



2022 Weekly Devotions

Week of: November 14th - 20th

Sermon: November 13th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
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November 14

2 Corinthians 12:10

I want to begin our points to ponder this week by first reminding you of the circumstances that led to verse 16 of our text for Sunday's message. Our passage began with Paul "waiting for them at Athens" (Acts 17:16). Why was he there and all alone? I think if we paint the backdrop just a bit, it will make this devotion more meaningful to each of us.

As pastor Aaron reminded us Sunday, Paul constantly faced opposition and even physical resistance to his ministry. There were wonderful highs to his work but there were also discouraging lows. In the first 15 verses of Acts 17, there are already two occasions in which the crowd who rejected Christ were forming mobs to create chaos, discord, and even harm to the followers of Christ: especially Paul. It was the formation of another mob in Thessalonica and their attacks that bring us to our text for today. As the previous section of Scripture ends (vv. 10-15), Paul is separated from Silas and Timothy, for everyone's safety, and sent to Athens. It is there that we find him sitting alone waiting for the eventual arrival of his friends.

The way in which we can read a Scripture passage and gloss over it without any real appreciation of the moment is unfortunate. Put yourself in Paul's shoes for a moment. This man had to be tired of the constant battle with the people to whom he was trying to reach with the gospel. In the midst of the moments that he experienced with Lydia, the jailer, and others, there was always the enemy. Every place that Paul went, the devil raised up opposition that was often violent. Can you imagine how easy it would have been for him to argue with God? I can hear myself saying, "Come on God, I'm serving you and at every turn I am getting hammered. What's the deal?" Well, now he is run out of town again, only this time he is by himself. There is no partner with him to offer encouragement, to pray, or to sing hymns. He is by himself, and I assume in a spot where discouragement and doubt could surely harass his mind.

As Paul sits there in Athens, something happens to him. The Bible tells us that his spirit was "provoked" within him. He was getting a bit irritated at what he was seeing in this famous and godless city of Athens. I will write more about what this all led to, but for now suffice it to say, God was giving him strength in a time of weakness. That leads me to something Paul wrote later to the Corinthian church in his second letter to them. He wrote, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Beloved, please know that much of what we read from Paul's writings was both inspired by God and wrought from his own personal journey. When this man wrote, he wrote from a place of experience that I hope will make what he writes even more powerful to us. His speech, or in this case writing, was authentic and serves to bring these truths to light in real life.

If you and I will have enough faith to give God time to "show up" in our lives when we are struggling, discouraged, lonely, or hurting, we too will have a story to tell that glorifies God and encourages those around us. Too often people quit too soon. We must remember that when we are in times of weakness, God shows up and gives us a strength to do more than we thought we could. We will find as we venture through this passage, that God met Paul in his weakness and used him mightily, even while alone, in the idolatrous city of Athens. God used one man to shake that place and I figure He still can through us. Fight to believe that when you are at the end of your strength and abilities, God is more than capable to do wonderful things through you – especially then.

November 15

1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 24:12

I often remember the time that Johanna and I took a trip to New York City. I went up there for a pastor's conference and added a little site seeing and tourism in while we had the chance. I will never forget walking around Time Square and seeing all of the lights, the ticker tapes, the people, and so on. One thing that stood out to me, a country boy, was the fact that I could not see the sky. The lights and "activity" were all consuming and you could not see past it all. It would be so easy to become enamored with all of it and be swept up in the hoopla. It happens all the time.

Paul was sitting in a city that would have been akin to NYC. No, certainly not 21st century style but glamorous, active, cutting edge with art and education galore. The architecture alone would have been enough to capture the mind and leave a person somewhat breathless. Then there were the endless idols, gods, temple prostitutes, and philosophers to gratify every ounce of a person's humanity. There, sat Paul! I believe we could all agree that a little R & R for our beloved apostle would have been understandable. While waiting for his friends, he could have taken in all of the sights, smells, and scenes of Athens – the cultural center of Greece. He could have visited museums that highlighted the works of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He, being a religious man, could have enjoyed the religious history of this secular hotbed of religions with all of its temples, statues, and worship. But he did none of that. Why?

I remember the first time I began to notice an interesting human phenomenon. Johanna and I bought a white Ford Tempo many years ago. Until that purchase, I cannot remember ever seeing white Ford Tempos on the road. After the purchase, I saw them everywhere. I began to realize that we notice what is on our minds, in our hearts, or that in which we are interested. For the Apostle Paul, he noticed one main characteristic and truth of this grand city – the lostness. The Bible says that while he was observing the city what he noticed was the fact that it was a city full of idols (Acts 17:16). Paul did not talk about the lights, the beauty, the architecture, or any such things. He noticed the spiritual bankruptcy of Athens. Why? Because God had given him the ability to see below the surface to the important stuff. You see what you are interested in.

Dear ones, I think of how much time is spent on trivial or surface level issues. We tend to talk about everything except what matters most. We visit our family and friends and are captivated by the new car, the beautiful home, and its furnishings. We are in awe of the landscaping and the scenery. We love to talk about accomplishments on the ballfield or in the classroom. Pictures of the family vacation and who your child is dating nearly send us into convulsions. All of this happens over and over again all the while the things of God are completely ignored or relegated to peripheral place if at all. Paul would not dare let himself fall into such a waste of time.

The issue that mattered most to Paul was not the "awe" of the city but the neglect of our Creator God. The Bible records for us a truth about God that we should learn to incorporate into our lives as well. It says, "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him'; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Paul was able to see to the heart of the city and not get impressed by surface level beauty that was not spiritually valuable at all. Pray that God would give you eyes to see like He does and to see what truly matters most.

November 16

Matthew 23:37; 1 Corinthians 10:31

I find it extremely telling that with all of the idols filling the city of Athens, there was still a statue made to "An Unknown God." That should be an indication to all of us that regardless of how many worldly resources you try to gain for a sense of peace, security, or salvation, it is never enough. I glean from this statue to an unknown God that there was still a sense of uncertainty, lack of peace, and a realization that they had still not done enough. It carries with it the idea that we better do a little more just in case. The problem and truth is, that feeling that you haven't done enough and there remains a fearful dreading of the future will never depart until the One True God fills your heart with His Spirit and His love. Then and only then is there peace, residing joy, and a grasp that it truly is finished, and we are safe in the arms of our Savior and King.

In our passage from Sunday, Paul viewed Athens and the residents of that city as doomed to hell because of their pagan and godless idolatry. As he took in the scenes and experienced their culture, the Bible tells us that his spirit was "provoked" within him. That word carries with it the idea that his very soul was tormented by what he was witnessing. It is similar to what you read from the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 2:8. Paul was torn up about the circumstances. In like fashion, when you read the reaction of Christ looking over Jerusalem you see how deeply the lostness affected these men (Matt. 23:37). Was Peter, Paul, and Lot that devastated by lostness? Surely, we can understand Jesus feeling this way knowing what He knew, but these mere mortals? Is there more to it? I believe they truly did care about the salvation of lost people but there is more.

It appears to me that we might gain some insight into this reaction when we consider their love for God Himself. If you look at 2 Corinthians 4:15 you will read, "For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." Just prior to that verse (read 2 Cor. 4:7-15), Paul is talking about how the suffering that he is enduring is working to bring others to life. This then leads to the salvation of others which leads to the ultimate goal which is gratitude which abounds to God's glory. I am reminded of what Elijah said to God in 1 Kings 19:10. It is written, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant." Paul refers to this in Romans 11 where he mentions Elijah actually praying against Israel because of their rebellion against God and his jealousy for the glory of God.

So, do you see what I am attempting to say? Paul and Christ both were provoked to intense sadness, pain, and even controlled anger because they were jealous for God. In other words, they were motivated by and desirous of God being glorified by His creation *like He was supposed to be*. The Bible tells us that Jesus looked over the city of Jerusalem and literally wept because of their sinful and rebellious hearts. God desired to bless them richly and to care for them like a mother hen taking her little chicks under her wing for protection. The people rejected God's love and pursued other "lovers" and false idols instead. This broke the hearts of Jesus and Paul in our text because they did care about people's eternal destiny but also because they wanted God to be recognized, acknowledged, adored, and worshiped for who He is.

This is such a huge issue folks because idolatry of any kind steals God's glory. This is the reason why Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Paul worked so hard and was so dedicated because He lived to help others know God so that they could join in the praise that all of creation should give our Creator.

November 17

Exodus 32:19; Psalm 69:9

Yesterday I wrote about Jesus and Paul's "anger" that was provoked by their great desire for God to be rightly glorified by His creation. Today, I want to add to that their understanding that idol worship is spiritually deadly for those who practice it. So, what I want you to see is that yes, they had a zeal for God's glory but there was also a desire to see the people whom they were trying to reach be blessed. Their anger towards the people was in part due to their love for them. When you know that a person's life could be so much better if they would just pursue Christ and lay down their stubborn rebelliousness and pursuit of worldly things. A good example of this can be found in the God's chosen people during the Exodus.

You may recall that when Moses had gone up Mt. Sinai to get the Ten Commandments from God, the people quickly fell into sin and ended up urging Aaron to fashion a golden calf as their god. He did so, and gross sin broke out in the camp. About that time, Moses approached the camp with the tablets in hand only to see and hear the horribly sin that was taking place around their idol. The Bible tells us in Exodus 32:19, "Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets to the ground." Again, zeal for God consumed him (Ps. 69:9) but also his realization that the people had stepped into gross sin that would cost them more than they could imagine. Moses wanted better for them and they had blown it.

Pastor Aaron told me about a book that he was reading and enjoying entitled A New Testament Biblical Theology by G. K. Beale. I got a copy and have begun to read it. By the way, it is only 962 pages long. In the book, Beale writes about "what you revere you resemble, either for ruin or for restoration" (p. 368). His point is that if your heart's desire is to revere God truly, you will end up becoming like Him. Paul put it this way, "You become like Jesus as you behold Him" (2 Cor. 3:18). Likewise, if you revere or worship idols, you will become like them – spiritually lifeless and ruined. Beale writes further, driving this point home from Exodus 32.

The first part of chapter 32 reveals how the people moved towards their horrible sin of idolatry involving the making of the golden calf. God tells Moses that the people had corrupted themselves (32:7). In verse 9, God describes them as stiff-necked or obstinate. This is the first time, Beale writes, that God had used that terminology to describe His people. In essence, they had already begun to become like that which they revered. Again, you see "cow" talk in 32:25 when they are described as out of control and in need of being gathered back together at the gate (v. 26). I find all of this quite intriguing and like Beale, I believe it is already pointing to the fact that you become like what you worship (focus on or spend your time consumed with). Israel is pictured in Exodus 32 as a herd of cattle that is now running wild, obstinate, and in need of a shepherd to gather them back up. All of this because they decided to worship a cow!

Notice what Hosea wrote in his book in chapter 4:16, "Since Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer, can the Lord now pasture them like a lamb in a large field?" It is clear that Beale is correct in his conclusion. You do indeed ultimately resemble what you revere. So, dear ones, it is vitally important that you pursue Christ and the way in which He would have you go. As you do, you will be blessed with His favor (even in hard times) and will eventually begin to look a lot like our precious Savior in word and deed. Therein lies the path to love, joy, peace, and all the things that every person actually desires. He is the only way to true life.

November 18

Revelation 3:17

One can imagine what the Athenians thought of themselves from what Luke records in our passage from Sunday. We learn that the city was full of philosophers, both Epicureans and Stoics. They were so self-righteous and arrogant that they called the apostle Paul nothing more than a babbler. So, picture this, Paul who well educated, trained, full of the Holy Spirit, and used mightily by God was deemed by the residents of Athens as nothing more than a “want to be” intellect with no merit or clout. They thought poorly of God’s man while thinking far too highly of themselves.

This causes me to think of what Jesus said to the church in Laodicea in Revelation chapter 3. There he said, “Because you say I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing, and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked...therefore be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:17,19b). The failure to rightly evaluate your standing before God is an enormous issue. Both the Laodiceans and the Athenians missed the mark by a mile and yet both groups of people deemed themselves as elite. Surely it goes without saying that the evaluation of Christ is far more important than what we think of ourselves. In both of these situations, we have people thinking that they are something special all the while living in rebellion to God and still having to face the wrath of God of which they have no idea it is coming.

When I think back to Paul, I am reminded that, as I wrote earlier, he could see the reality of the situation. My mind goes back to the joy and the great burden of seeing deeper into circumstances than most people do. It is a joy because you can get to the heart of the matter and that always pays off in the long run. It is a joy because the truth is that most people have no desire to look below the surface. To know that there is so much more to a situation and that people whom you either love or are trying to reach are in grave danger and they do not know is a heavy burden to carry.

I remember decades ago hearing some people talking about Dave Angel, who at that time was pastor of Central Baptist Church. They said that David often looked like he was preoccupied or carrying a heaven burden that made him less joyful than I assume they wanted him to be. Now I understand his look and his feelings. This may be a weak or odd illustration, but I am going to try it. When I come into our building on any given morning and walk around to make sure everything is still in place, there are times when I find a room that is unusually cold. I take a look and the thermostat is set on 60 degrees and has been running all night. You may think that is no big deal. I reset it, walk away and immediately begin to think of what that did to the electric bill. That leads me to think about the overall budget of our church which makes me think about our overall giving as a church.

Well, the overall giving makes me think about bills and the mortgage which makes me think of the people who could do so much in the area of giving but choose not to. That makes me think of the spiritual condition of their hearts which causes me to sigh heavily and to worry about the health of our people. Yep, all of that because someone left the A/C on all night. My simple point is that I wish we would all take the time to ask God to give us eyes to see more deeply into circumstances from a purely spiritual perspective. I’m sure that Paul walked around Athens looking like he was carrying the weight of the world. The reason was that he saw clearly and accurately the danger before him while others went merrily along as if there were no impending judgment day coming. The spiritual condition of the heart is the most pressing issue in every person’s life.

November 19

John 7:15; 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

It has always been a real source of irritation for me to consider how there are people who think theological training is a joke. I recall the times when people thought they were being cute by calling the seminary the cemetery. Granted, there have been times and places where theological education has been overrun and ruined by liberal theology, but when you find an institution where the Bible is taught well by those who truly believe in its authority, inspiration, infallibility, and usefulness for all of life, you have found a goldmine. I was blessed by God to have been a student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary when it was theologically and doctrinally in the sweet spot.

Now, it is equally true that simply obtaining a degree from a Christian college or seminary does not alone make you a scholar or spiritually mature or adept (capable or skilled). The presence of the Holy Spirit in a believer and His ministry to us is the most precious and valuable ingredient to understanding God's truth. It must be understood that God's plan for our gaining knowledge of Him and His ways includes the office of the pastor/teacher. I am so very thankful for those who have gone before me who have led me personally or through their various ministries of preaching and writing.

For today, I want us to ponder the truth that the world may believe that theological education is a joke, not valid, and unnecessary, but God does not. The "educated" Athenians looked at Paul as nothing more than a babbler which is translated "Seed picker" (Acts 17:18). That was a derogatory word that simply meant he had little of value to say and was simply picking tad bits of information from various sources (like a bird finding a seed here and there on the ground) and throwing them together to form a loose and useless philosophy of life. They, on the other hand, saw themselves as true philosophers with "real" education and knowledge useful for life. You might note that in our society today, more often than not, the culture makes little to no room for the Christian perspective on issues of the day. They honestly deem it useless and archaic.

The world can think what it will about the value of biblical knowledge, but what God says, and thinks is what matters most. If we turn to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we read, "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God" (1 Cor. 3:18-19). God designed salvation for mankind so that it would come through the "foolishness" of preaching the Word. It was through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ that man was to be redeemed. This is a reality that is impressed upon the hearts of people through the preaching of the Word as it is applied by the Holy Spirit. A person, apart from God, who thinks they can uncover deep truth from manmade philosophy is the actual fool. It is a grave loss for our nation that biblical truth is not welcomed in the arena of answering our greatest problems in society. Therein lies the truth that could rescue us, but folks are too "wise" to listen.

The Bible makes it clear that if a person wants to become truly wise, he or she must be willing to humble themselves, lay down their arrogant independence and pursue God through the means that He has provided – namely His Holy Spirit and the written Word. The gospel may be foolishness to the world, but it is beautiful wisdom from God. A wise man may pursue education in other fields of interests in life too, which is fine, but he will not forego the need and joy of increasing in knowledge and wisdom of the Lord, His cross, and the gospel. There he/she will find real wisdom that will equip them for everything in life.

November 20

1 Corinthians 9:20-22

God gives us a valuable lesson in evangelism in my passage chosen for today's point to ponder. When we look back to 1 Corinthians 9, we read of Paul telling us that he adjusted his methods and approach for reaching his audience based on their knowledge and areas of familiarity. In other words, Paul was excellent at finding the common ground from which he could launch his gospel approach. To those who knew the Old Testament and Jewish law, you find him basing his conversation on their familiarity with the subject. To those who did not have the "law", he would begin talking about creation from a more experiential place. For those who were weak in their faith, he would start off with a great deal of patience and gentleness as he tried to lead them as a good shepherd would lead a weak sheep. To Lydia he spoke one way, to the slave girl another, and so on.

My point today is to help you see the same truths in the 17th chapter of Acts. You will recall that when he arrived in Thessalonica and entered a Jewish synagogue, he "reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:1-2). He talked to them about the suffering that Christ had to endure according to the Old Testament. The same method is employed when He is talking to the Bereans. It is from the Scriptures that he taught, and it was the Scriptures that they were examining (Acts 17:10-11). Now, you should be able to recognize quite the contrast when he arrives in Athens – a pagan and idolatrous city. It is true that he ended up talking about Jesus and the resurrection, but I want you to be aware that he took his time getting there.

This next reference is to a passage from next week's sermon, but I want to make my point with it today. In Acts 17:18 Luke writes, "...as even some of your own poets have said...." You see, Paul knew his audience and he found common ground on which to stand and connect their knowledge and understanding to biblical truth. Paul was very good at building bridges with the resources that his current audience provided. In light of what I wrote about yesterday, I want you to be clear. I believe it is extremely valuable for us to know something about the people and communities in which we live. We need to know what people think, how they live, and something of their worldview. Paul is familiar enough with Athenian and Greek culture that he is able to gain a hearing by "speaking their language."

Friends, the simple idea of this devotion is that it would certainly behoove all of us to consider the ways, beliefs, and thoughts of the people to whom we are speaking. It is highly unlikely that any of us will find ourselves talking to Athenians any time soon. However, the same principles apply when one generation is speaking to the next. It is foolish and even wrong for an elderly person to try to reach a young person with a 1950's mentality. People are not the same, our culture is not the same, our churches are not the same, and we can either resent others because they don't behave like us or value what we value, or we can figure out ways to relate to them so that we can build bridges on which we advance the gospel.

Our message of Christ and His cross will always be the same, but our methodology must change with the times. I am not talking about watering down the truth, entertaining people, or making our churches look like night clubs. I am talking about loving people enough to get to know what matters to them and then figuring out ways to "speak their language" so that we can eventually share "God's language" with them. Let's be willing to shape our approach to the audience to whom we are reaching. Like Paul, let's become what we must, to win others to Christ.