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Agnostics in Antioch

Text: Acts 13:13-41

This is not a snippet, a sermonette, or a sound byte. In fact, this is the only full-length sermon preached by Paul that we have on record.

**The setting:**

Antioch in Pisidia - the chief town in South Galatia;

The synagogue on the sabbath- this was Paul’s custom (17:2)

**The audience:**

Men of Israel

You who fear God

The message is similar to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:14-39. Both sermons are an overview of what God His done in history.

An overview of Israel’s history:

* Israel as chosen (v. 17)
* Israel lives as nomads and strangers in Egypt for 40 years (v.17)
* God gives Israel judges (v. 20)
* Israel gets Saul for 40 years (v.21)
* Israel gets a king (David) (v.22)
* God send Jesus and John the baptizer (v.24)
* God sent the word of salvation (v. 26)
* Jesus died (v. 28)
* Jesus rose again (v. 30-37). Paul strategically includes references that would pique the interest of a Jewish audience (Psalm 2[v.33]; Moses [v.39]).

**Illus.**

William Barclay, in his commentary on the book of Acts, tells the story of a little girl who, hearing the howling winds declared, “God must have lost grip of His winds tonight”. Then Barclay writes, “The Resurrection is the proof that God never loses grip, that in the end His purpose and His will reign supreme”.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The gospel is clearly presented:

1. Through Jesus the Christ, forgiveness of sin is made available (v.38).
2. The grace of Jesus, by which sinners are justified, is superior to the law of Moses (v.39).
3. Unbelief and agnosticism (literally, *without knowing*) are always around. The risk of not believing the clear message is high (v. 41, 44-46)

We, the 21st century colleagues and fellow proclaimers with Paul, will encounter agnosticism at every turn. That ought not stop us. We have been commissioned, sent, appointed, anointed. As Paul met resistance in Antioch, we shall meet resistance in Atlanta, in Stone Mountain, in New York City, in Nairobi, in Abu Dhabi.

I close with three provocative quotes:

“I do not consider it an insult, but rather a compliment to be called an **agnostic**. I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure — that is all that agnosticism means.”

― Clarence Darrow (Lawyer in the Scopes “Monkey” trial;1857-1938)

“A totally nondenominational prayer: Insofar as I may be heard by anything, which may or may not care what I say, I ask, if it matters, that I be forgiven for anything I may have done or failed to do which requires forgiveness.  Conversely, if not forgiveness but something else may be required to ensure any possible benefit for which I may be eligible after the destruction of my body, I ask that this, whatever it may be, be granted or withheld, as the case may be, in such a manner as to ensure said benefit. I ask this in my capacity as your elected intermediary between yourself and that which may not be yourself, but which may have an interest in the matter of your receiving as much as it is possible for you to receive of this thing, and which may in some way be influenced by this ceremony. Amen.”

― Roger Zelazny, [Creatures of Light and Darkness](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2548393) (Poet and writer of fantasy and science fiction; 1937-1995)

“We all ought to understand we're on our own. Believing in Santa Claus doesn't do kids any harm for a few years, but it isn't smart for them to continue waiting all their lives for him to come down the chimney with something wonderful. Santa Claus and God are cousins.”

― Andy Rooney, [Sincerely, Andy Rooney](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/170268) (Radio and television writer;1919-2011)

Beloved, we are not on our own and we do not proclaim a God who is cousin to Santa. No, we proclaim, with confidence, the One whom Paul preached; the One who sent Jesus to take on Himself our sins; the One who raised Jesus from the dead and in so doing, made a statement about His power over death. This is the One we preach, we teach, we present. Beloved, there are two qualities of Paul’s sermon that made it notable:

1. It was **clear**
2. It was **comprehensive**

3. I could add a third. Paul’s sermon was passionately delivered.

If you desire a third “c” for a neat outline, Paul’s preaching was **clear**, **comprehensive** and **compelling**.

Dr. Francis Collins, of the National Institutes of Health, on his journey from atheism to faith:

So it was really as a medical student, and later as a resident, encountering the realities of what disease and the specter of death does to human beings, that I began to wonder about this. Some of my patients were clearly relying very heavily on their faith as a source of strength in circumstances that were pretty awful. They had terrible diseases from which they were probably not going to escape, and yet instead of railing at God, they seemed to lean on their faith as a source of great comfort and reassurance. They weren't, somehow, perceiving it as the really awful thing that it seemed to me to be. And that was interesting and puzzling and unsettling.

As I began to ask a few questions of those people, I realized something very fundamental: I had made a decision to reject any faith view of the world without ever really knowing what it was that I had rejected. And that worried me. As a scientist, you're not supposed to make decisions without the data. It was pretty clear I hadn't done any data collecting here about what these faiths stood for.

Now, I was still pretty sure that faith traditions were all superstition and something that would not apply to me, and something that I wouldn't be interested in. But I did feel compelled to find out a bit more about what it was that I had rejected. So, with an intention of shooting this all down, I went to speak to a Methodist minister in Chapel Hill, which is where I was at the time. I sat in his office and made all sorts of accusations, and probably said blasphemous things about the faith that he stood for, but sincerely asked him to help me find out what it was all about. And he was very tolerant and patient and listened and suggested that, for starters, it might be good if I read a little bit more about what these faiths stood for. And perhaps the Bible would be a good place to start. I wasn't so interested in that at that point. But he also said, "You know, your story reminds me a little bit of somebody else who has written about his experience — that Oxford scholar, C.S. Lewis."

I had no idea, really, who Lewis was. The idea that he was a scholar, though, that appealed to my intellectual pride. Maybe somebody with that kind of a title would be able to write something that I could understand and appreciate.

So this wonderful minister gave me his own copy of [Mere Christianity](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/ownwords/mere1.html), Lewis's slim tome that outlines the arguments leading to his conclusion that God is not only a possibility, but a plausibility. That the rational man would be more likely, upon studying the facts, to conclude that choosing to believe is the appropriate choice, as opposed to choosing not to believe.

Dr. Collins moved from atheism/agnosticism to vibrant faith. How about you??

Amen

1. William Barclay. *The Acts of the Apostles*. P. 112 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)