

Feeling Their Way

In Athens, Paul tells a council of the city's most educated men that God made every nation from one, and set the times and the boundaries of where they would live. Then he says what it was for: that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way towards him and find him – though he is not far from each one of us.

Seek, feel, find. The middle verb is not like the other two.

“Feel their way” is one word in Greek, *psēlaphaō*. It means touch with the hands. Handle something, run your fingers over it, fumble for it in the dark.

In the Greek Old Testament it belongs mostly to blind men. Isaac, old and unable to see, tells his son to come near so he can feel him and know which son he has (Genesis 27:21–22). Moses warns Israel that they will grope at noonday as a blind man gropes in the dark (Deuteronomy 28:29). Job says the great are left feeling their way without light (12:25). Isaiah says we grope for the wall like the blind (59:10).

In three of those four it is not a search. It is what has happened to people who cannot see, and in Deuteronomy it is named as a curse.

That is the word Paul chooses, in the city where men came to see clearly, having walked through streets he has just described as full of idols.

Then the grammar.

English carries this with extra words. *He will find it. He might find it. If he somehow found it.* The same event three times, and each one says something different about whether it happens.

Greek carries it inside the verb. The ending changes, and the change is the bet. There is a form for what is expected to come off, and a form for what is hoped for and not counted on. Paul uses the second. By the first century it was going out of ordinary Greek. Acts uses it more than any other book in the New Testament, so when it appears Luke has chosen it intentionally.

In front of it he puts three small words that all pull the same way: *if, then, actually perhaps.*

So the sentence is not “so that they will find him,” nor even “so that they may find him.” It is closer to *if somehow they might feel for him and might find him.*

They might reach out. They might even touch him.

And then the sentence turns.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:27)

Nothing in the groping is corrected. Paul does not say they were looking in the wrong place, or that they had not tried hard enough. He says the distance was never the problem.

A man feeling along a wall in the dark, and the one he is looking for standing at his elbow.

This is where the arguments have run. Calvin said the groping proves only how dark it is – that what can be known of God this way leaves a person without excuse rather than bringing them home. Others have read the reaching as counting for something in itself, even when it does not arrive.

C. S. Lewis put it the other way round. You spend years hunting for something, and find at the end that you were the one being hunted.

Paul's sentence holds both. The hands are out and finding nothing. And the reason they find nothing is not absence.

Three verses later Paul stops describing and starts speaking.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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 17:30–31)

The times of ignorance are over. Not because anyone's groping succeeded. Because God has spoken, and the speaking is happening in the room.

There is nothing vague in what he says. A day, fixed. A man, appointed. A proof, given – and the proof is a resurrection.

The dark room has someone in it now, talking.

Some of them laughed. Some said they would hear him again another time. Luke then names two who did not do either.

Dionysius the Areopagite. The title is a seat, not an address — he sat on the council that had just been assessing whether this teaching could be taught in Athens at all. One of the men weighing it came over.

And a woman named Damaris. No title, no husband, no city.

Groping is not the condition of the ignorant. The man whose job was to judge the teaching was doing it too, and so was a woman about whom nothing has survived.

What became of them is not recorded. Two names, and no more.

Luke wrote the Gospel as well as Acts, and he uses *psēlaphaō* once more.

It is in the locked room, on the evening of the resurrection. They think they are looking at a ghost. Jesus says:

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. (Luke 24:39)

Same word. Hands out in the dark, and a body that can be held.

Paul's speech ends where Luke's Gospel ended. A man raised from the dead, offered as the assurance.

For years I read this as a hopeful verse. People searching, and arriving. It is not that. The reaching is honest and it is real, and on its own it does not get there.

What changes is not the reaching. It is that God was never far, and then he spoke, and then he stood in a room and said *touch me*.

The destination was never wrong. Only who does the travelling.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.