

# The Unknown God

SERMON

By

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**TEXT:** Acts 17:22-31

**PROP:** Because God is personal and real and not far from any of us, he demands that all people everywhere repent.

Acts 17:22-31 (ESV)

**22** So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for

"In him we live and move and have our being";  
as even some of your own poets have said,  
"For we are indeed his offspring."

**29** Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Our text concerns Paul the apostle in Athens. He had taken his leave of Philippi where Lydia, and the jailer had been converted. As usual Paul and Silas had found much hostility there brought about by the healing of the slave girl. Because her masters lost their source of income they managed to have Paul and Silas imprisoned. After leaving the prison to preach the gospel to the jailer and his family they returned to the prison because they refused to be thrown out of the city secretly. They were Roman citizens who should not have been beaten and incarcerated without a trial. Therefore

Paul demanded an apology and after they had visited Lydia, they left the city to go to Thessalonica. Once again Paul met with trouble. The provincial capital of Macedonia, Thessalonica, was a city of some 200,000 people. There was a synagogue there and we read

Acts 17:2-3 (ESV)

**2** And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

The Jews were upset because so many of their people had been converted. Not able to find Paul and Silas they dragged some of the new converts before the city authorities. One of these was Jason with whom Paul and Silas had been living. They were charged with the treason of saying that there was another king, Jesus. Thus we get a glimpse of the focus of Paul's preaching, Jesus Christ, the crucified, raised, glorified King and Head of His people. To the pagan mind this meant that Jesus was threatening to wrest the throne from Caesar and we will recall Jesus' response to Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

John 18:36-37 (ESV)

**36** Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." **37** Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world— to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Jesus is not simply an earthly king but the great king of the universe. He is the king of kings. Who but God bears witness to the truth? Who but God himself can command the obedience of everyone who is of the truth. Pilate and Caesar both were anything but truthful. Indeed Pilate indicated that he had no knowledge of the truth. Like a great many people today the people of Paul's day were relativists. There is no truth, they say. There is no standard of truth by which we must live. Because truth is a relative thing, there is no fixed standard of righteousness and men can change the law to suit themselves. But Jesus lay claim to something that no human king can. He claimed to be the way, the truth and the life. So Jesus is a king but not like Caesar. Because Jesus has such awesome authority we can do no other but bow the knee to him and accept his commandments as the highest authority.

In order to get Paul and Silas out of harm's way they were sent on to Berea. However, the Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and agitated and stirred up more persecution for the apostles. It is particularly noteworthy that a society so inured to a multitude of gods and religions should be so upset by preaching the claims of Christ. It is true that much of the opposition to Christ was instigated by the Jews but at Philippi the apostles had faced purely pagan persecution and would again at Ephesus. Even in our day much of the world's venom and hatred is directed against the Christ of the Bible. Liberal theology reduces the God of the Bible to a benign father who does nothing to end the pain and misery of mankind. There is nothing to fear from such a god. But there is much to fear indeed from the true and living God who cannot be appeased by sacrifice or great human exploits.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God without the blood of Christ covering our sins. And this is really the issue that is most important to each one of us. What will happen to us when we die? If we do not believe that Jesus is Lord and if we do not believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead we will not go to heaven but we will perish in our sins in hell forever. The exclusive claim of the Bible is what infuriates unbelieving society. If it is true that there is, "Salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved," then all other religions are worthless and false. It is no wonder that Jesus is so widely hated and his followers persecuted and it was exactly this moral and religious environment that Paul faced in Athens.

Paul was taken by himself to Athens leaving behind Silas and Timothy and it was there that Paul delivered the words of our text. As he did everywhere he went he first entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and reasoned with the Jews preaching to them Jesus and his resurrection. During the week he preached in the marketplace with the inevitable result of some believing and the rest mocking or persecuting him. Some of the philosophers who were the aristocracy of the Athenian city, wanted to hear more of Paul's new teaching so they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus or "Mars Hill". This was the highest court in Athens, charged among other things, with the duty of supervising the affairs of the national religion. The Apostle was led up the steps or stairs which still remain to this day. The judges took their places on the rock-hewn benches, Paul was placed upon the defendant's stone, called, as Pausanias tells us, the Stone of Impudence, and then the trial began. The Athenian philosophers were cultured and polite. They simply asked,

Acts 17:19-20 (ESV)

**19** -- "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."

This educated, academic kind of listening audience was something Paul had not enjoyed since those early days of his first Christian love, when, after his escape from Jerusalem, he resided at the university city of Tarsus for a long time, until Barnabas persuaded him to come and minister to the crowds of Gentiles who were flocking into the Church at Antioch. Paul was very familiar with the philosophers before him, the Stoics and the Epicureans, with whom he had to contend, and he dealt with them very effectively in the speech he delivered before the court. Of that address we have only the barest outline. We read,

Acts 17:22-23 (ESV)

**22** So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul began very courteously not slapping them in the face with their rank idolatry but simply taking note of their apparent devotion to religion. His reference to the altar inscribed with, "To the unknown god," was possibly referring to the Altar of the Twelve Gods at Athens. Paul may also have noticed such altars as he passed up the road from Phalerum, where he landed, to the city of Athens, where, as we learn from Pausanias, the next-century traveler, such altars existed in his time. Or he may have seen them on Mars Hill where he was standing, where, from ancient times, altars existed dedicated to the unknown gods who sent a plague upon Athens. Paul's argument then was this. The Athenians were already worshippers of the Unknown God. This was the very deity he came proclaiming, and therefore he was not telling them about anything strange or new that may have been liable for punishment. He then proceeded to declare more fully the nature of the true and living God who had so long been unknown.

No matter how many gods were proposed by the philosophers of Greece and Rome there would always be one more who remained unknown. Indeed all mankind worshipped a multitude of gods with the single exception of Israel. Israel alone worshipped Yahweh. It was to Israel alone that Yahweh had revealed himself and it was upon Israel alone that God had set his saving love. Paul believed in Yahweh not because he was a very capable theologian or philosopher but simply because God had revealed himself to him. The origin of Paul's religion was the word of God applied to his heart by the Holy Spirit without which no one can or will believe in Yahweh. All men are

religious not just the Greeks and Romans and they have an insatiable desire to worship some sort of God. We all know in our heart that there is a god. Just thinking about and studying the world around us inevitably brings us to that opinion. The existence of some sort of god is obvious and to make sure they included all possible gods in their thirst for knowledge of a divine being, Roman society worshipped the unknown God.

In his speech to the Chinese officials, President Bush once said, "Someone once called us a nation with the soul of a church. Ninety five percent of Americans say they believe in God, and I'm one of them." It is hard to believe that ninety five percent of Americans believe in the triune God Yahweh. In fact, we are very much like Rome believing in all sorts of gods none of whom is the unknown God Yahweh. We read in Deuteronomy 6, *Shemah Yisrael, Yahweh Elohenu, Yahweh Echad*. Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One. And Yahweh who is One requires that we have no other Gods before him. This commandment informs us that all gods or so called gods other than Yahweh are false. There is only one Christ and only one Holy Spirit therefore it would appear that most of the ninety five percent of Americans who believe in god believe in a false god just as the men of Athens did.

Apart from revelation people will continue to worship a god they know nothing about and we may wonder whether we can ever know anything about God. Even with revelation is it possible to know God as he really is? God has revealed certain things about himself in the Bible but the terms with which they are expressed are anthropomorphic or analogical. God is said to hear our prayers but he does not have ears. On the other hand, idols have ears but they cannot hear. We are to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God but he has no mouth. In contrast idols have mouths but they cannot speak. To speak of God in this way is to think of him by analogy. How then does God reveal himself to us? We read,

Hebrews 1:1-4 (ESV)

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **3** He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, **4** having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Yahweh is the unknown God. We cannot know him apart from revelation and even then our hearts must be opened to the gospel. According to,

Romans 1:18-23 (ESV)

**18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. **21** For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools, **23** and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

To those who are perishing in their sins God remains unknown and the preaching of the cross is folly. Even though Paul went on to expound the unknown God to the philosophers of Athens he remained unknown to many who mocked the revelation of Yahweh. The God concept of the unconverted never rises above an extension of themselves but Paul went on to say that the true God is not limited by what he has created. God is not subject to the limitations of the universe he created.

Acts 17:24-28 (ESV)

**24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for

"In him we live and move and have our being";  
as even some of your own poets have said,  
"For we are indeed his offspring."

In contrast to Roman gods Yahweh does not dwell in temples and does not need anything. He is absolutely self-sufficient. Roman Gods need to be appeased with orgies and sacrifices but Yahweh must be obeyed. As Samuel told Saul when he spared Agag the king of the Amalekites, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams." Paul informed his hearers that Yahweh created the world and all that is in it. He established the boundaries of mankind on earth but these boundaries do not apply to their creator. There is no sense in which Yahweh is limited. Yahweh provides

for all that he has created and is the origin and maintainer of life. The Greek and Roman poets were right when they wrote, "In him we live and move and have our being," and, "For we are indeed his offspring." But even so Yahweh God remained unknown to them. Even with this insight these poets carved their gods from gold and silver and stone and placed them in temples where they could be admired. But the true and living God, Yahweh is not like the Roman gods in any respect.

Paul continues,

Acts 17:29-31 (ESV)

**29** Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

The art and imagination of man cannot depict God as he really is. Furthermore the art and imagination of man cannot depict any of the persons of the Godhead as they really are. God is Spirit and not physical. He is not part of anything he has created. We understand from the Bible that God is everywhere present,

Psalms 139:7-12 (ESV)

- 7** Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
- 8** If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
- 9** If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
- 10** even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.
- 11** If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light about me be night,"
- 12** even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light with you.

God is not physical in any sense and therefore not part of his creation but he is personally present everywhere continuously. Therefore we cannot hide from God or as

the psalmist notes we cannot flee from his presence. Furthermore we cannot depict him as one who is physical, with a body, eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Jesus is not to be depicted as a man because he is also God. The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, so was and continues to be both God and Man in two distinct nature and one person forever. Therefore it is not possible to depict any of the persons of the Godhead with art or the imagination of man. So called pictures of Christ are no more than the imagination of man and in no way portray Jesus correctly either as Man or God who is not like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

God is not an impersonal idol but a personal God who demands holiness and not sacrifice. Because God is personal and real and not far from any of us, he demands that all people everywhere repent. The Lord does not want sacrifice but obedience. He sent his dear Son to die as the sacrifice for the sins of his people. Speaking of Jesus Paul wrote,

Hebrews 9:12-14 (ESV)

**12** he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. **13** For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, **14** how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

It is not sacrifice the Lord wants but obedience and repentance from our sins. As Paul told the philosophers on Mars Hill, one day God will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ whom he appointed as our eternal sacrifice and our holy judge. We will all give an account of ourselves before this righteous judge and all this is rendered certain because God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to the right hand of God. May all of us be as Dionysius and Damaris who hearing the gospel from Paul turned from their sin unto Jesus as their only hope for salvation in this life and in the life to come.