

The Unknown God Acts 17:22-23

As we come to this passage we see that Paul has been summoned to speak to the council at the Areopagus. It is not so much that he was arrested but all gods or goddesses that were preached in the city had to be verified or approved. Also we see that the Athenians were always looking for something new to sort of tickle their minds or stimulate their thinking. They loved ideas and debate but they seldom came to any conclusions or arrived at the truth. In fact, Sophists, which would have been a very popular teaching in the city taught that there really is no truth for anyone individual or no such thing as universal truth. But truth fluctuated from situation to situation. What was true for one person might not be true for another. Sometimes it might be right to lie, cheat, steal, or murder. At other times it would be wrong. But that was the idea, always churning over various philosophies but never arriving at any definitive truth.

And so Paul stands up, he is given the opportunity to speak, and he does. So many are familiar with different parts of this sermon but have never gone through it as a whole. Again, this is probably more of a summary rather than all that Paul preached that day. But it is a well-crafted sermon. There is an introduction, followed by four points. And it is centred on one main theme, the One true God and who he is. Paul presents God as Creator of all things, then presents him as sustainer of all things, then he ordained of all things, and then the call to repentance and believe on him. And it is such a classic sermon to individuals who have no biblical background. There is no quoting of Scripture, even though there are biblical themes throughout the sermon, because they didn't know the Scriptures, and would be totally unfamiliar with their authority. But every point Paul makes builds on the former point of who God is and their accountability.

And I do find it amazing because the clearer the revelation of God in the hearts and minds of any person the stronger the conviction of sin and need of repentance and trust in Jesus Christ. And this is what the gospel is about. This is what life is about, this is what everything is about, not you — God. And so often we never start where we need to start and that is with God. This God is so much greater than you could have ever imagined. In all your philosophies and so-called wisdom and knowledge — you do not know this God. Look at who he is. Marvel at who he is. And with that knowledge of him it is incredible how the need of Jesus coming is so obvious, and that we need to turn from sin and trust in him for forgiveness. But it all starts with that knowledge of God — his greatness and grandeur.

This is a wonderful sermon to study to see how we should present the gospel to those who have no point of contact with the God of the Bible. And we live in a society that might drive by various churches but has never heard a Bible or Bible story, never heard a gospel sermon. They might hear of Easter but have no reference to Jesus — his death and resurrection. How do we present Christ to this person? Where do we start? And Paul's sermon is a wonderful manual to begin with something with what people already know. Every person has a knowledge of God but it is so inadequate, and even that which can be known of Him has been suppressed. The glorious one and true God needs to be brought into the light. God has called us to bring that light.

The other reason why this passage is so key is that often we struggle in our homes, marriages, relationships. Think of the things that are so wrong in your life and bring so much pain and discomfort. People often go through the same cycles of sin and they even hate their lives. They say they are going to respond differently, but they end up with the same arguments, the same accusations, the same distance, the same life. You might be stuck in the same sin that seems to bring so much shame and guilt. And they feel stuck and just do not know how to get out of that cycle. They say they are going to try better the next time. I am not going to get mad or lose my cool or say mean and nasty things, but then sit there after another knock down drag out fight. I believe in God but often things never seem to change in my life.

Let me ask you — are you there? Does that describe your life? If it does, there is hope for the hopeless. And the hope is not found in you, no it is found in someone so much greater and glorious and grand — it is found in our God — who he is and his forever presence with us. You cannot spend time in God's presence or meditating on the great truths of who he is, or his absolutely extraordinary promises and not be changed. Our problem is that we are trusting in other things and other philosophies rather than looking and beholding our God. You want to know how change takes place in your life? It takes place by looking away from the person you are in conflict with to our great God. It is seeing his glory and greatness. Listen to 2 Corinthians 3:18, **“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”** You cannot spend time in his presence without that sense of awe rising inside of us. This God is greater than we could have ever imagined. And you cannot spend time in his presence without seeing your own sin, and need to really change and trust Christ. You begin to want to change through that delight in Christ.

And through all your battles are you seeking him and to know him? I want us to look at Paul's introduction. And I want us to see that the God who is unknown is knowable. He has made himself known, and he truly is more glorious and grand and higher than we could have ever imagined. We see two things this morning.

1. We realize, that we are all religious. V.22

Every single person that lives on planet earth is religious in some sense. They have some sense about God. When push comes to shove even though they might suppress their thoughts about him, those thoughts will come out. And it is often been said what you believe about God really is the most important thing that could be said about you. And it is true, because if you tell me your thoughts about him I can tell you how you handle your life and respond to life and the react to the trials of life. A mayor in a major city after a tragedy happened where several people were killed asked Christians not to pray because if there was a God he certainly didn't care and couldn't do anything because those people were already dead.

Think about what he believed about God. God should be there to serve us and give us a pleasant life and happy life. Life is about us. There is no reason for suffering and God cannot bring good out of suffering. The suffering of Christ really speaks against that. And really this is all there is. And so when suffering happens he responds in anger and hostility against God and even against Christians. Whatever you believe about God will set the direction of your life, relationships, goals and aspirations. Every

single person believes something about God. It is the most significant thing about every single person. What are we believing about God this morning? What message are we preaching and holding out to ourselves? You can see through your life.

Because look at what Paul says here, **“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.’** Paul stood up which would have been the normal means to communicate to others. And the council in the Areopagus would have been seated in a semi-circle to listen to Paul. And he addressed them as “Men of Athens.” They would have been the representative council for all of the people of Athens. And Paul perceives or thinks or observes something about them. And that is they are religious “in every way.” And that is not an overstatement or exaggeration. They did have many gods and goddesses, and they had them for every way of life and every problem. They even had a wine god who if they worshipped would give them not only a good harvest of grapes but really stellar wine. They had gods for every fabric of their life.

And here is the thing — Paul’s perception that they were religious, especially with all the statues and images was not very difficult. But as he watched the people respond and lived, as he debated with various different philosophers in the market place, it was not difficult to see that they responded to life based on what they knew or thought they knew about God and life. And we might see someone do something or hear of some heinous acts that someone did, and ask — how could they ever do that? And the answer is there is some belief system that happens to be in them. This should help us in our evangelism. What is someone believing about life and about God? It really gives us a point of context. People are religious whether they admit or not. Every person has a belief in God. Paul by saying this has a point of context. He certainly is not saying they are right in their conclusions, but it is point of understanding where he can present the truths of Christ. Sometimes in our presentation of the gospel instead of being in such a rush we have to slow down and ask what someone believes about God. People get frustrated many times, especially when they are talking about big issues when they feel they are not being heard or understood.

And it is the same when we are trying to help other believers. We need to listen. It is a skill to be quiet. People seek help most often because they need help. They feel they cannot resolve or handle the problem or difficulty that they are going through, so they seek the guidance of others. God has called all of us to be involved in the lives of others. And what we need to do before we ever speak is perceive - listen - really hear. And as I listen to people’s struggles and even their responses to trials, there are always two questions I ask myself as I listen. One is what are they believing about God? And second — what are they believing about self? People are religious but just being religious is not enough. Think about the man who comes and is totally defeated and discouraged about life. “I work hard every day to provide for my family. I go to church and participate in church life. I try to read my Bible daily. But my wife can’t stand me and my children want nothing to do with me. Look at all that I have done for God — and this is what I get for all my efforts?”

Now certainly empathy and mourning for that person goes a long way. But he in his religious thinking is pondering things about himself and about God that are not true. Certainly he has a work-based salvation view. God you owe me. God is indebted to him and has not lived up to his end. God owes him. He forgets the holiness and glory

of the one above and therefore cannot see his sin. He sees the sin of his spouse and his children but believes exactly opposite of what the Scriptures say — all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. He is basically a good guy. There is nothing of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Therefore through these trials and struggles God has nothing to show him about his own heart. There is no big God who can use trials to expose I am not believing this big gospel. As we listen to people and seek to help even our brothers and sisters in Christ we listen to their stories, and need to perceive what they are believing about God, and what they are believing about themselves. Are you willing to listen to others, your spouse, children, whoever?

Also, when we look at our own struggles with anger or lust or hopelessness there is always a message that we are telling ourselves about God and self. An angry person lashes out and feels justified, feels that he or she is righteous, and might profess that God is sovereign and present, but in that moment believes that God is not sovereign or present therefore he has to take God's place as judge and executioner. God has no good purposes in that. We need to think through all our behaviour because there is always a message we are telling ourselves. But it is not only realizing the message we are telling ourselves but also realizing that God in midst of our struggles and battles and pain is not silent but he has spoken and he can be known.

2. We need to perceive the God who can be known. V.23.

Think of why we are in this world. We are in this world as interpreters. We will see this in the sermon of Paul that the evidence of God is overwhelming. His presence is stamped everywhere in life and Creation. There is no place you can go where the imprint of his work and love are not present. Listen to Psalm 19:1-4. These verses are familiar but do not let the familiarity somehow cause you to lose the glory of what is being communicated, **“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”** This revelation is there for every single person.

Now think about it, people know there is a God. Only a fool says in his heart there is no God. But how come they can't see the immensity of who God is? And the reason why is they are willfully blind. So think of it, why does God give believing parents to children who can look at the glory of trees, streams, butterflies, stars, and skies and not see the glory of God? He has given them believing parents to interpret and describe what they cannot see. Why does God place you in a workplace where people can look at the things of this life and not see the handiwork of God? He has given you into their lives so that you can see for them, or interpret what they cannot see. And through our seeing and interpreting that God may give them sight.

But think of it also as believers who go through this life and struggle. We all have blind spots, things that we should see, especially with the amount of Biblical knowledge that we have but we just do not see or perceive so often. So why has God given us other believers in our lives? To help us to see, to speak those truths into our lives that we already know — to help us to interpret what we are not seeing. Have you ever had that happened to you? Your feeling sorry for yourself, or your angry at the

world or others, and someone comes alongside or we are sitting in a service listening to the Scripture expounded, and it just like the light went on, or there was that “aha” moment. We saw God was present in our lives, and sovereign over our circumstances. We saw he was so good in giving us our trials. And we saw that the greatest obstacle was not my circumstances or others but my own pride and sinful heart. And change really happened. Because here is the truth — God has spoken. And God in his glorious grace even gives others to speak that truth to us when we are so blind to the very truths we know.

So think about what Paul says here, **“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 passed by many of these idols and statues to various deities, and no doubt their were worshippers before some of them. And certainly we can pass and see people who worship various things in this life that they think can give them life. The two big idols of our day are money or materialism and sex. And it is amazing that people agree that these are two idols that people worship today, but the vast majority of people would say they are not addicted or worshipping those things. No, not a materialist, as they buy more and more to hoard it in their closets and barns building up the kingdom of self. No, I am not addicted to sex and they constantly think about it, or indulge in pornography, or watch certain entertainment or argue about it in the marriage relationship. I want what I want, and I want it now. We are worshippers.

Paul observed these objects of worship. But Paul found an obscure idol, with an inscription on it, **“To the unknown god.”** Now this image of statue no longer exists but there are various different writings in the ancient world that make reference to this actual idol. Listen to what one commentator writes, **“Philostratus mentions a conversation of his hero Apollonius, a contemporary of Paul, in which he informs a certain Timasion that it is a sign of wisdom to say good things “about all gods” (περὶ πάντων θεῶν), “especially in Athens where altars are erected even for unknown gods”** Certainly the reason for erecting this image was not so much to honour the one true God but to cover their bases that if they missed a god, by doing this they could still incur his or her favour. It was more about them than God.

Paul takes this as a reference of all the gods that they worship, they in all their wisdom are ignorant of the one true God. He says, **“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”** Now Paul is not saying that they actually worshiped God, only that they were ignorant of the true God that he was about to proclaim. And certainly men and women are without excuse. They suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness as Romans 1 indicates. But they suppress that truth so much and the further they get down the line and create gods after their own image this true God becomes totally foreign to them. There is so much revelation as we will see in the creation around every person, so that every person is without excuse. It is willful blindness that suppresses that truth. But it is still blindness. Not only that — what can be known of Christ and his saving grace can only be known through God’s specific revelation — and therefore a proclaimer is necessary. God sends those with spiritual eyes into this world to announce to those who are blind to the truths of Christ.

And this statement right here is an affront to the Epicurean philosophy that God could not be known, and also the Sophists who said that truth fluctuates. There is a specific truth and a specific God that all must give an account to. And let me end with a couple of challenges. One is God has given all of us as true born again believers in Christ, new life with new eyes where we see the truth of Christ and the wisdom of the cross. We grow in our seeing and perception of who Christ is and our love for him. But here is the thing — he hasn't given that knowledge and even growing knowledge in seeing him to be kept to ourselves. It is not about you and Jesus. Eternal life and seeing and savouring Christ was never meant to be kept to yourself. It is meant to be shared, and shared to both those who are blind and those who see. The blind are those outside of Christ. It is incredible how we say we love Christ and we love others but never open our mouths to speak the life saving truth, the truths where God can give sight to those who are blind. Are we seeking to speak to the blind what they cannot and do not see? God truly has given us a mission.

And are we speaking these truths to those who do see? God gives us spiritual sight but our sinful hearts often complicate things, and muddle our sight. When we are in the midst of struggles and suffering our sight can become foggy and we cannot see ten feet in front of us. We know truth but perceiving it seems out of sight. God brings believers into our lives with clearer vision. They see through the fog. They can help us see the glory and goodness of Christ. We all need to be these believers with spiritual sight for others, and we all need these kinds of believers in our lives. Praise God — He has given us sight. But spiritual sight is such a glorious stewardship where we want our great God to be glorified and others to know Him. Let us be led through seeing and help lead others through what we know about our great God.