

## Acts 17:22-34

Easter 6, May 14, 2023  
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*So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> 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.' <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> 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." <sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

We have an interesting text before us this morning, of which, every time I read this text, I notice another little detail that I realize I've overlooked until now. I can't tell you how many times I've read this, and this might be the first time that I really stopped to realize that it ends with a conversion to Christianity. Usually, I focus in on the stoic philosophers that Paul is talking to, and I picture them in their so-called wisdom "tut-tutting" over this new thing before walking away in the blindness of their own reason. But in the end, we see God at work. Some actually believed what Paul was saying that day—two are mentioned by name, and then there are some others as well. That shouldn't be surprising, after all, we are promised that whenever God's Word is preached the Holy Spirit is working. But if we look at the context of this account, we really see just how strange and seemingly unlikely this whole conversion event is.

If we were to read the verses leading up to our text, we would learn that the Apostle Paul had been doing his business preaching to the Bereans in northern Greece, where people were coming to faith in Christ. However, there are always those who oppose the Word of God, and so it was there. There were some Jews from Thessalonica, another city in northern Greece, that heard about their Berean neighbors searching the Scriptures diligently. These men decided to go to Berea and incite riots because of it. Thankfully, the good Berean brothers-in-Christ took the Apostle Paul and shipped him off to safety in Athens. They did this so quickly that Paul's missionary partners, Timothy and Silas were left behind in Berea and would have to catch up to him later.

And that's where we find Paul, standing alone at the entrance, and what an amazing sight that must have been! Athens stood at the crossroads of the cultural world with all of its poets and musicians and playwrights and scholars and philosophers. And Paul must have had some time on his hands as he

waited for Timothy and Silas to arrive, so you can imagine he did some exploring in that great city, walking the streets and seeing all of the artisans with their crafts and wares. He must have marveled at all the fascinating exotic goods being traded that came in from various ports from around the known world.

But there was something else that caught Paul's attention, that hit him right in his heart and created a zeal for the Lord. Paul saw that the city was absolutely *full* of idols. Not only the temples and their statues carved out of valuable stone, but even the household idols that were for sale on the streets, the little gods that were tucked away in the various corners of the marketplace. And we're told in the verses leading up to our text that Paul was angry about it, filled with a righteous anger so that he went to the local Jewish synagogue and started reasoning with the Jews and the believing Greeks about all the false gods in their city, passionately proclaiming Jesus Christ as the one true God.

And in the corner of that synagogue, a group of men was standing quietly and listening. They were the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers—two groups of men who loved nothing more than to sit around all day and talk. They'd talk about the latest idea that came in on the boat, talk about the latest philosophy, the newest religion, the latest understanding about the origins of the world. And now Paul was bringing something new to talk about, so they invited Paul to the Areopagus, a prominent hill in northern Athens that served as a gathering place to sit and discuss ideas. And Paul went! And when he was there he didn't beat around the bush, he didn't hide from the truth, he didn't try to sugarcoat anything—he came right out and preached Christ crucified.

And I often wonder what *I* would have done in that situation. I can think of two possible courses of action—one that I would have *imagined* myself doing in Athens that day, and one that I would have more likely done. I would have *thought* about going around the city and smashing all those false idols and toppling those statues and proclaiming the true God with righteous indignation in my heart. But in reality, I probably would have put my head down and minded my own business. After all, I would be merely a visitor to that city, *and* greatly outnumbered, and I wouldn't want to draw the attention.

What would *you* have done? Or, better yet, what *do* you do? After all, we live here in a modern day Athens, the United States of America. Here we stand at the modern crossroads of culture and learning and technology, with all of our writers and musicians and artists and celebrities, we're surrounded by our own versions of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. These are those who have no interest in the God of the Bible but who love to think and hear about every new thing that fallen mankind can invent. What do you *do*? Do you keep your head down, so as not cause a stir? Do you find yourself thinking, "If they don't want to believe, that's their own loss. It's no skin off my back!"

Well, that's *not* what the Apostle Paul does. He goes and he brings them to the truth, but he starts with a very interesting approach. And this is what really floors me. He starts talking to them, not by quoting from the Old Testament or quoting from one of Jesus' sermons. He *begins* by quoting their own Greek philosophers. First, he pulls out this number: "***In him we live and move and have our being,***" which sounds like it could be a quote from the Bible, but it's actually a quote from the Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides. Then, he turns to the Greek poet Aratus and quotes *him*, "***For we are indeed his offspring.***" And do you know what's interesting about that? Do you know who those

writers were referring to? Neither Epimenides nor Aratus were talking about the one, true God, clearly. They were writing about Zeus, that people are the offspring of and owe their lives to Zeus.

And I guess my question is why would Paul do this? Why is he quoting from scriptures that are dedicated to an idol? Isn't he hindering the Gospel by using these words about false gods—gods who lived in the streets, gods who are made of stone? Why not just stick with the true Word of God?! Well, you see, the reason is that as Paul saw all the idols and statues and shrines surrounding him in Athens, he knew exactly what was going on. He could see through the surface level and recognize a people who had discovered God's hints and *were in fact seeking* God! He says the same in verse 27 that people around the world ***"seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him."***

It was not a surprise to see all these gods around Athens, because since the beginning of creation, every man, woman, and child on earth has been looking for God. Paul would discuss the same topic years later in his letter to the Romans, saying, ***"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."*** (Romans 1:19-20)

God has been leaving clues since the beginning so that anyone, no matter where they live in the world, will know that there *must be* a higher power, and that this life on earth is not all there is. *Everyone* knows this! Some will hide these thoughts buried deep down, but everyone knows there is a God. However, as people seek out God, they will inevitably create a god in their own likeness rather than discover the God that created mankind in *His* likeness. And so, the Athenians had been searching for God, but they looked in the wrong directions. They settled upon gods of their own creation. And the true God, the triune God—He remained an *Unknown God* to them. And so Paul has compassion on them. He realizes they are lost, so he meets them where they are at. He speaks in language which they understand. He uses story and myth and narrative which they were familiar with, and then he begins to weave it into his own hymn—a beautiful hymn, not about Zeus, but about Jesus Christ.

Paul does this by addressing some of the misconceptions that the Greeks had imagined about God, replacing those misunderstandings with what God reveals about Himself in His Word. He starts in verse 24 by proclaiming the truth about Creation: ***"The God who made the world and everything in it,"*** he begins. Much like many in our day, the Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers were two groups of people who believed that the world was the result of random motion and a lucky combination of atomic particles. Such a random, chaotic world results in our lives being random and meaningless. After all, we would only be here because a cluster of atoms arranged correctly, and by sheer luck we were formed. With this origin model, people are left scrounging about, trying to find purpose for their life. Today, we see people striving to find that purpose in politics or social justice or worse pursuits.

Instead, Paul points to the One who gives meaning to our life: ***"That God designed the world, and crafted it carefully."*** And He still is careful in His work of creation, like King David writes about in the Psalms: ***"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*** (Psalm 139:13-14) A random, lucky arrangement of particles? Not so, says Paul, for we have a God who formed us with love and care.

He addresses another misconception in verse 25, that God is ***“not served by human hands, as though He needed anything.”*** When mankind creates a god—anytime that’s happened in history—it imagines a god who exists solely for humans to serve. That’s the proper relationship. That was the Grecian idea about their gods, that the people existed to serve the gods of Mount Olympus, hoping that occasionally the gods would be pleased enough to send them some help.

So, still today, we might still conceive in our minds that our God is one who exists only to be served. We might sometimes think that if we need something from God, whether that be good health or good fortune or a career advancement, then we could possibly receive it from him if we did more for him and were extra good, extra pleasing, as if His care is something we can buy or coerce from Him. It’s the type of idea that makes perfect sense to us, but what does God reveal about His relationship with us? Paul says, ***“He’s not served by human hands, as though He needed anything.”*** That’s totally the opposite of what we might expect! And yet Jesus also said, ***“The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*** (Mark 10:45) Yes, the reality is that the one, true God, who has all power and might and authority, choose to serve you, His creation. And He chose to demand payment in return for our faithlessness—not from the fallen creatures of His creation, but from His own Son, whom He sent to serve us all. This is what God reveals to us about Himself, so that we can truly know who He is.

Paul hints at another misconception the Greeks had about God at the end of verse 27, where he says, ***“He is actually not far from each one of us.”*** The caricature painted of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus is that they spent their lives in the luxury of their own domain, and that they were relatively unimpressed by humans, only descending from their mountain kingdom when they wanted to have a little fun at the expense of people. They were distant gods. And so, still today, even Christians might think of God in this same way. We could convince ourselves that God has so much to deal with, He’s certainly not concerned with me. *Me* of all people, especially with how much wrong I’ve done, it’s easy to imagine that God’s given up on me and is ignoring my pleas for help.

But what *Paul* says is accurate: ***“He is not actually far from each one of us.”*** God speaks in the same way when He uses the mouth of Isaiah to invite us, ***“Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”*** (Isaiah 55:6-7) God reveals that He *is* near to us—not remote—near and willing to help. He reveals that He *wants* us to ***“Call upon [Him] in the day of trouble,”*** and that He will deliver us. (Psalm 50:15) He *wants* us to carry our sins and our guilt to Him, and He promises that He will have compassion and forgive, for ***“His mercy is new every morning, great is His faithfulness.”*** (Lam. 3:23)

The last misconception Paul addresses is in verse 30: ***“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”*** The Greek gods were crafted in mankind’s image, meaning that they were described as vindictive, vengeful, spiteful, and cruel, punishing people. And though we know about God’s mercy and love, oftentimes, we might trick ourselves into thinking that He is vengeful like us. In times of turmoil, we might think that our pain is God’s punishment, getting back at us for what we’ve done. But this is *not* how God operates. He reveals instead that though He *could* demand payment from us for our sins, He has overlooked these things.

He's practiced divine forbearance—*not* demanding satisfaction from *us*. Instead, He demanded it from His Son, and Jesus was the only One who was punished. And now, God invites us to repent and believe in that Son, with the promise that we will be judged based on His Son's righteousness. And that will be more than good enough for you; in Jesus, you are found to be righteous.

If it were not for God revealing Himself to us in His Word, He would still be an Unknown God to us. We would still be living in fear of God and probably doing our best to ignore Him. But He reveals that He is not like us, not at all. He is compassionate and gracious and merciful, a God who desires to be with people *like us*. ***“As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”*** (Psalm 103:11-12)

Having had your sins removed, learning about the God that you could not know by yourselves, I want you to consider those in your life for whom God is still unknown. You've maybe convinced yourself that they are so hardened in their unbelief that there's no way they would listen to you. I would encourage you to look at them in a different light. Those are people who have also looked for God, but not knowing what He's truly like and what He's done for them, they have stumbled because the god of their imagination was terrifying. Remember, in Athens—an ungodly place dedicated to the wisdom of mankind, much like our own country—Paul came out proclaiming exactly what God reveals about Himself.

And how did it end? Yes, some left in the dark of their unbelief, but *others*—God called others out of darkness and into His marvelous light. They were lost and now had been found. Once they were not a people, and now they were the people of God. And you know what? God still does the same today. He's done so for you already. So may He also help *us* now to be His faithful witnesses. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.