

- *Today we've arrived at one of the most important passages in the entire book of Acts*
- *Paul's famous sermon about the Unknown God*

- *Paul starts by telling the most prestigious religious and intellectual body of the first century they are ignorant of the most important thing they could know. Gutsy.*
- *Then, with remarkably few words, Paul lays out the nature of God, the purpose of God, Humanities need of God, and God's provision to meet that need.*
- *Here's what's so remarkable- Paul says all of this without addressing any issues of ethics, morality, politics, or church culture. He doesn't even use the name 'Jesus', even though he explicitly says who Jesus is.*
- *In this speech to an audience that was very spiritual and yet completely ignorant of God, Paul strips away everything except the essential truths of who God is, what God has done, why He has done it, and how we are to respond.*
- *These essential realities are critical reminders to the church today as so much of Christian culture defines itself in terms of moral debates, political stances, and second tier theological issues.*
- *In our own time so dominated by division and fear, Paul's message is a proclamation of what all humanity has in common, and why we- disciples of Christ- should by definition be people of courage, compassion, and hope*
- *OK- we left of with Paul in Athens, waiting for his crew to join him. Paul occupies himself by going to the city market- the AGORA- and debating with the various philosophers who were teaching there.*
- *Luke told us that the people of Athens loved nothing more than listening to and debating all the latest ideas, and so Paul uses this common ground to share with them something they haven't heard*
- *In response they tell Paul he is bringing STRANGE IDEAS to them, and they invite him to their gathering at the AREOPAGUS- also known as MARS HILL- an actual stone outcropping near the Acropolis.*
- *Word literally means 'hill of ares', with Ares being the Greek god of war- but the term really refers to the gathering that happened here- this was high council of Athens, often the judiciary, but the members of the Areopagus would meet to listen to and discuss a wide variety of issues.*
- *So Paul is brought before the most influential and prestigious gathering of intellectuals in all of Athens, and they want to hear what he has to say.*

Acts 17:22-23 *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.*

✠ The Unknown God

- *Wow. Bold thing to say to this group! Paul cuts to the chase, diagnosing their condition- a condition very similar to our culture today.*

- **FIRST- People are religious. Tone of this statement isn't complimentary.. "You are SOOO religious!"**
- **NOW, American culture is increasingly NOT religious- but our culture IS very spiritual.**
- **Most people believe there something greater than them, beyond them. Over the years, I've done many funerals for people/families that had no evidence of faith at all- and yet in that moment were searching for some concept of God to give them hope.**
- **MOST PEOPLE, BY NATURE, ARE instinctively spiritual in some way- the true atheist is very rare.**
- **SECOND- It is in our nature to worship. We worship something when we say "This is what provides me with a sense of meaning, worth, security, identity." We worship what we look to as our SOURCE of life.**
- **For the culture in Athens, this was very literal- they had the full pantheon of Greek Gods, but to cover their bases they had an altar to the UNKNOWN GOD. Idolatry, but at least they were honest about it.**
- **SO PAUL SAYS- it's in your nature to be religious, it's in your nature to worship, BUT- you are IGNORANT of that which you worship.**
- **Paul was a master communicator, and He uses their own idol as an open door to engage them with the gospel. AND his statement raises an interesting thought.**
- **Do people who are ignorant of the God of scripture- or even say they reject God- actually innately acknowledge the True God they don't know?**
- **YES. Even though they may deny it, people acknowledge God's goodness when they seek after His nature.**
 - **Seek to be loved, and to love.**
 - **Recognize the value of basic goodness, kindness, justice, and rightness**
 - **Express the nature of God through activities such as art and creativity.**
- **As Christians, we often bemoan how far away our culture is from God- but this actually is not the case. Our culture- and all cultures- are full of people seeking after God.**
- **The better statement is our culture- just like the Athenians- is IGNORANT of God. They are trying to worship, and control, what they don't know.**
- **And so Paul says, "I'm going to make Him known".**
- **WHAT FOLLOWS are essential realities- truths- about God to a very spiritual world that is ignorant of the God they innately seek to worship.**
- **Paul starts, literally, at the beginning.**

☩ Reality! God is **CREATOR** of all, and He is **LORD** of all.

Acts 17:24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

- **Many seek to deny existence of God, and even more, deny God is purposeful CREATOR.**
- **But most people still believe that God – however they understand God- is the creator. Paul's statement here was not radical- most of the philosophical systems of his day acknowledged to some degree the reality of a creator.**

- **WHAT THEY DIDN'T believe, and what culture increasingly rejects today, is that God is also LORD of all creation.**
- **THIS is what the human condition most rebels against- The reality that GOD IS GOD, and he is IN CHARGE- meaning that we are NOT God, and we are NOT in charge. Paul's opening statement puts God on throne, and in doing so takes us OFF OF IT.**
- **BUT THIS IS GOOD NEWS. If God is truly both creator AND LORD... AND He is GOOD, then we, by definition, should be people of HOPE, NOT FEAR.**
- **Paul makes his point emphatic by saying "God doesn't live in temples made by human hands"... in other words, all your temples, structures, ingenuity by which you seek to house God, control God, and control access to God- these are meaningless.**
- **The church today needs to remember this. There is no such thing as a sacred space. The notion that there are spaces built by people where God can be accessed or experienced in a way that can only happen in that space- or where God is closer to us than any other space- this is foreign to the NT- and can create all sorts of confusion and distortions.**
- **Paul continues- Since God is both creator AND Lord..**

† Reality! God doesn't **NEED** anything from us.

Acts 17:25a *And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.*

- **Oof. This is a blow to our religious pride.**
 - **We like to think... look how much God needs me for his work.. look how valuable we are to God's work... but this is pride.**
 - **Likewise, we worry and stress... what will God do without us? Without our ministry? If we don't succeed in our religious plans, what will happen? What will God do? What if we don't keep or advance our religious influence politically? What will happen to God's purposes for our country?**
- **Make no mistake! God calls us to give Him Glory, to be people of influence, and seek to make Him beautiful by making this world a better place!**
- **BUT we must allow ourselves to be humbled, and surrender our pride and the stress that flows from sustaining our pride, that we are essential to God... because GOD DOESN'T NEED US. RATHER....**

† Reality! God **PROVIDES** everything for US!

Acts 17:25b *Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.*

- **God, in His nature, is GENEROUS. He pours out physical and conscious life to ALL PEOPLE.**
- **God calls us to obedience, BUT HE ALSO provides everything we need to BE OBEDIENT.**
- **Now, what we like to do is get all worked up with existential questions like "well, should we then work? Should we just wait for God to provide everything? Is it wrong to take joy in working, creating, and enjoying the fruits of our labor?"**
- **OR, If I have needs in my life, does that mean God is providing for others but not for me? Why? Does he not love me? Am I not good enough? AAAHHH!!**
- **I think Paul would say- CALM DOWN! God's word speaks to these questions, and there's some questions you're just not going to get answered!**

- **YES, we are called to work, to engage creation as faithful stewards- Joy we receive from doing so gives glory to God.**
- **ALSO YES, we live in a fallen world where there is suffering and unmet need. God calls us to bring his goodness into this reality, as obedient and generous stewards of the resources we have.**
- **BUT ULTIMATELY, GOD IS OUR PROVIDER. When we take undue pride in what we have accomplished, OR live in fear/stress over our needs, we are claiming for ourselves something that belongs to God.**
- **GOD IS OUR PROVIDER, therefore we can work from a place of peace and rest- and not lose hope when we find ourselves in places of great need.**
- **NOW, Paul gets personal- as he pry's out of our hands something we think is ours to control...**

Acts 17:26 *From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.*

✠ Reality! God is **SOVEREIGN**.

- **CHURCH! There are doctoral dissertations written on that one verse. This is the topic we LOVE to follow down the rabbit hole of what if's and yeah but's.**
- **Just few thoughts, staying very close to the text...**
- **God is active and involved in his creation. He is working out his plans and purposes according to HIS plans and purposes. He is doing so in his timing, and His plans and purposes WILL HAPPEN.**
- **This is a mystery we must surrender, but there has never been a change of governments, or a tide of history that is outside of God's foreknowledge and purpose- and the same is true of our time TODAY.**
- **Right now many within church throughout the world, and right here in our community... many people are filled with anxiety over whether or not the events of our day are part of the end times. I'm going to speak to this issue in a few weeks. But let me say this, in light of this passage.**
- **For us- as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ- to think that the actions of our government, our culture, or the church for that matter- has the ability to trigger the rapture, the tribulation, Christ's second coming, or any concept you may have of the 'end times'- to think humanity has the power to bring these events to bear- is prideful and lacking in sound Biblical theology.**
- **Likewise, spiritual leaders and teachers who are proclaiming the end times are now upon us- especially if they engender fear in the people granting them influence- this likewise is prideful, lacking in sound Biblical theology, and spiritually irresponsible if not dangerous.**
- **GOD WILL, in his time, bring this world to its end, and usher in the fullness of the resurrection and a New Creation. God has given us prophetic scripture that must be interpreted with humility, contextually, and appropriately.**
- **But the Great Message is that God is sovereign! Nothing has ever happened, or is happening today, that has caught God by surprise, and Scriptures proclamation that God**

will in his time make ALL THINGS NEW- this is a message of HOPE, COURAGE, not a message of fear. More on that later.

- *SO, Paul proclaimed God is creator, He is provider, and in his sovereignty and grace has superintended all of history. This is WHAT GOD HAS DONE. Now, Paul proclaims WHY GOD HAS DONE IT.*

† Reality! God's great purpose is that we may KNOW Him.

Acts 17:27 *God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*

- *This also could be a deep theological rabbit hole.*
- *Hear Pauls' words! God is NOT FAR from ANYONE.*
- *God is HERE, he is ACTIVE, and he desires for ALL PEOPLE to KNOW HIM. THIS IS HIS PURPOSE IN CREATION- that his creation would come to KNOW HIM- not just in a general way, but PERSONALLY, as our SOURCE OF LIFE itself.*
- *This is where Paul goes next...*

† Reality! God isn't just Creator, He is the SOURCE of Life.

Acts 17:28 *'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

- *FASCINATING! Paul here quotes from one of the Greeks own philosophers. This was a statement they would agree with, at least on its surface.*
- *For the Greeks- especially the Stoics- God was an impersonal and all present force of nature you could access and control for your purposes.*
- *But Paul turns this statement upside down. In contrast to an impersonal God WE manipulate, there is the GOD AND LORD OF CREATION, who is present and active- HE is our source of Life, meaning, Identity. He does NOT need us, but he freely gives life TO US. There IS NO LIFE AND GOODNESS apart from Him!*
- *And because he is the giver and sustainer of life, this means that ALL LIFE is sacred, valuable, and precious to God. SO MUCH MORE could talk here...*
- *But now, Paul lays it all on the table, as he identifies the fundamental rebellion/ sin, of the human condition. GIVEN EVERYTHING HE JUST SAID....*

Acts 17:29 *"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.*

† Reality! As created beings, we must NOT seek to create God in our own image, through our own skill and intellect.

- *Of course, this is Idolatry- and is one of the defining desires and activities of human history. Our postmodern culture doesn't generally create physical idols we think are God, but we create idols of our intellect all the time.*
- *We seek to be our own center, our own arbiter of what is right and wrong, and thus we create our own gods that reflect and reinforce our agendas, what we wish to be true, with no power to bring us anything beyond what we already have.*

† Reality! Humanity's great sin, and our fundamental need to repent, is IDOLATRY- looking to things less than God to be our God.

Acts 17:30 *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.*

- **The New Testament concept of repentance, at its core, is not turning away from specific sins- it is turning to God, to know and trust Him as our creator, our provider, and our source of life.**
- **You see.. within Christian culture we can spend SO MUCH TIME- endless debates, over moral and ethical issues- some of which are very important.**
- **BUT WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT, the crucial question before humanity is NOT, 'WHAT IS SIN'. The essential question is WHO IS GOD.**
- **THIS is the question Paul puts before the Areopagus, and that stands before our culture today. WHO IS GOD? Is God our own creation, in our image, and under our control, OR is God the God and Lord of all creation, who does not need us, but in His grace desires us to turn to him, and come to know him?**
- **NOW PAUL BRINGS the discussion FULL CIRCLE.**

† Reality! Christ is the Creator of life, the Source of life, and He will be the JUDGE of all life.

Acts 17:31a *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.*

- **This was a strange idea to the Athenians, and it is has remained offensive ever since. The human condition proclaims that we are accountable only to ourselves, and we chafe at being held accountable to any standard- be it of God or of humans.**
- **But the Gospel proclaims that we - all of humanity- are accountable to God, and in His time God- through Jesus Christ- will bring Justice to all things. This is a sobering thought, but in light of the Gospel it is not a statement of fear, but of hope and redemption.**
- **At this point you can almost feel the objections of Paul's audience rising against him. "WAIT A MINUTE Paul- are you saying that WE will be judged by YOUR God?" How do you back that up?**
- **And so Paul concludes with the evidence to validate everything He has said. It is the evidence of the RESURRECTION.**

† Reality! The objective evidence of Christ's identity as God is the RESURRECTION

Acts 17:31b *He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."*

- **This is key. The foundation upon which the entire Gospel stands is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no Christian message, and there is no hope for humanity, apart from the Resurrection.**
- **There are many messages the church- Christian culture- sends to our society and world around us. If we are honest, MOST have to do with matters of morality, ethics, and how these are framed in the political debates going on all around us.**
- **And these are important!**

- ***But FRIENDS, THE ESSENTIAL MESSAGE of the gospel to our world is not a political one. It's not even a moral one- in the sense of how we use that word.***
- ***THE GREAT MESSAGE of the Gospel- the message entrusted to the church- to a broken and hurting world is the REALITY, and HOPE, of the RESURRECTION of Jesus, and the Resurrection- the NEW LIFE- we now share with Him.***
- ***Luke concludes by telling us how the council responded.***

Acts 17:32-34 *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”³³ At that, Paul left the Council.³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

† The response: Some **SNEERED**, some were **INTERESTED**, and some **BELIEVED**.

- ***We are called to be ambassadors to the goodness and hope of the Gospel. This is our calling, THIS is our message.***
- ***In response many will mock us. But some will want to hear more, as God opens that door. And through the mystery of God’s sovereignty, some will believe.***
- ***We are not responsible for how people respond. We ARE called to bear witness! This MUST BE a primary lens through which we consider how we live, what we say, what we agree with, how we compassionately engage with, come alongside, and present ourselves to the people of our community.***
- ***Church- as people who by God’s Grace alone have been brought from death to Life- THROUGH US may the reality of the Unknown God be made known.***