

Acts 17:22-31 The Grace of God Be with You
May 10, 2026

The next time I drive to Denver to see my son and his family, I am going to take Hwy. 36 all the way from Delaware. I have done this before for about the first half of the trip. Once I get past Indianapolis, it means I will miss Terre Haute, Effingham, St. Louis, Columbia, Kansas City, Topeka, and Limon, to take a more northerly route.

Instead there will be Crawfordsville in Indiana, Champaign/Urbana, and Springfield in Illinois, Hannibal, Macon. There is where the second half begins with St. Joseph, and then a litany of little towns in Kansas, the names of which I do not know. It is the Kansas part of the journey will be a little foreign to me.

But only a little. It is hard for me to imagine embarking on a similar journey in South America, or Siberia, or China, where I would meet languages and customs much more foreign, and people that might be difficult and uncomfortable to engage.

There are actually some people in the world for whom such a situation is invigorating, the more exotic a place, the more they feel at home. All the while, journeys home only make them restless, as if they are more at home on the road and more on the road at home.

It strikes me that Paul may have been in the latter category. His travels were wide and diverse for a

person of his day. Most people who did not serve a stint in the military or the merchant marine did not stray too far from home.

My understanding of Paul, is that he should have been more at home in Asia than in Europe and more well adapted to a city like Ephesus than say Thessalonica, Corinth, *or Athens*.

Athens was, of course, the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the philosophical founders of western civilization, whose reflections about the nature of the world and humanity are still with us. Even in Paul's day they were in the historical past.

Athens itself had declined as a political center, but retained a robust culture that involved esoteric conversations that many people would have been too immersed in the practical demands of their lives to care much about. Paul's interaction with them is among the most interesting in the bible.

There was a marketplace of ideas where if a thought was possible, somebody will have thought it. It is there that Paul finds a statue dedicated to an unknown God. It is hard to know if it is to God, who is unknown, and perhaps unknowable; or to a particular deity the name of which they simply did not know, but wanted to acknowledge just in case.

Either way, Paul took advantage of the statue and used the reference to speak of the Jewish understanding of God, and *that* in terms of Jesus

Christ. He spoke of the Resurrection of Jesus and of God as the one, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being.”

The latter sounds a little like the Star Wars idea of the Force, “a mystical, all encompassing energy field created by all living things, that binds the galaxy together.” The Resurrection of the Dead would have been strange to Greek ears, would conflict with Plato’s idea of the Immortality of the Soul.

If one had escaped the physical body with all of its limitations, why would anyone want to enter again into a body, even if it was a changed one? They said they would hear again from him about that one.

This text has been praised as an example at least of a creative way to address people who come from a different culture and speak a different language, and have different religious ideas. It is *that* to be sure. I am not sure it would be the same today, because we live in a world that has had 2,000 years of biblical thought and Christian interpretation stamped on it.

What is interesting to me is that when I read this text, I don’t think of it as a clever and creative evangelistic strategy. I think of it as a statement about God’s nature, about what theologians call the, “omnipresence of God.”

This omnipresence is not meant to convey the idea that God is everything. That is called, “pantheism.” It does not mean that God is, “in everything.” That is

called, “panentheism.” But it does mean that Creation reflects God’s presence and Lordship.

It means that we are surrounded by God’s presence and protected by the indwelling of God’s Spirit, no matter where we are or what is happening, and that the life in which we have our being is God’s life. It tells us that God is very near to us all the time.

The idea that sounds like, “may the Force be with you,” would be an appropriate farewell, might have made sense to the people in Athens, and it might make some sense to us. But after some reflection we might realize that it falls into a bit of a conflict with the biblical ideas of Creation and Providence, and Incarnation, and Resurrection, and other biblical doctrines.

The chief difference between the biblical God and this unknown God, and whatever is meant by the Force, is that the biblical God is a person, and is personal. God is not an energy field or general sense all around us and in us.

It may not be quite correct to say that God is a person like us, perhaps that we are persons like God, or in God’s likeness, would be a better way of saying it. We not only experience God as a presence some of the time, but as a *personal being*.

Sometimes the people we meet on journeys surprise us because when they are unknown to us, they can raise our anxiety level because we don’t know what to

expect from them or if we can have successful encounters, but once we meet them, have an experience of understanding them and of them understanding us, there is a miracle of meeting that can take place.

The great question of the Age regards the possibility that a person can have such a meeting with God.

Today is itself the celebration of an encounter. It is called, "Mother's Day," but it is not impersonal, because each of us has a personal relationship in mind, of our own moms, but also of all those who have served as moms to us, perhaps at a crucial time in our lives.

And it has been the testimony of believers for thousands of years that their experience of God *has been personal*. I suppose that on this day it is appropriate to say that we have met God as Mother, as well as Father, and there are descriptions of God as giving and seeking to give a mother's care to each of us, like when Jesus spoke of God as being like a hen gathering her chicks under her wing.

But there is no more personal way of relating to God than in our relation to Jesus. He came and lived among a certain group of people; he taught them, and led them, spoke to them of divine things, such as the Peace of God, and the Grace of God. He gave them stories to tell and remarkable experiences that sometimes, as we say, took them out of their comfort

zones, as I might be in some little Kansas town, as Paul was in Athens.

And then in a way that surprised them so much that they did not understand it even as it was happening before them, *he died for them*, and when they came out on the other side of that experience, they proclaimed it as an revelation of God; it was a great forgiveness, a resurrection not only for Jesus but for all those who trust in him, it was a triumph of love and goodness in a world often deprived of such things.

It was a demonstration of God's Grace. In other words, *God is not unknown to us, for God has made himself known in Christ Jesus*. That was what Paul was offering the folks in Athens. That is what the gospel offers to us.

If one does a quick survey of the epistles of the New Testament, the greeting at the beginning is nearly always, "grace and peace to you," and at the end, "the Grace of God be with you all." That sounds about right. I will leave you with the way Paul concludes 2nd Corinthians, just as an example;

"May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all."

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