

## 43—Acts 17.16-34—The Hill of the Unknown God—Part 2

### I. Introduction

- a. The book of Proverbs tells us in (Prov. 14:12) <sup>12</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.
- b. What a sobering truth. Linger there for a moment. What seems right to you that is actually leading to death?
  - i. It seemed right for Adam and Eve to take of the forbidden tree and it led to death.
  - ii. King David thought it seemed right to take Bathsheba which should have led to his death according to the law. But God had mercy on him.
  - iii. The whole book of Judges is summed up like this: (Jdg. 21:25) <sup>25</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
- c. Of those examples, none of them saw death coming. I suppose it was much like the scene in Romans chapter one where they suppressed the truth.
- d. The Apostle Paul was living his life in what seemed right to him before Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. These Athenians were on the same path. All of them were heading to death but will God intervene and have mercy. Let's take a look. And as we do, ask the Lord to show you ways that seem right to you but lead to death. There is a King and he is the way, the truth and they life.
- e. Though we may be found wanting, God's grace is available to those who have ears to hear.

### 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 pick up in the story where we left off last week. Paul had been taken to the Areopagus and he is standing in the midst of the council. It doesn't seem to be a formal hearing but rather an attempt to understand what he means by preaching Jesus and resurrection. I mentioned last week that there are no visible signs and wonders performed in Athens but God is making himself known through the proclamation of the word of God. Thus, Paul goes to war on the hill of the god of war not with weapons but with words and the Holy Spirit.
  - i. Beginning in verse 22, we hear Paul addressing the council: "Men of Athens, I understand that in every way you are very religious."
    1. In light of the introduction, take note of Paul's observation that the men of Athens are very religious in every way.
      - a. Every way is not right. The idea of every way leads to death. And these people are very religious in all of them.
      - b. Maybe you think every way or most ways are okay and lead to life. If I start naming the religions that either have a distorted understanding of God and the gospel, I fear some of us would think that way or that religious group is on the right path.
        - i. For example, according to their on doctrines, Roman Catholics believe a false gospel. That doesn't mean some of them are not true believers. There are and they actually do not believe what their church teaches.
    2. Paul uses a very general term to describe the people of Athens.

- a. This word for religious can mean very devoted or superstition.
  - b. I would compare it to how many use the word “spiritual” these days. It’s a catch-all category that includes the most dedicated to the gospel to the craziness of demonic worship.
    - i. I suppose that performance at the Grammy’s would have been categorized as spiritual. In a comment from CBS they said, “They were ready to worship.”
  - c. The word Paul used describes what he saw as he walked around Athens. He could have used a more pointed word that would have possibly shutdown the conversation.
    - i. This is a wise way to begin as he narrows in later.
- ii. Paul understands these Athenians to be very religious because among their objects of worship, he found an altar to the unknown god.
    1. This is one among many altars in Athens. Their city was full idols.
    2. Think about if we gathered this morning with no idea who to praise. Our song void of Jesus’ name. A god we knew nothing about. Prayers offered up in what name?
    3. Isn’t that strange? I get it with the others. At least they had a name and some attributes like Ares who was the god of war.
    4. However strange it might be, Paul makes uses of it to proclaim to them the God they admit they don’t know.
      - a. He removes a step in the process of convincing them of another God they might not have thought of and he wisely points out that they all acknowledge these learned men do not know.
      - b. Keep an eye on how many times Paul brings up the fact that they don’t know.
  - iii. Now that Paul has them disarmed and has connected them to an object of worship they claim not to know, he now proceeds to proclaim to them what they worship as unknown (2<sup>nd</sup> time).
    1. Paul begins at creation. This a very different starting place than when he sought to reason from the Scriptures with the Jews. There he sought to persuade them that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and that he was the Christ.
      - a. The point is, you will have to start at different places with different people as we seek to make the One, true and living God known.
    2. He begins there because that’s the beginning—the Genesis of the world. The world they live in and they themselves were created by God.
      - a. Paul will make the argument that the God they do not know is not made and cannot be made. In fact, He made everything.
      - b. Now, I don’t know how each one understood that. Even among this crowd there are different understanding about creation. But regardless, Paul is connecting his earlier discussions about Jesus and the resurrection with the Creator. He doesn’t bring something new, but rather the fulfillment of God’s plan for creation in Christ.
        - i. Indeed, Christ has come that we might be a new creation in him.
    3. Part of Paul’s strategy is to establish God as the Creator which makes him also Lord of creation.
      - a. That means all of creation is subject to and accountable for their actions. He has Creator rights over his creation.
      - b. He created the world and he has designed the world a particular way.

- c. Therefore, he is Lord of heaven and earth. He has the right to say to everyone: (Exod. 20:3-5) <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.
- d. He is no tribal God. He is no territorial God. He's not merely the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel is not the only sheep of his pasture.
  - i. (Ps. 96:5) <sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
  - ii. Like we read in our call to worship last week: (Ps. 24:1-2) The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, <sup>2</sup> for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.
  - iii. God almighty lays claim to all peoples. They are his!
- 4. Because God is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, he does not live in temples made by man...or handmade.
  - a. Get the image there. Only handmade gods live in handmade temples.
    - i. You would be right to ask—but the God of Israel did dwell in a handmade temple.
      1. Let's try to understand that. God's intent in the temple was to bring heaven to earth. The holy of holies was not accessible but once a year by the high priest with many sacrifices.
      2. Heaven was not accessible either by this sinful creation.
      3. But when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he said in (1 Ki. 8:27) <sup>27</sup> "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!
      4. "From the beginning of the temple there was an unsolvable paradox of God's simultaneous inability and ability to live within an earthly temple. Back in Acts 7, Stephen's sermon explains that this paradox is resolved by realizing that Solomon's temple was a mere physical pointer to a time when God's dwelling on earth would not be limited to a handmade house but would be expanded everywhere through Christ and the Spirit as the new temple." (Beale 188)
      5. That was God's ultimate design and purpose for the temple. But how could that happen among sinful people? How could we be a new creation. Another flood and start over?
      6. How about a flood poured out on God instead of man?
      7. How about starting over with the resurrected Jesus instead of Noah who found himself drunk and naked in his tent?
      8. No, it must be through the sinless one. It must be through the one who drank down the cup of God's wrath on the cross.
      9. Now sinful humanity can be forgiven and counted righteous. Now the Holy Spirit can dwell in his people. Now the presence of God can spread even to Athens and Nashville!

- b. Can we change how we think and talk about this building?
  - i. This building is not the House of God. The baptistry is not the holy of holies. God is not tucked away somewhere in a closet.
  - ii. The danger in this thinking is that God stays here when you leave. You might be tempted to think that he cannot see or hear you when you are not here.
  - iii. It's also a danger to think this is God's House in some sort of privileged way. We are God's people. We go to his house.
  - iv. NO. God dwells in his people to spread his presence across the face of the earth and his glory to ends of the earth.
  - v. His Holy Spirit is in us to transform us into his likeness again. We are to be the images of God, not carved images of gold and wood.
  - vi. Listen, God cannot be reflected by an idol. When Jesus (the One who said if you've seen me, you've seen the Father) came, were they supposed to notice Jesus was God's Son by his physical resemblance? Or was he to be known by what he did? When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the One or should they be looking for another, what did Jesus say?
    - 1. What you don't see the resemblance? (Matt. 11:4-5) "Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.
    - 2. None of the Athenian idols can do that!
- 5. Let's move on. It stands to reason that if the God Paul has come to make known to the people of Athens was the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, doesn't live in handmade temples, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.
  - a. Handmade gods live in handmade temples and they need to be served by the hands of men.
    - i. Just as an application: God doesn't need you to serve him but we are called to serve one another. The office of deacon gets shifted to taking care of the physical needs of this building rather than the physical needs of the church. This is your number one priority, deacons: to serve the physical needs of the people.
  - b. Handmade gods have needs. In our small town of Dresden, we have a bronze statue of Ned McWherther, former governor of Tennessee who grew up and lived in Dresden. Once a year, the FFA from our high school must come and clean and polish the bronze statue because it loses its glory so to speak.
  - c. I think that statement implies that handmade gods need someone to speak for them and hear for them. They have no life...no breath in them.
- 6. He doesn't need to be served. In fact, God is the One who serves creation.
  - a. Indeed, he gives life and breath and everything to all mankind.
  - b. It began with God breathing life into Adam and consequently creation continues because God gives life still.
  - c. Listen, idols cannot give life and breath or anything to anybody because life is not in them.
  - d. Only the living God can give life.

- e. When you sing here in a moment, just know that every breath you have was given to you as a gift. That should make you sing differently.
  - f. Whether these Athenians or yourself want to admit it or not, all are dependent on God for life.
- iv. He also made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.
- 1. Yes, every race of people...every color of skin...every nation and tribe began in Adam.
  - 2. God determined the appointed times and the fixed boundaries of their dwelling.
    - a. Why? That they should seek God!
    - b. But how would we find him if we can only grope around like blind men?
      - i. Even if God is right in front of us, can we find him?
      - ii. Even though in him we live and move and exist?
      - iii. Even though all are God's children? Not in the salvation kind of way but we are his creation. Like Adam, we have all turned our backs on our Father even though he gave us life and everything.
      - iv. How will we find him? Paul is there to bring the revelation of God to them—the Word of God.
      - v. Creation alone is not sufficient for God' plan to deliver humanity. This God is living and he speaks. He has spoken clearly in his word.
  - 3. If he is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth and gives life to all and being 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.
    - a. In other words, we are God's creation and we should not think that God is something we can create.
      - i. That's like a car deciding to create a person to drive the car.
- b. Now to our last point, what then should we do? There are three responses. Some mock, some are curious and delay their response, and some repent and believe.
- i. Paul tells them the times of ignorance are over. God will no longer overlook their ignorance.
    - 1. The Lord will not allow their ignorance to be an excuse for not responding.
    - 2. Therefore, he demands that everyone repent. Everyone must turn from following these idols like those in Thessalonica.
      - a. (1 Thess. 1:9-10) <sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.
    - 3. Why? Because the God who has fixed the boundaries and times has also fixed a day of judgment.
      - a. He will judge the world by a man he has appointed.
      - b. Who is this man? The one who he raised from the dead!
      - c. The God-Man Christ Jesus.
  - ii. When Paul mentions resurrection, some mock! Others say, "We will hear you again about this." They delay their response. But some join him and believe!
  - iii. So Paul went out from their midst.
- V. Response
- a. Where did idolatry begin? It began in the Garden of Eden.
    - i. Adam's allegiance shifted from God to an idol. What was that idol? Himself.
    - ii. Idol worship is revering anything other than God.

- iii. He also has shifted his allegiance to the serpent. Instead of imaging God he now becomes like the snake when he refuses to answer the Lord forthrightly about the tree. Like the serpent, he doesn't trust the word of God.
- b. Adam had taken over as the authority of his own life but that authority belongs to God alone.
  - i. Who calls the shots?
  - ii. What decides where the line is?
- c. If you worship idols...even yourself you must repent and turn to Jesus.
  - i. If everything seems right in your own eyes and you have no king, King Jesus demands that you come to him. Turn from trusting others things. And come find grace for your souls.

**Benediction:** (Jude 1:24-25) <sup>24</sup> Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, <sup>25</sup> to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.