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Acts chapter 17

17So 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. **18**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.

19And 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.”

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

22So 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. **24**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. **26**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.’

29Being 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.

30The 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.”

Acts 17:16

ESV

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.

What does Acts 17:16 mean? For the first time in a long while, Paul is alone. He left Luke in Philippi and Silas and Timothy in Berea. He doesn't need an entourage to teach, however. He starts in the synagogue, branches out into the marketplace, and receives a cordial invitation to share in the Areopagus. First, he tours the city.

He is used to idols, monuments, and temples. Non-Jewish cities were filled with them. Most homes had a family idol that sat on a shelf, waiting a daily offering of grain in return for guarding the household. Each city had an array of civil gods that promised to bring fortune and safety if worshiped properly. And there were the national gods, not least the emperor, that had to be placated to ward off famine, plague, and infertility.

Still, Paul finds Athens' array of gods overwhelming. As a Roman citizen, he understands, but as a Jew, he's horrified. It was because of idolatry that God condemned the Jews to seventy years of exile in Babylon. Since then, Jews have made a slightly better attempt to follow God and the Mosaic law. Persia destroyed Babylon, and Greece destroyed Persia, but Greece never learned that God dictates their victories and downfall. Though controlled by Rome, Athens is still respected as the cradle of classical civilization. Rome allows it to be a free and allied city within the Empire, but it's 500 years past its prime. Rome has over a million residents, Paul's home base of Syrian Antioch has around 400,000, and Jerusalem 80,000, but Athens has only 30,000. Even the altar "To the unknown god" (Acts 17:23) could not save the great city.

When he arrived in Athens, Paul asked his escort to tell Timothy and Silas to come to him as quickly as possible. He will change his mind, sending Timothy to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:1–6) while Silas either stays in Berea or goes on another errand. They won't join Paul until he is settled in Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:6). Until then, Paul has work to do. "Provoked" is from the Greek root word *paroxuna* from which we get the word paroxysm. It can mean to become angry or exasperated, but it can also mean to stimulate to action. The

rampant idolatry in Athens convicts and moves Paul to share the story of the one God who can save.

Context Summary

Acts 17:16–21 records Paul's interactions with the Greek philosophers in Athens. First, he teaches in the synagogue that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. He takes a similar message to the Agora where the Stoics and Epicureans hear and invite him to the Areopagus. Paul uses their own poets to speak of their mutual Creator God. When Paul mentions the resurrection of the dead, however, they lose interest. They have no problem worshipping so many deities that it requires a monument to "the unknown god," but the idea any god could raise the dead is unthinkable.

Acts 17:17

ESV

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.

What does Acts 17:17 mean? Paul is alone in Athens. Silas and Timothy are in Berea (Acts 17:14) and they left Luke in Philippi (Acts 17:1). Every non-Jewish city Paul has traveled to in his missionary journeys has had idols and temples, but Athens is overwhelming. Where most cities in the Roman Empire have a selection of civil gods to watch over the city, Athens seems to have collected them all—plus one, just in case (Acts 17:23). The more Paul sees, the more he feels driven to share about the true God—the only one who can save (Acts 17:16).

Fortunately, Athens is not completely foreign: there is a synagogue. Paul always starts in the synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:13–41; 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:4; 19:8), when there is one to be found (Acts 16:13), because the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there have a baseline of understanding. Paul starts with the Psalms of David and the covenant God made that David would have an heir that will sit on the throne forever. He goes on to show how prophecy predicts that this heir—the Messiah—will die and rise again (Acts 13:16–41). Paul then shows how Jesus of Nazareth fulfills this prophecy: Jesus is the Messiah.

Undoubtedly, Paul also preaches in public during his different stops, but the "marketplace" of Athens is notable. It is the Agora and not only holds various merchant stalls, but also space for people to gather in assembly. It is used by noblemen to conduct business, elected officials to decide government affairs,

philosophers to debate, and citizens to trade and watch entertainers. It's unclear if the people of Athens consider Paul to be a philosopher or an entertainer, but he does come to the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Intrigued by his teaching, and with no fear of a new God unauthorized by the Roman government, they invite him to speak at the Areopagus.

Acts 17:18

ESV

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.

What does Acts 17:18 mean? Like the slaveowners in Philippi (Acts 16:21), the philosophers in Athens notice that Paul is promoting worship of a deity that is not authorized by the Roman Empire. In *De Legibus*, ii. 8, Cicero says, "...let no one have private gods—neither new gods nor strange gods, unless publicly acknowledged, are to be worshipped privately..." Unlike the slaveowners, they don't have any reason to use this against Paul: they find it interesting.

The philosophers use the plural "divinities" because they think Paul is teaching a God of healing named "Jesus" and another god named "Resurrection." If they'd realized their error from the beginning, they wouldn't have paid Paul any mind. Epicureans believed in materialism and annihilationism: that there is no true supernatural and when a person dies there is no soul or spirit to resurrect. Stoics believed everything is material, including the soul, which is made of fire, and at death the soul returns to *logos*, the foundational law of the cosmos. Neither believed in a final judgment of wrong behavior.

Epicureans are wrongly accused of teaching hedonism. They did not teach that since humans cease to exist at death they should indulge in any pleasurable behavior while living. Rather, they sought to reach a state of ultimate peace and enjoy life without worrying too much. Gods are far away and unconcerned with us, they said, so don't worry about them—they don't even remember humans exist, and there is no judgment after death. A fulfilled life, in the mind of Epicureans, includes just enough food, just enough comforts, peaceful friendships, and balance in all things.

Stoics were also materialists but believed in the *logos*—the natural law of the cosmos. They thought that if one could align their expectations with the *logos*,

one could find fulfillment and avoid the disappointment that comes with striving against reality. Where Epicureans debated, Stoics meditated.

"Babbler" is from the Greek root word *spermologos*. Literally, it refers to a bird that picks up random seeds from the ground. Metaphorically, it refers to someone who wanders about the marketplace, picking up bits and pieces of different philosophies and mashing them together in an incohesive mess. Paul knows Greek philosophy, and it's possible that the philosophers know something of Judaism. This talk of resurrection and healing and sin, however, is too new; the classical philosophers don't see a cohesive framework yet.

Acts 17:19

ESV

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"

What does Acts 17:19 mean? Silas and Timothy are over 140 miles away from Paul, either in Berea or Thessalonica. This puts him in a precarious position. Paul has been breaking Roman law by promoting the worship of Jesus—a deity not authorized by the Roman Empire—in the Agora of Athens. Now, Greek philosophers "take" Paul to the Areopagus to explain what he is teaching.

"Took" is from the Greek root word *epilambanomai*. It means to take possession of or to seize in a violent way. The Areopagus is a hilltop where philosophers debate, but it's also where city officials hold trials for murder and crimes against public order. Legend says the first trial was against Ares for the murder of Poseidon's son—"Areopagus" is Greek for Ares's Hill; the Roman is Mars's Hill (more commonly, Mars Hill). Another trial, described 500 years before in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, was against Socrates for a similar crime as Paul: introducing foreign gods.

Fortunately, the philosophers have no ulterior motive. They think Paul's a "babbler"—someone who takes bits and pieces of different philosophies and combines them in a way that doesn't make sense (Acts 17:18). Specifically, they seem to think he has been teaching about two strange gods named "Healer" and "Resurrection."

Once Paul is allowed to speak, he provides an eloquent argument for the existence of Creator God. He even weaves in the words of classical poets. He moves on to explain this God is calling His creation to repent of their sins or else

be judged. God identified the judge by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:20–31).

Ironically, it's the most important part of Paul's message that saves him from the law—not because people think it's true but because they think it's ridiculous. Epicureans and Stoics do not believe in the supernatural. They believe people cease to exist at death because they have no soul or spirit that could return. Consequently, there is no judgment. A handful do continue to listen and accept Jesus' offer of salvation; the rest are convinced Paul is just a harmless babbling (Acts 17:32–34).

Acts 17:20

ESV

For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.”

What does Acts 17:20 mean? Paul is in Athens, alone. Jealous Jews from the synagogue in Thessalonica ran him out of Berea, even though the Berean Jews were willing to investigate his teaching about Jesus' fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah (Acts 17:10–15). Luke stayed in Philippi (Acts 17:1). Timothy is in Berea—or possibly Thessalonica (Acts 17:14; 1 Thessalonians 3:1–2). It's unclear where Silas is (Acts 17:14; 18:5).

Not being one to sit still, however, Paul has already shared about Jesus in the synagogue in Athens as well as the Agora. It was in the Agora that the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers found him and aggressively invited him to the Areopagus to share his beliefs. They think he's a babbling: someone who picks up bits and pieces of philosophy from the Agora and puts them together like a bird picks up seeds. Even though they don't expect much, they love to hear new, surprising worldviews (Acts 17:16–19, 21).

Paul's position is precarious. On the one hand, it is against Roman law to promote the worship of a foreign god. On the other hand, because of its cultural significance, Rome granted Athens the status of a free city. But on the third hand, the law against foreign deities is older than the Roman Empire. In 399 BC, Socrates had been tried and convicted on this same hill. Xenophon, in *Memorabilia*, described the charges: he "does evil, for he does not acknowledge the gods whom the state acknowledges, while introducing other, novel divine beings."

In the first century BC, the Roman statesman Cicero had outlined the Roman Empire's assertion of the law in *De Legibus*, ii. 8: "...let no one have private gods—neither new gods nor strange gods, unless publicly acknowledged, are to be worshipped privately..."

Fortunately, even though the philosophers have brought Paul to the court where the most serious crimes are tried—including, legend says, the trial of murder against Ares—they seem more curious than confrontational (Acts 17:21). They think Paul's wrong, but they don't persecute him.

Acts 17:21

ESV

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

What does Acts 17:21 mean? "Areopagus" is the name of a rock outcropping in Athens and the court that meets there. The court tried serious crimes such as murder and burning down olive trees. The rock is also known as "Mars Hill" because allegedly the first trial held was against Ares for the murder of Poseidon's son. "Areopagus" means "Ares's hill" and Mars is the Roman name for the Greek deity Ares.

The court also tried those charged with serious religious crimes. In 399 BC, Socrates was convicted of teaching his students to disrespect the Athenian gods and worship foreign gods. He was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock. About 350 years later, the Roman statesman Cicero, in *De Legibus*, ii. 8, wrote that worshipping unapproved gods was not permitted even in private.

Paul has no defense; he is clearly breaking the Roman law. He has already been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi for teaching the worship of Jesus (Acts 16:16–24). When he arrived in Athens, he started in the Jewish synagogue, but he also preached in the city marketplace—the Agora. It was in the Agora that the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers found him and demanded he come to the Areopagus to share his beliefs more formally (Acts 17:16–20).

Paul does not share Socrates' fate for several possible reasons. Socrates was teaching young students about the gods of the Spartans—the Athenians' enemy. Socrates was well known while Paul is a nobody in Greece. Athens had been the capital of the Greek Empire, but that was 200 years prior; now Athens is a free city within the Roman Empire. The Athenian philosophers are curious, but not threatened.

Perhaps most influential of all, the philosophers quickly dismiss Paul as a complete fool (Acts 17:32). Paul teaches that the Creator God raised His representative, Jesus, from the dead. Both Epicureans and Stoics are materialists, believing there is nothing but matter, and therefore no spirit. Epicureans are annihilationists, thinking people cease to exist at death. Stoics believe the soul returns to the unifying law of the cosmos. Either way, both resurrection and final judgment are impossible in their worldviews. But Paul is also very clever. There is an altar inscribed "To an unknown god." Paul merely compares this "god" to the Creator God he worships (Acts 17:23–24).

Some of Paul's audience do believe him (Acts 17:34). Those who don't seem to leave him alone. This is unusual compared to Paul's prior experiences.

Context Summary

Acts 17:22–34 contains the second of two sermons which Luke records from Paul. The more typical sermon explains to synagogues how Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 13:16–41). Here, however, Paul is speaking to a group of Athenian philosophers. Paul uses lines from classical poets to introduce the Creator God who cannot be represented by an idol. He calls his audience to repent of their idolatry lest they face judgment by the representative God has resurrected. But they don't believe in the resurrection of the dead or final judgment. The majority dismiss Paul as a fool and go on their way.

Acts 17:22

ESV

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

What does Acts 17:22 mean? Athens is the site of a court called the *Areopagus* on the top of a rock outcropping. Paul has been aggressively invited to share his religious views there, by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who heard him preaching in the Agora. We only have recordings of two of Paul's sermons. In Acts 13, he is in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, surrounded by Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who are dedicated to studying the Jewish Scriptures—our Old Testament—including the prophecies. He moves quickly through Jewish history to David and God's covenant that the Messiah would come through David's line. He then reminds them that John the Baptist identified the Messiah as Jesus of

Nazareth. The crux of his message is that the prophets—including David—said that the Messiah would die and be raised again, as Jesus was (Acts 13:16–41).

The Athenian philosophers likely know little about Jewish prophecy and have no interest in this Messiah, so Paul uses what they do know. When he arrived, he noticed the city was filled with idols (Acts 17:16)—so many they had an altar to an unknown god, just in case they missed somebody (Acts 17:23). Paul quickly dismisses the pantheon and shows how the classical poets recognize a single Creator God. Paul branches from this point of contact to say the Creator God has a representative who will judge the dead and who Himself died and rose again (Acts 17:21–31).

"Very religious" is from the Greek root word *deisidaimōn* which can mean pious or superstitious. He is literally talking about all the idols, but Paul is not above being a little sarcastic. His words might be a slight since Stoics were very logical and Epicureans were likely actually atheists. It was also against form to flatter one's audience at the Areopagus to win approval of an argument.

Some scholars say Paul's decision to try to reach the people through their own culture instead of presenting a clear gospel message is why only a handful of people believe (Acts 17:34). They say Paul realizes his mistake and when he reaches Corinth preaches only "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1–2) as a result. Others say he is being missional by directly addressing the evil in the culture—idolatry—and that without his culture-spanning approach, even fewer would have responded.

Acts 17:23

ESV

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.

What does Acts 17:23 mean? Paul is speaking to Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in the Areopagus. "Areopagus" means "Ares's hill"; it is the court where myths claimed the war god Ares was tried for killing the son of Poseidon. It's also the hill where Socrates was tried and convicted to death for promoting the worship of foreign gods. The Roman statesman Cicero insisted that even the private worship of a god not endorsed by the Roman Empire is illegal.

It is bad form to use flattery to convince one's audience instead of logic. So, brazenly using their own debate style against them, Paul insults these critics,

instead. When he arrived in Athens, he noticed the entire city was filled with idols (Acts 17:16). From the Areopagus, the people can see the temple of Hephaestus as well as the Parthenon: the temple of Athena. Paul starts by calling the philosophers "very religious," meaning, superstitious. The Stoics consider themselves to be the epitome of cold logic, and the Epicureans don't believe in the spirit world. They like to think adding an "unknown god" to their pantheon is judicious, not superstitious.

Paul has a purpose in using a blunt approach, however. He's not being brusque just to make others angry; by tying in the Jewish Creator God to the "unknown god," he asserts that he is *not* teaching a foreign deity. He goes on to identify his God as the Creator who is Lord of heaven and earth. As with all good debaters, he starts from a common point and leads his audience to his conclusion. The philosophers dismiss him when he says this God raised someone from the dead, but they have no reason to charge him with teaching the worship of a foreign god.

The origin of the altar to the unknown god is debated. Diogenes Laërtius wrote of a pestilence that threatened Athens. The people sacrificed to every god they could think of to no avail. When consulted, Epimenides said to let loose a flock of sheep around the Areopagus. Where they lie down, the people were to make an altar to the god they missed—the unknown god. An alternate explanation is that if a monument to a god was so worn it was no longer clear who the monument was for, it was inscribed "to an unknown god."

Acts 17:24

ESV

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,

What does Acts 17:24 mean? Paul is in the Areopagus in Athens, sharing the story of Jesus with Greek philosophers. He starts by pointing out an altar to "an unknown god" and compares this god to the God of the Jews. He can't start with an assumption of God and dive headfirst into history, as he does in synagogues, because the Athenians have a very different view of what "god" means—even the Epicureans and Stoics disagree. As in Lystra, Paul starts with God the Creator (Acts 14:15–17). Paul asserts that God can be known—to a degree—by His creation (Romans 1:19–23), but idolatry and sin cloud our view.

From the Areopagus, Paul can see the temple of Hephaestus, the Theatre of Dionysus, the Parthenon—the temple of Athena—the Sanctuary of Zeus, and

many other monuments and altars to the gods. "Areopagus" itself means the "hill of Ares." Despite all these monuments and temples, Paul's assertion is familiar to his audience of Greek philosophers. Euripides, in fragment 968, said, "What house built by craftsmen could enclose the form divine within enfolding walls?"

This agrees with Jewish Scripture. When Solomon dedicated his great temple, he said, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Jesus affirmed this when He told the woman at the well that a time was coming when people would worship God in spirit and truth, not in the temple (John 4:23–24).

Acts 17:25

ESV

nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

What does Acts 17:25 mean? Paul is in the Areopagus in Athens, expertly weaving together the local use of an altar to an unknown god to the true Creator God of the universe who, by the admission of Greek poets, made us and thus cannot be represented by idols. He starts by noting that a deity cannot be contained in a human-built structure (Acts 17:24), as Euripides admitted. He goes on to say the Creator God needs nothing from us because He created us, which philosophers Socrates, Seneca, and Lucian agreed with. Indeed, God sets the times and places for nations so that we might seek Him (Acts 17:26–27). The fact that He gives us our breath proves He is findable: He is near us (Acts 17:28).

If God cannot be contained in a temple made with human hands, and if He gives humans life and movement—if we are His offspring—He cannot be represented by idols made of gold, silver, and stone. To attempt to do so and then to worship those idols is not only futile, but also sin. God overlooks such idolatry done in ignorance, but now that they know the truth, they need to repent or face judgment (Acts 17:26–31).

Throughout history, mankind has developed systems of false gods that need something from us. Creation myths claim the gods made humans as slaves to work the earth. Fertility gods seemingly must be reminded every year how to bring life to crops and livestock. Even household idols get a daily offering of grain. The God of the Bible is not so needy. Yes, He is mighty and worthy to be

praised. But He is also the gracious Father who provides gifts for His children (Matthew 7:11). We serve Him out of love and thankfulness, not because He *needs* anything from us.

Acts 17:26

ESV

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,

What does Acts 17:26 mean? Paul knows that when sharing the gospel, it's helpful to start from a common point of view. In Athens, surrounded by temples, monuments, altars, and idols, Paul finds an altar dedicated to "the unknown god." He uses this "god" as an illustration of the God who created the world and everything and everyone in it. This God is so great, He cannot be contained by human-made structures like temples. He is our Creator, and we can do nothing for Him. He even orchestrated our lifetimes and places—individually and as people-groups—with the purpose of inviting us to look for Him (Acts 17:22–25).

Even the Greek poets believe He created us and gives us life—how could His creation think He could be represented by an idol? To think so is ignorance that God fortunately overlooked. Now, however, is time to face the truth. It is wrong that we try to confine God in buildings and idols, and He will judge us for it. In fact, He has already identified His judge by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:29–31).

Paul's strategy is good, but he must know it will largely fail. The message of the gospel includes aspects which run absolutely contrary to the worldviews of his audience: Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Epicureans were materialistic, in that they didn't believe in the supernatural such as souls. If there is no soul, there cannot be resurrection from the dead. And if there is no resurrection, there is no purpose for judgment. Stoics believed souls enter the *logos* and become one with the law of the cosmos. A handful in Paul's audience believe his message, some express interest in hearing more, but it seems that the majority are more convinced more than ever that Paul is a "babbling" (Acts 17:18, 32–34).

Although the purpose of Paul's comment is not to argue the validity of God's creation of Adam and Eve as described in Genesis 1–2, there's no reason to think Paul doesn't affirm a literal reading of the creation story. Athenians believed the first Athenians had popped up out of the soil like Athena from Zeus's head. They believed they were the first to come to Greece, so they had

no collective memory of the journey, but that they remember everyone else coming. "Periods" is from the Greek root word *kairos*. It means a set amount of time during which a defined qualification is fulfilled. Not only does God authorize who will rule (Romans 13:1–7) and what the boundaries of a nation will be (Deuteronomy 32:8), He also determines how long a nation should last. He arranges the time and place for every nation "that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27).

Acts 17:27

ESV

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,

What does Acts 17:27 mean? A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers are hearing from Paul in Athens. He is connecting their altar to "the unknown god" and the words of their poets to the true Creator God who will judge mankind. He has already compared the unknown god to the Creator of the world who is too magnificent to be confined in human-built temples and too powerful to need anything from humans. In fact, this God determines where and when individual people as well as empires will exist (Acts 17:22–26).

Paul now brings this mighty God closer to His creation. God's plan in establishing nations is to encourage people to seek Him. As he will say in his letter to the Romans:

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Romans 1:19–20).

Paul will go on to show that God can't be far away because even the Greek poets have said that God gives people life. Further, the poets say that we are His offspring. But if we are, it is foolish to think God could be represented by an immobile statue designed by human imagination and made by human hands (Acts 17:28–29). To worship such an idol is ignorant foolishness; once people realize this, they must repent (Acts 17:30; Romans 1:22–23). Such affront against God will not go unjudged (Acts 17:31).

The Epicureans, in particular, find this hard to take. Like most Greeks, they believed the gods were far off, for the most part uninterested in human affairs. Faithful sacrifices may keep them occupied and even occasionally entice them to give blessings, but the gods don't go out of their way to seek relationships with humans. Furthermore, Epicureans did not believe in the soul, judgment

after death, or the resurrection of the dead. They lived for sufficient food, comfort, and friends to live a peaceful, balanced life. In fact, these philosophers were probably closet atheists who didn't take the gods seriously, anyway. Some mock Paul as he walks away, some want to hear more, and a handful accept Jesus' offer of forgiveness (Acts 17:32–34).

Acts 17:28

ESV

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.’”

What does Acts 17:28 mean? Paul is in the Areopagus. There, he explains to Stoic and Epicurean philosophers that the Creator God of the universe is near enough to us to want a relationship, but magnificent enough that His likeness cannot be confined to a handmade idol. He has explained that God not only gives life and breath to everything, but He also established the times and places for people and nations to exist for the purpose of inviting them to seek Him (Acts 17:22–27, 29).

His first quote is by either Epimenides of Crete or an unknown Athenian poet. It is from the verse:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one— The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!— But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever, For in thee we live and move and have our being.

It shows that the Creator must be "near" because He is our source of life and animation. The fact that He gives us life means He is greater and yet like us.

Paul's second quote is from the opening call to Zeus in the poem *Phaenomena* from the Cilician Stoic Aratus:

Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus, for we are truly his offspring.

The Stoics in Paul's audience so believe that all mankind are Zeus's offspring, they insist slaves are equal to citizens and freedmen.

If God is the source of our movement and being, and if we are His offspring, it's illogical to make images of Him by human hands (Acts 17:29). Paul shows that idols don't make sense even within the Athenian belief system.

Instead, Paul calls the Athenians to repent. They have disrespected God and need to acknowledge their sin of idolatry. Just as God set times for individuals and nations, He set a time for future judgment. He affirmed this by selecting the judge and identifying Him by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

This is a step too far for most of the philosophers. Epicureans and Stoics didn't believe in judgment or the resurrection of the dead. They mock Paul while he walks away (Acts 17:32–33).

Acts 17:29

ESV

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.

What does Acts 17:29 mean? Athens is a city filled with idols (Acts 17:16). There, Paul is showing Epicurean and Stoic philosophers how idolatry is an affront to their Creator God. He quotes two ancient poets to show that through God "we live and move and have our being" and that "we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28). This second quote refers to Zeus, not the God of the Bible. "God," here in the phrase for "Divine Nature", is from the Greek root word *theios*, which means just a general deity which Paul has identified as the world's creator.

Stoics believed humans are the offspring of God; if that is so, Paul points out, how could we move while the idol stands still? The argument sounds like that of Elijah who mocked the prophets of Baal for worshiping a god who did not answer by asking if he was in the bathroom (1 Kings 18:26–27). After Elijah, Isaiah spoke of the folly of comparing the Creator of the universe to a metal object made with human hands (Isaiah 40:18–20).

If our own likeness and being cannot be contained in a statue, neither can God's. If God's image cannot be represented by an idol, it is sin to worship an idol. God overlooked such foolishness in the past, but now that Paul leads the philosophers to understand this, they must stop, realize what they're doing is wrong, and discover what is proper: they must repent. God has already chosen a day in which He will judge the world and He has identified His chosen judge by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

Paul's ability to take an altar to an unknown God and wind it around to Jesus' resurrection is impressive. Unfortunately, neither Epicureans nor Stoics believed in the resurrection of the dead, so they did not believe in judgment. Stoics

thought the chief aim of man is to live in harmony with the *logos*—the law that governs the universe—to which they will return. Epicureans thought life is about finding just enough food, pleasure, and comfort to not be in want but not be in excess. For them, fulfillment comes in the moment, and when they die, they will cease to exist. Most of the philosophers mock Paul, but a few ask to know more, and a few join him and believe (Acts 17:32–34). Athens is not known as a significant church in the rest of the New Testament.

Acts 17:30

ESV

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

What does Acts 17:30 mean? Epicurean and Stoic philosophers have gathered at the Areopagus. This is a court where serious issues are discussed in Athens. The Greek philosophers pride themselves in discovering the truth about life. The Epicureans endeavor to find the balance between need and excess in all things. Stoics try to live according to the *logos*, the overarching law that governs creation; one of their four cardinal virtues is wisdom. Here, they have dragged the apostle Paul to hear him defend his preaching about Jesus.

Paul began his argument by comparing the altar "to the unknown god" with the God who created the world and the people in it. He points out that if this God is mighty enough to give humans life and movement, He can't possibly be reduced to an idol (Acts 17:22–29). To worship an idol as if it is the Creator is a sin of ignorance. Now that they understand it is wrong, the people need to repent or face judgment (Acts 17:31).

The idea that God overlooked times of ignorance is echoed in Romans 3:25. From the time of Moses to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, relationship to God was almost exclusively defined through the Mosaic law. Many confused those laws and rituals with the means of salvation, itself. With Christ, the times of ignorance—lack of understanding about God, His expectations, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus—have ended. Now that the Athenians know the truth, they are responsible for it. They have done the best they can by trying to live according to what they know of the world (Romans 2:14–16). It's time for that knowledge to be redeemed and for them to see the truth. They can show that they understand this by repenting: rejecting their previous worldview and accepting God's.

The problem is, neither group believes in the resurrection of the dead and so they don't believe in a final judgment. Despite claiming to search for and live according to the truth of the cosmos, they deny God exists and some mock Paul as he walks away (Acts 17:32–33). Others request to hear more, while others do believe (Acts 17:32, 34).

Acts 17:31

ESV

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.”

What does Acts 17:31 mean? Paul is finishing his monologue to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens. The gist of his argument is that the Creator God is too big and majestic to be limited to temples or represented by human-carved statues. Their idol worship is wrong. Although God has overlooked their ignorance, He will judge them now that they know the truth. They need to repent of the past behavior—turn away from it and turn toward behavior and worship that shows they understand the truth (Acts 17:24–30).

This is the most overtly Christian part of Paul's speech. Just as God determined the dates and places of nations (Acts 17:26), He determined when judgment would occur. He will judge based on what is right and wrong; not on how people *think* they should live their lives, but on how He intended us to live our lives. God the Father has commissioned God the Son to be the judge (John 5:22–23). He will divide those who are saved from those who aren't (Matthew 25:31–46), He will reward the works of those who are saved (1 Corinthians 4:5), and He will determine the punishment of the unsaved (Revelation 20:11–15). Jesus has the authority to judge because He is righteous, as validated by the Father raising Him from the dead.

Unfortunately, neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics believe in the resurrection of the dead or judgment after death. Stoics were somewhat pantheistic. They tried to live according to the *logos*—the universal law that reflects the truth of the universe—and death, to them, meant you join that logos.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, believed people cease to exist after death. In Epicurus's letter to Menoecus, he explains it is no good to fear death because death means the end of all feeling. "Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is

come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer."

When the philosophers first heard Paul, they called him a "babbling" (Acts 17:18). They thought he had picked up bits and pieces of philosophy like a bird picks up pieces of grain. For most, Paul's argument does not disavow them of that judgment. Some, however, understand and ask him to say more (Acts 17:32). A few even believe (Acts 17:34).

Psalm chapter 66

English Standard Version

1To the choirmaster. A Song. A Psalm. Shout for joy to God, all the earth; **2**sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! **3**Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. **4**All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name." Selah **5**Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. **6**He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, **7**who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah **8**Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard, **9**who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip. **10**For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. **11**You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; **12**you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance. **13**I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will perform my vows to you, **14**that which my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. **15**I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah **16**Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. **17**I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. **18**If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. **19**But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. **20**Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!

1 Peter chapter 3

1 Peter 3:13

ESV

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

1 Peter 3:13

ESV

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

What does 1 Peter 3:13 mean? This verse continues Peter's teaching to Christians about living in harmony with each other (1 Peter 3:8). We should refuse to seek revenge when harmed, but instead to do good to those who hurt or insult us (1 Peter 3:9). The previous verse revealed that God is paying attention to the righteous, even in the midst of their persecution. He notices. He is listening to their prayers. And His face is against those who do evil to them.

Here, Peter asks what seems like an odd question: Who is going to harm you if you are zealous or eager to do good? The question could be read in two ways. First, those who are eager to do good, even to those who hurt them, are much less likely to be mistreated. Certainly in most times and places, that is true. Doing good to others rarely inspires their desire for revenge.

But, as Peter will say in the next verse, Christians may still suffer even when they are eager to do good. Sometimes, we can suffer *because* we are doing good in the name of Jesus. What this question most likely means is that Christians—God's saved, set-apart people, secured by Him for eternity—cannot truly be harmed by anyone. In other words, Christians may be hurt or even killed for the sake of Jesus in this life, but nobody can take anything from us that truly matters. All of that is secure in the hands of our Father forever.

Context Summary

1 Peter 3:8–22 addresses all believers, commanding Christians to be unified and to refuse to seek revenge when wronged. Peter quotes from both David and Isaiah to show that God's people have always been called to reject evil and to do good. This is true even when we are suffering. In fact, it may be God's will for His people to suffer, in part, to demonstrate His power. Our good example can convict others into repentance. Christ, too, suffered, died, was resurrected, and ascended to power and authority in heaven.

1 Peter 3:14

ESV

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

What does 1 Peter 3:14 mean? Peter follows the question of the previous verse—who will harm you if you are eager to do good—with the acknowledgement that Christians may very well suffer for the sake of righteousness. Christians performing good deeds in the name of Jesus may, in fact, be harmed for that very reason. Peter is writing to a group of Christians who probably experienced intense suffering for Christ. Others, reading Peter's words today, certainly have suffered for the faith. Peter himself was persecuted and killed for Christ's sake.

Thus far in his letter, Peter has made several things abundantly clear. Christians have a secure and abundant future with the Father in eternity. Christians are called to live differently from the world. We are to lead good lives, now, for the sake of Jesus. Jesus, our example, suffered for our benefit, so we should not be surprised to suffer for His sake. In fact, in this verse, Peter writes that to suffer in that way is to be blessed. It is a privilege.

Peter then references Isaiah 8:12, a passage about fearing God rather than men. As Christians, we are called to refuse our natural instinct to be afraid of those

who might hurt us for our faith in Christ. We are told to reject our anxiety. The next verse reveals what we should do, instead of falling into fear.

1 Peter 3:15

ESV

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

What does 1 Peter 3:15 mean? In the previous verse, Peter instructs Christians not to fear those who cause them to suffer for the sake of Christ. In this verse, he reveals how believers should choose to respond, instead.

First, we should set aside our hearts as the place where Christ is fully honored as the Lord. Peter is writing to people who are already believers. His audience already understands Jesus to be the Lord of all. Still, he instructs Christians to focus intently on Christ's role as our master, living as if that were absolutely true in all cases, even in suffering. Peter calls us to full submission to Christ.

When we set apart Christ as Lord, it will change us. Peter says those who observe us will notice the difference. That difference is hope. Even in the midst of our suffering, our hopefulness should be apparent. So, Peter instructs us to be ready to answer the question our life *should* inspire: "How can you be so hopeful in such difficult circumstances?"

Peter anticipates people will become curious. Hopefulness and joy are starkly different from the normal human response to suffering. So much so that people will be eager to understand it. What will we say when they ask? We must be prepared to give our defense, to make the case for faith in Christ. We need to reject the cultural pressure to keep our beliefs to ourselves. Instead, believers should openly share the good news of redemption through faith in Christ.

The Greek word translated as "make a defense," or "give an answer" is *apologian*, from the root word *apologia*. This is not related to the English word "apology," where one expresses regret or remorse. Rather, the term means a justification, or an "answer back," or a reason. This is the source of the terms "apologetics" and "apologist," which refer to a rational defense of the Christian faith.

Finally, it matters how we make that case for Christ. We must present it with gentleness and respect. Christians are not called on to condemn those who are

curious about our hopefulness. Nor are we to be vindictive, vengeful, or insulting to those who disagree. Rather, we should explain our faith without harshness or dismissiveness.

1 Peter 3:16

ESV

having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

What does 1 Peter 3:16 mean? In the previous two verses, Peter taught Christians how to respond to suffering for the sake of Christ. We must not give in to fear and anxiety. Instead, we must commit to treating Christ as our Lord, ready to give an answer to questions about the surprising hopefulness that comes with our place in God's family (1 Peter 3:15).

But, we must give this answer with gentleness and respect. In this verse, Peter explains why this attitude is key. First of all, it allows us to maintain a good conscience. This is an inner confidence that we have not done even the slightest hurtful thing in telling others about Christ. Secondly, those who wrongfully hurt us for our good behavior should feel shame about doing so. Without any cause to accuse us, they will become aware of their own wrongdoing in accusing us in the first place. Lacking that, it will at least be apparent to others that we are being attacked for no good reason.

1 Peter 3:17

ESV

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

What does 1 Peter 3:17 mean? Peter continues his teaching on how Christians should respond to suffering for the sake of Christ. This relates to persecution resulting from being known as a believer in Jesus. Here, Peter reveals what may be a startling idea for some of us: It might be God's will that we suffer.

Contrary to many false teachers, God's will for the Christian life does not always involve wealth, health, and ease. It may require hardship and abuse. Why would God ever want that to happen? 1 Peter chapter 2 explained that our example,

Jesus, suffered enormously for our sake. We should not be surprised to be called on to suffer in the same way for His sake.

In addition, the previous verses (1 Peter 3:15–16) describe a scenario in which those who persecute Christians may be attracted to our message. Hopefulness in the face of suffering can lead them to conviction of their own sinfulness in causing that suffering. God can use our suffering to bring even our persecutors to faith in Christ. Or, to prove to others that we, not our tormentors, are following the will of God.

Whatever the reason behind God's will, Peter clearly teaches that it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. A Christian suffering for Christ's sake brings blessing (1 Peter 3:14), both for us and the world around us. To suffer for doing wrong, however, means the misery is merely the consequence of our own sin. As a believer, this is especially heinous, since it can harm the reputation of Christ in the world.

1 Peter 3:18

ESV

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

What does 1 Peter 3:18 mean? Peter has just stated that Christians are sometimes called to suffer, by the will of God, for doing good. Here, he again reminds his readers that's exactly what Jesus Himself did for us. This is a concise summary of what exactly happened when Jesus died on the cross.

First, He suffered, which is quite an understatement in the context of Roman crucifixion. Next, His suffering was for sin—not His own, but ours. And, importantly, Christ suffered and died only once. Jesus was the sacrifice for sins but, unlike the annual animal sacrifice for sins in Old Testament, Jesus was the final sacrifice for sin. God required no more blood, no more death.

Then Peter reveals that Jesus' sacrificial death was as a substitute—the righteous (Christ) for the unrighteous (us). Why did He do it? To bring us to God. Without Jesus' death for our sins on the cross, we could not come to God. Because of it, all who trust in Christ are brought to His Father. What was the result? Physical death, but not permanent death.

Following His crucifixion, Jesus was "made alive in the spirit." Bible scholars offer multiple explanations for what this phrase might mean, especially in light of the following verses. The most obvious explanation is that Jesus was resurrected from the dead by the Holy Spirit, something clearly taught in the rest of Scripture. Another explanation is that while Jesus was physically dead, His own personal spirit—Himself in Spirit form—somehow was made alive before His physical resurrection to accomplish what is described in the following verses.

1 Peter 3:19

ESV

in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,

What does 1 Peter 3:19 mean? Peter ended the previous verse with a statement declaring that Jesus was put to death in the flesh "but made alive in the spirit." Over the years, Bible scholars have offered several interpretations of what this might mean.

One view is that the verse is simply describing Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead. Another is that it describes a spiritual resurrection which happened *before* His physical resurrection on that first Easter Sunday. This suggests that Jesus, in spiritual form, was alive and proclaiming to the "spirits in prison" before returning to physical life. This may mean anything from those who died before Christ's ministry, to fallen angels, and a host of other options. Verse 20 gives more details on this idea.

The bottom line is that we are not entirely sure what this passage is about, and that's okay. As Martin Luther put it in his *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, "A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means." It is fascinating to study the various explanations offered by Bible scholars, but none of them changes the essential truth that Christ was dead and then made alive, that He suffered for our sake and was then made victorious forever by the power of God.

1 Peter 3:20**ESV**

because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

What does 1 Peter 3:20 mean? Peter has written that Jesus was "made alive in the spirit" in which He went and proclaimed something to the "spirits in prison." In this verse, Peter continues by saying that those "spirits in prison" did not obey when God waited patiently. In Noah's days during the construction of the ark, God waited before saving Noah and His family from the flood. Note, just as Jesus did (Matthew 24:37), Peter acknowledges that Noah was an historical figure and Noah's flood was an historical event.

So what could Peter possibly be describing in these verses? What does it mean that Jesus proclaimed to spirits in prison who disobeyed during Noah's time during the construction of the ark. Bible scholars offer several views. Two of the most popular are that the spirit of Jesus preached, through Noah, to those living in disobedience during that time. Another is that Jesus went and declared His victory over death to the fallen angels, now imprisoned, who disobeyed God during that time.

Another persistent view, less biblically supportable, is that Jesus traveled in spirit form after His death and before His resurrection to proclaim something to those in Hades or hell who died before or during the flood. All of these views raise many questions, none of which are easily answered. The bottom line is that we just don't know for sure what Peter means by these verses. What we do know is that Jesus was dead and then made alive, that He suffered and then was made victorious by the Father forever.

1 Peter 3:21**ESV**

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

What does 1 Peter 3:21 mean? Peter has just concluded several difficult-to-understand verses with a reference to the ark of Noah. In this craft, eight people were "brought safely through the water." In this verse, he writes that baptism corresponds to the water of Noah's flood.

This is also a controversial verse. Bible scholars offer differing interpretations of it. Part of the issue is that the New Testament clearly and repeatedly teaches that salvation from hell comes only through faith in Christ, by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8–9). Christians were expected, even commanded, to be baptized. However, the act of baptism is an expression of faith and obedience, not the means of salvation. (See Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3–5.) Is Peter contradicting that idea when he writes that baptism now saves us?

Clearly, based on his other writings, Peter is not suggesting that the mechanical act of being baptized is what makes a person saved for eternity. Instead, taking the verse as a whole, he seems to be saying that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead saves us. It is this resurrection which Christians publicly express their faith in when being baptized. This is supported by Peter's inclusion of the phrase "which corresponds to this," suggesting a parallel, rather than an identical purpose.

Another possible reading is that the word "saves" doesn't refer to eternal salvation, at all. Instead, by this view, Peter is saying that the act of publicly identifying ourselves with Christ, through baptism, saves us from being tempted to hide our faith to avoid the suffering and persecution of Christians Peter has been addressing.

In any case, this water baptism is not about making a person clean in their flesh. It's about asking God for a good conscience, or standing identified with God with a good conscience. In 1 Peter 3:16, Peter wrote that Christians should live in the world with a good conscience so that nobody can have a valid reason for accusing us of doing anything wrong. The act of being publicly baptized was part of establishing that good conscience with God and before a watching world.

And, again, as the final phrase of the verse states, this is all made possible through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that reveals the power of God to give eternal life.

1 Peter 3:22**ESV**

who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

What does 1 Peter 3:22 mean? Peter concluded the previous verse with a reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He continues in this last verse of chapter 3 by describing where Jesus is right now. Peter was there the day Jesus ascended into heaven. He saw the Savior rise up into the sky with his own eyes. Now Peter reveals where Jesus went and what He is doing.

Jesus is today in heaven in the place of greatest honor at the right hand of God. He was reunited with His Father and remains there for now. God has given to Jesus a position of ultimate authority in the universe. He reigns over angels, authorities, and powers, including both human and supernatural powers. In fact, Jesus reigns over all of creation (Colossians 1:15–20).

With this verse, Peter may be making a connection to earlier passages in his letter, where Christians are commanded to be subject to every human authority. We can do this knowing that, in the end, Christ holds the ultimate authority over all.

John chapter 14

15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. **16**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, **17**even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

18“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. **19**Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

20In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

21Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

Context Summary

John 14:15–31 contains a prediction about the Holy Spirit. Jesus refers to this as the Spirit of Truth, and promises that the Spirit will arrive to help the disciples carry on after Jesus is ascended to heaven. Throughout this section, a person's

love for Christ, their obedience to His teachings, and the indwelling of the Spirit are intertwined. As in prior statements, Jesus is focused on comfort and encouragement. He will continue to highlight the need to maintain faith, based on all He has said and done so far. Later, after advance warnings about what Christians will face, Jesus will return to describing the work and purpose of the Holy Spirit under the new covenant.

John 14:15

ESV

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

What does John 14:15 mean? For such a simple statement, this verse is often exaggerated or ignored. Jesus has been reassuring the disciples as He approaches His impending death and resurrection. Part of that included encouragement—their knowledge of Him was their way to God (John 14:4–6). Those who believe in Him have the opportunity to do "greater works" than even He had done (John 14:12). The phrase immediately before this verse was a conditional promise that Jesus would do anything, provided it was asked "in [His] name." This condition prevents interpretations that make God into a robotic servant of men.

Following directly from that, Jesus connects a person's love for Him with their obedience to His teachings. There are two possible extremes to which this verse can be subjected. One is something like legalism, or works-based salvation. The other is to brush the statement aside as if a person's behavior says nothing about their eternal destiny. Both are wrong. Christ has just made it clear that He, not His followers, is the One responsible for their salvation (John 14:5–6; Titus 3:5). He has also pointed out that legitimate followers still need some level of "cleaning" from sin (John 13:10; 1 John 1:9–10).

Jesus pointedly taught that those who follow Him are obligated to show love for others (John 13:12–15, 34). That is the primary sign of faith to the outside world (John 13:35). Here, He indicates that obedience to His commands is the primary sign of our love for Him. A person cannot claim to know Christ and hate other Christians (1 John 4:20). Nor can someone claim to know Christ while disregarding His teachings (1 John 2:4).

In most earthly situations, this idea is non-controversial. True "pacifists" don't start fights. True "vegetarians" don't eat hamburgers. Incredibly, some object to the suggestion that truly born-again "Christians" don't make a habit of ignoring the teachings of Jesus. The point is not that believers are perfect—far from it (1

John 1:9–10). Nor is the lesson here that good behavior earns or keeps one's salvation (Romans 11:6). It's that a self-labelled "Christian" who lives contrary to the message of Christ is like a meat-eating warmonger who claims to be a "pacifist vegetarian."

The connection between behavior and love for Christ clearly made an impression on John, who echoes it in his letters (1 John 2:3–6; 2 John 1:6; 3 John 1:11). The guidance of the Holy Spirit is key for this obedience (John 14:16).

John 14:16

ESV

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,

What does John 14:16 mean? Jesus commanded the disciples to love each other (John 13:34–35) and to obey His commands (John 14:15). He has also reassured them that knowledge of Him is their means of salvation (John 14:6). In that context—acting in His name—Jesus also promised to provide whatever is asked of Him (John 14:14).

English translations of this verse are relatively consistent, but translating from Greek blurs a subtle difference in this statement. When Jesus refers to the disciples "asking" for something in prayer, He uses the root word *aiteō* (John 14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23). Here, however, Jesus uses the term *erōtaō*. This also means "to ask," but carries a more personal and mutual sense. Jesus uses both words—with the same distinction between their requests and His—in John 16:26. This, once again, implies that Jesus shares a relationship with God which transcends mere humanity. It also reinforces the idea that prayer is not intended to blindly grant us our wishes.

"Helper," here, is translated from the root term *paraklētos*. This can also be translated as a "comforter," or "advocate." This is the same term John will use later to describe Jesus in 1 John 2:1. That connection has meaning—Jesus will later point out that He is leaving behind His earthly ministry specifically so the Holy Spirit can act (John 16:7). The Holy Spirit, in a sense, does from the inside what Christ would do from the outside: teach, convict, remind, and guide. In the following verse, Jesus will clarify that this Helper is the Holy Spirit, who is available only to those who believe (John 14:17).

This Spirit is guaranteed to be with the believer "forever." This contrasts with the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, which came and went from God's servants at various times (1 Samuel 19:23; 2 Chronicles 15:1; Judges 14:6).

The beautiful role of this "Helper" is also demonstrated by understanding its translation. In legal terms, the "defense attorney" is the *paraklētos*. The opposing side is the "accuser," from the Greek *katēgōr*, a term John uses in Revelation 12:10. The concept of an "accuser" features heavily in the Old Testament, through the phrase *ha sā'tān*. The One who stands by us and guides us is God, the Holy Spirit—our accuser and enemy is *Satan*.

John 14:17

ESV

even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

What does John 14:17 mean? This passage contains teachings from Jesus as He prepares the disciples for His impending arrest and execution. In the prior verse, Jesus promised to send a "Helper" (John 14:16). Here, He specifies that this is the Holy Spirit, available only to those who believe in Christ. In fact, this Spirit "indwells" those who believe (Romans 8:9).

Recently, Jesus referred to Himself, using specific terminology, as "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Each of those statements came with a definite article—translated into English as "the." Here, Jesus once again uses specific terms. In Greek, He literally calls this promised Helper "the Spirit of the Truth." This not only emphasizes that there is only one valid kind of "truth," it connects the nature of this Spirit to the nature of Jesus Himself.

The Holy Spirit permanently resides in those who express faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). That indwelling will not begin until after Jesus is resurrected, which is why He says this Spirit "will be in you," rather than that it "is in you," at the moment He speaks to the disciples. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will begin to live with all who believe in Christ (Acts 2:1–4; 10:47).

Those who do not believe do not have the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). Scripture often uses the expression "the world" in reference to the fallen nature of man which rejects God. Those who believe in Christ know Him (John 6:69; 8:31–32; 10:14), and they know the way to salvation (John 14:4). Those who reject Christ don't see Christ, so they don't see God (John 14:8), do not know God (John 8:19), and are lost (John 8:24).

John 14:18**ESV**

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

What does John 14:18 mean? Some of the predictions Jesus has made leading up to this passage are troubling. These include reminders of His impending death (John 12:23–24), warnings about a traitor in their midst (John 13:21), and prophesying that Peter would deny even knowing Jesus that very night (John 13:38). To bolster their courage and faith, Jesus has also offered extensive reassurance. He has comforted them with promises that He will return, having made preparations for them (John 14:2–3), and that by knowing Him they know the way to salvation (John 14:5–6). Most recently, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to permanently live within those who have faith in Christ (John 14:16–17).

Here, again, Jesus notes that He will come to those who believe. In context, this seems to refer to His resurrection (John 14:19; 16:16), rather to the rapture or a person's death. Upcoming comments will hint at how the disciples will be among the first on earth to see Jesus after He rises from the dead.

In the ancient world, being an orphan was even more tragic than it is today. Fatherless children were effectively homeless and penniless, dependent entirely on the charity of strangers. When Jesus promises not to leave believers—the disciples in particular—as orphans, He is reassuring them that this is not the end of their relationship with Him. They will not be abandoned or left without help.

John 14:19**ESV**

Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

What does John 14:19 mean? "The world," in these contexts, means the unbelieving and fallen human condition. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come (John 14:16), but noted that unbelievers would neither see nor know Him (John 14:17). Here again He notes that this is the end of His earthly presence, in a form visible even to those who do not believe (John 12:44–46). The disciples, on the other hand, will see Jesus again, and soon (John 16:16; 20:19).

Scripture often ties the life of a believer to the life of Christ—we live because He lives (1 Corinthians 15:21). Those who have faith in Christ are said to have passed from death to life (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14), exclusively because of the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 5:21; 6:8; John 14:6). This promise from Christ is the ultimate answer to our struggles (Romans 8:18, 28). Christians have the guarantee of redemption and restoration at the end of our earthly lives (Hebrews 11:14–16).

Christ's resurrection is the proof that those who put their faith in Him will also see victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:19–20).

John 14:20

ESV

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

What does John 14:20 mean? In this passage, Jesus has promised the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17). That reference implied that this Spirit of Truth "would be" in believers, presumably looking forward to Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). This event will occur after Jesus' resurrection, and will mark the beginning of the Holy Spirit's indwelling ministry.

The reference to "that day" here has been interpreted in various ways. Some connect this to Jesus' prior comments about the Holy Spirit, making it a reference to Pentecost. Supporting this view is the fact that Jesus continues to speak of being "in" believers, and Christ being "in" God. Another strong possibility is that "that day" refers to the moment when the disciples "will see [Christ]" after His resurrection (John 14:19), as mentioned in the last verse.

Taken along with verse 16, this statement also continues to provide support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus promised that the Helper "will be in you" (John 14:17), while here Jesus says "I [will be] in you." This is the consistent pattern of the Bible, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are spoken of with the same attributes.

John 14:21**ESV**

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

What does John 14:21 mean? Earlier in this passage, Jesus noted that those who love Him would obey His teachings (John 14:15). He followed that statement with reassurance that the Holy Spirit would come to be in believers (John 14:17). Our ability to follow the will of God depends on the influence of His Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14–16). Later, Jesus will reinforce this idea of the Spirit guiding and teaching believers (John 15:26; 16:7–11).

Here, a person's obedience to Christ's teaching is presented as evidence that they do, indeed, have faith in Him. Good works *cannot* produce salvation (Titus 3:5), but salvation *will* produce an attitude of obedience (Romans 1:5). Passages such as James 2:18 echo this same sentiment. John, himself, makes note of this idea many times in his letters (1 John 2:3–6; 2 John 1:6; 3 John 1:11). At no point does Scripture suggest that we must do good to earn or keep our salvation. Yet, it frequently indicates that salvation influences our lives—where there is no such influence, there is no faith.

This idea of being "manifest" to the world follows from Jesus' earlier comment about the world not seeing or accepting the Holy Spirit (John 14:17). Those who reject God won't see Him—those who reject Christ reject God (John 14:9). Those who truly love God are those who accept Him, in faith, and receive the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–17). In a very literal sense, the world will no longer see Jesus—the crucifixion represents the end of His physical appearance to non-believers (John 14:19). In a spiritual sense, only those who accept Christ will see and understand God (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The "manifestation," so far as it applies to Christians, has a spectrum. For example, those who exhibit greater or more mature love for God will more readily understand Him (John 14:28).