

- **As an undergraduate student at Texas A&M back in the mid 80's, went through bit of a philosophy stage**
- **Like many of my fellow architecture students I was a minor disciple of Ayn Rand. Imagine a naive 19 year old reading "The Fountainhead" and coming across a statement such as this:**

*The hardest thing to explain is the glaringly evident which everybody has decided not to see.*

- **Hmmm, deep. But aside from "The Fountainhead" and "Atlas Shrugged", my favorite book at that time was Robert Persig's tome "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." It's been 35 years, but this quote still sticks with me:**

*The truth knocks on the door and you say, 'Go away, I'm looking for the truth,' and so it goes away. Puzzling.*

- **Puzzling indeed.**
- **SO! Today we're back on the road with Paul, and our destination is ATHENS. If you lived in the first century and were into philosophy, Athens was the place to be.**
- **We'll see Paul get into a debate with a group of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers, who, after hearing what Paul had to say, said "You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears."**
- **What was so strange about Paul's message? Luke tells us he was sharing the good news of Jesus and the resurrection. What's so strange about that?**
- **THIS is what we're going to explore today- but before we head to Athens, TODAY is OCT 17, 2021, PE, TO**

#### ✚ Destination, Athens

- **Do you have your Bible? Notes? Here we go. We left Paul and the team in Thessalonica, where yet another mob was driving Paul out of town. (if you missed)**

**Acts 17:10-15** As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea (**about 45 miles**). On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. <sup>12</sup> As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. <sup>13</sup> But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

- **There are parallels here to what happened in Thessalonica that I won't re-cover. But a few things.**
- **Luke tells us the Berean Jews examined the scriptures (OT) to see if what Paul was saying was accurate, and as a result, many of them believed. This isn't major point here, but it points to the power of scripture, God's Word, to open people's minds. Many will say they reject scripture as inspired, but when people see our faith is not just some mushy religious opinion, but rather founded in the ancient texts of our scripture- especially when these texts have the working of the Holy Spirit behind them- this is a powerful thing. WE SHOULD NOT neglect the use of scripture when we share with people the hope we have.**

– **You may say- but to do that, I would need to know and understand these scriptures myself! Yes!**

– **Going on... The Jews from Thessalonica show up and try to shut Paul down again... continue...**

<sup>14</sup> The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. <sup>15</sup> Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

– **This journey was around 270 miles, most likely by boat. SO, Now we have Paul, left on his own in Athens. What is Paul going to do? Well, he did what everyone else did when they were in Athens....**

✠ **When in Athens...**

**Acts 17:16-21** While Paul was waiting for them (**Silas and Timothy**) in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

– **Set scene: Paul wasn't just standing on a street corner preaching. Luke tells us- almost sarcastically that thing to do in Athens was listen and talk about all latest ideas- principally meaning Philosophy. Ideas about meaning of life, undoubtedly with a good measure of politics thrown in.**

– **In the marketplace- functionally the city center or commons- people would gather round, someone would speak, and then the ideas would be debated.**

– **Paul simply joins in with the activity that is already happening.**

– **ONCE AGAIN, we see Paul looking for common ground. In Thessalonica and Berea he found it through the Hebrew Scriptures in the Synagogues. HERE, in Athens, he finds it through the people's love of intellectual discourse and philosophy.**

– **After some time, he is engaged by philosophers from the traditions of Epicureanism and Stoicism. These were two major streams of philosophic thought, both dating back to around 300 BC.**

– **The Epicureans and Stoics were generally understood to be opposed to each other, but here they both turn their focus on Paul, because as different as their two systems of thought were, what Paul was saying was completely strange.**

– **SO, lets spend a minute talking about these two philosophical systems, then contrast both with the Good News of Jesus. What's interesting is that both of these philosophy's- while over 2,300 hundred years old, are alive and well in our culture today.**

✠ **Let's get philosophical: Epicureanism. +/- 307 B.C.**

– **Founded around 307 BC by Greek philosopher 'Epicurus'. GREATLY GENERALIZING HERE!**

• **Chief goal of life is to seek modest, sustainable pleasure through the elimination of fear, a troubled soul, and bodily pain.**

- *In other words, managed your circumstances to keep life simple, good, and avoid anything that is negative. One example is that the Epicureans avoided any political involvement because politics brings fear, a troubled soul, and sometimes bodily pain!*
- Emphasis placed on pleasures of mind over physical pleasure
- *This is distinction between epicureanism and hedonism, which emphasizes physical pleasure.*
- Rejects superstition and concept of ‘divine intervention.’ If God exists, he (or they) have no role in life. Rejects afterlife.
- *BOTTOM LINE, benefiting from this philosophy was up to YOU, and your ability to control your circumstances. As a result...*
- Existence is intrinsically SELF-centered, SELF-dependent.

† Let’s get philosophical: *Stoicism*. *Founded by Greek philosopher ‘ZENO’ also around 300 BC. Zeno would teach his followers at a covered outdoor space on the Agora in Athens- basically, a PORCH. The greek word for porch was ‘stoa’, therefore, stoics.*

- Chief goal of life is reason based ethical virtue. Contrasted with Epicureanism, the ‘good life’ is *not* circumstantial, but found thru ethical virtues in the midst of any circumstance.
- Inner virtue is source of happiness, and strong emotions of any kind are to be avoided. Goal is immunity to the emotional pain of misfortune. *If you don’t care about anything external to you, you won’t be upset by anything external to you.* This gave rise to the concept of ‘stoic calm.’
- *HUGE cultural example of this- John Lennon’s anthem ‘Imagine’. Imagine no God, no religion, no countries, no possessions, nothing worth dying for, the only thing that matters is peace and living in harmony with other people. External things have little to no value, all that matters is inner virtue. ZENO would be proud.*
- God is seen not as a person, but as living force of the universe, embodied through all living things.
- *Of God, the stoic might say “Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. It surrounds us and penetrates us, It binds the galaxy together... Yoda, anyone? (last bit was Obi-wan) Another Yoda... “Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose” ZENO would be proud!*
- *George Luca’s theology of the Force is pretty much orthodox Stoicism.*
- *BOTTOM LINE, benefiting from this philosophy was up to YOU, your reason and your ability to control your emotions and ethical virtues. As a result...*
- Existence is intrinsically SELF-centered, SELF-dependent.
- *IN CONTRAST to these both, we have the radical, strange, life giving message of the Gospel. The...*

† Strange Ideas: *The good news about Jesus and the resurrection*

- *So what was so strange about Paul’s teaching to these Athenians? Just think about a few...*
- Humanities fallen nature and our need of REDEMPTION.
- *Both Stoics and Epicurean’s- as well as virtually every secular world view today- believed what you needed for life was found in yourself or in positive circumstances- which you accomplished by yourself.*
- *If you just had enough knowledge, were smart enough, virtuous enough, dedicated enough, then you could achieve goodness, contentment, and peace in life. Sounds a lot like religion.*

– **THE GOSPEL, on the other hand, teaches...**

We have no power to save ourselves, we are wholly dependent on the Grace of God- which means the pressure is OFF!

**Romans 3:10-11, 20-24** As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. <sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. **In comparison to prevailing worldviews, that is STRANGE. AND, IT IS GOOD NEWS!**

– **Expand out just a bit into NT... Another core tenet of the Gospel**

• **The personal and present nature of God**

- **GOD IS purposeful creator. This is not accident. All creation, especially people, are endowed with significance and value because are purposeful creations of God. THAT IS STRANGE THOUGHT**
- **God is bringer of redemption, restoration, new life, identity, purpose. These are not achieved through our performance, received through Faith in what GOD SAYS is true of HIM, and true of us when we receive new life through faith in Him. STRANGE! GOOD!**
- **Christ accomplished this all through suffering death and then defeating death- miracle of resurrection. WHY DID JESUS DO THIS? So that people- the purposeful creation of God, could be brought back into an experienced, relational, union with God.**
- **THINK OF THIS! THE reality of resurrection refutes the most common and distorted views of God.**

God’s heart toward humanity isn’t indifference or anger, it is sacrificial LOVE. Imagine that! God isn’t angry with you...

- **The wrath of God is his nature against SIN- and core to God’s nature is his desire and work to set us FREE from sin- but even more than that, to be with us, so that we may live in the GOOD OF LIFE for which He created us. THIS LEADS TO NEXT STRANGE IDEA**

• **Matters such as pleasure, contentment, reason, emotions, and ethical virtues all have their place- but they are neither the SOURCE nor the GOAL of life.**

- **In the the different philosophical systems of ancient Greece- and virtually every worldview today- the source of life is the SELF- and the goal of life is achieving some form of contentment for the SELF- be it through external pleasure or internal virtue.**
- **IN CONTRAST, the Gospel and resurrection proclaim**

**Our source is Christ, and our goal is the GLORY of God.**

**Ephesians 1:3-6** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup> For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. **(To live, experience his nature and goodness in and through our lives)** In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

- *There is so much there, but in contrast to the human condition and our distorted views of God, that is a radical, strange idea. BUT IT IS TRUTH, and GOOD.*

Life is now Christ centered, and our greatest expression of worship and glory to God is how we....

- *LOVE AND CARE FOR OTHER PEOPLE.*
- *Think of how strange this is, how far we've slipped...*
- *We have the GOD OF THE UNIVERSE- who calls us to worship Him and give Glory to him. AND YET, according to His own word to us, the greatest way we do this ISN'T THROUGH*
  - *Music, song, art, buildings, event greatest cathedrals, or even most sincere, personal, emotional response.*
  - *THE GREATEST and HIGHEST worship of God is when we, from the FREEDOM OF OUR HEARTS, sacrificially- and yes, sometimes laying down our rights- joyfully express the love and nature of God to the people in the circle of influence where God has placed us.*
- *YOU SEE, most world religions and philosophical systems that recognize God in any form say we worship Him by looking UP.*
- *The NT, the Gospel, proclaims that we worship God by looking AROUND us.*
- *We often say that in worship we lift GOD UP. But the Gospel proclaims that the greater worship is in how we lift PEOPLE UP- so that they may come to know the redemption and freedom of Christ as well.*
- *Strange ideas. SO...*

✠ As disciples of Jesus, what makes us strange today?

- *In FirstTracks I asked question...*
- *If you were to go Jay Leno and stop people on the street, asking them the question "What is strange or distinctive about Christians?", how do you think they would answer?*
- *Would they bring up politics? The many things we routinely tell culture we are opposed to?*
- *Or, might they just maybe say something like:*
- *"So, I know these Christians worship God, talk about how they love Jesus, and I know they hold some social views I disagree with, but what really strikes me is how they genuinely care for all people, whether they are like them or not. I mean, my neighbors go to this church in Edwards, so I know they're Christians. The thing I don't get is that while we disagree on just about every issue there is, they are kind to me, respect me, listen to my perspective on things, and seem to have that perspective toward the community. They seem to care about others more than themselves. You just don't see that much these days."*
- *Call me naive, but if you study church history you will see the gospel flourishing in the most hostile environments because of sentiments like the above. This isn't rainbows and unicorns, it's one of our most fundamental callings.*
- *There's a famous Christian song called "I can only imagine" that imagines the glory of Heaven. It's a great song.*

- *But what if instead of imagining what it will be like when we go to heaven, what if we imagined what it would be like to bring HEAVEN TO EARTH.*
- *What if we imagined a community of Christ followers who take serious the dominant New Testament themes we've explored the past two weeks.*
- *That by how we live, we are not offensive, we make God beautiful (another way of saying 'Glorify God'), and the sacrificial goodness of our lives is used by the Holy Spirit to open the door to share the hope we have. What power would that have?*
- *Well, this we don't have to imagine. We see the answer throughout Acts, we see it throughout church history, and it could be seen right here in our own valley.*
- *Stranger things have happened*