

LET INSPIRATION GUIDE YOUR ASPIRATION!

Today's Text: Acts 17: 16- 34

Extracts:

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there...And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?"... Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with the inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing Him I proclaim to you" [Acts 17: 16-17, 19, 22-23]

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about two-thirds (or almost 23 million) of the estimated global total of people affected by HIV and AIDS.¹The worst impacted areas are in Southern Africa, with rates ranging from 10-15% of the population in Zimbabwe to almost 26% in Swaziland. A report by UNAids and the WHO (World Health Organisation) has suggested that male circumcision can reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS by as much as 60%. So, as part of their contribution to the campaign to reduce cases in Zimbabwe, 10 male MPs offered themselves to be circumcised in a makeshift clinic in Parliament House, Harare. More than 120 other MPs and parliamentary staff have shown interest in the circumcision programme. Mr. Blessing Chebundo, the Chairman of the Zimbabwe Parliamentarians Against AIDS, has said that his organization's main objective is to inspire other citizens to follow suit.

The politicians aspired to reduce HIV and AIDS in their country. What better method could they have used than to lead by example? That was a piece of inspiration. Right now, you may be working on something to make your situation better in life but you still have some doubts. Perhaps inspiration can help! In this week's Bible story, Paul wanted to preach the gospel to skeptics in Athens but he had a problem communicating his message until he accidentally stumbled on a simple idea. It made a difference! For more, read this week's inspirational study.

¹ Based on the following sources: "HIV and AIDS in Africa," <http://www.avert.org/hiv-aids-africa.htm> ; and "Zimbabwe's MPs to be circumcised in bid to fight HIV," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18549968> ; 22 June 2012.

1. Background: How could Paul preach Christ to diehard skeptics?

How did you choose your current profession or career? When you examine areas of your *aspiration or ambition or life purpose*, are they driven by your natural talents or marketability or what? When you look at the person that you ultimately married, did s(he) meet the criteria that you had cast in stone when you were searching? ***The likelihood is that most of us do not get what we aspire to have but we could wind up with something better!*** What can account for that? ***A plausible answer can be found in inspiration, that is, a chance occurrence that comes from outside your normal expectations or reactions.*** That is why Thomas Edison, a top American inventor, has said, “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.”² ***Believers know that inspiration is from God.*** In the words of Amos, “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He [first] reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [Amos 3: 7]. Amos was a sheep breeder and also tended sycamore fruit but God called him out to be His prophet [Amos 7: 7-15]. That is why Solomon has also said, “There are many plans in a man’s heart; nevertheless the Lord’s counsel—that will stand” [Prov. 19: 21]. ***Can you imagine how much better it would be if your inspirations were to come from God? Would that not make your aspirations easier to attain? That is the essence of this week’s Bible study.***

In continuation of his missionary journey through Greece, Paul and his colleagues had come to Thessalonica where he spent three Sabbaths preaching Jesus at the local synagogue. A great multitude of devout Greeks and more than a few leading women joined Paul and Silas. However, some Jews that had become envious of their success stirred up “evil men from the market place” to form a hostile mob against the missionaries, alleging that they were a security threat to both local rulers and Caesar! So, the local brethren had to smuggle Paul and Silas out of there at night to Berea where they found a most receptive Christian community. There, Paul left behind Silas and Timothy while he went alone to Athens [Acts 17: 1-15]. This week’s story begins from there, and we shall pay attention to the following highlights:

a) *Paul’s aspiration*

As Paul waited for Silas and Timothy at Athens, “his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that ***the city was given over to idols.***” As was his usual practice, he went into the local synagogue to reason with the Jews and the Gentile worshippers. In addition, he went to the marketplace daily to preach to “those who happened to be there” [vv. 16-17]. ***Clearly, Paul’s aspiration was to spread the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles in Greece.*** But he came against a brick wall! He came across Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who ridiculed him, saying, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods” [v. 18].

² <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/genius-is-one-percent-perspiration-ninety-nine-percent-perspiration.html>

Epicureans were the disciples of Epicurus, 341-207 B.C., who *taught that pure truth could only be found through experience*.³ Therefore, it was better to search for it through pleasure than reason. The *Stoics* were disciples of Zeno, 336-264 B.C. who *practised human self-sufficiency based on self-discipline*.⁴ Clearly, such were not the audience to which you would bring the gospel of death and resurrection for Paul “preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.” They found Paul’s message “strange things to [their] ears” [v. 19].

Have you ever tried to explain to your parents or school mates or colleagues at work what you want to do or become? Some will certainly discourage you; some will try to be sympathetic and encourage you; but many others cannot help you! You can, therefore, imagine how Paul felt after he had made what he considered to be “Spirit-filled” presentations that had worked wonders elsewhere? He needed some inspiration to guide his aspiration out of a dead end!

b) *Then he stumbled on a simple piece of inspiration!*

Happily for Paul, the Athenians had one cultural trait: they and the foreigners that lived among them spent their time “in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” So they brought Paul to the Areopagus, that is, the highest court of Athens that usually met on Mars’ Hill, west of the Acropolis. They said to him, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak... We want to know what these things mean” [vv. 19-21].

Unknown to his Athenian audience, Paul had stumbled on a simple piece of inspiration! Standing in the midst of the distinguished court, Paul said, “Men of Athens, *I perceive* that in all things you are very religious; for *as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you*” [vv. 22-23]. Paul found the idea in Athens, not from Jerusalem.

That put him on the driver’s seat! If the empirically-minded Epicureans and the mentally-disciplined Stoics did not know anything about the unknown God, they should be open-minded enough to learn from the master on the subject! Paul went to town to show them that that unknown God:

- Made the world and everything in it- the Lord of heaven and earth that does not dwell in temples made with human hands, nor

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epicureanism>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism>

worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, because He gives to all life, breath and all things [vv. 24-25];

- Created all humans equal who dwell on the face of the earth, irrespective of times and boundaries of their dwellings; and they are to seek Him with the hope that they might grope for and find Him, even though He is not far from each one of us [vv. 26-27];
- In Him we live and move and have our being. We are His offspring who ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold, silver or stone, shaped by art and human ingenuity [vv. 28-29].

After making his case, Paul threw in his main message: God had overlooked the times of their ignorance but now commanded all men everywhere to repent and to accept the Man (Jesus) whom God had ordained to judge the world in righteousness, having Himself overcome death by His resurrection [vv. 30-31]. I believe that Paul might have surprised himself with the eloquence of his sermon. It could only have come by inspiration from God Himself.

c) *It gave him some converts*

But ***eloquence alone cannot guarantee the effectiveness of a speech.*** Some of his hearers mocked him when they heard of the resurrection of the dead; but many others promised, "We will hear you again on this matter." As he left the Areopagus, "some men joined him and believed" [vv. 32-33]. ***The message was not meant for everyone but for those called and chosen by God. Therefore, Paul attained his aspiration of bringing the gospel to Athens.***

Writing to the Corinthian church later, Paul said, "The Jews request a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but ***to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God***" [1 Cor. 1: 22-24]. He could only have come to that conclusion because his aspiration had been truly guided by God's inspiration, such as we have just seen above. How about you?

2. Are you in search of inspiration?

The Chinese say that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. But with respect to your aspirations, you can take that first step in 360 different directions, since a circle has 360 degrees! So, where do you go from there? You have to first choose the direction in which to take that first step so that you do not wander away from your aspiration! The African tortoise is reported to have said that it is a good thing that he walks slowly because he could be going in the wrong direction! ***When you know your destination, then you can choose your direction. The problem then is what your aspiration should rely on when you***

are pursuing it: God or man. As a believer, we expect you to let God decide your road map. That is why ***believers are enjoined to walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7].*** Within that framework, let us examine some aspiration options that you may currently be considering:

a) *Perhaps you are still daydreaming!*

You are young, restless and adventurous. You have not yet quite made up your mind what you want to become in life. Some of your natural talents do show up but they are far from harnessed. Perhaps, your parents are already programming you to succeed them in their professional or business careers. We can call this the daydreaming stage of your aspiration. Even so, it is important for you to know what God wants you to become.

John the Baptist is a good illustration. Even before he was conceived, the angel that God had sent to announce his birth to his father said of John, “He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah” [Lk 1:11-17]. At his naming ceremony, on the eighth day of his birth, his father, Zacharias, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied, saying, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you shall go before the face of the Lord to prepare His way” [vv. 67, 76]. Consequently, John grew and “became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel” [v. 80]. He became Christ’s precursor. It took inspiration to point the way to his aspiration.

Therefore, ***even as a child, your parents can seek God’s guidance on how He wants you to glorify Him. When they follow His word, you will grow up with your aspiration having been guided by inspiration.***

b) *Or you are a pathfinder*

You may already be grown up, striving to make a mark in your career or chosen profession. You are trying to find your niche but you are not quite sure you have got it right. It is possible that you have been Spirit-led up to that point but you are wondering in what ways you can cooperate with the Lord to fulfil His plans for your life. Or, it is possible that you have relied on career guidance from parents or specialists only to discover in recent times that your interests are going elsewhere. You are what we can call the pathfinder. You are ***trying to get your bearing right.***

Peter was a skilled fisherman. Gradually, however, fishing began to be boring because he would toil night and day, sometimes without catching anything. One day, he had an encounter with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. He offered Him one of his boats to use to teach multitudes of people. Soon

after, Jesus told him to launch into the deep and cast his nets for a catch. He did and caught so much fish that he and his partners, James and John, filled two boats. Peter had achieved his aspiration but Jesus had a higher one for him. From then on, he was going to be a fisher of men! So, as soon as they came ashore, “they forsook all and followed Him” [Lk 5: 1-11]. Inspiration changed their aspiration. Does it then surprise you that Paul was being prepared by God to become the apostle of the Gentiles when He enabled him to become a Pharisee and a Roman citizen? Did Matthew not later turn his accounting skills as a tax collector into accurately recording one of the Four Gospels?

c) *Or you have stumbled on something by serendipity*

In Peter’s example above, his aspiration was to be a successful fisherman. After meeting Jesus, he remained a fisherman but he was going to be catching people for God’s kingdom thereafter. The third case we are looking at now is where you stumble on something that is not in any way related to what you have been looking for. You are looking for something and you stumble on something bigger. It is called serendipity, *an accidental discovery of something more valuable or more useful.*

For example, Saul was looking for his father’s lost donkeys when he came by chance to the prophet Samuel who anointed him the first king of Israel! It was *by chance but God had inspired it [1 Sam. 9: 1-17].*

From the foregoing, it is clear that *you can save so much energy and resources when you pursue earthly aspirations by letting God inspire your every move. That way, it becomes less stressful and more rewarding!*

3. Conclusion: In search of salvation? Make Christ your inspiration!

Your biggest aspiration may be to make heaven when your days on earth are over. As you well know, salvation is by grace, not by own effort [Eph. 2: 4-8]. God has provided the best inspiration to guide your aspiration in that regard. He has given you His only begotten Son to die in your place. So, by accepting Him as your Lord and Saviour, you have insured your aspiration against any failure. You have let inspiration guide your aspiration.

Make Jesus Christ your inspiration today!