

Have you ever had your world turned upside down? We normally think of that phrase negatively: Death, diagnosis, difficult truth, loss, failure. I think back to parents' divorce, business failure, Martha friend-zoning me for six months. But what about when you trusted in Jesus? The Gospel turned all of our lives upside down. We realized it wasn't all about us, there is a holy, righteous God whose standards we can't meet, we are sinners in need of salvation, God offers us that salvation through trusting in Jesus, and there is an abundant life today and eternal life we can hope in. When you trusted in Jesus, your world was turned upside down. That is true today, and that's been true since the beginning.

In Acts 17, Paul and company have made their way to Thessalonica. They preach the gospel, some accept, but some reject, and they reject vehemently. Luke records their accusation against them: **[Acts 17:6b] "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."** As the gospel has marched from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and now to the ends of the earth, it has disrupted lives, nations, and systems. But what the men in Thessalonica meant as a negative accusation is actually a glorious declaration of the truth.

" That is one of the greatest compliments which has ever been paid to Christianity. ... When Christianity really goes into action it must cause a revolution both in the life of the individual and in the life of society." -William Barclay

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a world-flipping message because it contains a life-altering truth. It changes what we know about God, what we know about ourselves, how we view the world, and how we treat one another. It changes the purpose of our lives, changes our belief system, and changes world systems. It is a comprehensive reframing of life, leaving no area untouched, and **when we share it with someone, it confronts all they are and believe.** But if we don't recognize that, we may be callous, condemning, or thoughtless in the way we share it, rendering us ineffective, frustrated when we don't get the response we want, and resentful towards those God is sending us to. So how do we present the truth of the gospel while recognizing how disruptive it is, and what can we expect when we do?

After Paul is confronted in Thessalonica, he's whisked away to Berea. There he preaches the gospel to a receptive audience who open the Old Testament scriptures to confirm what Paul teaches. However, the opposition from Thessalonica follows him there and stirs things up again, and Paul is whisked away to Athens, and that's where we pick up the story.

[Acts 17:16-21] 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. ¹⁷ So 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. ¹⁸ Some 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. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of Hellenism. It was also full of idolatry. What we know as Greek mythology was the belief system of the day. As Paul observed how pervasive it was, his spirit was distressed within him. **When you recognize the gospel as a world-flipper, you recognize and are burdened by the things that need to be flipped.** You see the brokenness in the world that Jesus came to heal.

What troubles your spirit? What offends you as you look into the world? One of the great burdens God placed on my heart was the vast number of middle-aged men, similar to me, who were just eking their way through life. Success was ending your day without too many people mad at you. They may be successful in their careers, but they have no delight in it, in their marriage and kids, and in their relationship with God. The activities of their life provide escape more than fulfillment. They are missing the abundant life Jesus offers, and I want to engage it. What is it for you?

When your life has been turned upside down by the gospel, you want it to do the same for others. You say things like “If they’d only let Jesus into that.” And this is where it begins... a burden for the brokenness of the world and a desire to be used by God to redeem it. Paul sees the brokenness, depravity, lostness, idolatry in Athens, and it stirs him to do something about it.

Paul preaches the gospel to a number of different groups, including two groups who carried the prevailing philosophy of the day. Epicureans believed pleasure was the chief aim of life and, while they believed in gods, they considered them far off and disengaged. Stoics were pantheistic, believed there was a great Purpose directing history, and man needed to fit himself into that purpose, leading to pride and self-sufficiency. The gospel will turn both of those belief systems upside down. Some dismissed Paul outright, calling him a babbler, a word that means “seed-picker”, implying that Paul picked up learnings here and there and then tried to pass them off as his own. Others are interested. Some are interested because some just like new ideas that rarely, if ever, lead to life change. They’d love our 24-hour news cycle. Others are interested and want to hear more, and he is invited to the Areopagus (Hill of Ares, Mars Hill), where the supreme body for judicial and legislative matters meet. **Paul has carried himself in such a way that he has earned another hearing at the highest levels.**

[Acts 17:22-31] ²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For 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. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “ ‘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.’ ²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to

repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Look how Paul begins. He acknowledges this is a very religious people and even have an altar to the unknown God. **He is meeting them where they are.** He recognizes their sense of the divine and their fear they would miss out on worshipping another God.

This is a great place to start because it reminds us that **the gospel is first and foremost an invitation**, not a condemnation. There would have been little place to go if he started by dismissing them. Instead, he says “Here’s where you are. Let’s talk about it.” What a great lesson for us in the day where so many of our exchanges begin with “Let me tell you why you’re wrong.” I used to look at spiritual conversations as opportunities to win an argument, and it wasn’t very winsome. What about you? If you want to turn someone’s life upside down with the gospel, honor where they are first, let them feel valued, and earn the right to proclaim the truth.

So Paul does that. And as he meets them where they are, he says “This unknown God? I know him. Let me tell you about him so you are ignorant no more.” He lays out the gospel, but contextualizes it to the perspective of his hearers.

He begins by showing the common ground they share. This God is the creator and Lord of all and is so great he can’t be contained within temples and is self-sufficient and needs nothing from mankind. This would appeal to the Epicureans who believed the gods existed above human events.

He continues, though, by saying God gives mankind life and breath and everything. He is intimately involved. This would appeal to the Stoics who believed we were related to the gods and sought to align their lives with the great Purpose of the Cosmos.

So he finds common ground, and then begins to turn their world upside down. He says all mankind came from one man, Adam. The Greeks believed they were special, set apart. They considered all the rest of the world to be barbarians, but they hear we’re all distant relatives.

Paul says it is God who has determined the times and boundaries of the nations. No one nation can declare superiority because it’s all been determined by the providence of God. Greece isn’t special.

God revealed himself in creation and history to show that he is near, that he is findable, that the unknown is knowable, and they would find him if they feel around for him. The Greek gods were far off and aloof. The idea that a god would desire to be found and known flips the script on them. He further makes his point by quoting from their poets Epimenides and Aratus to show this even pagan poets had a sense of the nearness and knowability of God.

Paul concludes by saying since we (he identifies with them because we are all in the same place/condition) are God’s children, reflective of him, he can’t possibly be thought of as gold or silver, a manmade idol. God has overlooked their idolatry in the past due to their ignorance (a

bold claim to the center of philosophy), but now God has given fresh revelation for all people through Jesus. His life and ministry is a proclamation that God has come near (Immanuel is “God with us”), wants to be known, has made it possible to be known, and calls mankind to respond in repentance, and all he said and did was confirmed through the resurrection. The time for ignorance is over. The unknown God has made himself known, and it’s now time for them to respond.

This is an amazing sermon. Yes, Paul gets to the need for repentance and turning to God, but he does so by contextualizing it to his hearers. He takes the truth of God and applies it to their current set of beliefs, turning their world upside down one belief at a time.

This is such an incredible example to us because we can know the gospel and be able proclaim it, but meeting someone where they are and contextualizing it to their lives will increase its impact. Think about what the gospel confronts and seeks to turn upside down today. The world believes everyone has their own truth. The gospel says there is one truth, and his name is Jesus. The world says there are many ways to god, if there even is a god. The gospel says there is one true God and the only way to him is through Jesus. The world says “you do you”. The gospel says our God is holy, righteous, and just, and we will give an account and stand on our own righteousness or stand on Jesus’ righteousness. The world is full of self-righteous Pharisees who try to virtue-signal their way to absolution. The gospel says Jesus took care of that on the cross. The world gets their identity internally and relationally. The gospel says our identity is in Christ. The world is divided. The gospel is the work of reconciliation. The world is wondering if there’s any hope. The gospel says there is eternal hope. The gospel touches every aspect of life, and when we present it in a way that addresses where someone is, they will likely be more receptive. But results will still vary.

[Acts 17:32-34] ³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul receives the same three responses: rejection, not no but not yet, and acceptance. Not everyone is ready to have their world turned upside down. We can expect the same. Our job is to be faithful. God will determine results. So then what do we do with this?

Get close.

I have said many times that, if you know Jesus, you have something to pass on to others. You have a testimony, and it is enough. But, if we are to look at the example of Paul, there is more we can do to be more effective in sharing our faith. It begins with getting close to God. We are able to know more about God as we know more of what he has revealed about himself. We do that through studying his Word. In a sense, it’s a biography of God, who he is, and what he’s done. To know it more is to know him more, and the more you know of him the more you can tell about him. We also do that through prayer, being still in his presence, because he is near and wants you to come near to him. I can tell you a lot more about someone I know intimately than I can about a stranger. It’s no different with Jesus.

The second part of that is to get close to others. Make it a point to be friends with non-believers, ask a lot of questions, be curious, participate in the culture, involve yourself in others' lives, read, take our cross-cultural workshop next time we offer it. You don't have to become an expert in Greek mythology, but the more you know of people and the more you know of the culture at large, the more you'll find common ground and see how the gospel intersects with their lives and beliefs and how it will turn it upside down.

In 1961, 25 students of Operation Mobilization drew up a Christian manifesto for world evangelism. They wrote: Literal adherence to the principles laid down by Jesus Christ would, without a doubt, result in worldwide revolution—a revolution motivated by love, a revolution executed by love, and a revolution culminating in love!

The gospel is not a nice idea, a nice story, an interesting option. **The gospel is very work of God that has turned eternity upside down,** and we get the privilege of taking that message into the world. Let us do so with compassion and determination and witness the life-changing work of our Savior.