

The Unknown God

Part I

Acts 17:16-24

Introduction

Mark Bailey's recent book on discipleship tells a rather humorous true story of the fact that things and money no longer matter – at least to one woman. Let me read it to you.

A young man had a passion for Porsches. Every day he would look through the classified ads for Porsches offered for sale, even though he knew he could never afford one. One day, he was shocked to see an ad offering a brand new Porsche for only five hundred dollars. Quickly, he came to his senses and realized it was just a “typo” – brand new Porsches do not sell for five hundred dollars. But, the next day, the same ad ran again. The man decided to call the number in the ad, although he felt quite foolish because he knew the whole thing had to be a mistake.

The woman who answered the phone assured him that the ad was correct – a brand new Porsche could be his for five hundred dollars. The man just could not believe it, but upon arriving at the house, he saw a beautiful new Porsche sitting in the driveway. He got out and examined it carefully, thinking to himself, “It must not have an engine in it.”

The woman came out of her house and again, assured him that it was for sale, it was brand new, and five hundred dollars was all that she was asking for it. So, he test drove it. The car ran beautifully. He could not believe it. He paid her five hundred dollars and left as quickly as he could, fearing she might have second thoughts.

The car was in mint condition, but it kept bothering him to think that he had paid the woman

only five hundred dollars. So, after driving the Porsche for a week, he called her, identified himself, and said, “Ma’am, are you aware that the book listing on this car is thousands of dollars more?”

“Yes,” she responded.

“Well,” he asked, “why did you sell it to me for only five hundred dollars?”

Without pausing a moment, she answered, “I’ll tell you why. Three weeks ago, my husband ran off to Bermuda with his secretary, and the last thing he said to me was, ‘Sell the Porsche and send me the money.’ So I did.”¹

I have been checking the ads since reading that story!

While at a store recently, I was struck by the message on a woman’s sweatshirt. Across the front of the middle-aged woman’s sweatshirt were the big, bold words, “I want it all.”

I could only hope that she discovers before it is too late, that even if she had it all, it would not be enough.

I want to take you today, to a city that had it all. By the time the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, it was already world renowned as the philosophical center of the world. It was the birthplace of the democratic system, which we still follow today, in our parliament, law, and individual freedoms.

Athens was also the home of the world’s most famous university. Socrates, and his brilliant student Plato, taught there, as well as Plato’s famous protégé Aristotle. Everything from hydrostatics to biology were framed for Western consumption from this incredible city of Athens.

This city was wealthy, affluent – even today, the ruins speak of its glory in the sun. The Parthenon was considered the masterpiece of ancient architecture. The city by Mount Olympus, where Homer and Hesiod once lived, was the shining jewel in the golden age of Greece.

Athens had discovered many truths – but they did not know the truth. Athens had it all – but, as we will soon see, it was not enough. They did not have God; they did not know who He was.

When Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburg were married in 1947, King Faisal, the young twelve year old monarch of Iraq, was among the dignitaries to visit London for that spectacular wedding. As the wedding march proceeded down the main boulevard in London toward the cathedral, the crowd lined the streets and packed the alleyways, hoping to catch a glimpse of the royal couple. King Faisal could not have been less interested, but he wanted a glimpse of the prancing horses that pulled the coaches along the road. He, dressed in his eastern garb, pushed his way through the crowd to get a better look. He was grabbed by an officer and told to stay out of the way. This is certainly what you might tell a twelve year old who does not seem to fit the scene. It was only after it was discovered that the twelve year old was the King of Iraq did the apologies come flying. In the major London newspapers the following day, the headline articles read, “We’re sorry King Faisal, we didn’t know who you were.”

Athens will largely ignore Paul’s introduction of the King of Heaven, just as the nation Israel did a few decades earlier. Jesus Christ did not fit the royal scene; He did not look like a king. He was born to peasant parents, delivered in a filthy stable and then, wrapped in rags. He would grow up, undiscovered by His world, mistreated, and ultimately crucified. They could have said, “We didn’t know who You were!”

To this day, the message can still be heard in our country, “We do not know who You are!”

Not only is this truth seen in our culture, but it is becoming more and more apparent in the church. The church today is weak and worldly; it is affluent, yet ineffective; it seems out of breath in keeping pace with its mission.

The solution is not:

- a series of campaigns;
- pietistic exercises;
- larger contributions;

- longer fasts;
- smarter methods.

The solution to the ills of the church is a fresh understanding of the nature and character of who God is.

The Puritan writer, Stephen Charnock, wrote two hundred years ago, his classic work, *The Existence and Attributes of God*. He stated these words, “A God forgotten is as good as no God to us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There has never been a generation more desperately in need of an introduction to God than our generation. And there has never been a church age that has needed a re-introduction to God than our age.

Listen to the words of a Charles Spurgeon, who preached to his congregation nearly one hundred fifty years ago:

Would you lose your sorrows? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in His immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of grief and sorrow; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of [God].ⁱⁱⁱ

So, for the next two or three discussions, we are going to dig deeply into the text of Paul’s sermon as he introduces to the city of Athens, The Unknown God. I believe we will also rediscover for ourselves, many things about our wonderful, sovereign, gracious God.

Turn in your Bible to the book of Acts, chapter 17. In this chapter, we have already seen the truth rejected at Thessalonica and the truth researched at Berea. Today, we will see the truth ridiculed at Athens.

Paul’s Use of Idle Time

Let us return to Paul’s second missionary adventures, at verse 16 of Acts, chapter 17.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.

Two key words

There are two interesting words chosen by the Spirit of God to tell us about Paul.

Paul is in the beautiful city of Athens. He has only recently escaped from Berea and is now waiting for Timothy and Silas to rejoin him. He has idle time on his hands, and the way we use idle time tells a lot about us, doesn't it?!

I read recently the challenge, "Find your lot in life and then build something on it."

Paul was passionate about building the kingdom of God, and you never find him far from his tools.

Observing or beholding

This latter part of this verse tells us he was "observing," or your translation might have "beholding," the city full of idols. You could write in the margin of your Bible beside that word, the word, "theater". The original word gives us that English word.

Paul did not simply arrive and casually notice all the idols, he took the city in; he strolled from street to street; he stopped and watched people, like you do at the mall when you sit on one of the benches and just watch the people. Aren't people weird? I would say more, but I am one of them! Paul took long walks, and long looks – he saw it all.

Provoked

And then we read that, "... his spirit was being provoked within him ...". The second key word, "provoked," can be translated "angered; deeply moved; troubled". What he must have seen!

One Grecian author, who came to Athens fifty years after Paul, wrote that it would be easier to meet a god in Athens than to meet a man.

I have read that Athens had 30,000 statues of gods and goddesses. These statues literally lined the streets. The centerpiece of the city council building was the idol of Apollo. The building that housed public records was dedicated to the mother of the gods.

From the Parthenon to the Acropolis, Paul was surrounded by idols. He was angry because the Athenians were following a lie. He was deeply moved because every one of those idols testified to their hunger for spiritual truth.

Athens . . . and America

I could not help but contrast Athens and America.

Pluralistic

1. The first word that came to my mind was pluralistic.

Athens could not have enough gods. It could not follow enough paths.

A poll released several months ago, found that 96% of Americans polled believed in the existence of God. Yet, 28% of them also believed in reincarnation, 45% of them thought Jesus probably sinned, and 75% percent of them did not believe in absolute truth.

On our currency we have the words, "In God we trust". The trouble is, we no longer collectively know which god that is.

Intolerant

2. Secondly, Athens, like America, was intolerant.

I found it very interesting that Luke slips in a little personal commentary on the Athenians. Notice verse 21.

(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

That sounds very tolerant, doesn't it? But just let someone come along and declare the gospel of Jesus Christ! Paul is called an idle babler; a seed picker. He is taken to the highest court in Athens, and, after he is finished, half the crowd sneers at him.

I thought they liked hearing something new! They like it as long as that new thing does not convict of sin and remind them that it is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment.

I heard a few days ago, that it took a great deal of pressure and wrangling just to have one of our town schools simply allow a small nativity set to be put on a table that already displayed symbols of other religions in the world; symbols of what other religions did during Christmas.

Hey, would somebody look up Christmas is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*? I happen to have it with me, so get ready for a shocking revelation! It says, "Christmas – the Christian holiday that commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ." Just don't remind anybody.^{iv}

It is becoming more and more apparent that America is open minded – as long as Christians are close mouthed.

Uncertain

3. The third word of that comes to my mind is the word uncertain.

Athens had a deep abiding uneasiness that perhaps it was indeed missing true spiritual reality, so they kept their monument to the unknown God.

Paul was moved by the sight of that monument. He knew he had the answer.

Empty

4. One more word that came to my mind, as I compared Athens to America, is the word empty.

Athens had heard it all. It was saturated with philosophies and speculations; it was surrounded by spiritualities, and it was empty.

Athens had it all, and it was not enough.

Would you have been moved by that – so deeply moved that you would move into action? Would you have been moved to not simply describe the darkness, but to willingly shed the light?

Many Christians get moved, but never get moving.

Paul's Delivery of a Timeless Message

Notice what Paul does next. And, notice the categories of people that he is dealing with. Look at verses 17 and 18 of Acts, chapter 17.

The worshipers

In verse 17a, we are told,

So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, . . .

This is the first category of people, which we will call, the worshipers.

The shoppers

Continue to verse 17b.

. . . and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

We will call this category of people, the shoppers.

Epicureans and Stoics

Look at verse 18a.

And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. . . .

This is the third group of people, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Continue to verse 18b.

. . . Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Let us stop at this verse for a moment. I learned more from my research about Epicureanism and Stoicism than you would ever want to know. But I do want you to know, and in fact, you should write in the margin of your Bible, one word beside each school of thought.

Beside the word "Epicurean," write the word, "indulgent". They believed that attaining pleasure and avoiding pain was the chief pursuit of man. They believed people only lived once, and there was nothing after that, so you should squeeze everything out of life that you could, while you could.

Do not get caught by the little saying I read recently, "You know you're getting old when you have money to burn, but the fire's gone out."

The Epicureans would say, burn it as quickly as you earn it; live it up.

While the Epicureans were indulgent, the Stoics were indifferent. They believed that the pursuit of man was to feel neither pleasure nor pain. Self mastery over circumstances, situations, emotions, etc. was living.

While they were very different, they were united in their contempt of Paul.

Paul's approach to delivering the message to the people of Athens

Now, notice verses 19 through 22. The Athenians take Paul to the Areopagus, or the high court.

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.) So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men

of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.”

We could learn something from Paul’s approach to the Athenians in these verses. While he ends his sermon with the threat of impending judgment, he begins by tactfully building a bridge.

Notice Paul does not say, “I observed that you are really carried away with idols; I observed how ridiculous you are.” No, Paul says “I observed that you are very religious.”

Some translations unfortunately, render the Greek compound word for “very religious,” to mean, “too superstitious”. That interprets more than it translates. The Greek compound word could actually be translated to read, “I observe that you have respect for the supernatural.”

Look further at verse 23.

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.

Six hundred years before Paul’s visit, history records that Athens had been overwhelmed with a terrible plague. Hundreds were ill and dying and the city was desperate for a cure. A famous poet from Crete, named Epimenides, came up with a plan to pacify whatever gods were causing the plague.

Epimenides went to the Areopagus and turned loose a flock of sheep. The plan was to let the sheep roam the city freely. Whenever an individual sheep lay down, they were to be sacrificed to the god of the nearest temple. The assumption was that the angry gods would actually draw the sheep to themselves. When the sheep were turned loose, however, many of

them lay down in places with no temples nearby. The people did not know what to do, so in order to cover all their religious bases, they built a monument and simply named it, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”

Paul arrives on the scene and says, “I’m here to give you the missing name; I’ve come to introduce to you that unknown God!”

Continue to verse 24.

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;

Paul is saying, “My God is more than a monument. He’s more than an idol of marble and stone. My God is the one and only, living Sovereign, and I want to tell you about Him.”

Conclusion

I am going to stop at this point and pick this up in our next discussion. However, I want to close by saying that I thought it was ironic, if not planned for us as students of scripture and history, to make a discovery. From the very place Epimenides released the sacrificial lambs to find their way into the path and wrath of angry gods, the apostle Paul declares to golden city of Greece that a Lamb has indeed been sacrificed to an angry God; that is, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That Lamb voluntarily wandered into the grasp of God’s wrath, and died in order to cure mankind from the plague of sin and the epidemic of everlasting death.

Paul said, “May I introduce to you that Lamb who came back to life – His name is Jesus Christ. He is more than a monument, He is the Lord of heaven and earth.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/21/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Dr. Mark Bailey, *To Follow Him* (Multnomah Books, 1997), p. 119.

ⁱⁱ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Klock and Klock Publishers, 1997), p. 67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Spurgeon, quoted by Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. in *Acts Commentary* (Moody Press).

^{iv} “Christmas,” *Britannica Junior Encyclopaedia* (1981 ed.), vol. 4, p. 992.