

Series: Upstream

June 5, 2016

## **Title: Jumping the Rapids**

**[Slide 1]**

**Text: Acts 17:16-34**

### **The Ultimate Obstacle**

#### **Going Airborne:**

Of all the things that salmon do, the thing they're most known for is their ability to *jump*. In fact, the word "salmon" is derived from the Latin "salmonem," which most likely means "leaper." And leap they do. The Atlantic salmon holds the record for the highest jump: 12 feet!

They jump in order to overcome obstacles that would otherwise mark the end of their upstream journey. Where other fish must simply turn around, salmon blast right out of the water in order to clear the rapids. Scientists tell us that they actually *use the force of the rapids* to jump the rapids. The water at the base of a waterfall churns in such a way as to create a "hydraulic pump" that the fish uses to get a "jump" on the waterfall.

In our upstream journey to follow Jesus and fulfill God's purpose for our lives we will eventually encounter obstacles like the waterfall that blocks the salmon's way. When we do, we can either give up on the journey and mill around aimlessly at the base of the falls, *or* we can allow God's Spirit to show us how to make the obstacle itself provide a way to overcome it.

#### **Athens, A.D. 51**

Paul's upstream journey to bring the Good News of Jesus' resurrection to the world of his time brought him face to face with the raging rapids of paganism in the place that represented the very heart of pagan religion and philosophy: Athens, Greece. Athens' most famous landmark is the Acropolis – a collection of ancient temples on the top of a hill overlooking the city. Paul gazed up at these same temples in A.D. 51 when he came to share the Good News about Jesus with the Athenians.

Luke tells us that Paul was incensed at the sheer number of idols in the city. As one ancient writer said, "Athens is a veritable forest of idols." Clearly, Paul had his work cut out for him. Luke tells us that he spent his days in the

Agora, or market at the foot of the Acropolis making his case for King Jesus. It wasn't long before he ran into the waterfall of paganism.

### **New gods?**

In the course of these conversation, he found himself debating with the Athenian philosophers:

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*Acts 17:18 NIV*

*A group of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?"*

*Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*

The Athenians, used to the idea that there were many gods, took Paul's message to mean that Paul was announcing the existence of *two brand new gods: Jesus and Resurrection*. And that was a major problem!

Paul would have to find a way to jump the waterfall of the pagan understanding of the world if he were to succeed in telling God's Story.

## **A New Story of the World**

### **The Areopagus:**

Everyone at that time knew the story of Socrates, the grand-daddy of Greek philosophy. Socrates had come to an untimely end after being tried and convicted in part for introducing "new" and "strange" gods. Now, Luke tells us that Paul was accused of doing the very same thing. We read that the debate turned into Paul being arrested and hauled before the supreme court of Athens, known as the Areopagus:

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*Acts 17:19 NIV [amended]*

*Then they seized him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him "We have a right to know what this new teaching is that you are presenting."*

This appearance before the Areopagus court has often been portrayed as a polite philosophical conversation. In fact, it was anything but. Luke tells us that the Athenians *seized* Paul and brought him to trial on the spot. In a very real way, he found his life on the line for proclaiming the story of Jesus.

Some waterfall!

### **The Unknown God:**

Remember the salmon jumping the waterfall? It can't swim its way over the falls; the force of the falling water is far too strong. But as the water tumbles into the pool at the base of the falls, it mounds up and forms that hydraulic pump. The salmon swims down to the bottom of the pool, finds the surge of rising water, and allows the waterfall's own water to help launch it over the falls.

Paul chose to do the same thing when faced with the impenetrable waterfall of entrenched paganism. Instead of fighting back, he dove into the pagan belief system, found common ground, then launched his own bigger story – the story of the world's Creator and Redeemer.

He began by connecting his message with their own religious behavior:

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*Acts 17:22-23 NIV*

*Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.*

Paul used the pagan system's own words – TO AN UNKNOWN GOD – as the way to begin to launch his story. How could they protest when they professed their own ignorance?

### **A New Story of the World:**

Paul then introduces the UNKNOWN GOD as the One True God who created the world:

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*Acts 17:24-25 NIV*

*"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."*

There it is: that bright line between Creator and Creation, between God and humans. This is no "new" or "strange" god. This is the God who came before everything else. All other notions of god are "new" in comparison to Him.

Paul then embeds human beings within God's Creation. To do so he quotes pagan philosophers and poets – sentiments well known to his audience.

### **[Slide 6]**

*Acts 17:26-28 NIV*

*"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.*

*"God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"*

This is common ground for Jews, Christians and pagans. No argument here. But Paul is cleverly refuting the notion that humans can define God. He is the Creator; He alone does the defining. We are made in His image and not vice versa.

The salmon is streaking upwards through the deep waters of the pool. Now it's time to launch itself over the falls!

## **Jumping the Rapids**

**"Now"**

One of Paul's favorite words is the little word "now." "Now!" shouts out the news that everything has suddenly changed. Yes, there was certainly a time when we didn't even know what we didn't know:

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*Acts 17:30a NIV*

*"In the past God overlooked such ignorance..."*

But now...! The little world "now" changes everything:

*Acts 17:30b-31 NIV*

*"...but **now** he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."*

In a flash Paul has leaped over the waterfall. In so doing he has left the meagre and cramped world of the pagan behind. Here is a story with a beginning and an ending. The Creator who made the world has already come to begin its rescue and repair.

All of a sudden, time is not just a way of talking about the endless passage of days, months and years. All of a sudden, Time has a beginning and an End. And the End has broken into NOW.

The proof? God has in Jesus reversed Death itself. The earth is NOW in recovery mode. And we must choose to get on board with the new time and the new story.

**How to respond?**

There are two ways to respond when your story gets swallowed up by a bigger one. Paul's message prompted some to sneer. Resurrection? Absurd! But others said,

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*Acts 17:32b NIV*

*"We want to hear you again on this subject."*

Luke tells us that Paul left the council unscathed. One member of the council even became one of Athens' first believers in Jesus.

### **[Slide 9]**

*Acts 17:34 NIV*

*Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

Mission accomplished. Paul had leaped over the waterfall and fulfilled his purpose.

### **Jumping the Rapids:**

#### **[Slide 10]**

Paul met people who had a tiny and cramped story of their lives and their world. It lacked a real Beginning and a real Ending. Instead, it was all about living in a world where you won some and lost some. The best you could hope for was to break even. And even then, there was no answer to the question: Why bother?

Paul didn't reject the good and true parts of those insufficient stories. Instead, he gave the pagan story a real Beginning and a real Ending. We have the same task. Like Paul, our task is to connect with people who don't know God's Story yet. We are to **frame this world's story with God's story**. We take the stories of this world and make them bigger. Make them truly *lifesized*. And most of all, we are to find the NOW in every story that marks the presence of the God who created everything and will one day completely restore His Creation.

When we do, we give a lost and needy world a glimpse of God's love and justice, God's original purpose for His world, and His ceaseless work to restore it to Himself.

When we do this, not only do we leap the waterfall, but we show the way for others to do so as well. This is what we were made for.

Jump the rapids!