

## The Unknown God

### Part III

Acts 17:25-26

#### Introduction

Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God?! In other words, have you learned yet that God never learned anything – He always knew.

God never woke up one day and said, “I think I’ll work on some math problems.”

Who in their right mind would?! God created the laws and principles of mathematics by which He logically ordered His universe.

Nothing occurs to God. He is:

- omniscient – all knowing;
- omnipresent – all present;
- omnipotent – all powerful.

We will never grasp but a fraction of the knowledge of God.

One of the evidences that you will never master the study of God is the fact that you will never even master His revealed word, the Bible. You will never read the Bible enough times that you can put it on a shelf and say, “There, I’ve mastered it!”

No matter how many times you read the Bible, you are only just beginning to learn it. However, even though we will never master the study of God as revealed in His word, there is no study that is more important to life and living.

J. I. Packer’s introductory remarks in his book *Knowing God*, give an interesting illustration of that truth. He writes,

*Knowing about the nature and character of God is crucially important for the living of*

*our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London and put him down without explanation and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.<sup>i</sup>*

The tragedy of our generation, is that the study of the character of God has been removed from the curriculum of the evangelical church. The church today, is more interested in the blessings of God than the character of God.

The pulpits of our land have also been trivialized into personality displays, or therapeutic lecterns that dish out comfortable, practical tips on everything from hygiene to nutrition to positive thinking to financial, relational, marital three steps to fulfillment. I am not suggesting that the word of God does not address some of these things, but I am saying that these things have so taken center stage, that the person and character, the nature and attributes, the holiness and judgment, the grace and mercy of God are rarely expounded.

The Bible has become a manual on how to live a happy, prosperous life, rather than a manual on how to know and worship the true and living God.

Listen to this quote from Donald McCullough:

*Visit a church on Sunday morning – almost any will do – and you will likely find a congregation comfortable relating to a deity who fits nicely with its positions, who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. But you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery. The only sweaty palms will be those of the preacher, unsure whether the sermon will go over; the only shaking knees will be those of the soloist about to sing.*

*Yet the New Testament warns us, “Offer to God (believer) an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12) Today, reverence and awe have been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has turned into a candle flame with no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification. Why? Because we prefer the illusion of a safer deity, and so we have whittled God down to a more manageable size. It may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Ladies and gentlemen, I will propose to you today, that God has become trivialized simply because we do not know who God is. He has become, “The Unknown God”! So, we have sought to be re-introduced to Him through a sermon preached by the apostle Paul and recorded for us in Acts, chapter 17. Turn there in your Bible.

## Review

Thus far, in our study of Acts, chapter 17, we have uncovered two of Paul’s sermon points.

### My God is more than a monument!

1. Point number one – My God is more than a monument!

In other words, He is not a god of stone or gold or silver, He is the living and true Lord of heaven and earth.

### My God made it all!

2. Point number two – My God made it all!

In our last discussion, we looked at the world views of Deists, Pantheists, Atheists, and Finite Godists. Each world view demanded faith to believe what they believed. To review:

- For the **Deist** to believe that God created the world and then walked away, takes faith.
- For the **Polytheist** to believe that the world is filled with many gods and he or she is one of them, takes faith.
- For the **Atheist** to believe that there is no God; that order evolved on its own and that life and breath sprang out of nothingness, takes faith.
- For the **Finite Godist** to believe there is a God, but He is not powerful enough to handle a busy world, takes faith.
- For the **Theist** to believe the record of scripture, that God created the heavens and the earth by His almighty power and creative perfection, takes faith.

The faith of the Theist is substantiated by the creative order of the heavens and earth. As David said in the Psalms, chapter 19, verse 1,

***The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.***

Sir Isaac Newton had a perfectly scaled down replica of the then known solar system built for his studies. A large golden ball represented the sun at the center and the known planets revolved around it through a series of cogs, belts, and rods. It was a rather sophisticated, marvelous machine.

One day, while Newton was studying his model, an agnostic friend stopped by for a visit. The man marveled at the machinery and asked, “Who made this exquisite thing?”

Without looking up, Newton replied, “No one.” “No one?” his friend asked.

“That’s right,” said Newton, “all of these balls and cogs and belts and gears just happened to come together and, wonder of wonders, by chance they began revolving in their set orbits with perfect timing.”

The message was loud and clear.

Paul says to the Athenians, “My God made it all!”

## The Bold Declaration of Paul - Continued

In our study today, we will uncover the third point in Paul’s sermon.

## My God is the Almighty Mover and Shaker!

3. Point number three – “My God is the Almighty Mover and Shaker.”

Now, in order for the God of the apostle Paul, this unknown God to the Athenians, to be the mover and shaker of planet earth, two things would have to be true: God would have to be transcendent and immanent. It is easy to divide verses 25 through 29 of Acts, chapter 17, along these two theological expressions of the nature and character of God.

### God is transcendent

- God is transcendent.

When we say that God is transcendent, we mean that:

*God is over and above all of creation; He is separate from creation; He is a distinct, superior, sovereign spirit.*

While God is everywhere, He is not in everything! Notice what Paul says of God, in verses 24 through 25a,

***The God who made the world . . .***

(He is separate from the world),

***. . . and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, . . .***

(He is transcendent – over and above as Master),

***. . . does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands . . .***

This does not mean that we cannot serve Him, it simply means that God does not depend on us for His existence. Theologians refer to that as:

*The self-existence of God*

He does not need you in order to survive, you need Him! You do not put a plate of food out for this God; you do not have to burn incense to this Deity, as I saw in the homes of unbelievers in Japan, with their god-shelves and constantly burning incense. God does not want the work of our hands, He wants the worship of our hearts.

Notice, in fact, the next phrase in verse 25b,

***. . . as though He needed anything . . .***

*God is self-sufficient!*

The original Greek word translated “He needed anything,” is “prosdeomia”. This could be rendered, “He doesn’t want anything or need anything in addition.”

He is unlike us, isn’t He? We always want something in addition to what we already have. We may want an addition to our home or an addition to our automobile collection or an addition to our wardrobe or an addition to our status or position in life.

If you were to ask my wife, “Is there anything you would like more of?” – she would say, without hesitation, “More storage space.”

My wife’s birthday is coming up and what she would really like is another closet. They just do not sell those at Wal Mart!

If you were to ask me that question, I would probably say, “There’s a set of books I’d like to add to my library. I don’t have any room, but I’ll make room!”

Last year, you thought, “If only I made a few dollars more a week, I’d be so much better off.”

Well, now you make a few dollars more a week and now what? None of us ever say, “We have enough!”

God does! He is self-sufficient.

David wrote in Psalm, chapter 50, verses 10 through 12,

***Every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains.***

Now notice the last part of verse 25 of Acts, chapter 17.

***. . . since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things***

Now, at this point in his sermon, Paul begins to fire some missiles of truth into the Athenians fortress of Polytheism. They had given to Zeus the honor of being the source of life. In fact, the Greek word for life is “zoe”. Paul is saying, “Zoe does not come from Zeus!”

Paul says, “There is a mover and a shaker of planet earth – that sovereign, self-existent, self-sufficient, transcendent Lord is the God you do not know.”

Now why is it important that we understand the transcendence of God – that God is separate from His creation; that He is above and sovereign over His creation?

One reason is that it gives us a proper view toward creation. You cannot deify or personalize the earth as if it were a mother that requires your protection in order for her to be happy and fulfilled. I have seen bumper stickers that say, “Love your mother – earth”.

The elevation of creation occurs simply because people do not know the Creator. So, rather than love, worship, and honor the Creator, they offer all of that love, worship, and honor to creation.

However, if we understand that a separate, superintending Person, known as the triune God, who through Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, created all there is, then we place our worship at His feet.

The Bible makes it clear, when it told us “The heavens are telling of the glory of God . . .”, that God uses nature in a way that is similar to the way we use a telephone. We hear, as it were, the attributes of creative design and power coming through the telephone of nature. Can you imagine a man hearing the voice of his sweetheart through the telephone, then falling in love with the telephone? Can you imagine him saying, “Well, I heard her voice through this plastic thing, and I decided to marry it instead. I just love my telephone!”

Isn't that what unregenerate man has done? He sees and hears the character of creator God coming through nature, and then falls in love with nature.

### **God is immanent**

- Now, not only is God transcendent, or over and above all of creation, He is also immanent.

When we say that God is immanent, we mean that:

*While God is separate from creation, He is at the same time, actively involved in human nature and human history; He is a personal, caring, loving Leader who interacts with His creation.*

The Greeks that Paul spoke to, knew nothing of a personal, caring God. Yet, as already declared in the last part of verse 25, Paul will go on to teach the personal involvement of God.

Matthew records the sermon of Jesus Christ, when He preached that creator God was involved in the sending of sunshine and rain, the feeding and protecting of the birds, and the clothing of the flowers. Jesus then made an astounding politically

incorrect statement to His human audience, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 26b, saying,

*. . . Are you not worth much more than they?*

In other words, you have more value than a bird; you are more important than a flower; a tree does not have an inherent right to exist, but you do! Imagine how Jesus would be quoted in the newspapers today!

The wonderful thing is the point that Christ was making with His audience; that is, “If God cares so much about the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, imagine how much He cares about you.”

Verse 25b tells us,

*. . . He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things*

James wrote, in chapter 1, verse 17,

*Every good thing given and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father . . .*

He is not a distant, removed, transcendent God, He is an intimately involved – a transcendent, yet immanent – God.

Paul goes on to say, “Here’s just how involved He is!” Notice verse 26 of Acts, chapter 17,

*and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation*

The Greeks believed they were a special master race. Paul says, “You originated from the same man everyone else did – Adam and his wife, Eve.”

The Greeks could not claim to be some special class. They were made out of the same clay as everyone else.

I found it fascinating to read the results of a study by two biochemists at the University of California at Berkeley. The article said that most of the DNA in human cells is in the cell nucleus, in the form of chromosomes. But there is also DNA outside the nucleus – in mitochondria (or mtDNA). The interesting thing about mtDNA is that over generations, it changes at a steady, known rate of mutation in human beings. Another interesting thing is that mtDNA is inherited solely through the mother.

These biochemists examined mtDNA from 147 individuals representing five broad geographic regions of the world. They were able then to construct a family tree by analyzing the differences in the mtDNA samples. The data revealed a common ancestral mtDNA. They believe now that one single

female was the ancestor of everyone on Earth today. They have nicknamed her EVE.

So, it is not mother earth – it is mother Eve! What a discovery!!

Approximately two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul made the declaration that the proud Greek was of the same family tree as everyone else. There is no special class or race.

In other words, the unknown God is color blind; He is race blind; He is no respecter of persons. No one has the inside track with Him – all are equally sinners and all will stand before Him one day.

Paul is moving toward the climax of his sermon with that very point.

There is more on this point that I had originally hoped to discuss, but if I do not stop now, I will not be able to develop the next critical point of Paul's sermon. The next point is that God has already determined the boundaries of Russia and China and America, and He knows how long these nations are going to be around.

## Application

Let me apply the preciousness of these attributes of God that we have studied today with an illustration by William Beebe.

*Theodore Roosevelt and I used to play a little game together. After an evening of talk, before retiring to our sleeping quarters, we would go out on the lawn and search the skies until we found the faint spot of light-mist beyond the lower left hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then one or the other of us would recite: "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one billion suns, each larger than our sun."*

*Then Roosevelt would grin and say: "Well, I think we are small enough now! Let's go on to bed."*

The wonderful thing about studying of God's greatness and majesty; that is, that He is *transcendent* and *immanent*; that He alone is *self-existent* and *self-sufficient*; that He is the *divine resource* and the *divine ruler*, is that when I discover how big He is, I re-discover how small I am. And my problems, that I thought were large, become very small compared to Him. My little challenges over my brief life, are nothing compared to His transcendence and immanence. And I can take every one of my problems and cast them on Him because He cares about me.

This is like my little four year old daughter coming to me recently, with her little plastic bracelet that she could not get on her wrist. It is the one with the really fancy plastic jewels all over it. She brought it to me and said, "Daddy, can you fix this?"

With a few adjustments, I put that little bracelet on her little wrist. It was a big problem to her, but it was nothing to me.

The reason the church is overwhelmed with its problems and Christians are as anxious and troubled as non-Christians, is because their God has become small, and distant. In reality, He has become an unknown God.

However, when you discover the greatness of your God, then you become small enough to rest in the shadow of the Almighty. And then, you can flee into the strength of His everlasting arms.

Like the song says,

*He's got the whole world in His hands,  
He's got the whole world in His hands,  
He's got the whole world in His hands,  
He's got the whole world in His hands.*

*He's got you and me, Christian, in His hands,  
He's got you and me, Christian, in His hands,  
He's got you and me, Christian, in His hands,  
He's got the whole world in His hands.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/4/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> J. I. Packer, Knowing God (InterVarsity Press, 1987), pp. 14-15.

<sup>ii</sup> Donald W. McCullough, The Trivialization of God (NavPress, 1995), pp. 13-14.