

## 42—Acts 17.16-34—The Hill of the Unknown God

- I. Introduction
  - a. We have an opportunity to believe, today, the one, true and living God. The God who has spoken through divine revelation has made himself known. The God who is jealous for his glory. The God who loves himself supremely which is the very best thing he can do for us. If God loved us above himself it would prove he is in need of something outside of himself. But God is sufficient in himself. He has no needs. He doesn't need us in any way. Also, to love something ultimately that is less than himself would make him an idolater.
  - b. Indeed, God does love us. And "In view of God's infinitely beauty and power and wisdom, we have to ask what would love look like? Love is when you give someone the best thing you can give them for their very best good. And ask, 'What would God give to me if he loved me infinitely?' Himself." (Piper) The best gift God can give a person is himself.
  - c. That's what is so troubling about this passage and the world we live in. Much of the world is satisfied to love a Matchbox car more than the real thing.
  - d. We step into Athens this morning where there are countless Matchbox car gods but the God of the universe has sent his messenger to bring divine revelation to them.
- II. Main Point
  - a. The all-knowing God can be known and must be proclaimed demanding that every person repent
- III. Outline
  - a. Paul was provoked therefore he preached
  - b. The Preaching provokes many responses
  - c. Paul goes to war with word on Mars Hill
  - d. Some Mock, Others are Curious, and a few Believe
- IV. Exposition
  - a. We left off last week with Paul being escorted out of Berea because the Jews from Thessalonica had traveled two days to stir of the city against him. The new followers of Christ took him as far as the coast it seems where he sails some 300 miles south to Athens. It appears that Paul intended to wait for Silas and Timothy to join him because he had sent word for them to come as soon as possible. However, as Paul toured the great city of Athens alone, his spirit was provoked within him. Therefore, he seems to have abandoned his intent to wait and begins to preach.
    - i. Athens was the intellectual capital of the world. There's no fair comparison even in our day. While Harvard and Princeton and the likes are thought to be the highest of higher education, quite frankly they are pitiful attempts when compared with Athens.
    - ii. Though it doesn't explain why Paul was waiting, we know that Jesus set a wise pattern of sending people out in pairs. There's much wisdom to this. In many places in the world, prisons require you to provide for your own food. If you don't have someone on the outside then I suppose you had to fight others for a piece of bread or pay for it somehow. Some prisons in the Roman world would provide a food allowance for you if you were a Roman citizen but Paul did not always take advantage of that. He relied on his friends as we will see in Acts 28.
    - iii. The risk of trouble seems very probable. We've seen the pattern. His understanding of the world will collide with a city full of idols.
      1. Whatever you've heard of Athens, I'm not sure any of us have encountered what Paul walked into that day. The closest thing some of us have seen this would be at a local Chinese buffet.
      2. The Parthenon in Athens is so famous, there's a replica here in Nashville. The original one was "built between 447 and 432 B.C. during the height of the ancient Greek Empire. Dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena, the Parthenon sits high atop a compound of temples known as the Acropolis of Athens. It was the largest and most lavish temple the

Greek mainland had ever seen.” ([Parthenon: Definition, Facts, Athens & Greece - HISTORY - HISTORY](#))

3. They had all the options available for idol worship and when Paul saw it his spirit was provoked within him.
  - a. This isn't like different denominations here who essentially worship the same God with some variations of beliefs. But this was a city full of many different gods for which they would worship by offering sacrifices to and among other things.
  - b. This idea of being provoked is like that of being angered. But it's an anger in the same way God was provoked by Israel when they turned to others gods like creating a golden calf. This is a righteous anger. He's really bothered by what he sees.
    - i. Certainly, it is visibly obvious. If you've ever been to Washington D.C. the Lincoln memorial would somewhat resemble what it looked like but many more.
    - ii. The things they did in idol worship would not be appropriate to share. And competing with was a tall task. I'll just say this, if you had a place of worship that had prostitutes available and then the church which forbids that which one would you go to?
- iv. Before we go any further, let's define idolatry. What is it that has so disturbed Paul? It seems the God who is jealous for his glory shows up in those who follow him. Paul is jealous for God's glory too.
  1. To define idolatry, we must begin with the first commandment from Exodus 20:3 which says, "You shall have no other gods before me."
    - a. To briefly explain, "Idolatry is whatever your heart clings to or relies on for ultimate security." (Beale 17)
    - b. We've discussed at length how this is connected to the demonic but we also need to realize that idolatry "is the work of human hands, constructs of our own fallen and rebellious imagination."
    - c. "The major problem with idolatry is that it blurs the distinction between the Creator God and the creation. This both damages creation (including ourselves) and diminishes the glory of the Creator." (Beale quotes Christopher Wright 17)
    - d. "Since God's mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessings that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict." (ibid)
  2. Paul's heart is in conflict when he sees this city full of idols and so too is God's heart. He joins the battle against this eternally destructive worship of idols.
    - a. Paul has walked into a city that is adamant on staying safe and enjoying as much pleasure as possible.
      - i. But they don't trust in that which is eternally safe and eternally enjoyable.
      - ii. This is the most basic first question: What is the chief end of man? It is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Or think of this way, you glorify God by enjoying him forever.
- v. With the scene set for us in part, we see in like fashion Paul steps into the synagogue first.
  1. There he reasons with the Jews and the devout or God-fearers from the Scriptures.

- a. Luke rolls past this as if they were not interested and gave no real backlash like other Jews have in the other cities.
2. Remember, because the city is full of idols, Paul seeks to make the One, true and living God known. “He saw the city was full of idol. Therefore, he reasoned with them.”
  - a. Next, he goes to the marketplace—the agora.
    - i. He goes there every day reasoning with those who happened to be there. This is very similar to what the Berean Jews were doing when they searched the Scriptures daily.
    - ii. It would have been very common for someone lecturing and asking questions of people in the market.
    - iii. Some of those who happened to be there were two schools of thought.
      1. The Epicureans and the Stoic philosophers. They too conversed with him.
      2. As these learned men heard what Paul had to say, they were dismissive of his claims.
      3. There are two responses: Some made fun by name calling and the others charged him with being a preacher of foreign divinities.
        - a. They used an interesting word to poke fun at Paul’s teaching. The word babbler might have been some Athenian slang because it literally means “seed picker.” It’s like a scavenger bird.
        - b. In other words, they think Paul has gone around picking up scrapes of truth second-hand that makes no sense. He’s an “ignorant plagiarist.” (Stott)
        - c. The others respond with a similar charge made against Socrates some 450 years earlier by claiming Paul is preaching some strange heathen gods akin to the demonic.
          - i. They said this because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.
          - ii. Don’t miss that. This is how they understand the world. Jesus and resurrection are foreign to them. Many of you have heard of these things since you were kids.
          - iii. This is the first time for these people and that’s what they say about it.
          - iv. Just a side note, anyone who claims that the apostles picked up the resurrection from these places of false worship should take note of how strange this is to the Mecca of idol worship.
- vi. Before we march off to Mars Hill, I want to ask how your spirit responds to a city full of idols?
  1. Does it bother you that people give glory to other things?
  2. Is it concerning to you when God is left out of the conversation?
  3. I’m sure this question causes you some confusion because we don’t seem to easily identify our idols like the Athenians.
    - a. We were having a discussion Wednesday night about how the 9/11 attacks revealed what many people relied on as their ultimate security.

- i. You don't really feel it until it's taken away.
    - ii. If somehow a scammer was able to access your computer and take all of your money, would you panic because that was your security?
  - b. We need to be more clear and more accountable to one another as to what idols we fashion for ourselves. We're going to try and be clear about what our idols look like next week.
    - i. But for now, Paul looks like Moses when he comes down off the hill of Horeb and God's people have made a golden calf.
      - 1. Instead of grinding it up and throwing it in the river, Paul's means of battle is with speaking the good news. He reasons from the scriptures.
    - ii. You will not see any plagues or miracles in Athens. Many people have read the bible and concluded that since they don't have the gift to do miracles, they don't have anything to engage the unbelief of this world.
      - 1. Well, you have the truth. We are a people of the book. Share the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation.
- b. The preaching of Jesus and resurrection has already provoked many responses. But this next response sees Paul brought to the Areopagus—aka Mars Hill.
  - i. Ares is the god of war and pagus means hill—the hill of Ares. Ares and Mars mean the same thing. Ares was a Greek god and Mars was the Roman equivalent. Thus we get Mars Hill.
  - ii. This place is thought to be the highest of thought. It's debatable whether they thought of it as the highest of knowledge because it seems that some held that the highest of knowledge was to admit you didn't know. But that doesn't mean these people had not given much thought about the world and how to live in it.
    - 1. I suppose Athens proves that among the best thinkers in the world, you cannot figure out who God is and how to live in light of that without divine revelation and the Holy Spirit.
  - iii. Whatever the case, Paul is standing on the hill of the greatest thinkers. Of that day and maybe ever since, this was the largest platform on which to stand.
    - 1. It's location tells of something about what they believed about this place. It stood above the agora (the marketplace) where smaller ideas and debates were had. It also stood above the acropolis which at the time was the place the gods.
    - 2. The higher the building the higher of supremacy. One might question what in fact was their god? And that's just it, without divine revelation, man stands above the gods and determines who they are and how they will be worshiped.
      - a. That's why it was so popular for churches to use steeples to gain height over everything else in the city.
  - iv. I suppose it sounds like Paul has been arrested or brought into custody because of the way this is described. V. 19 describes Paul being taken and brought to the Areopagus which was a hill of debate and a court.
    - 1. It's true, the officials did meet there for hearings about matters of law but they were hard to distinguish. The council was convened and they give the reason in the rest of verses 19 and 20.
      - a. (Acts 17:19-20) "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish therefore to know what these things mean."
      - b. The people of Athens were careful to regulate or even censor what kinds of thoughts were swirling around Athens.

- c. That's why a hearing of law or a debate of thoughts were hard to distinguish even though there's no reason to think this was a formal trial.
- d. They didn't want anything interfering with their happiness and they didn't want the gods upset with them.
  - i. Their nature is showing. Do you know how animals in the wild often survive? They notice things that are different. You can put up a deer stand in a new place and the deer will avoid it until it proves to be safe to pass by.
- 2. Their response like that. They desire to know what Paul meant in his preaching of Jesus and the resurrection.
  - a. Yes, some called him a babbler or ignorant plagiarist and some thought he was introducing some heathen gods. But they still wanted to understand.
  - b. Some people immediately dismiss new and strange things when they hear them. That was not true of the Athenians.
    - i. In verse 21 it says this was normal for them to spend their time in nothing except telling and hearing something new.
  - c. When you first heard of Jesus and resurrection, they were new and strange to you.
    - i. How did you process these things? How did you decide they were true?
    - ii. Did you decide? Are you holding fast to them?

V. Response

- a. Obviously, coming to the table is our response. Let's take a moment to evaluate ourselves. Let's think about this passage as we prepare our hearts to remember Christ and his sacrifice for us.
- b. I want to ask do you know what the doctrines of the church are? Do you desire to know what they mean?
  - i. Do you think about them? Attempt to remind yourself?
    - 1. Deacons are called to (1 Tim. 3:9) 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
    - 2. If you do not then you can't be a deacon.
- c. The book of Jude tells us (Jude 1:3) to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
- d. Do you teach them to your children?
- e. Do you equip your them to understand the world they live in and how God commands them to live?
- f. Do you know what they are reading at school?
- g. Do your beliefs and your practices match?
- h. Many kids have walked away from the faith of their parents because they watched act differently than what they all heard at church.
- i. These Athenians at least want to know and possibly guard their city. Do you know what your kids believe?
- j. What are you eager to know?
- k. Are you jealous for God's glory? Does the idolatry of this world provoke you to contend for Jesus and the resurrection?
- l. "The motive of Paul in evangelism isn't simply love for mankind; it's also, and more fundamentally, a jealous passion to see God worshiped rightly among all peoples." --Bret Rogers
- m. As we will hear Paul proclaim next week, "Repent!" Lay down your Matchbox cars, your idols, your God belittling ways and turn to Jesus Christ. Even though you are on the wrong side, he extends the offer of forgiveness to those who will repent and believe in the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of he world.