

The Unknown God Made Known

Acts 17:22-26; Jeremiah 9:23

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The chief end of man is to glorify God. But how can we consciously and willingly glorify God if we do not know Him? How can we praise and exalt the Lord if He is unknown to us? Glorifying God as an act of worship requires that we know Him—not simply know some vague, impersonal ideas about God, but know Him according to His own revelation of Himself—that we trust Him, love Him, hope in Him, obey Him, and live for Him. A true knowledge of God will lead to nothing less. Even Satan knows God and believes that He is—there is not a moment of the day that passes that Satan is not aware that God is—Satan is constantly crashing into God’s omnipresence, God’s sovereignty, God’s justice, and God’s greatness. However, Satan’s knowledge of God and belief lead him not to rest in the salvation of God. Satan’s knowledge of God only condemns him to a far greater extent (as does a knowledge in you and me that does not lead us to trust Him, to love Him, hope in Him, obey Him and live for Him). Dear ones, let us not gain a knowledge that will condemn us, but rather a knowledge that leads to everlasting life.

As the Apostle Paul stood before the philosophers and teachers of this world, he revealed to them their ignorance of the one true living God who has revealed Himself within man and all around man, so that all men stand accountable before God for that knowledge which they have suppressed in unrighteousness. The main points from our text this Lord’s Day are: (1) Paul Reveals the Ignorance of the Wise of This World Who Know Not God (Acts 17:22-23); (2) Paul Reveals the God that the Wise of This World Do Not Know (Act 17:24-26).

I. Paul Reveals the Ignorance of the Wise of This World Who Know Not God (Acts 17:22-23).

A. As the Greek philosopher, Socrates, had been brought before the Areopagus about 450 years earlier to respond to his accusers, so Paul was taken before the Areopagus to respond to accusations that he was setting forth strange gods in Athens (Acts 17:19). This court had a responsibility to defend the established gods in Athens against rivals promoting new gods. Paul had proclaimed Jesus to the Epicureans and to the Stoics, and now he is called to defend the Lord Jesus (as being a new god with whom they were unfamiliar) before the Areopagus.

B. Paul begins his defense of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith by focusing on something he saw as he was walking about Athens. Paul observed all of the many statues and altars that had been erected to various false gods by name. The city of Athens was filled with these idolatrous images. Athens was noted as the most religious (though falsely religious) city among the Greeks. Even Josephus (the Jewish historian who lived about this very time) stated: “The Athenians . . . are affirmed by all men . . . to be the most religious of the Greeks” (*Against Apion*, ii. 11). Paul testifies before the Areopagus (in Acts 17:22) that they are “too superstitious” (or more religious than other Greek cities). Paul does not mean this in a good sense, but that Athens is entirely devoted to the service and worship of their false gods. That which was religious piety to the Athenians was religious idolatry to Paul (and it agitated him).

C. The immersion of the city into its idolatrous superstitions was especially brought home to Paul when he saw as he was walking through Athens an altar dedicated to “THE UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23).

1. What really hit Paul and which he brings to the attention of the Areopagus was that they were so religious (not in a good sense) that they did not want to miss devotion to any god of which they were

ignorant, and so they even included an altar to THE UNKNOWN GOD. They had identified most of the gods they worshipped by name, but their superstition had led them to acknowledge one that was unknown.

2. Now Paul is not making any direct connection between Jehovah God and this UNKNOWN GOD that the Athenians worshipped (Acts 17:23). Paul is not saying, “Let me tell you about the God you are worshipping whose name you do not know.” Paul is simply saying, “Since you who claim to be most wise and acknowledge your ignorance about this UNKNOWN GOD that you worship, let me declare to you the one true living God of whom you are ignorant, who is UNKNOWN to you.” What Paul here emphasizes is not so much their worship of this UNKNOWN GOD, but their ignorance of this UNKNOWN GOD. They boasted in their knowledge, yet they had publicly acknowledged their ignorance of this UNKNOWN GOD. Paul seizes on their ignorance to declare to them knowledge of the Lord God Almighty, who was unknown to them. Their publicly acknowledged ignorance of this UNKNOWN GOD was Paul’s connection that he would use to proclaim the truth to these “wise” men—they were not as wise as they thought.

3. Dear ones, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ with family, friends, and co-workers like Paul, we should look for some connection (point of contact) we might have to lead them to the Lord, who is the chief end of man. If we seek the wisdom of God, we can turn almost any discussion in this world to Jesus Christ being the answer (whether poverty, whether corruption in government, whether murder and violence, whether abuse in marriage, whether success in business, whether cancer, pain, and sorrow in this life). Listen to them; then pray and seek from the Lord the connection that will allow you to testify to the greatness, glory, power, righteousness, and grace of God through Jesus Christ. Even if they are proud in their conceits (like the Athenians), we must not seek to match their pride, but humble ourselves before God.

II. Paul Reveals the God That the Wise of This World Do Not Know (Act 17:24-26).

A. Now Paul has the attention of the Areopagus, and he proceeds to introduce them to the only wise God of whom they were ignorant. What follows in these few verses is only a summary of what Paul declares to the Areopagus (these verses would take less the 2 minutes for Paul to state). And yet these verses highlight what Paul declared concerning the knowledge of the God who had created them.

1. Dear ones, there is nothing so humbling to the pride of man than to know the infinite God who answers to no man, who has never had a need, who never errs, who is not confined to time or space, who never had a beginning, and who cannot increase or decrease in knowledge, holiness, mercy, love, or truth (Jeremiah 9:23).

a. We cannot glorify God by faith, love, and obedience if we do not know Him. We fear people, death, and circumstances because we know our God little (we might know about Him, but we have become strangers to Him because we spend little or no time in His presence). Why do we fear? Because that which we fear is greater in our own minds than the God we profess to trust and love.

b. Oh dear people of God, let us dive into the bottomless ocean of God, and though we will never fully comprehend and fathom His complete greatness, and though we can only scratch the surface of Him who is infinite and without limitations and boundaries, let us nevertheless dive as deep as God’s revelation of Himself will allow us in knowing and understanding the God who created us, provides for us, and saves us.

c. I dare say whatever the burden you carry today as you come to worship the Lord, it will be lifted from you as if you were in a weightless space when you turn your eye from the cares of this life and look in faith to God Almighty. Our lack of faith, hope, love, obedience, patience, and perseverance is due to how small our God is in our sight.

d. To be lost in the infinitude of God does not make you useless in this world—it makes you a David before Goliath—it makes you a Daniel in the lion’s den—it makes you Moses before Pharaoh—it makes you a Knox before Queen Mary—it makes you untiring in running the race that Jesus has

set before us. There is nothing more sanctifying in the life of the saint than meditation on the glory and majesty of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). There is no time better spent than time spent learning, growing, exalting, and praising your glorious God.

2. There is an inborn knowledge of God that all men have regardless of their denial of such—their denials are in effect lies (there are no atheists). God makes clear that He created Adam and Eve with this knowledge, and though when they fell that knowledge of God became dimmer and distorted (like looking at yourself in a broken mirror), nevertheless there is sufficient knowledge of God within man and within the creation all around man to make all men accountable before God (Romans 1:18-21). God is inescapable, and so is knowledge of Him.

3. Man's problem is not that God has not made Himself known to him. Man's problem is that he has taken the dim knowledge that he yet has of God and has made himself a god—made others in his life a god—made the things in this world a god—made images of the creature by which to worship the Creator (Romans 1:22-25—a person that perverts the true knowledge of God will be given over to all manner of ungodliness—the root sin of this nation is not abortion or homosexuality—it is false religion, blasphemy of God, and idolatry in worshipping the creature rather than the Creator/Savior—Jesus Christ).

4. Though there is sufficient revelation about God within man and all around man to judge man accountable to God and a transgressor of His moral law, there is only sufficient revelation in the Scripture to reveal salvation through Jesus Christ. Only the Scripture is able to make you “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). Therein is the most complete revelation of God to man. If we spend little time in it, is there any wonder that we know our God so little? If you want to know God and grow in your knowledge of Him, you must daily pray, take up the Word, and good Reformed literature that will guide you into the deep knowledge of your God.

B. Paul's defense here in Acts 17 to pagan idolaters is different (as you might expect) from that of sermons preached in the synagogues of the Jews. In preaching in the Jewish synagogues, Paul is heavy in his use of the Old Testament Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Messiah that was prophesied in the Old Testament to come. Whereas here before the Areopagus, Paul presents biblical truths and yet truths which are also known from what God has revealed in nature (he even cites from a couple pagan Greek poets later on in his defense). These Greek philosophers were likely unfamiliar with the Old Testament Scriptures and so Paul reveals to them truths that are known within them and known all around them in God's creation.

C. Paul introduces these Greek philosophers to the one true living God that is known to them by natural revelation and yet unknown to them through unbelief, idolatry, and pride. Paul declares the knowledge of God to the Areopagus. Interestingly, Paul does not give arguments to prove the existence of God that so many today seem to think is necessary. Paul simply assumes and states the existence of the one true living God (much like Moses does in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”). Paul lists six truths concerning knowledge of the one true living God.

1. **God created all** (“God that made the world and all things therein” Acts 17:24).

a. This knowledge of God condemned the Epicureans and Stoics neither of which believed in one true living God who created all things out of nothing by the word of His power; neither of which believed in creation beginning at a point in time to fulfill His eternal purpose and design to save by His grace alone underserving sinners and to condemn by His righteousness alone deserving sinners. Paul did not proclaim to them that God stood aloof and had nothing to do with creation (as did the Epicureans that said it was all by chance of atoms bouncing into one another), nor that God and nature were one and the same (as did the Stoics). The design and order of creation undeniably reveals God the Creator. Would you not think it foolish to ask a contractor to please give the name of the designer of a beautiful house and for the contractor to reply, “There was no designer. It just came into being and accidentally fell into the shapes, forms, and

positions that it did.” And yet this universe with its vastness and complexity just happened by chance. Given enough time (millions of years), the impossible happened by chance—from nothing came everything (this is the foolishness of unbelief).

b. Dear ones, a faulty view of creation will inevitably lead to a faulty view of God in other respects. If we doubt that God created this universe in 6-day 24-hour days, then we will likewise have reason to doubt other supernatural acts of God revealed in Scripture (the universal flood—Noah, the extension of a day—Joshua, the sun dial that retreated by 10 degrees—Hezekiah, the multiplying of fish and bread to feed thousands—Jesus, and ultimately the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). However, if God created all things material and spiritual within the space of 6 days and all very good, and created man in His image, then the supernatural God cannot be excluded from your life or mine, from your family or mine, from the nations of this world. Paul declares that God is the Creator of everything.

2. **God rules over all** (“seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth” Acts 17:24). Because God is alone Creator, He alone is Lord over all His creation. “He is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). This is why people ultimately deny the existence of God or detach Him from their lives—they do not want to be accountable to One who is Lord of all. And yet just as Jonah could not flee the presence of the Lord God, neither can you, me, or anyone else. Denying God’s existence does not make Him go away—it only brings greater condemnation. We, too, act as if we are lord of our lives when we will not submit to Him and His loving commandments (Luke 6:46). Since He is you Creator and Savior, He must be your Lord!

3. **God is everywhere** (“dwelleth not in temples made with hands” Acts 17:24). God is not material as to His nature (contrary to the Epicureans and the Stoics)—He is infinite Spirit that cannot be contained in any space (whether a building, whether this world, or whether the universe—immensity of God, 1 Kings 8:27). The universe is not infinite for God created it. Thus, the words of that great philosopher Buzz Lightyear are a gross error and blasphemy: “To infinity and beyond.” Since this is true, let us think not that we are ever out of the presence of God, whether it be a secret sin that we commit, or whether we face our greatest fear. We are not alone. If nothing can contain Him, let us not limit Him by our unbelief, fears, weakness—even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, “thou art with me” (Psalm 23:3).

4. **God is self-sufficient** (“Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing” Acts 27:25). God does not need us. We need God. He has no needs. He has no weaknesses. He is absolutely complete in Himself. He depends not upon anyone or anything outside Himself for His life and existence—He is self-existent and eternally so. He exists not for man. He exists not for man’s glory. He exists for Himself and for His own glory. The theological term for God’s self-sufficiency is aseity (from Latin “from himself”). God did not create man because He had this insatiable desire for fellowship. He had from eternity perfect and complete fellowship within the Holy Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A.W. Tozer has rightly written:

The picture of a nervous, ingratiating God fawning over men to win their favor is not a pleasant one; yet if we look at the popular conception of God, that is precisely what we see. Twentieth-century Christianity has put God on charity. So lofty is our opinion of ourselves that we find it quite easy, not to say enjoyable, to believe that we are necessary to God. But the truth is that God is not greater for our being, nor would He be less if we did not exist (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 40).

This truth when received by faith will not paralyze our efforts or bring the Kingdom of God to a halt. To the contrary, this truth will motivate and energize the Christian, knowing his/her own absolute dependence upon the all-sufficient God.

5. **God is Provider for all** (“seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” Acts 17:25). Not only is God not in need of anyone or anything outside Himself, He mercifully provides for all by

giving life, sustaining life, and even ending life at His appointed time. He is good in giving even what the wicked who hate Him need (Matthew 5:45). And even God's provision of all that man needs does not lead men to repentance (Romans 2:4). Dear ones, every good and perfect gift comes from God in heaven above (James 1:17). Notice James says "gift" because God gives us what we do not deserve (especially salvation).

6. **God is sovereign over all** (Acts 17:26). All mankind descend from one couple—Adam and Eve—Noah and his wife. Any teaching that argues a racist view based upon different origins (Identity Movement) denies this truth. There is only one race taught in Scripture—the human race. God determines the nations that would exist (and those within each nation), the time in which those nations would exist, and the boundaries of those nations. Nothing is outside the sovereign control of God the Almighty, who has given as a donation this universal dominion to His Mediatorial King, Jesus Christ ("all things" have been put under Jesus Christ as Mediator to the good of the church, Ephesians 1:22).

Dear ones, is this the God you know, trust in, love, hope in, obey, and lay your life before? Those who trust in this great God through faith in Jesus Christ have great energy to serve Him; have great thoughts of Him; have great boldness for Him; and have great peace in Him (Romans 11:33-36).

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