

The Unknown God

Part V

Acts 17:30-34

Introduction

James Woolsey, former Director of Central Intelligence, told the following story some time ago at a conference on global organized crime. A really funny incident took place when FBI Agents were conducting an investigation at a San Diego psychiatric hospital for medical insurance fraud. After hours of reviewing thousands of medical records, the dozens of agents worked up quite an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza parlor to order dinner for his colleagues. The following telephone conversation took place and was recorded by the FBI, who were in the process of taping all incoming and outgoing phone calls.

Agent: "Hello. I'd like to order nineteen pizzas and sixty-seven cans of coke."

Pizza Man: "And where would you like them delivered?"

Agent: "We're over here at the psychiatric hospital."

Pizza Man: "To the psychiatric hospital?"

Agent: "That's right, I'm an FBI agent."

Pizza Man: "You're an FBI agent?"

Agent: "That's correct, just about everybody over here is. Oh, and you'll have to go around to the back entrance to deliver the pizzas, we have the front doors locked."

Pizza Man: "And you say you're an FBI agent?"

Agent: "That's correct."

Pizza Man: "And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?"

Agent: "That right. We've been here all day, and we're starving."

Pizza Man: "I don't think so!" Click.

This story is a classic illustration of the challenge of communication. The agent should have instead, given the pizza man a little more background at the beginning of the conversation. He could have said something like, "Hello, I'm an FBI agent and my colleagues and I are in the process of conducting an investigation at the San Diego Psychiatric Hospital. We've been here all day and would like to order dinner."

However, because the background was not fully established, the message never got across.

Review

We have been listening to a sermon by the apostle Paul in our last four discussions. Today, we will continue with a fifth discussion of Paul's sermon to the Athenians in Acts, chapter 17.

We have been observing background, developed by Paul, as he moves toward his request. In order for Paul to get his message across, he has spent a lot of time on the background. And make no mistake, the apostle Paul sounds as ridiculous to the Athenians as the FBI agent sounded to the pizza man. Paul has been introducing the Athenians to "An Unknown God".

Let us briefly review several statements Paul has made about this Unknown God.

My God is more than a monument!

1. First, in verse 23, Paul states, “My God is more than a monument!”

In other words, He is alive; He is Lord of heaven and earth.

My God made it all!

2. Secondly, in verses 24 and 25, Paul declares, “My God made it all!”

In other words, He, the creator of the universe, is:

- transcendent – over, above, and separate from creation;
- immanent – personally involved in His creation.

My God is the Almighty Mover and Shaker!

3. Thirdly, in verses 26 through 29, Paul says, “My God is the Almighty Mover and Shaker!”

He, the Almighty Mover and Shaker of planet earth, is the:

- Divine Resource – providing all we need;
- Divine Ruler – as the God of anthropology and history.

This has all been background to set the stage for the final and most compelling point of Paul’s sermon.

Paul’s Final Declaration

Now we move into the fourth and final point of Paul’s sermon to the Athenians.

My God is the Divine Magistrate in the coming judgment!

4. Finally, Paul states, “My God is the Divine Magistrate in the coming judgment!”

This is the conclusion of the sermon – and this is the confrontation of the gospel – *judgment day is coming*.

Three Judgments

In Sam Smith’s outstanding book, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, he has included a prophetic timeline of the coming judgments. In order to understand which judgment Paul is referring to, we need to be aware that there is more than one judgment scheduled in the future.

Judgment #1 – The Judgment of Believers

1. The first judgment is the judgment of believers.

This judgment, referred to as the “Bema Seat,” with “Bema” being the Greek word that referred to “the tribunal,” is for believers only. This judgment, therefore, cannot take place until after the rapture of the church. Most pre-tribulational expositors believe this will happen prior to the marriage ceremonies of the church to the Lamb, Jesus Christ. I would agree that this judgment takes place in heaven shortly after the rapture.

The Bible makes it clear that this judgment does not determine whether you get into heaven or not. The fact that you have been raptured as a member of Christ’s body secures that fact.

However, it is a judgment of every believer’s works, and God will reward every believer according to their faithfulness as a believer. I also believe another outcome of this judgment will be the position and responsibility of the believer in the millennial kingdom.

Some Christians are going to be governors and leaders in the thousand year reign of Christ on earth because they have been committed to Christ’s cause and church. Other Christians will be garbage collectors. Why? Paul says in I Corinthians that unfaithful believers will have all their works burned up because they lived unproductive, unfaithful lives on earth. In chapter 3, verse 15, Paul wrote,

If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

However, so that none of us anticipate anything of ourselves being worthy of reward, apart from the grace of God, let me tell you what Augustine, the fifth century theologian, called the “Bema Seat”. He called it, “the time when God crowns His own gifts”. By this, he meant that the only way we can perform with any measure of obedience to God is by God’s gracious help. Not only does God stoop to help us, He will, at the “Bema Seat,” reward us for what we could not possibly have done without His help. There is no wonder that our response will be to cast our rewards back at His feet.

This is not the judgment that Paul is warning the Athenians to avoid.

Judgment #2 – The Judgment of the Nations

2. The second judgment is the judgment of the nations.

When the rapture has taken place and the believers are in heaven, then earth enters a seven year period known as, “the tribulation”. This is a time when God unleashes His wrath on humanity; a time when the nations of the world unite against Israel; a time when the ecumenical dream finally comes true and any doctrine that divides is laid aside and a one world church is created, which follows their mesmerizing, spiritual, and political leader, the antichrist.

Following this seven year period, Matthew gives us further information in chapter 13. The redeemed and the unredeemed will be separated. Those who have placed their faith in Christ during the tribulation will be ushered by the angels into the kingdom, then the thousand year reign of Christ with His bride, the church, will commence. The unredeemed will be banished to Hades to await their final judgment and sentence of eternal hell.

Judgment #3 – The Great White Throne

3. The third judgment is the Great White Throne (Revelation 20).

This is the final judgment; the comprehensive judgment of the unredeemed from all of human history. They will stand before God to be judged.

Sam summarizes what will happen at this time:

- First, this divine courtroom will prove each individual a guilty sinner.
- Secondly, the court will reveal that the individual is not redeemed and is therefore liable for his own punishment.¹

Turn to Revelation, chapter 20, which makes clear that in order to determine the unredeemed, two books will be consulted. One set of books is the record of that individual’s works – every sin, every evil deed, every impure thought, every crime, every secret sin will be exposed. The other book is the book of life – the names of every person who has been redeemed by faith alone in the Lamb of God alone will be recorded.

Look at the judgment that Paul is about to mention to the Athenians in verses 11 through 15.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This is not popular stuff today. The most recent public opinion polls show a belief in heaven is held by nearly twice as many people as a belief in hell.

Why? Because the wrath of God is not a very popular concept. And frankly, many churches today skip the subject, bypass it, or even ignore it because it is hard to talk about.

That is why you can talk about golf to your unbelieving co-workers; you can talk about the weather; you can talk about the upcoming Super Bowl; you can talk about kids and school, but you clam up when it comes to talking about Jesus Christ. Why is that? May I suggest that it is because inherent in the message of Jesus Christ is a message of condemnation; a message about guilt and sin; a message about a future in heaven or hell. In other words, just bringing up His name and His plan of salvation immediately conjures up in the heart of every person you talk to, the matter of future accountability.

There is a judgment day coming! They do not want to hear it, and you know it before you even mention it.

One author had a conversation with an unbeliever. Let me read it to you.

A man once told me, “I’m not into that hell stuff. I don’t believe in the wrath of God. But even if hell is true, I’m going to turn the place around because all my friends are going to be there. We are going to go down there and have a party.”

He obviously didn’t get the picture, so I said, “Do me a favor. When you go home today, turn on a burner on your stove and wait until it gets real hot. Then sit on that

burner and try to get a party going at the same time.”

He did not understand that hell has no fellowship, no parties, no get-togethers, no buffets. God will eternally quarantine all those who are not rightly related to Him in the pit of the universe called hell.ⁱⁱ

Perhaps you think a preacher should not talk about hellfire and judgment; should not be so judgmental and negative. Furthermore, he should not try to scare people into heaven by talking about hell.

Well, if you will turn back to the book of Acts, you will not like Paul's sermon either. Paul now draws to a conclusion in chapter 17, and that is exactly what Paul does.

He has presented all the background information on the character and nature of God that was necessary for the Athenians to understand the right and power God has to one day, demand an accounting with the human race that He created. Notice verse 17 of Acts, chapter 17. Then, let us pick our paragraph back up with verse 30.

Therefore . . .

(in other words, “on the basis of everything I’ve just said”),

. . . having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,

The word translated “overlooked” comes from a Greek word that could be rendered, “He did not interfere”. In other words, God has chosen not to wipe Athens off the face of the earth because of their idolatry. But Paul says, “A new day has come – a new dispensation, if you will. The plan of salvation demands repentance; that is, a change of mind, about this personal God, the Lord of heaven and earth. And you’d better change your mind about Him . . .” – continue to verse 31a,

because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed . . .

By the way, Jesus Christ referred to Himself as the judge and He used the titles, “the Son,” “the Son of Man,” in John, chapter 5.

Now follow this – in our last discussion, Paul declared that from one man, the first Adam, all of humanity descended. Now, he declares that from another man, the second Adam or the God-man, all of humanity will be judged. Romans, chapter 5, discusses this concept thoroughly.

Now, by what right does this God-man judge the world? Look further in Acts, chapter 17, at verse 31b,

. . . having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.

The climax and the confrontation of Paul's sermon is this, “Leave your dead idols and follow the living and true God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the coming Judge.”

Paul's entire sermon could be summarized this way:

There is one God; there is one human race; there is one Savior, therefore, there is one Judge.

The polytheism of Athens was swept away. You cannot have many gods and follow the true and living God. There are not many roads that lead to God, there is one road which leads to God, and that road is Christ. God's claim to that revelation is the empty tomb of Jesus Christ.

Our nation, which has become a mixing pot of polytheism and pluralism and syncretism, is in desperate need of a reintroduction to this true and living Lord.

Some time ago, an article in *World Magazine* contained an interview with Jim Stephens. Stephens was a Buddhist for fourteen years.

He talked about the inroads being made today into American intelligentsia by Buddhism. I find that fascinating because the average American does not like to talk about the reality of hell, and yet Buddhists believe in sixteen different hells. That is beside the point, I guess.

Jim Stephens raises his concern over the fact of Buddhism's growing influence in local churches and even in formerly evangelical works. “Buddhist monks,” he says, “are increasingly welcome as speakers in churches. Last Christmas, St. Anslem's Episcopal Church in Orange City, California, brought in a statue of the Buddha and celebrated his birthday alongside that of Christ.”

Stephens eventually reached, what he called, “the despairing dead end of Buddhism”. He came to grips with the “concrete reality of Christ's resurrection,” and was converted.

The fact that the Buddha is dead and Jesus is alive is the supreme claim of Christ to not only be the living and true Lord, but the coming judge.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Divine Magistrate must be . . .

Have you ever thought about the fact that for Jesus Christ to be the Judge, He would have to be God? The only way billions of people from all of human history could ever be judged fairly, so that no verdict could be wrong, would demand every attribute and quality of God's character. Let me list a few for you.

The Divine Magistrate must be holy

1. First, the Divine Magistrate of all humanity would have to be holy.

This Judge; this Divine Magistrate would have to be the perfect standard of holiness and perfection. He could not be bribed, cajoled, influenced, or manipulated. If He could, with even one human, be influenced, then all of humanity could rightly demand eternity in heaven and He would be deserving of hell.

Only a Holy Judge can inspire the awe and respect that humanity will give to no earthly judge. Only a Holy Judge can see through the excuses of sin and demand a holy verdict.

I used to watch "The People's Court" on television. I would find myself listening to the first side and thinking, "Man, they've got some good points." Then the other side would speak and I would think, "Wow, that puts everything in a different light!"

Part of the problem is the ability of every human being to not only make themselves look good, but to justify their sin.

Someone in our church clipped an article from *The Wall Street Journal* that is classic proof of that ability. The question was posed to a senior high student, "Is cheating ever okay?"

You would think that is a simple thing to answer – "No!"

Let me read the answer of a high school senior honors student.

I think there are different degrees of cheating. I'm a dedicated student, but when my history teacher bombards me with fifty questions due tomorrow, or when a teacher gives me a fill in the blanks worksheet on a night when I have swim practice, aerobics, homework and church, I'm going to copy from a friend. It's not like I won't know the stuff for the test and, since I only do this when I need to, it isn't a habit. Every kid does this when they are in a pinch. It doesn't mean they are "cheaters".

A holy God can see through the flimsy excuses of humanity, and His tribunal will declare, "Thou shalt not lie." Cheating is a form of deception, and deception is synonymous with lying.

You might say, "But wait a second – even a holy God, if He were only holy, would be unable to judge. Yes, He is the standard, and He did say, 'Thou shalt not lie,' but did He really know all of my circumstances?"

The Divine Magistrate must be omniscient

2. Secondly then, the Divine Magistrate, in order to accomplish the task of judging the world with perfect justice, must be omniscient.

In other words, He would have to know all the facts. This Judge; the Divine Magistrate would have to be able to weigh all the evidence, understand every nuance, and know every motive that proves a person really did sin.

By the way, how many unbelievers do you know who admit that they are guilty sinners? I can count on one hand the people I have encountered with the gospel who have said, "Man, I need to hear about this because I am a guilty sinner."

No, the world is filled with innocent people who are misunderstood.

This is illustrated best by something I read several years ago. A monarch once visited his prison with the purpose of pardoning whoever was truly remorseful for committing their crime. He interviewed each criminal and then asked them, "Are you guilty of your crime and deserving of your punishment?"

Each one of them said, "No, I'm not guilty. I was framed; evidence was overlooked; I had a crooked lawyer; I don't deserve this sentence . . ."

Finally, he came to one man and said, "Are you guilty?"

The man humbly answered, "Yes, Your Majesty, I am guilty."

The king said to the warden, "Release this man immediately, before he corrupts all of these innocent people."

Jesus Christ knows the innocent from the guilty – that means He must know all things.

I remember my parents going out one day and telling my brothers and me that we could not watch

any television while they were gone. When they came home, they asked, “Did you boys watch TV?”

“No sir. No ma’am.”

My mother walked over to the television and put her hand behind it. In those days, they had those big tubes that heated up. Well, the back of our television could have fried an egg. It was at that moment that I realized she was smarter than I was. In fact, at that moment, anyone was smarter than I was.

However, there was one time when she was not aware of all the facts and I got a spanking for something I did not do.

Halloween was coming. Back when I was a kid, we would get four or five grocery bags full of candy. Now you need to understand that thirty years ago, observing Halloween was not considered a test of orthodoxy. We all dressed up like hobos and hit the streets at dusk. Sure, there were rumors of razor blades in apples, but we were not looking for fruit anyway, so we were safe.

There was a mask that someone had given us – a rubbery mask that looked hilarious. I was supposed to be doing my homework, but instead I slipped downstairs to the basement closet, put the mask on, and entertained my younger brother. Mom told me to put it up and not to touch it again – or else!

So, I was obediently sitting in my seat, doing my homework, when one of my younger brothers (I had three brothers, which provided a very peaceful childhood!), went downstairs and put on the mask. He then heard our mom coming, so he took the mask off and, just before she appeared, threw it in my lap and ran around the corner. She yanked me up and proceeded to discipline me according to the righteous ordinances of almighty God. But I was innocent – I really was!

I have held this over my wonderful mother’s head for years. And Mom, if you listen to the tape of this sermon, and I am sure you will, I have forgiven you – even though it warped my personality, I have forgiven you!

The irony is that I am now a parent and I have made similar mistakes. The only one capable of judging sin is one who knows all the facts.

You might say, “But how do You know the facts, Lord? You say You know all things, but You should have seen what happened.”

The Divine Magistrate must be omnipresent

3. So thirdly, not only must He be holy and omniscient, this Divine Magistrate must also be omnipresent.

He was there when my brother threw that mask in my lap and ran away – and as far as I am concerned, my brother will be severely judged. He is everywhere at once.

God saw you fill out your income tax return. He was there with you on that date. He saw you cheat on that exam. God was sitting next to you when you watched that movie. He saw you log onto cyber-porn. He heard you lie to your boss. God saw you steal. He watched you write off that activity as a business expense. He listened in on that phone conversation. God heard your adulterous plans. He heard your filthy language.

God is not only judge and jury, but at the Great White Throne, He is the eye witness. And He is supremely qualified to be your judge.

That still is not enough, however. In order for God to be the righteous Judge who judges evil and exacts eternal punishment for crimes against His eternal character and His eternal Son, who offered the gift of eternal life, He must not only be holy and omniscient and omnipresent, He must also be powerful enough to carry out the verdict. If He were not, billions of unredeemed would certainly attempt to overthrow His court.

The Divine Magistrate must be omnipotent

4. So, finally, He must be omnipotent, or all powerful.

The apostle Paul said to the Athenians, “You claim Zeus has power over everything, but I claim that my God is instead, the One who is so powerful that He conquered the one absolute certainty of living that no one can deny, and that is the absolute of dying.

God revealed that power by raising from the dead, His son, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. And that Man will one day occupy the throne as Judge and Jury and Executioner of all who have denied His character and refused His glory.

Conclusion

Now notice verses 32 through 34 of Acts, chapter 17.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” So Paul went out of their midst. But

some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite [one of the thirty judges] and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

The three responses to Paul's sermon are the same three responses that will occur among those hearing this sermon today. Some were critical, others were curious, and a few were converted.

How can you avoid that awful judgment day? Repent! Paul said, in effect, "Change your mind – leave your idols and the gods that you have created in your own mind – and follow the living and true God by faith in Jesus Christ."

I will close with the following story:

In 1829, a Philadelphia man named George Wilson, robbed the United States mail and killed someone in the process. Wilson was arrested, brought to trial, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged.

Some friends intervened on his behalf and were finally able to obtain a pardon for Wilson from President Andrew Jackson. But, when informed of this, Wilson refused to accept the pardon.

The sheriff was unwilling to carry out the sentence. How could he hang a pardoned man?

An appeal was sent to President Jackson. Perplexed, Jackson turned to the U.S. Supreme Court to decide the case. Chief Justice John Marshall wrote the ruling that "a pardon rejected is no pardon at all".

George Wilson would have to face his sentence. So, although Wilson's pardon lay on the sheriff's desk, George Wilson hanged by the neck until dead.

My friends, your pardon was written in blood from the cross of Jesus Christ. It is efficacious to those who believe. But to those who refuse to receive His death on their behalf, it is no pardon at all.

There is a judgment day coming. Have you accepted the pardon; have you received the Lamb of God as your personal Savior?

Move from being critical; move from being curious; move to being converted – to being a member of God's family, by a personal prayer of faith in Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/18/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Sam Smith, What the Bible Says About the Future, p. 45.

ⁱⁱ Tony Evans, Our God Is Awesome (Moody Publishers), p. 244.

ⁱⁱⁱ World Magazine, (Sept. 20, 1997), p. 23.