kingdom reaches even those far removed from Israel's Scriptures and expectations.

Paul in Athens

Athens was a city characterized by intellectual achievement, beauty, and philosophy, yet saturated with misplaced worship. Paul responded by reasoning in both the synagogue and the marketplace (Acts 17:17). He did not confine the gospel to religious settings, nor did he wait for people to seek him out. Instead, he brought the announcement of Jesus into public life. As Paul taught, some dismissed him as a "babbler," while others were intrigued by his message about "Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

Paul was eventually brought before the Areopagus, the intellectual center of Athens, where new ideas were examined. There, Paul delivered a carefully contextualized message. Rather than quoting Scripture, he began by observing their religious practices and referencing an altar dedicated "To the unknown god" (Acts 17:22–23). Paul used this altar to proclaim the God they worshiped without fully knowing.

Paul described God as the Creator who made the world and everything in it, who does not live in temples made by human hands, and who gives life and breath to all people (Acts 17:24–25). He explained that God directs history so that humanity might seek Him, emphasizing that God "is actually not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). Paul even quoted Greek poets to affirm that humans are God's offspring (Acts 17:28), demonstrating that traces of truth exist within pagan culture.

However, Paul did not stop at common ground. He confronted idolatry directly, calling people to repentance and declaring that God has appointed a day of judgment, giving assurance of this by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:29–31). The resurrection became the decisive moment that demanded a response. The reactions followed a familiar pattern: some mocked, others delayed, and some believed (Acts 17:32–34). Luke highlights that faithful proclamation does not always result in widespread acceptance. Nevertheless, the Good News was truly proclaimed.

Insights from Acts 17

Luke's account of Paul in Athens reveals key truths about the Good News:

The Good News of Jesus' Reign is radically inclusive.

The Good News of Jesus reshapes the people of God from the inside out.

The Good News of Jesus' kingdom confronts every worldview, including intellectual and philosophical systems.

People are often deeply religious without knowing the true God; idolatry takes many forms.

The resurrection of Jesus stands at the center of the Christian message and demands a response from all people everywhere.

Success in God's mission is measured by faithfulness to Jesus, not by cultural approval or numerical growth.

Because Jesus is risen and reigns as King, the Good News truly is for everyone.

Athens represents the cultural frontier of the gospel's expansion. Luke wants readers to see that the Good News remains good news even where Scripture is unknown and belief is not assumed.

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Evening Discussion

In Athens, Paul proclaimed Jesus to people who did not share Israel's Scriptures, story, or expectations. They had not been formed by the Law or the prophets, nor were they waiting for a Messiah like Israel. Still, Paul did not treat the resurrection as a truth limited to a Jewish audience. He insisted that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an event that demanded a response from everyone.

The resurrection announced that Jesus is Lord, and that claim reaches beyond cultural, intellectual, and religious boundaries. Whether shaped by Israel's story or by Greek philosophy, whether devoted to the God of Abraham or to other gods, the message was the same: God's kingdom had been established in Jesus, and all people were now called to reorient their lives around him. For Paul, the Good News was not about adopting Jewish customs, but about allegiance to a risen King whose reign addresses every worldview.

Discussion Questions

Paul did not quote Scripture directly in Athens the way he often did in synagogues. What does that tell us about knowing our audience when we share the Good News?

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Paul affirmed parts of Athenian culture without affirming their idols. How can Christians show respect for people without compromising truth?

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Paul trusted God with the results; some believed, some mocked, some hesitated. How does this challenge our desire to control outcomes when we share our faith?

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In what ways might modern culture resemble Athens, and what “altars to unknown gods” do you see around us?

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The resurrection demands a response, not just interest. How can Christians avoid presenting Jesus as merely an “interesting idea” instead of a reigning King?

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What does it look like to call people to allegiance to Jesus without asking them to first adopt Christian culture, language, or traditions?

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