

Part 44 The Unknown God

A sermon series by Pastor Byron Chesney Wednesday, July 20, 2016

✚ Acts 17:15-34

We left off in our studies last time looking at Acts 17:1-14 which dealt with Paul's time in Thessalonica. We saw that once again Paul had to leave under great turmoil. Some unbelieving Jews had stirred up trouble and had the whole city in an uproar. They arrested a man named Jason who had allowed Paul and his men to stay at his house. Then the brethren sent Paul away into Berea. The Bible says that the Bereans were "more noble than those in Thessalonica and that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things that Paul was preaching was so. Then the Jews from Thessalonica heard Paul was in Berea and they went there and stirred up the people against Paul again and he had to leave there. That is where we pick up the story from tonight:

15 And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed.

So Paul leaves Berea and travels 250 miles by ship to Athens. Athens is the Capital city of Greece. It was known for its great philosophers, artists, educational system, and architecture. You may be familiar with the Philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. This is also where the Olympics started. You've probably heard of the Acropolis where the Parthenon is located.

As we will see in our next verse, Athens was a very religious city, however, they did not worship the God of Heaven, they worshiped many gods because they were Polytheists. Their supreme god of course was Zeus who was the King of gods. The city of Athens was named after the Greek goddess, Athena who was the goddess of wisdom, war, and arts.

Paul had the men that helped him get to Athens go back to Berea and tell Silas and Timothy to join him there as soon as they could. He obviously thought they would be doing a great bit of work there for the Gospel.

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

Just as we said, Athens was a very religious city but the wrong kind. These idols Paul saw were most likely statues of Greek gods such as Apollo, Zeus, Mercury, etc.. They considered these earthly substitutes for these gods that they would worship. Athens and Greece were full of temples dedicated to these gods. They built the temple as a home for these gods and they would erect statues of them inside.

- The Parthenon that we mentioned was the Temple for Athena (goddess of wisdom, war, and arts).
- There was the Temple of the Olympian Zeus (king of the gods and god of the sky).
- The Temple of Apollo Epicurius (god of archery, poetry, prophecy, medicine, and the sun).
- The Temple of Poseidon (the god of the sea), and the list goes on and on.

This is what Paul saw while he was there and it grieved him knowing they were so given over to idolatry.

17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

There were a lot of Jews from Jerusalem that had made Athens their home; enough that there is a Jewish synagogue. Paul wasn't disputing with these Jews about the idolatry going on in Athens, he was disputing with them about the same thing he disputed the others Jews in the other cities he had been in, and that was concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. These "*devout persons*," would most likely have been Jewish proselytes; those that once worshiped idols but now worshiped the true God of Heaven along with the Jews.

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.

The Epicureans – were materialists who taught that pleasure was the greatest good, and to attain such pleasure was to live modestly, to gain knowledge of the world and to limit one's desires. They believe by doing that, it leads one to a state of tranquility and freedom from fear, and the absence of bodily pain.

The Stoics – according to Albert Barnes' Commentaryⁱⁱ, The doctrines of the Stoics were, that the universe was created by God; that all things were fixed by Fate; that even God was under the dominion of fatal necessity; that the Fates were to be submitted to; that the passions and affections were to be suppressed and restrained; that happiness consisted in the insensibility of the soul to pain; and that a man should gain an absolute mastery over all the passions and affections of his nature.

What will this babbler say? – These two groups didn't think much of Paul. Webster's dictionary defines the word "**babblers**" as: **An idle talker; an irrational prattler; a teller of secrets.** The Greek meaning of this word is: "**one who collects seed.**" Bible commentator, John Gill, in his commentary states this: "*it (babblers) properly signifies a gatherer of seeds; and the allusion is either to a set of idle people, that used to go to markets and fairs, and pick up seeds of corn, that were shook out of sacks, upon which they lived; and so the word came to be used for an idle good for nothing fellow, and for one that picked up tales and fables, and carried them about for a livelihood.*"

"He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection" – Wow, they say Paul is teaching about strange gods... This is the first time they have ever heard about Jesus. They consider it very strange, especially the part about his resurrection.

19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? 20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

Areopagus – this is where the Athenians held their court of 12 judges. It was similar to our Supreme Court. It was also called "The Hill of Mars." Anytime someone new came to town with a new or different philosophy, they would have to go before these judges to explain their philosophy. This is the place where 400 years before Paul was there, the Philosopher, Socrates was put on trial for his philosophies that didn't agree with the rest of the Athenians. He was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and was sentenced to death by poison.

So they bring Paul before this council to explain his philosophy. They want to know what this "**new doctrine**" is that Paul is teaching. They said it was "**strange things to their ears**" and they didn't know what these things meant.

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.)

These folks didn't have anything better to do than spend their time telling or hearing new things. Athens was widely known for the culture and philosophy. Anybody that was anybody went to Athens to learn new things. They came from all over the world.

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

So, Paul stands up in the middle of the 12 judges to explain what he is doing and what he is teaching. He starts out by telling them that they are way too religious and they worship way too many gods. The word "**superstitious**" here has the meaning behind it of "**being too religious, or more religious than others.**"

23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

This idol that Paul came across was captioned with an inscription that read "**to the unknown god.**" The Greeks were Polytheists, meaning they believed in worshipping many gods, not just one god. It is said that there were over 300 different gods that the ancient Greeks worshiped. Just in case they left one out or looked over one, or if something good had happened and they didn't know which god to thank or worship, they dedicated this idol to the unknown god to cover everything.

Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. I'm sure these Greek philosophers didn't take kindly to Paul telling these men that they were ignorantly worshipping. They were after all the elite.

24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

Paul starts going into details about the One True God. These people believed in many gods but Paul is telling them there is only one God and he can't be confined to a temple like their false gods.

25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

These Greeks would sacrifice animals upon the altars of the temples that were built for their gods. They believed when they did this that they were feeding the gods. Paul tells them real quick that the God of heaven doesn't need their pitiful sacrifices that they offered up to their fake gods.

26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

The Greeks believed that life was left up to fate and that the gods didn't plan out a course for human life. Paul tells them that the God of heaven is the creator and controller of everything.

27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

Paul tells them that they need to seek the Lord, the Supreme being, the Kurios (koo'-ree-oss). That He is there and they can find him if they seek after him.

28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. 29 Forasmuch then as we are the

offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Paul explains that man is totally dependent upon God. It is only by God's grace that we live, move and exist. The Greeks put a lot of stock into building their idols of gold, silver, and stones but Paul tells them that his God is nothing like their gods.

I was having some difficulty trying to discern what Paul was talking about in these verses when he says ""**as certain also of your own poets have said.**" So I had to do some research to figure it out. I found something very interesting. Paul is actually using quotes from pagan poetry written by a Greek poet and a Greek philosopher.

ⁱⁱⁱ"*The phrase "in him we live and move and have our being" is found in the poem Cretica, written by Epimenides in the 6th century BC, although in the poem the description is applied to Zeus. -- Paul then builds on this quote, adding "your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'." This is a direct quote from the Stoic thinker Aratus [Phainomena 5], although Aratus ascribes the origin of humanity to Zeus. What Paul is trying to do is confront idol-worship, by arguing if humans are 'god's offspring', then god must be alive, not a statue. He uses the quote from Aratus to discredit idol-worship, before introducing his own view of who God is.*"

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

Paul cuts to the chase. He tells them that at one time God "winked" people's ignorance. He is referring to the times before the Gospel. Before people were aware of the Gospel. But now they were in a new dispensation of the Gospel era. God has sent Jesus into this world of darkness and he no longer winks at this but commands that men are to repent of their sins

31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead

Then he warns them of the judgement. There will be a day when every man must stand before God's judgement in light of His Son Jesus.

32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 33 So Paul departed from among them.

Well, Paul mentioning the resurrection was too much for these men. They immediately wrote him off as a lunatic. The Epicureans did not believe in any afterlife. They believed once you died that was it. "*We will hear thee again of this matter,*" was probably just a frivolous saying. They probably never intended to listen to Paul again.

34 Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

There were a few people there though that hear Paul's teaching and the Holy Ghost softened their hearts and they believed. A man named Dionysius the Areopagite, which we hear nothing else about, however, he was most likely one of the judges of Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris believed and some other folks not mentioned. So Paul did do some good despite the rejection by most of them.

†ⁱ All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version of the Bible

ⁱⁱ Albert Barnes Notes on the Bible, Acts 17:18

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://freelancetheology.com/2007/09/12/pagan-quotes-in-the-new-testament/>