

The Unknown god

Introduction:

1. I'd like to ask that you turn in your Bibles to **Acts 17**.
2. While you are finding **Acts 17**, which is incidentally between **Acts 16** and **Acts 18**, I want to read you a story
3. Paul and Silas were escorted by the Philippi magistrates out of the city.
4. They first went to Lydia's house and then left for Thessalonica.
5. The Jews from the synagogue there got some thugs to stir up trouble.
6. **Verse 6, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too"**
7. This accusation reflects the significant impact of their preaching, which challenged the existing social and religious norms.
8. The people in Thessalonica are hostile, and so they move on to Berea.
9. **Verse 11-12 "These people were more noble and open-minded, so they received the message of salvation through faith in Christ with great eagerness, examining the scriptures to see if these things were so. As a result, many of them became believers ..."**
10. Story of church in Berea
11. But some of the troublemakers from Thessalonica came to Berea; Paul hastily had to leave
12. So today we are going to be walking through this incredible text, and it brings to mind a very special memory.
13. Gaby and I in Greece "Footsteps of Jesus"
14. While in Athens, we looked, and we actually went up the stairs where Paul, went to the top of this rocky knob off to the side, and I was amazed how the very tops of the rocks up there had been polished smooth by the feet of people over 2000 years who had gone to stand where Paul was and preached.
15. And as we stood and looked at those words written there in the Greek language, I was mindful of how ignorant people are about Christ
16. It occurred to me how urgent our mission is in this world.
17. We are called on to bring the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a modern world that can barely notice the beauty of creation
18. At the beginning of the year, we committed to pray for "our 5"
19. Think about it: as we stand and look at the effects of the greatest pandemic this country has ever seen, we realize more than ever how acute the need for the Gospel is.
20. It was not as politically significant as Corinth but remained influential as a university town, attracting thinkers and philosophers from across the region.

Overview of Athens during Paul's visit:

1. It was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, with magnificent buildings and architecture
2. The Acropolis, built in about 447 B.C., soars above the city of Athens and has three temples, including the Parthenon.
3. Athens was the center of human knowledge, of science and philosophy, boasting some of the greatest thinkers the world has ever known: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras (The Pythagorean theorem states that in a right-angled triangle, the square of the hypotenuse, the longest side, is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.) and many others, either lived in Athens or came to Athens to ply their trade as philosophers.

4. So, the city reflected both human intellect and corruption.
5. In **verse 16** of our text, ***"The city was full of idols."***
6. ***Romans 1, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."***
7. Although it had lost some political significance to Corinth, it remained a vital hub for intellectual thought and education.
8. It was said that there were more gods than men in Athens, highlighting its spiritual complexity.
9. So, Paul felt that way, as he looked around and saw God dishonored by idolatry, God's glory and honor taken away from him by this idolatry.
10. Do you have that kind of reaction to the modern-day idolatry that we see around us?
11. Paul's response to that darkness was ***Verse 17. "So [because of that idolatry] he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there."***
12. The marketplace was as pagan as it got, a noisy din of meat vendors, merchants, political figures, and individuals preaching their own philosophies and political agendas; you could imagine a carnival barker saying, ***"Step right this way."***
13. The altar to the unknown god seemed to have been constructed for the purpose of acknowledging any God who had been overlooked, so Paul seized the opportunity to introduce the Greeks to Christ.
14. But as time went on, he began to have discussions with some philosophers in the marketplace, and it says that a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers listened to him and invited him to Mars Hill, to the Areopagus, to debate with them.
15. Let me just go on a little tangent here

How will God judge those who have never heard?

1. I am often asked is: How will God judge those who have never heard the gospel and thus have no chance to be saved?
2. We are not God and therefore cannot definitively know how God will deal with those who have never heard the gospel message and responded
3. ***God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though he is not far from each 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.'" (Acts 17:27-28)***
4. In Romans, Paul explains that God has given humans clear clues in nature -- and holds us responsible to learn from them.
5. ***"What may be known about God is plain to [all people], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:19-20)***
6. Yet there remains in even pagans some semblance of a conscience, however mutated.
7. ***"When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." (Romans 2:14-15)***

8. Even in nature, it is possible to gain some understanding of God and to act on that knowledge.
9. Without faith and repentance, both the Gentiles and the Jews are lost.
10. So, the Areopagus was the local government authority carrying out statutory duties for Athens, later serving mainly as a judicial body responsible for cases of homicide, wounding, and certain religious offenses. It was set in place before the 5th Century BC
11. Epicurus believed he could disprove the possibility of the soul's survival after death, and therefore effectively disprove Judgment Day
12. The Stoics were a little bit different; they were one of the newer philosophical movements in Athens, and they believed that emotions like fear, envy, or even impassioned sexual attractions or attachments were really a sign of weakness, and it rose from false judgments.
13. Think about this statement, the arrogance in it. ***"What is this babbler trying to say?"*** The word babbler in the Greek is ***"seed picker"***.
14. It's disparaging for them to call Paul that, but they are intrigued.
15. ***1Cor 1:21 "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."***

The unknown god:

1. ***"Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he observed that the city was full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be present" (vv.16-17).***
2. ***"And some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers as well were conversing with him. Some were saying, 'What could this scavenger of tidbits want to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,'—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.' (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new)." (vv.18-21).***
3. Athens was not just a highly populated metropolis; it was also a spiritually crowded city, and there was a saying in those days that, *"in Athens, there are more gods than men."*
4. Paul adapts himself to the Athenians' thinking, demonstrating to them that the gods they serve with sacrifices and worship cannot truly be gods at all unless a god can have faults or needs that must be satisfied.
5. ***"So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."***
6. Paul quotes an ancient poet and philosopher named Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.) in his sermon, using the line, ***"for in Him we live and move and exist"*** from one of his poems.
7. Epimenides is none other than *the* "prophet" that the Athenians believed once saved Athens from a great pestilence that broke out in 600 B.C.
8. We do know that Epimenides is credited with helping them solve the problem by offering spiritual advice: to make sacrifices to the unknown god.

9. In the book by Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, he tells the backstory of Epimenides that I have been talking about.
10. Fast forward to first-century Athens; there we read about how Paul was standing in the Areopagus where Epimenides stood centuries before, where Epimenides told them to build altars and sacrifice to the unknown god so they could be saved.
11. Now Paul has been invited to speak there, but this time Paul is pointing to these same altars, saying in effect, ***"You have ignorantly worshipped this unknown god who once saved your city back then, and I am His messenger here to tell you exactly who He is."***
12. ***Paul acknowledged the Athenians' religiosity and used it as a starting point to proclaim the one true God, the Creator of the universe, who does not dwell in temples made by human hands (Acts 17:24)***
13. He emphasized God's transcendence and immanence, stating that God ***"is not far from any one of us"*** (Acts 17:27)
14. ***Paul declares that God commands all people to repent because He has set a day to judge the world with justice (Acts 17:30-31).***
15. This reference to the resurrection was the pivotal point in his message, challenging the prevailing philosophical views of the time.

Three insights from the backstory of Paul's Preaching in Athens

1. **God doesn't waste a moment of our history** – we are created in His image for His glory, and God does not make a mistake – there are no second best or rejects
2. King David said in *Psalms 139*, ***"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."***
3. I believe God was at work long before Paul arrived and created the situation that caused the Athenians to place those altars in their city.
4. Paul put it this way to them, ***"From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live"*** (v.26).
5. He sent Paul to tell them that God sent a sacrifice to save them, but it wasn't the sheep that Epimenides had them sacrifice that saved them.
6. Do you realize that in God's providence, you are placed where you are to serve God's purposes and plan for your life?
7. **God uses our experiences to shape us for His mission of Gospel advancement**
8. When I read this passage in Acts, I thought, how clever Paul was that he could randomly notice an altar to an ***"Unknown God"*** and use it to help him introduce the Gospel to the pagan Athenians.
9. God used the education of Paul and his knowledge of Greek history and thought to prepare him to preach to the Athenians.
10. When I read this passage in Acts, I thought, how clever Paul was that he would use an altar to an ***"Unknown God"*** to help him introduce the Gospel to the pagan Athenians.
11. God used the education of Paul and his knowledge of Greek history and thought to prepare him to preach to the Athenians.
12. We don't know how Paul knew about Epimenides or the backstory on the ***altar to the unknown god***.

13. What did that have to do with God's purposes?
14. **Missiological principles are valid even when we don't realize we are using them**
15. What I didn't know about Paul before learning this history was that there was some serious missionary discipline behind his decision to begin his message by talking about the altar to the unknown God.
16. I believe Paul was a great missionary, and his ministry has helped missiologists understand missiological principles that were true then and are still true today.
17. Maybe you are like me; you knew the story of Paul preaching on Mars Hill, but this historical understanding has deepened your appreciation of God's sovereign hand in history and in how he shaped Paul as a missionary.
18. Now, as we faithfully share the gospel here in our area and all of this region, we know that we're going to meet with the same kind of mixed reactions.
19. Some are going to mock us.
20. Some are going to get angry.
21. Some are going to ignore us.
22. Some are going to be intrigued and want to talk some more.
23. But eventually some are going to believe.
24. Let's be faithful to be witnesses for the glory of God.