

Acts Series Part 49

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 January 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] How good are you at waiting? Perhaps we wouldn't think waiting is something we are good at or otherwise, but waiting is something that we do a lot of. We have rooms dedicated to waiting.

I wonder what you think of waiting rooms. What do you do in a waiting room? Do you wriggle? Do you grab a hello magazine and flick through what is within it? Are you more productive and take a book, knowing that you will have time that you can make use of? Do you think about what you would prefer to be doing? Do you worry about what the appointment that awaits will reveal? Life itself can be a continuum of waiting for one thing or another. Recently, some have been eagerly waiting for Christmas. Some of you are maybe waiting to leave school, waiting for release from parental control, waiting for exam results, or waiting for the outcome of job interviews. Some are into the drudgery of waiting for five o'clock or whatever it is that you're able to escape at work. Waiting for the weekend. Many live their lives waiting for the weekend, and then it comes, and then back to waiting again for it to come again. Waiting for love. Waiting for things to sort themselves out. All manner of things that maybe we can't do much about, and we simply wait and hope that things will sort themselves out. Waiting for retirement. Waiting even for death. Now, on the subject of death, is waiting dead a time?

How do you spend your waiting time? Well, as we rejoin Paul on his second missionary journey, and we left Paul and his companions alone for a few weeks now, especially over December and Christmas, but we return to where we left them. And as we rejoin Paul and his colleagues, we find that he has passed over from Macedonia to where he had been called by the man in the vision, and he has moved from Macedonia to Achaia, and particularly to no less a city than Athens. And that is where we find Paul in verse 16 of Acts chapter 17. And what is he doing? What is he doing as we find him there in Athens for the first time? Well, we can read the verse there. Verse 16 of Acts chapter 17. We read, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens. He's waiting. What's he waiting for? Well, we're told. We're told very specifically what he is waiting for. He is waiting for the arrival of Silas and Timothy. His companions who are mentioned there in verse 15, Paul leaves them and heads alone, or in any case accompanied by brethren from Berea, but left alone in Athens. Silas and Timothy will rejoin him at some point, and he is waiting for that. Why they split up isn't explicitly mentioned. It may have been in the context of the persecution for security reasons that Paul went first alone, and then subsequently

Silas and Timothy. That's a very reasonable explanation. It may have been that Paul was concerned about leaving the new believers in Berea unattended, and if he and Silas and Timothy had all left in a rather sudden way, that would have been unhelpful for the church that was just beginning, just being born there in Berea. Whatever the reasons, Paul in Athens is waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. That is the specific reason that we're told very clearly there in verse 16. Perhaps more generally, and we can't state this with absolute confidence, but it may be the case that Paul was also waiting for the opportunity to return to Macedonia. This was, after all, certainly from Paul's perspective, an unplanned diversion. Clearly it was planned by God, but it hadn't been in Paul's agenda this trip to Athens. And so maybe there was in Paul this sense that, well, once things quietened down, in Berea, once the Jews who have been persecuting or in any case chasing us or returned to

Thessalonica, then maybe we'd be able to return to Macedonia. We don't know if that may have been a part of his thinking. But Paul, in any case, is waiting. And what does he do as he waits? Now, given the very brief presentation of the context in which Paul finds himself in Athens, they've been persecuted in Macedonia, and so he is forced to make this journey to Athens, given that and bearing that in mind, you might have expected that the prudent thing to do for Paul in the circumstances would have been to lie low and maybe enjoy for a brief spell the safety of anonymity.

In Macedonia, he'd been preaching the gospel, he'd been going out of his way to share with others the good news, and that is what had brought him all his trouble. And so here, would it not have been wise, would it not have been justifiable to lie low and see how things developed? But Paul knows nothing of just waiting. He is waiting, but he knows nothing of just waiting. What does he do while he waits? Well, we can say three things that we want to notice this morning. First of all, he gets to know Athens. Here he is in Athens, as far as we know, and it's entirely reasonable to presume for the very first time, what does he do?

[6 : 42] Here in Athens. He gets to know Athens. That's the first thing we want to notice. Secondly, he gets seriously worked up in Athens, and we'll explain what we mean by that, in what way we can describe Paul as getting seriously worked up. The language probably isn't adequate. And then thirdly, he gets on with the work of telling Athens, the people who live in Athens, about Jesus. While he waits, he gets to know the city, he gets seriously worked up in the city, and he gets on with the work, with the task of telling the people of the city about Jesus. I think of each of these in turn.

First of all, he gets to know Athens. Again, if we just notice in verse 16 what is stated there, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens. He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Paul, we might say, goes sightseeing. He wanders around the city. He sees all that there is there to see and to admire and to be impressed by, and it was a very impressive city. He acquaints himself with the city. He has this time. He's waiting for Silas and Timothy. And so, no doubt, having secured lodgings of one kind or another, he then wanders around the city to see what he can see.

And what does he find? Well, he himself highlights for us that which most impressed him, not in a positive way, but nonetheless in a literal way, what most impressed him.

He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. The word that is used here is a word that could be translated that the city was swamped with idols, was overrun with idols. The language has its intention to demonstrate just how many idols there were, that this was a city that as I say, was swamped or overrun with idols. One Roman writer is said to have affirmed that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Now, no doubt there's an element of hyperbole or exaggeration, but it conveys the idea. This was a feature of this great city, the multitude of false gods, of idols, that there were statues of one kind or another to a multiplicity of gods.

Again, those who have studied these matters and the archaeology of the city tell us that in the Parthenon there was a gold and ivory statue of Athena holding a spear, and the point of that spear was visible, presumably on a clear day, 40 miles from Athens. A very impressive sight by any measure.

[10 : 00] So, Paul, of all the things that he sees, and no doubt there were many things that he saw that were worthy of note and indeed even of admiration, he is drawn to this one thing, this one thing that occupied the attention and loyalty of the Athenians, and that is the idols. They're idols. They're gods.

What Paul is doing here isn't sightseeing at all. Not that there's anything wrong with sightseeing, but that's not his primary concern. What Paul is doing here is what you might call a spiritual audit.

He is determining the spiritual condition of that city. What he is doing is establishing who it is that the people of that city worship. He is trying to determine by going through and seeing what he sees what it is that they live for. You see, Paul was bringing to Athens, as he brought to every town or city that he visited. Paul was bringing another king, another king, one called Jesus. And if he was to present this other king, he had to know, first of all, who were the usurpers that needed to be displaced?

Who were the monarchs who had the loyalty of the people of that town? To whom the people were subject that needed to be removed? To come and simply say, well, I'm going to tell you about Jesus with no concept or no concern for or no understanding of who currently enjoyed the loyalty and affections of the people. And so, Paul gets to know the city and discovers that it was full of idols, and indeed, begins to have an understanding of the people themselves and who they are loyal to.

Now, that's what Paul did in Athens. He got to know the city. But the application for ourselves is an entirely reasonable one and an obvious one. What about the city where God has placed us? What about the city of Aberdeen? What about the nation of Scotland where God has placed us? Are we acquainted with Aberdeen? What are those things that are most important in the lives of those who live in this city? And we must include ourselves in that question. Who or what are the idols that enjoy the loyalty and occupy the affections of those who surround us? Is something, or is this

something, that we are aware of? Are we oblivious to that? Or, like Paul, are we able to discern spiritually who or what are these idols, these usurpers who are taking the place that is due only to King Jesus?

[13:23] Well, what do you see? What do we see as we look around our city? We maybe see the thousands of students at our universities and colleges. What are they motivated by? There's no one answer to that question. We see the gleaming office buildings where behind the glittering exterior men and women scramble up or sometimes stumble down the professional ladder. What makes them tick? Who are their idols?

On Saturday and Sunday morning, and indeed on other mornings, we can see thousands heading to the temple complex that is Union Square and other such locations. In terms of the nighttime economy at the weekend, we can see scantily clad girls and suitably lubricated young men make their way down to Union Street for a good time on that weekend that they'd been waiting for so anxiously. We move to the suburbs, and we see life revolving around securing and looking after the toys sought by children and adults alike.

Different toys, but toys all the same. What do we see? No doubt so much more could be said. And this task with Paul of acquainting ourselves with the city where we live, establishing with Paul who are or what are the idols who occupy the attentions and the loyalties of those who live here, is a task for all of us to be engaged in. What do we see? Paul needed to know what made the Athenians tick, what their lives and affections were given over to or revolved around, and we also need to know. We need to know if we can bring into the discussion, as it were, what we've been considering in the evenings. We need to know in what way the first and second commandments are being broken in Aberdeen. We need to know what are the idols of our city. Idols that we are not called to smash, but rather to replace by the one, the one who alone is worthy of the loyalty and the love of all. That's the first thing Paul does as he waits in Athens. He gets acquainted with the city.

We must do the same. But the second thing that he does is that he gets seriously worked up in Athens, and that's in the same verse, verse 16, that we have that described. While Paul was waiting for them, waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

What is the outcome of this tour of Athens? Does Paul, having walked through the city, send a postcard to Silas and Timothy, telling them how awesome Athens is, and telling them to come on down and join him in this wonderful city that he is discovering? No, he doesn't do that. The way he responds to what he sees, well, we're told he is greatly distressed. Now, this clearly is Paul himself describing his response. He is alone at this point. There's nobody observing him. He clearly had to share this with Luke in order for us to have it here in front of us. Paul himself says, this is how I felt.

[17:06] This is my response. This is how I responded to what I saw, to this multiplicity of idols swamping the city of Athens. I was greatly distressed. Some translations use the word anger. He was angered. He was greatly distressed by what he saw. Indeed, the Greek word that is used here, the verb *paroxino*, is the verb where we have the English word *paroxysm*, as in that related to a fit or a seizure of some kind. And the idea of the word, so it would appear, is to get across the sense of deep indignation. This isn't simply Paul irritated by what he saw. You know, this is a monotheistic Jew, and he sees all these idols, and he's just uncomfortable with it. It just doesn't go down well with it, and he's just mildly irritated. That is not the idea. The idea, rightly translated or rightly got across by the version we have, is of great distress, of deep indignation. It's also true that the manner in which it is expressed for us, suggests not some immediate response or some temper tantrum that he then gets over, but rather what is described here is his settled reaction to what he sees before him. No doubt when he first saw what he saw, it was distressing. But even as he continues in the city, even as he considers what he's seeing, he doesn't get used to it. He doesn't say, oh, well, you know, that's just the way things are. He is deeply distressed by what he sees. Indeed, to help us a little more to understand Paul's reaction, why he is so worked up, it's helpful to notice that this word, this verb translated distressed there in verse 16, or greatly distressed rather, is also the word that is used in the Old Testament. Well, the Greek word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in the Septuagint to describe God's reaction to idolatry. Indeed, we have read already this morning in Isaiah chapter 65, and we can just make reference to that again, that passage that we read.

And particularly in verse 3, the people are described as provoking God to His very face, a people who continually provoke me to my very face. And there, the word translated provoke is exactly the

same verb as we have here in Acts chapter 17. God's response to idolatry is one of deep distress and of deep indignation, that there would be those who would wrongly usurp the place that only He is due. The verb then describes the proper and the right reaction, the fitting reaction to idolatry. It speaks of a jealousy that there ought to be, the jealousy that there is in God, as He considers idolatry, and a jealousy that there ought to be in God's people, as they are witnesses of idolatry and the place that idols are occupying that God ought to occupy.

A holy jealousy, a right and dignified jealousy, a resentment of illegitimate rivals, of usurpers. This is God's reaction to idolatry. It is Paul's reaction, and it ought also to be our reaction.

Paul's distress, his deep distress, is not due to some character fault in Paul. It's not due to bad temper. It's not due to some religious intolerance that he was guilty of. It's not due even to a sense of pity for the ignorance of these pagan people. It's not even, his distress is not even in the first instance, or at least the distress that is described here, is not due to a concern for the eternal destiny of the Athenians, though no doubt he was concerned for their eternal destiny. But his distress, as it is presented to us here, is because the Lord is being denied the worship that He is due.

His distress is because the Lord is not being recognized for who He is. He is indignant because idols are usurping the place due to God, due to God's Son, Jesus, alone. This is the motivation. This is the reason for his distress. This is why Paul gets so worked up in Athens. His abhorrence of idolatry and the deep distress it provokes him is born of his jealous concern for the name of God.

[22 : 16] This is his motivation. This is the explanation, but it also serves as his motivation for what he goes on to do, which we're going to be noticing just in a brief moment. Well, that was true of Paul. What about you? What about me? What about us? What distresses you? Does anything distress you? We can sometimes create, what might we say, a barrier around us that helps us not to be distressed by anything because we don't like being distressed. It's uncomfortable to be distressed. But sometimes we ought to be distressed as Paul was distressed. How do we feel as we look on at the idolatry that there is in our city? Do we look on indifferently or do we look on in the manner or respond in the manner that Paul does? This has a great deal to do and a great deal to say and to inform as concerns our motivation for mission, which is precisely what Paul goes on to do as he is confronted with this city swamped with idols. What is your motivation for mission, for evangelism, for telling people about

Jesus? Is it obedience? Well, it certainly ought to be, and that is a worthy motivation. Is it compassion for the lost? Well, that is also a very worthy and right motivation. But is it also jealousy for the glory of Christ? This is a fundamental motivation. Jealousy for the glory of Christ. This is what, in the first instance, drives Paul. I think we can probably say over and above these others, though perhaps we don't need to establish a hierarchy, but recognize that all these motivations together are to be considered and are to have their proper place. Henry Martin, who was a pioneer missionary to Persia, what today we know as Iran at the beginning of the 19th century, evidently shared Paul's motivation concerning a jealousy for the glory of Christ. He is quoted as saying, I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were to be always dishonored. And so he went to those who were worshiping other gods that they might be freed and liberated from that slavery. Well, returning to Paul, all of this, acquainting himself with the city, getting worked up and angered by what he saw in the city, all while he was waiting. But that is not where it ends. Paul also acts. He gets on with the work of telling Athens about Jesus. There in verse 17, so he reasoned in the synagogue. In the light of what he sees, in the light of the city swamped by idols, what can he do? Can he lament only? Can he run away to a more comfortable location? No. In the light of what he sees, there is something he must do. He must tell these people who are worshiping other gods, who are bowing down before usurping monarchs. He must tell them about Jesus, another king, one called Jesus. His reaction is not only negative in the sense of anger and indignation, and I don't use the word negative there pejoratively. It's not only one of a negative response because it is bad, that is right and proper that there should be that, but it's also positive in the sense of what he does, and he witnesses to these people. He shares with them the good news, to be indignant. Maybe in a measure we can know something of the indignation that Paul experiences, though I suspect only in a very small measure, but it would be possible perhaps to know something of that indignation. Maybe as we look around our society and we say, oh, isn't it terrible the way standards are slipping and the way people live and the way morals have been abandoned and and nobody goes to church and the Lord's day is desecrated and we could go on

and have this long list and lament these terrible things that are going on. But to only be indignant, to only be distressed and do nothing, it just all becomes very shallow. It all becomes very hypocritical. Or perhaps what also could happen is that it simply leads us to despair and hopelessness. What can we do? It's a day of small things and, well, what can we do? Wait for better times. But Paul isn't content to just wait. He does something. He tells the people of this city about Jesus. Now, for the moment, our concern very briefly is simply to notice who he tells and where he tells them. The message that he brings, that will occupy us on another occasion. Well, this morning we're not going to think at all about the message that more than justifies being treated on its own. For the moment, just to notice that he tells the people who he tells and where he tells them. Well, we have that even in these two or three verses at the beginning of this section. In verse 17, so he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-feeding Greeks, as was his custom. He began in the synagogue with the Jews, with those who were sympathetic with the monotheism of the Jews.

[27 : 58] If we could establish a parallel, though there is no exact parallel, we might say something along the lines of our Sunday church services. In that space, as it were, Paul sought out the opportunity to tell people about Jesus. But he's not content simply to leave it there. We're told in the same verse 17, as well as in the marketplace day by day. In the marketplace, where he could go out and look for people, not only the people who wanted to hear, not only the people who were willing to gather to hear a rabbi speak about the Bible, and not only such, but he would deliberately and proactively go out and look for people to speak to in the marketplace. The application there is so evident that it doesn't need to be dwelt on at any length. Not sufficient for us, as we would tell this city about another king called Jesus, to wait for people to come here. We could be waiting till the cows come home, and most won't come here. With Paul, we need to go out to the marketplace, go out into the streets, go out to where the people are, to seek opportunities, to bring the good news concerning Jesus to the city, to go out into the city. That is what Paul does. He simply doesn't lament the idolatry.

He says, I want to change these people. I want to show them a better way. And so he goes out into the market. And then we're told of another location. In verse 18, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them said, who is this babbler trying to say? Or what is this babbler trying to say? And then it goes on, rather, in verse 19, then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus. And again, without going into the details of that location and what went on there, the practical point to make is simply this, that that invitation would not even have happened had Paul not gone to the marketplace and engaged the people where they were. As a result of that, as a result of his boldness, as it were, as a result of his creativity in seeking out the people to speak to, that then generates an interest. And so they invite him to somewhere he could never have gone just of his own initiative. He had to go by invitation. But the invitation is given to him because he is already involved in the marketplace, in the public square where the people are. And again, I think the application of that is one that we're all perfectly capable of working out for ourselves. This is what Paul does. He acquaints himself with this city where God has placed him. He knows what makes the people tick. He knows who their idols are. He knows who it is that is taking the place, or who they are who take the place of King Jesus. He is distressed by that. He is deeply distressed by that. And driven by a jealousy for the name of Jesus Christ. He goes out and tells this city about Jesus. And he goes out and finds people. He goes out into the marketplace to tell them concerning this king called Jesus. What he says, as I've already commented, we'll think about on another occasion. But all of this, all of this, while Paul was waiting. Was it worth his trouble doing what he did?

Well, if we fast forward to verse 34, we're given an answer to that question. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. And then it goes on to describe one or two of them. Sometimes it's said that Paul's Paul's experience in Athens was a failure. That this endeavor to meet the philosophers on their own terms, as it were, with the message that he brings that we haven't thought about, that we'll think about on another occasion, was a failure. Well, that seems quite an unwarranted conclusion, given that God was pleased to bless this man, this man that he had sent to Athens, this man who, driven by a passion for the name of the Lord and for the honor of the Lord, went out into that city to speak concerning Jesus, that God would help us do the same in the city where he has placed us. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you and we confess that we are often indifferent, unmoved by what we see around us, by the idolatry that there is, indeed,

the idolatry in our own hearts. But also, as we look around us and see the idolatry that there is in our city, we have become familiar with it. We are used to it. We have been vaccinated against it in some kind of way. And we can go about our business and do what we have to do, unmoved and often unconcerned. And for this, we seek your forgiveness. But we pray also that by your Spirit, you would awaken us and grant us that spiritual insight and discernment, that we might look around us and see where we are and see where we're at, and that there would be, with Paul, that deep distress, a distress that does not result in hopelessness or simply a rejection of others, but rather a distress that would drive us and motivate us to tell the good news concerning Jesus Christ. In this, we ask your help, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.