

Five Forks Church
Sermon: "From Boomtown to Ghost Town"
Series: The Truth of the Matter
Text: Acts 17:16-34
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INTRODUCTION: GOLD RUSH

In the mid-19th century, the California gold rush saw tenting communities springing up overnight. Businesses saw opportunities to make profits while supplying miners and prospectors with what they needed in food, clothing, supplies, and entertainment. They built stores and livery stables and blacksmith shops and tanneries and hotels and taverns. Those businesses moving in also moved in more people, and more permanent quarters than canvas tents were built. Such communities were called "boomtowns."

All because of the hope of becoming instantly wealthy. Days of glory indeed! Excitement must've run high in a boomtown, especially when one miner or another would come to town with a good-sized nugget. Proof there really was gold in those hills!

But few miners actually made it big. In fact, the first millionaire of the gold rush was not a miner at all. It was Sam Brannan, the man who sold shovels!

And when the gold was gone, the glory departed. With nothing else to keep them going, businesses closed their doors. The people left; the buildings remained. The boomtown became a ghost town, a fading, falling memorial to the glory days of old. I guess that's what ghosts really are – the fading memories of the glory of people long gone.

Not too long ago, Debbie and I were visiting friends in another town who lived on a street that ended in a cul-de-sac. As we parked along the street, a car cruised by slowly, and the driver, the only person in the car, made eye contact with me. He turned around at the end of the street, came back, and his window wound down. Now, I wasn't sure what he wanted, and I have no idea what that fella had been thinking about as he was driving around, but he looked at me and said, "Y'know, it's better to go out in a blaze of glory than to simply fade away!" With that, he drove off.

I just shook my head, wondering about him – even worrying about him a little. But he was gone before I could answer him. For whatever reason, he wanted to tell somebody what he was mulling over in his mind, he picked me out, and he shared his thoughts. And while I briefly stood there, trying to process what had just happened, he just kind of faded away, down the street.

Glory, the kind of glory here on earth – even the kind of glory of which one might go out in a blaze – is a temporal thing. Glory is so brief. Just like that – boomtown, ghost town.

How many falling stars we have seen in our lives! The previously celebrated, the also-rans, the has-beens, the once-famous maybe even trying to fan the embers of their former glory in a final attempt to get noticed again. The real thrill seems to be in the getting there and not in having already arrived.

I. SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Ravi Zacharias has said....

The loneliest moment in life is when you have experienced that which you thought would deliver the ultimate – and it has let you down.

The realization that “this is your moment”, that “the rest of your life is suddenly rushing toward you”, fails to satisfy. You won’t find satisfaction or an honest sense of fulfillment in the temporal glory of this life. Craig Groeschel, author of *Weird, Because Normal Isn’t Working*, wrote...

If you pour everything you have into this life, this world, which is temporary and fading, you're jeopardizing your relationship with God, the only thing that's eternal.

And that’s what we’re getting at this morning, that’s the idea towards which we’re heading, that’s what we want to explore. Any sense of satisfaction in this life fades away because all here is temporary. Lasting peace and satisfaction comes only from the eternal God.

We’re in this series, *The Truth of the Matter*, and we are looking at what people do when they encounter truth claims. When someone says to them, “This is the truth of the matter”, and then proceeds to tell them how things really are and how things ought to be. When such claims come from this world and its manner of thinking, we’re finding out, much as we did last week, that those kinds of claims fail to meet up with reality.

Today, we're going to travel with Paul into Athens, Greece, as it was in the first century A.D. He's going to confront people there with the truth claims of Christ. What can we learn from the Athenians? Let's get started....

In Acts 17, Paul arrived in Athens, then set to waiting for his fellow travelers, Silas and Timothy. He had some time on his hands, so he began to look for opportunities to initiate spiritual conversations....

Acts 17:16 – 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.¹

Athens was, of course, the cultural center during the golden age of ancient Greece. It was the ancient birthplace of western philosophy, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle being the founding fathers of human thought and human wisdom. You might say these three men lived back in the old glory days of Athens, a few centuries before the birth of Christ. But, by the time of Paul in the first century after Christ's birth, Athens' "glory days" were gone. Human-centered wisdom didn't hold out for very long. Athens' glory, as *all* human-based glory will *eventually* do, had lost its luster.

Boomtown, ghost town. Athens was fading. Bible commentator I. H. Marshall writes...

Although Athens had once been the intellectual center of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation. When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry.²

As Marshall suggests, Athens was plagued by a hindrance to the truth other than just human-centered philosophy. There was idolatry as well.

We might suppose Paul was offended by the idols because he was Jewish, and Jewish law obviously had strong prohibitions against carved images. But there was more to it than that. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the dangers involved with eating meat that had been offered to idols, he said idolatry had a demonic connection. Paul strongly suggested that eating what has been offered to

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:16–17). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² Marshall, I. H. (1980). [Acts: an introduction and commentary](#) (Vol. 5, p. 300). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

idols placed one in danger of interaction and relationship with demons. As you can tell from this text from 1 Corinthians, Paul is talking to the church members in Corinth about this offered meat, contrasting it with fellowshiping at Communion, with the bread and wine....

1 Corinthians 10:19-21 – What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.³

If Paul saw a clear connection between idolatry and the demonic realm, it's no wonder that all the idols in Athens troubled his spirit! To Paul, these statues of Greek gods and goddesses represented the presence of real supernatural evil, an embedded presence going back to ancient times – even before the times of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And to associate with such things as idols was to invoke the supernatural evil behind them, thus running the risk of inviting such entities to become part of your life!

The stories of the gods and goddesses of Greece were very old. Uranus and Gaia, heaven and earth, conceived together and gave birth to Cronus, who overthrew his father in rebellion. Cronus fathered Zeus, who then overthrew *his* father. And Zeus became the head of the pantheon of gods and goddesses of Greece. That was the basic foundational mythology handed down from ancient times. The myths were crafted lies designed to deceive, but the evil, deceptive entities behind the myths were very real. These evil entities were the *real* rebels, who had rebelled against the Almighty Creator who had made them.

With all the idols in town, Athens therefore was open to demonic influence, just as Paul had warned the Corinthians that they were open to it. And so was the city of Ephesus. Paul's letter to the Ephesians has numerous references to supernatural evil, as the city of Ephesus had many citizens who were involved in occult practices. In chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul warns the people against doing anything that might give the enemy an open invitation....

Ephesians 4:27 – Give no opportunity to the devil.⁴

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 10:19–21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Eph 4:27). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

With its demonic nature, then, idolatry would certainly give the devil opportunity. The Greek word translated as “opportunity” literally means “place.” Don’t do anything that would give place to the devil; don’t do anything that would allow Satan to get his foot in the door! In Athens, human-centered philosophy and demonically-influenced idolatry hung out a “Vacancy Available” sign for Satan, flung open a set of double doors for him, and rolled out the red carpet!

Paul is concerned that, through idolatry especially, supernatural evil had established a centuries-old stronghold in the Greek culture amidst the Greek people. Paul began to chip away at that stronghold....

Acts 17:17 – 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. ⁵

Notice how Paul interacted with non-Jewish people in Athens’ marketplace. That’s where Paul gained some inroads among some of the Athenian philosophy scholars....

Acts 17:18-20 – 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.” ⁶

Apparently, some of them in the marketplace heard Paul speaking and got curious. Some called Paul a babbler. Others, though, grew intrigued with his words. “He seems to be referring to other gods from other nations – gods about which we know nothing!” So they brought Paul to a local forum called the Areopagus. They wanted to understand better what Paul was saying....

Acts 17:21 - Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. ⁷

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:17). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:18–20). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

By the time of the Apostle Paul, the teachings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were about 500 years old. The gods and goddesses of Greece were something much older – and the evil spiritual powers behind them were even older yet. Acts 17:21 clearly implies that the citizens of Athens got no satisfaction from any of that old stuff – because they always spent their time looking for something new!

Like a former boomtown, the old gold of Athens' glory days was gone. The glory had faded. Zeus, Hera, and Apollo and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were like ghosts, merely haunting the city. For this first-century generation of Athenians, rehashing those old ideas, revisiting those old gods and goddesses, seemed dull; surely, there must be something better than that! The scholars of Athens had degenerated into a kind of consumerism of thought, always shopping around for the latest idea. The new, next best thing! Instead of something old, they wanted something new.

II. “THE GOD OF YOUR GODS”

So Paul gets to address this forum of thinkers in Athens....

Acts 17:22-23 – 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.”⁸

Do you see how this sense of dissatisfaction with their ghost town life drove the Athenians to assume, “There must be some god we don’t know about, out there somewhere!” I believe this altar to the unknown god was more than them trying to be sure and cover all their bases. I believe they sensed in their hearts there had to be something more; hence, their constant search for something new to come their way....

Acts 17:24-25 - 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.⁹

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:22–23). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:24–25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Remember, I told you the Greek mythology said Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth) came together and begat Cronos. Paul is now telling these Greeks that the unknown God whom they worship is the very one who made the world, the cosmos, and everything in it. This Creator God, Paul says, is Lord of *Ouranos* and *Gaia*, the Greek words for “Heaven” and “Earth”! Paul’s God is Lord over their gods!

“The God you don’t know is the God of your gods! He’s greater than all your gods! And you don’t have to make any offerings to Him; He doesn’t dwell in one of your temples, nor does He need anything from your hands! In fact, *God* has offered to *you* life and breath and food and clothing and shelter – all you ever need! All of it comes to you by His gracious hand!” That’s Paul’s message!

Let me tell you, if we could get Paul’s next statement embedded into the hearts and minds of our present culture, it would revolutionize our society! Listen to what Paul says....

Acts 17:26a – And God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth...¹⁰

The Bible does not teach that there are different races of men. That is a totally human concept; much could be said at this point regarding the history of corrupted human thought and its hideous generation of racist ideas. We have all descended from one man, Adam, just as the Bible plainly and literally teaches throughout its pages, just as Paul is teaching right here; there is but one race on earth, the human race, each individual made in the image of God, end of story! Let’s continue with Paul’s address....

Acts 17:26-28 – 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.’” ¹¹

We are, all of us humans, the creation of the God who made the heaven, the earth and the sea, and all that is in them....

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:26). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:26–28). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Acts 17:29-31 – “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.” ¹²

God created us, we didn’t create Him from gold or silver or stone! God precedes us; He is eternal, and comes before us, for we are but temporal beings. God commands repentance from all people everywhere. An established day, a fixed time, of accountability is coming. God will judge all in righteousness by one Man – the Man He raised from the dead!

See Paul’s message and how it fits together? God created all people from one man Adam; God will hold all men accountable before one Man, the Second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ whom He raised from the dead! That’s the message of God’s Word and, so, that’s what Paul is teaching here!

CONCLUSION: ETERNAL GLORY, ETERNAL HOPE

Paul was cut off at this point in his address to the Athenian thinkers at the Areopagus. When they heard Paul speak about resurrection from the dead, some began to mock him. Others said they would like to hear more from Paul. And there were those few who chose to follow Christ.

But the message here in Athens is not measuring Paul’s “success” based on how many people became believers. The real message in this story is weighing the “boomtown-to-ghost town” failure of the man-centered and demonically-influenced belief system of the Greeks against the eternal glory of Jesus Christ and what He has done for all people everywhere. The short version is that man’s glory is short-lived and fades away, while God’s glory is eternal!

I must also point out that not even “boomtown” conditions are desirable! Consider that the gold rush boomtowns were really predicated upon a basic moral flaw in human character, namely, greed. And much of the boomtown’s entertainment I alluded to at the beginning catered to human debauchery and vice. A boomtown culture had no redeeming qualities.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:29–31). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

All of which makes the boomtown-to-ghost town analogy even more apt at showing the spiritual poverty of all human-generated belief systems and philosophies and the like. Even in their boomtown state, even in their “glory days” (so to speak), beliefs and practices and philosophies and religions which fail to take the Creator God of the Bible into account are incapable of successfully addressing the all-too-real problems of the fallen race of mankind.

Couple that with the reality of supernatural evil that we’ve talked about this morning, and we can see that nothing in this world, nothing of this world, can offer any real and lasting hope to people.

Many in Athens rejected Paul’s message of hope. Maybe they thought that something else better might one day wander into town. Sadly, we know that nothing else ever did.

But the situation is not hopeless, is it! The eternal God offers eternal hope through the eternal Christ! For me, “my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness!” Jesus Christ took my place. He took my punishment, the judgment of my sins, upon Himself on the cross, dying for me! And Jesus rose from the dead, bringing me hope of eternal life! Hear Paul’s words to the Corinthians....

1 Corinthians 15:20-22 - But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.¹³

We have eternal hope in Christ – a hope that we can, and must, share with others so in need of the hope and assurance only Jesus can offer them! How blessed it is to know that Jesus is mine indeed!

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 15:20–22). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.