

THE THUNDER OF HEAVENLY ARTILLERY

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In his towering address to a band of heathen thinkers atop Mars Hill, overlooking the marketplace of ancient Athens, Paul tried to persuade men with the gospel (Acts 17:22-31). Their fatal fault had been in worshiping myths while ignoring their Maker. Toward the end of his sermon, Paul for the first time makes a reference to Jesus (v. 31), though not by name. In Luke's record of the speech, what is stated about Jesus is not his incomparable love for man. Nor is it Jesus' atoning death that is highlighted. No mention of his perfect example, his sacrificial mission, his sinless life, his humble service, his being a savior. Rather, the point Paul drives home regarding Jesus is that he will eventually "judge the world in righteousness," and the guarantee of that event is the fact Jesus, himself, was raised by God from the dead.

Pagans need the pressure of the disquieting concept of coming judgment weighing on their minds, and Paul wanted his hearers to feel the heat. Steeped in sin, they had no right to ease, comfort, happiness or a clear conscience. What they needed was the threat of hell and the painful knowledge they were rapidly headed there without repentance. Paul knew those outside of Christ are not merely disadvantaged; they are doomed. Today it is no different. Given the way people are, and the seriousness of sin, the message of salvation is best delivered in a salvo designed to penetrate deep, provoking a humble and hurried response. As J. W. McGarvey well said in his 1892 *Commentary on Acts* (p. 129):

"The soul-stirring fact that God has 'appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness,' is a powerful motive to repentance, because a judgment in righteousness must inevitably involve the condemnation of all the unrighteous; and Paul's hearers could now see the unrighteousness of their idolatry. In thus presenting the final judgment as the first and foremost motive to bring men to repentance, Paul was but following the example of Jesus, and proceeding according to the demands of human nature. The terrors of that great day, and of the awful fate awaiting those who shall then be condemned, constitute the heavy artillery of the gospel, by which the fortification that sin has constructed about the hearts of wicked men must be battered down, ere the tenderer motives of the gospel can be brought to bear. The wicked man must be made afraid to continue in sin, before the goodness of God can lead him to repentance; and the preacher of the gospel who neglects to employ the thunders of this heavenly artillery not only fails to preach according to the divine model, but he will preach a feeble gospel that can never work deep seated repentance."

