

Divine Appointments

Acts 17:16-21

Introducing God, Part 4

In his book on discipleship, Mark Bailey, the current president of Dallas Seminary included humorous and true story of how things can change in their value, based on things that might happen to us in life.

He writes that a businessman had really wanted to own a Porsche sports car. And every day he would look through the classified ads at Porsches for sale – and they were always way out of his price range . . . even though he knew he probably could never afford to own one, he kept looking.

One morning, he was surprised to see an ad for a brand new Porsche – on sale for only five hundred dollars.

He assumed it was a typo and that a couple of zeros had been accidentally left off.

The next morning as he checked the ads again, he couldn't believe it – the same ad was running – a brand new Porsche was on sale for \$500 dollars.

This guy figured he had nothing to lose, so he decided to call the number and a woman answered the phone. He asked her if it was a typo . . . she said, "No, that's the sale price – her brand new Porsche was available for \$500 hundred dollars. She said she was surprised no one had called yet because of the price.

This guy still couldn't believe it, but decided to drive over and see for himself. When he arrived at a rather beautiful estate, he saw the new model year Porsche sitting in the driveway.

She met him in the driveway as he got out to examine the car. He kept thinking to himself, "It must not have an engine in it." It did.

He asked her again about the price, just to make sure. She said with an air of disinterest – "Yep, that's the price . . ." So he got the keys and took it for a test drive. The car ran perfectly – it was in mint condition.

In total disbelief, he handed the woman \$500 dollars, watched her sign the deed over to him and he then drove away rather quickly, before she could change her mind.

After enjoying the sports car of his dreams for about a week, he was still bothered to think that he had paid this woman only \$500 dollars for a car worth a fortune.

He began to feel guilty that maybe she just didn't know. So he decided to call her. When she answered the phone, he told her who he was and then said, "Were you aware that the listing on this car is worth more than \$100,000 dollars?" She said, "Oh yes, I knew that."

"Well then, why'd you sell it to me for only \$500 dollars?" Without pausing for even a moment, she answered, "I'll tell you why. Three weeks ago, my husband left me and ran off with another woman; and the last thing he said to me was, 'Sell the Porsche . . . and send me the money.' So I did."ⁱ

I have been checking the ads ever since reading that! Something really valuable had suddenly become worthless.

I was at the store some time ago and saw a woman in one of the aisle's wearing a sweatshirt with the message on front that made me do a double take to make sure I read it correctly. In large letters, this middle aged woman's sweatshirt read, "I want it all." I want it all!

She evidently had no idea that even if she had it all – things in life could change and everything she had wouldn't matter.

For every human being on the planet who ever lived – there is a coming day that will change the values of everyone. What seems really valuable today, isn't gonna be worth anything at all, one day. And the reverse is true, by the way; things that the world considered worthless, will become priceless.

By the time the Apostle Paul arrives in Athens, it was the city that had literally had it all.

Five hundred years before Paul's arrival, Athens had birthed democracy and a system of parliament, and law, and individual freedoms still followed today by much of the western world.

Athens was also the home of the world's most famous university where Socrates and Plato both served together on the faculty.

Plato's most famous student – Aristotle – would walk these streets and teach in this city as well.

Athens was also the religious center in that region with its white marbled temples to the gods of the pantheon. The streets of Athens were literally lined with statues of the gods.

Fifty years before Paul's arrival, Caesar Augustus had rebuilt many of the temples and civic buildings that had been destroyed over the centuries, returning Athens to some of its golden age.

In the timing of God and the development of the gospel, it was time for Athens to hear of a God who alone had the attributes of deity and majesty and glory.

Let's return to the *Book of Acts and chapter 17* where Paul arrives in the city of Athens.

In Luke's account of this scene, he describes Athens in at two ways.

1. First, Athens was intuitively religious

Luke records that after Paul arrived in Athens – *verse 16, Now while Paul he was waiting for them at Athens (that is, Timothy and Silas to rejoin him), his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.*

The word translated, "observing" in *verse 16* is the word *theoreo* (θεωρεω) which gives us our words *theatre*.ⁱⁱ

And Luke is probably using a play on words, simply because Athens was famous for her theatres, most of whom were dedicated to emperors or the gods.

We know that the city-state of Ephesus nearby had a theater which housed 29 golden statues of Artemis – their chief goddess – and 60 statues of Nike (the god of victory) and 60 statues of Eros – the god of eroticism – imagine 150 statues to the gods in Ephesus; one can only imagine Athens.ⁱⁱⁱ

The truth is, we don't need to imagine; Pliny, the Roman author who lived during the days of Paul,

wrote that Athens had at least 73,000 statues to deities and divine emperors.^{iv}

Pausanias, a Greek geographer who visited Athens a few decades after Paul was there wrote the rather interesting statement that it was easier to meet a god on the streets of Athens than to meet a man.^v

The statues of the gods lined the streets; they were in every public building; their temples filled the hills and valleys of that region.

It reminded me of my tour through India a few years ago. The religious fervor is literally everywhere. Everything revolves around gods and goddesses – and you have no less than 300,000 to choose from. Temples are everywhere. Gurus are everywhere with their chanting followers.

One day, I was walking down a street and I heard beautiful singing – and looked over and saw at least a hundred people sitting on the cement floor of an open building – no walls – just support columns – they were singing and clapping. I asked my host who they were and he said, "They're followers of that guru sitting there in front of them, and they're singing to their god" – he didn't know which one it was; he said – "they're singing over and over again about how good their god is."

The Athenians – and every nation on the planet – is convinced there was an unseen world filled with gods and goddesses.

And in one respect, they are absolutely right. Mankind intuitively knows there is something more out there – the world reveals the existence of a powerful, creator God and the law of God's moral standard is written on every man's conscience (Romans chapters 1 & 2).

The citizens of Athens couldn't get enough gods to satisfy their religious appetite.

Luke informs us in verse that Paul's spirit was "provoked." That term can be interpreted both negatively (to be angry) or positively (to be excited). I believe Paul was more excited than angry. He was filled, I believe, with a sense of anticipation for the power of the gospel to potentially reach so many religious, curious – but empty – people!

And Paul isn't about to sit on his hands here. He's like the shoe salesman who arrived in a distant city where everyone went barefoot. He packed up and went home the very next day, telling his employer, "No one in that city wears any shoes." Another salesman arrived and immediately called the warehouse to send as many shoes as they could,

saying with excitement, “No one in this city has any shoes!”

Paul is the kind of person who would say, “This place is the perfect place to introduce the one true and living God.”

Athens was intuitively religious.

2. Secondly, Athens was intellectually curious.

Notice *verse 17*. ***So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles*** – that word reasoning, again, is the Greek word *dialogomai* which means to teach with the method of questions and answers – *dialogomai* gives us our word, dialogue.

Paul is in the synagogue taking the scriptures and asking them questions and giving them biblical answers.

He evidently kept at it because we read nothing of unrest or rioting – as in previous cities where the Jews threw him out of the synagogue.

Not in Athens; they wanted to know more. They were deeply, intellectually curious.

Tragically however, is the implication from Luke’s silence here that there indicates there wasn’t any response from these question and answer sessions in the synagogue.

There wasn’t a riot, but there wasn’t a revival either. They were just curious.

I talked to a man a few days ago on an airplane and I asked him what he would say to God if God asked him why he should be allowed into heaven. He gave me a brief answer that basically pointed to his good works – to his service in the church and the community. And then he said, “But listen, I’m really interested in what you think the answer is?” I spent 45 minutes telling him the answer from scripture. And at the end he wasn’t really interested after all.

You see, it’s one thing to be curious . . . it’s another thing to be converted to Jesus Christ. Now Paul doesn’t just stay in the synagogue where he’s not doubt most experienced and comfortable, reasoning intellectually with these Jews and Gentile proselytes.

Notice further in *verse 17*, ***Paul went into the market place every day with those who happened to be present.***

Here’s what’s happening . . . Paul has decided to go to the busiest place in Athens – the market place

– otherwise known as The Agora. Today we would call it “Downtown” or “The Central Plaza” . . . you could even call it “The Mall”.

It was acres and acres of shops, fountains, parks and temples with people streaming in and out of them; temples dedicated to Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Hephaistos, Nike, even Caesar Augustus . . . and more.^{vi}

So just picture Paul, right in the middle of it all . . . starting conversations with people . . . introducing himself . . . maybe even calling out to people who were leaving their temple, “Hey, I’m interested in talking to you about your god – if you’d like to hear about mine.”

This is open air evangelism. This is what some refer to as “cold calling” – you have no appointment. This is what some call confrontational evangelism. As if all true evangelism isn’t eventually confrontational.

And Luke writes here that Paul was doing something completely random, from man’s point of view. In fact, did you notice how Luke writes in *verse 17* that Paul talked to those ***who happened to be there*** that day. They happened to be there that day.

But oh, Luke understood . . . as did the Apostle Paul . . . every conversation was *anything* but random. And Paul was depending on God to lead his steps and bring people to that Mall, to that park, to sit at that fountain . . . to walk out of that temple . . . at just the right moment, orchestrated by God Himself.

Our evangelism explosion teams that go out weekly call it “divine appointments.” I love that terminology . . . there’s nothing random about a divine appointment.

On the north side of the Agora – this downtown plaza – was an old building called – in English – “The Painted Porch”. It was a popular gathering place for people – especially philosophers – to debate their differences and opinions.

Paul evidently made it over there as well because he ends up in the middle of them – ***notice verse 18. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him*** – you could translate that verb – arguing with him.

I would have loved to listen in as the greatest Christian theologian philosopher took on the intellectual descendants of Socrates and Plato.

Who were these philosophers? In short, the Epicureans believed that life is short and death ends

your existence so live it up as long as you can and get as much pleasure as possible; and as far as the gods are concerned, they really don't care because they're trying to get all the pleasure they can out of their existence too.

The Stoics argued that all the gods were really the same – they all reflected the “god-principle” and you didn't need to get all worked up about any one god; in fact, life should be viewed apathetically because eventually you're gonna die and become one with the universe.

Listen, Athens and America – and every other country on the planet are identical.

To this day, these are the dominate philosophies of life;

- Either the universe is an accident out of nowhere – it's called the big bang; and when your life is over, that's all there is, so get as much enjoyment as you can because the person who dies with the most toys wins.
- or – don't get too dogmatic about any one god – they're all saying the same thing. And one day you'll live forever anyway because you have divinity within you.

That's Athens . . . that's our world today. Notice what the Epicureans and the Stoics are saying – *verse 18b, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “he seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,” – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*

I can't help but chuckle at this statement – these people are surrounded by superstition and they think Paul is the proclaiming something strange.

Really? Jesus is a strange deity? The truth is, yes. You see, for Paul to talk to them God the Son dying to redeem humanity, that would have been extremely strange if we understand that the gods – to them – didn't care about people; and the gods definitely wouldn't die to save people. People died and their gods didn't care.

But this God, as Paul will explain Him, not only died to redeem sinners because He loved them, but He came back to life.

And that was shocking – that was entirely different than all of their gods combined . . . and still is, to this very day.

Paul's message seems to have gained a measure of credibility because of what they did next; *verse 19. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20. For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)*

The Areopagus was both a title for a hill – also known as Mars Hill, after the Roman god Mars – and the Areopagus was the formal name of the high court of Athens which met on this hill.^{vii}

According to Athenian law, no new religious system could operate – no new deity could be officially recognized – and no new temple could be built without the permission of the Athenian council. This was the Supreme Court, the Oval office and the House of Congress all rolled into one.

In fact, to this day, the Supreme Court of Greece is called the Areopagus – the Hill.

And we in America talk about Capitol Hill . . . “on the Hill” is where the decisions are made. It all goes back to Athens.

In the days of Paul, the Athenian council still met on this hill that jutted 500 feet into the air – nearly flat on top – making it a perfect outdoor meeting place with a panoramic view of Athens.

So here they come, followed by Paul, this proclaimer of strange new deities – to stand before the Supreme Court of Athens.

For Paul, this was the ultimate divine appointment.

And he will begin to introduce to them the unknown God – and as he does, Paul will introduce one stunning attribute after another – each phrase is so freighted with truth – as Paul introduces to them, the true and living God.

And when he does – he begins to change their value of everything. We'll begin there next time.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/14/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Dr. Mark Bailey, To Follow Him (Multnomah Books, 1997), p. 119.

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 307

ⁱⁱⁱ Eckard J. Schnabel, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts (Zondervan, 2012), p. 722

^{iv} Ibid

^v R. Kent Hughes, Acts: The Church Afire (Crossway, 1996), p. 230

^{vi} Schnabel, p.723

^{vii} Kenneth O. Gangel, Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts (Holman Publishers, 1998), p. 288