

“Sermon to the Unknown God”
(Part 1)
Acts 17:15-34
(Preached at Trinity, April 11, 2007)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Last time as we moved into **Chapter 17** we found Paul and his companions leaving Philippi and proceeding through Amphipolis and Appolonia on their way to Thessalonica. The pronouns have switched back to third person. Luke apparently did not accompany Paul to Thessalonica.
2. There was a sizable Jewish community in Thessalonica with its synagogue and Paul followed his custom of going to the synagogue to teach. He did this first in a city because the Jews had already heard of Jehovah God. They already knew of God's covenant with Abraham. Most important, they had the Scriptures.
Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures:
Acts 17:2-3 – “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, ³ Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”
3. Paul had mixed results in Thessalonica.
 - A. Many of the Gentiles believed and embraced Christ.
Acts 17:4 – “And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.”
 - B. Some were saved out of outright paganism
1 Thessalonians 1:9 – “For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;”
 - C. These Gentiles formed the nucleus of the church in Thessalonica.
4. Paul also faced severe opposition finally having to flee the city. He then proceeded to Berea where the people being more noble minded listened to Paul and searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul was preaching was true. Many of the Bereans also believed.
Acts 17:12 – “Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.”
5. Jews from Thessalonica soon stirred up conflict
Acts 17:13 – “But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people.”
6. Paul left Berea and arrived in Athens. Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea were all major cities, but Athens was the greatest of them all.

- A. 500 years BC it was a city of great splendor. Athens had one of the first examples of democracy—their officials were elected and responsible to the citizens. It was an age of literature with many Greek plays written and performed. It was also an age of philosophy under the great influence of Aristotle and Plato.
 - B. Athens lost most of its independence to Macedonia in 338 BC and it was sacked by Rome in 86 BC. Many of its monuments were destroyed, although it continued as a major center of learning.
7. The philosophers and teachers of Paul’s day were of considerable less ability than the golden age of men such as Socrates and Plato but it was still the intellectual capital of the ancient world.
- A. Paul, himself, was a very learned man.
Acts 22:3 – “I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.”
 - B. He would have been at home talking with the Athenian philosophers.
8. Luke says they were Epicureans and Stoics
Acts 17:18 – “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.”
- A. Epicureanism is a system of philosophy founded on the teachings of Epicurus around 307 BC. It is a form of hedonism in that it seeks pleasure as the highest goal.
 - 1. Our modern use of the word “Epicurean” reveals a misunderstanding of Epicurean doctrine. People today use the term to describe someone given over to pleasures such as partying, sexual excess, and expensive food.
 - 2. For the Epicurean the highest pleasure was tranquility and the absence of pain. These virtues were attained through living a modest and simple life which often meant denying oneself of bodily desires. For example, eating too richly may cause dissatisfaction later when the same delicacies are unavailable.
Their goal was to avoid pain at all costs. Many are like that today.
Seek pleasure, avoid pain.
 - 3. More important from Paul’s standpoint, the Epicureans taught against the concept of divine intervention. Epicureanism emphasizes the neutrality of the gods – they don’t interfere in the world we live in.
Most people today live as if they believe this—that God is not active in the world today. It’s called practical atheism—living as if God doesn’t exist.
 - B. The Stoics believed that life was filled with both good and bad. You can’t avoid the bad so you must simply accept it and bear it. The Stoic says, “There are things that are going to happen that I cannot control, but I will maintain control over myself and stand tall when difficulty comes.”
 - 1. There are plenty of Stoics around today. There is no sense of the Divine presence of God, of His Divine sovereignty and His dominion. Bad things just happen. You have to make the best of it.

2. Even among Christians this belief is common. They may believe that God has ordained all things, but they don't believe God has ordained affliction with purpose. Like the Stoic, affliction is simply something that must be endured—we just have to make the best of it. After all, these things happen.
9. These things are pagan ideas. Paul was stirred greatest over the blind idolatry in Athens. **Acts 17:16** – “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.”
10. Paul began to preach to them the Gospel of Christ. They were curious but it all seemed foolish to them. Put yourself in Athens 25 years after the death of Jesus. You love to discuss religion and are tolerant of many different points of view but you believe in none because you don't believe there is any God involved in the affairs of men. To the philosophers Paul was a foolish man. They used an Athenian slang to describe him. **σπερμολόγος** – “Babbler” literally means, “seed gatherer” – someone who hangs around the market place hoping to pick up something accidentally dropped from the merchandise. They saw his teaching as worthless. **Acts 17:18** – “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” **1 Corinthians 1:19-21** – “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. ²⁰ Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 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.”
11. They brought Paul before the Areopagus, a respected aristocratic body with jurisdiction in matters of religion and morality. They were curious and always seeking to hear some novel idea or philosophy. **Acts 17:21** – “For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.”
12. Paul stands and preaches the famous discourse known as Paul's sermon on Mars Hill. (The word for “Mars Hill” in **Verse 22** is the same word Areopagus in **Verse 19**. Paul gives a brief introduction followed by five clear points. As we've often seen with Luke's record of sermons, we are given just the highlights of the sermon. The actual message would have been much longer.
- God is the Creator of all things
 - God is infinitely greater than His creation
 - God is the Sustainer of all things
 - God is the Ordainer of all things
 - We should seek Him and repent of our sins
13. I want to take us through this sermon.

I. Introduction – **Verses 22-23**

A. Paul recalls the inscription he saw – “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”

1. Paul knew his audience. The message of the Gospel never changes but how we deliver it is always customized to our audience.
1 Corinthians 9:22 – “To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.”
2. Paul was speaking to philosophers who did not believe in an all ruling deity. Paul begins here.
3. Paul gives the identity of their “Unknown God”
 - a. Romans 1 tells us why God was unknown to them. The reason people don’t know God is because they don’t want to know Him.
Romans 1:28 – “And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge. . .”
Romans 1:21-22 – “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,”

B. The Gospel begins with God

1. To those who do not know God we have to start at the beginning
Acts 17:23 – “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”
2. God is not some theory or some mindless idol
He is our Creator who demands submission to Him.