

## ~ACTS~

## Lesson 54- Knowing the Unknown God

## Acts 17:22-34

We left off last week in our study in the book of Acts, as Paul was waiting for his companions, Silas and Timothy, to come meet him in Athens. And while he was waiting, he began looking around at this pagan city, seeing statues of thousands of false gods and alters to abominable things. And as a result, Paul was stirred in his spirit to preach the Gospel, **Acts 17:16-17**. Paul had started in the synagogue of the Jews, teaching on the Sabbath, and daily he was in the Agora marketplace, the center of public life, and he was preaching Jesus and the Resurrection. Then Greek philosophers of Athens began debating with him and wanting to know more, they invite him to preach on top of the Areopagus. Which is where we find ourselves today in verse 22 as Paul was in Athens preaching to the council of the Areopagites on top of Mars Hill. We left off last week just touching on the beginning of sermon which begins at verse 22...

**22) Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;**

Notice the gentle message of the Gospel. Our words don't need to be harsh; they just need to be full of Truth, seasoned with salt, 2 Tim 2:24-26. The Word will do what it does best... convict. It will cut deep to the soul, Heb 4:12. And then the people have the choice, humble or harden; hear or reject. Paul doesn't attack these pagans for being ignorant of the Truth but commends them for their desire to know spiritual things. **I perceive that in all things you are very religious.** You δεισιδαίμων, you reverence demons. They had a desire for the supernatural; things that are immortal and eternal. So Paul uses this as a starting point, directing them to the Truth.

**23) for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:**

Knowing the Unknown God would have been a good title for Paul's sermon that day. And he begins drawing their attention to knowing the Unknown God. This God, Paul says, they are already worshipping, but now Paul tells them that this God is the One True Living God, the Maker of all things, the Sustainer of Life, and the Righteous Judge... it is **Him I proclaim to you**. Paul begins proclaiming the Gospel using two factors to appeal to them: Creation and Conscience.

**24) God, who made the world (κόσμος- the ordered universe) and everything in it, since He (οὗτος- this one) is Lord of heaven and earth (He is heaven and earth's Lord), does not dwell in temples made with hands.**

Creation is Paul's first appeal to introducing them to the Unknown God. Creation and conscience are two innate factors that leave the hearer without excuse, **Romans 1:19-20**. The Creation impresses on a person's conscience to want to know God. There is a drive inside every person to seek after God, because He is the Creator of the ordered universe and everything in it. And this God is Lord of heaven and earth. Many times, we hear the phrase Lord of heaven and earth and we don't stop to think about what that means. Jesus is heaven and earth's Lord. The sun and the moon and the stars, and all of creation, they cry out to Him, they praise Him as their Lord, **Psalm 19:1-6**; Luke 19:38-40; Psalm 50:6; 89:5; 97:6; 148:3. Therefore, Paul goes on to make the point that this unknown God doesn't dwell in temples made with human hands as these Greek gods are displayed in the Agora. Solomon said something similar right after he dedicated the temple to the Lord, **1 Kings 8:27**; 2 Chronicles 2:6.

**25) Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.**

This word “worshipped” is θεραπεύω- it is the word for physical healing. We get the word therapy from this word. When someone is sick, they desperately need the service of a physician. That’s the sense Paul has in using this word. God isn’t sick, and he is not in need of the service of a physician. There is nothing that man can do or needs to do to give life to God. But rather it is the exact opposite. He gave life to us! Paul goes on saying... **He gives to all life, breath, and all things.** He is the Life giver, the Sustainer, the Healer. We are desperately in need of Him, whether people know it or not. Jesus is holding this entire universe together by the Word of His power, Heb 1:2. And it is through Him and for Him and in Him that all things consist, Col 1:16-17. But what is even more astounding is that Jesus not only gave us physical life, but He also wants us to have Eternal Life with Him, and to do so, He gave His own life so that we might live forever with Him. So Paul says that God is not in need of the service of a physician to be healed, but instead we were born dead in our sins, sick unto death, destined for eternal hell, but God healed us... Isaiah 53:5- *but He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.* We’re the ones in need of a Healer, not God. And He gave Himself so that we might be healed.

**26) And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,**

God is the Creator of all things, and all people in every nation came out from one blood, one person... Adam. It is interesting that Paul uses the word blood to describe the person of Adam. Leviticus tells us that the life is in the blood, Lev 17:11. But the blood of man was contaminated by sin, so God sent His Son, the Lamb of God, the kinsman to Adam who had the sinless blood of God and was a blood relation to Adam because he was the Son of God. And He shed His perfect sinless blood on the cross so that we could have eternal redemption in Him, Heb 9:11-12.

But in order to send His Son to the earth legally as the Kinsman Redeemer, He had to come through the gate of the woman. And to do this, God had to providentially arrange His plan so that at the fulness of time Salvation could be brought to this earth. And this is what Paul says in his next statement... **and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings.** This is describing the rise and fall of the nations of the world to usher in the Messiah and to eventually usher in our final redemption when He comes back. This is God working providentially for our good so that we can obtain salvation.

Within this providence, through His foreknowledge, He determined and pre-appointed times and boundaries of the nations of the world to accomplish His work of Salvation. Using the free will of mankind, He arranged Egypt to protect His chosen nation Israel, Acts 7:14-17. Assyria and Babylon were dishonorable vessels that dispersed His people throughout the world, Jeremiah 21:8-10. Then Persia conquered Babylon and the temple was restored in Jerusalem, Ezra 1:1-8. (Cyrus’ name was prophesied 250 years earlier, **Isaiah 45:1**). Alexander the Great conquered Persia and Hellenized the world with the Greek culture and language, **Daniel 10:20**; 11:2-4. This dispersing provided Hellenistic Jewish synagogues throughout the known world, **Ezek 11:16**. Then Rome invaded and brought a government and road system that was necessary to disperse the Gospel. And all this was known before the foundation of the world and through His foreknowledge, He weaved together His plan of redemption by which He determined and pre-appointed the rise and fall of nations for this one purpose... for the Salvation of mankind, Gal 4:1-5; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 19-20; Daniel 10:20; 11:2-4.

**27) so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;**

God is not far from us. Even those who are still dead in their sins and separated from God, His goodness is calling them to Him. His arms are held wide open, and He is working to call every one of us to Him, Isaiah 62:1; John 4:34; **5:17-21**; 6:29, 44; 12:32. God will work on a global level with nations and

kingdoms, but He also works intimately with each individual person as His goodness is calling us to repentance and faith in Him, **Psalm 107:7-9**. When you look back on your life, and the struggles that we all go through, you will always find that God was right there to help us and lead us by the right way. He doesn't cause these bad things to happen, but in the midst of hard times, He is the One to carry us through. And as you look back at those times in your life you will always find that He was there, not far from you, **Psalm 107:10-43**. This is His providential goodness. God, the Trinity, has been and is still continuing to work for one purpose... **so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him**. So that we might have Fellowship with Him. This is **Romans 8:28**- the all of God working together for the good of those who love Him...

I love this verse 27 because this may be the best verse to prove that man is completely capable of knowing and choosing God. ...**so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him**. Yes, we are born into sin, destined for eternal hell, but inside every one of us is the ability to seek and grope and find our Lord. We have free will, and even though we are born "bent" toward sin, and all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, this doesn't mean we lost our ability to choose Him and seek Him and grope for Him. And in fact, God is working and going through great lengths, drawing all peoples to Himself through His providential goodness, so that we might find Him.

Paul continues telling them about the closeness we have to our God. He ends verse 27 saying **He is not far from each one of us... 28) for in Him we live and move and have our being** (ἔσμεν- we are existing), **as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'**

God is our Creator and this creation, which includes all people, are functioning in Him, and through Him, and by Him and for Him, **John 1:4, 9; Col 1:16-17**. To make this point, Paul quotes two Greek poets. He says, **as also some of your own poets have said...** He is speaking to pagans who don't know the Scriptures, so Paul draws Truth from something they are familiar with just as he did by bringing their attention to the alter to the Unknown God. The two poets are Epimenides and Aratas. Aratas was a pupil of Zeno, who originally founded Stoicism. Paul then concludes that since we are created by God, then how can man think that God can be shaped by something that man has formed?

**29) Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.**

Athens was full of arts and eloquence and statues symbolizing the gods, but they were all shaped by the hands of men. But the Divine Nature of the One True Living God cannot be represented by even the most beautiful art and sculptures and precious metals since all these things came out from Him.

Now Paul gets to the heart of the Gospel... repentance, faith, and final judgement.

**30-31) <sup>30</sup> Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.**

This is an interesting verse. Does this mean that God overlooked sin? If He did, this wouldn't be Just. Forgiveness doesn't mean that God ignored or looked the other way concerning sin. God is Holy, Righteous and Just and He has to deal with sin Righteously. So what does Paul mean when he says **God overlooked** these times of ignorance? This word "overlooked" is ὑπεριδῶν, to look over. Paul is saying that God looked over their sin. If He wasn't looking at their sins, what was God looking at? I believe He was looking to the cross. From before the world began, it was God's plan to pour out all His wrath for the sin of the whole world, past, present, and future, on His Son Jesus on the cross, **1 Peter 1:20**. And it was His mercy and forbearance that delayed His Righteous wrath concerning sin, "looking over" sin until that fulness of time when He could pour out His wrath on Jesus, **Romans 3:21-26**. Now that Jesus has paid

the price for sin, this is the age of Grace, and God is commanding all men everywhere to repent, μετανοέω- turn away from sin and turn upon Jesus Christ. This is the commandment of God... Everlasting Life, but it only comes through repentance and faith in Jesus, John 12:50.

The cross was a specific, predestined point in time that God established before the foundation of the world to judge the sin of all the people past, present, and future. And there is coming another predestined, appointed time when God will judge the world in Righteousness. This is at the Coming of Jesus Christ after the Tribulation when Jesus comes back as King of kings and Lord of lords. But even then, He will not be judging the world on their sin, but on one question... did they receive Jesus Christ and His Words of Life? That is the one thing that all mankind will be judged on... not how good or bad they lived this life, but did they place their whole trust in Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation, John 12:47-50.

Final Judgement is part of the message of the Gospel. Sinners must know that rejecting Jesus Christ will one day put them face to face with the Eternal Judge. And Paul says this Eternal Judge was ordained by God and given authority when He raised Him from the dead. And notice the emphasis Paul puts on the humanity of Jesus. **He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.** It is because Jesus is a Man, this is the reason He can be the Eternal Judge, **John 5:26-27**. He is the Kinsman Redeemer, Son of God and Son of Man. And God has appointed this authority to Him as Son of Man, **John 6:27**. And it is the Man, Jesus Christ who will be coming back on that pre-appointed Day to Judge the earth-dwellers, οἰκουμένη for the rebellion against His command of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Paul says, **He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.** It was the resurrection that perfected our Salvation in Him. Because at the Resurrection, the Father appointed Jesus as our High Priest and Eternal Judge, **Psalm 110**; 2:6-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; 2:10-18; 1:5-13. On that pre-appointed Day of the Lord, Jesus will pour out His Righteous wrath on all unbelievers, **Jude 14-15**; Rev 3:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 19:11-16; 2 Thess 1:8-12. Paul had been preaching Jesus and the Resurrection in the Agora, but now this conviction of final judgement from the Man who was Resurrected from the dead is more than they want to hear, and the council begins to mock him...

**32-33)** <sup>32</sup> **And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.”** <sup>33</sup> **So Paul departed from among them.**

Paul spoke the Truth, and many rejected his message. Even the ones who said, **“We will hear you again on this matter”** I think this was still a polite way of rejecting Paul. And we know this because **Paul departed from among them.** But there were some who received the Gospel and were born again...

**34)** **However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.**

These are the first converts of Athens, and according to Eusebius, Dionysius the Areopagite became the Bishop of Athens, <sup>Eusebius 4.23.3</sup>. Paul probably spent a few weeks edifying these new believers and setting up a house church as Dionysius as the leader while waiting for Silas and Timothy to come join him in Athens. Then this leads us into 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2-<sup>1</sup> *Therefore, when we (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) could no longer endure it, we (Paul and Silas) thought it good to be left in Athens alone,* <sup>2</sup> *and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.*

After Timothy is sent back up to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas finish their work in Athens and decide to travel further west into Greece. There was no pressure to leave Athens, they left on their own accord, and now they are being led of the Spirit to the capital of Greece, Corinth.