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An Unknown God in Athens

17: 16-33

51-52 AD

An unknown God in Athens DIG: To be noticed by these Greek philosophers, how extensive must Paul's activity have been? What are these philosophers like (17:18-21)? The Stoics believed "god" was in everything and so everything was "god" (Pantheism); while the Epicureans had little or no belief in "god" at all. What does Paul emphasize about God in vs 23-30? How does Paul use their own culture to help them see the weaknesses in the way they related to deity? How is this sermon different from that in 13:16-41? Why? Is his lack of using Scripture in Chapter 17 a strength or a weakness? Why? How are the sermons alike in terms of what they teach about Jesus? In what they call people to do? How does the response in Athens (17:21, 33-34) compare with Berea (17:12) and Thessalonica (17:4)?

REFLECT: What distresses you spiritually about the area in which you live? What specific needs do you see? What do you feel God is calling you to do about them? Who do you know that has very little or no background in the gospel? How would your witness to them be different than to someone who has some biblical background? Paul uses idols and Greek poetry as points of contact between these people and the gospel. How might you use movies, etc. as a way of relating the gospel more efficiently to others today? What keeps you most distracted and unaware of openings for spiritual conversation with others? What could keep you more tuned in to these opportunities. Which do you find it more difficult to deal with: opposition or apathy? How have you experienced both?

There is something gripping about **Paul** in **Athens**, the great **apostle to the Gentiles** amidst the glories of ancient Greece. Of course **he** had known about **Athens** since **his** boyhood. Everyone knew about **Athens**. **She** had been the foremost **Greek** city-state since the fifth century BC. Even after **her** incorporation into the Roman Empire, **she** retained a proud intellectual independence and also became a free city. **She** boasted of **her** rich philosophical tradition inherited from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, of **her** literature and art, and of **her** notable achievements in the cause of human liberty. Even in **Paul's** day **she** lived

on her great past, and was a comparatively small town by modern criteria, but she still had an unrivalled reputation as the empire's intellectual metropolis.

Now for the first time **Paul** visited the **Athens** of which he had heard so much, arriving by sea from the north. **His** friends, who had given **him** safe escort from **Berea**, had gone. **He** had asked them to send **Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens as soon as possible (17:15)**. **He** was hoping to be able to return to **Macedonia**, for it was to **Macedonia** that **he** had been called (**16:10**). Meanwhile, as **he** waited for their arrival, **he** found **himself** alone in the cultural capital of the world. What was **his** reaction? What should be the reaction of a believer who visits or lives in a city that is dominated by worldly ideology or religion, a city that may be aesthetically magnificent and culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent and spiritually deceived?⁴¹⁰ This was **Paul's** challenge. This is our challenge.

Paul's witness: Now while Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, his spirit was greatly aroused within him when he saw that the city was full of idols. It was the Gentiles who were worshipping these idols because idolatry ceased being a problem for the Jews after the Babylonian Captivity (see the commentary on [Jeremiah, to see link click Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)). However, the principle of **Romans 1:16, to the Jew first**, must stand. So, he first began debating in the synagogue with the Jewish people and the God-fearing Gentiles. The rest of the week, he took on all comers in the marketplace, Athens' famed *agora*, every day with all who happened to be there. The marketplace was not only a place for buying and selling but it was also a public resort for all who wished to hear the news of the day or debate different ideas. Among those he engaged in debate were some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (17:16-18a). They along with the Cynics, represented the three most popular contemporary schools of philosophy.

The followers of **Epicurus** (341-270 BC) denied the existence of **God** and believed that the universe originated by chance from a falling reign of atoms (sounds pretty close to the evolutionists of today). They taught that the pursuit of pure truth was hopeless, and therefore, pleasure, and not knowledge, is the chief goal of life. Their view of the soul was materialistic, and taught that, at death, the body and soul (both composed of atoms) disintegrated into nothing. They believed that there was no afterlife to either fear of hope for; and as a result, must make the best of it in this life. They mocked the popular pagan gods believing that they were living in eternal calm away from the lives of mankind with whom they never intervened. The Epicureans of today speak of "doing your own thing."⁴¹¹

The **Stoic philosophers**, on the other hand, saw self-mastery as the greatest virtue. **They** believed that **wisdom** came from being free from intense emotionalism. **Stoic** philosophy taught people should submit themselves to natural law. The highest expression of this, according to **Stoicism**, was reason, which would lead one to be righteous, and to be righteous was to live in harmony with reason (circular thinking). This was the only true good. In their way of thinking, the only evil in life was not being righteous. Everything else, such as death, pleasure, and pain were themselves indifferent. In contrast to the practical atheism of **the Epicureans**, **the Stoics** were pantheists (believing that everything is god). They taught that the purpose of the gods was to direct history, and mankind need align themselves with that purpose. They understood the soul to be physical and at death was somehow absorbed into this blurry “god.” All the major Eastern religions and certain seemingly Western offshoots have at bottom a similar theology, that there is no transcendent **God** who created and rules the universe independently of mankind.⁴¹² The extremes of **Stoicism** and **Epicureanism** sum up the futility of mankind’s existence apart from **God**.

The mocking of Paul: Although **they** differed radically in **their** philosophical beliefs, both **Stoics** and **Epicureans** were united in **their** contempt for **Paul’s** teaching. **Some were saying, “What’s this babbler trying to say?” while others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign deities” - because he was proclaiming the Good News of Yeshua and the resurrection.** Totally misunderstanding **Paul’s** message, **they** may have thought **he** used the **Greek** word *anastasis* (**resurrection**) as the proper name of a goddess (*Anastasis*). **So they took Paul to the Areopagus** (a hill in **Athens** 377 feet high). In **Paul’s** day this court met in the Stoa Basilica, below the hill. **The council of the Areopagus (Mars Hill)** was responsible for supervising the religion, culture and education in **Athens**.⁴¹³ It had full control of all itinerant lecturers, and under Roman law it was illegal for anyone to introduce a new **god**. **Paul** was not formally tried before this **council** (which several centuries earlier had condemned Socrates), but was informally required to give an account of **his teaching**. The proceedings opened with a sarcastic question. **May we come to know what this new teaching is that you are talking about? For you are bringing some strange** (surprising or shocking) **things to our ears, so we want to know what these things mean.** Explain yourself. **They** really had no genuine interest in the gospel, however, as **Luke’s** parenthetical comment shows: **Now all the Athenians and foreigners visiting there used to pass their time doing nothing but telling or hearing something new** under the sun (17:16-21).

The theme of Paul’s speech was a masterpiece of communication on how to know the unknown God. That involves three steps: recognizing that God is, recognizing

who He is, and recognizing what He said.

Recognizing That God Is

So Paul stood in the middle of the council of Areopagus and said: Men of Athens, I see that in all ways you are very religious (17:22). The Greek word for **religious** is *deisidaimonia*, which in the B'rit Chadashah normally means *the fear of demonic things*. This is the way the Jews used it. But **the Greeks** used the same word in two different ways: in a good sense, meaning *pious* or *religious*, and in a bad sense, meaning *superstitious*. **Paul** intentionally used this word in an ambiguous way so that **the Greeks** could interpret it any way **they** wanted. **Paul** could say that **they** were *very superstitious*, while **the Greeks** could think **they** were *very religious*. Therefore, from **Paul's** Jewish frame of reference **he** was implying that **the Greek** reverence for **their gods** was really a reverence of *demons*.⁴¹⁴



For while I was passing through Athens and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, "To an Unknown God" (17:23a). The background of this altar is recorded for us by an ancient Greek writer, Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives of Philosophers* (1,100 AD). According to his account, around 600 BC a terrible plague broke out in Athens. It was believed by the city leaders that one of the many gods had been offended and had brought on the plague. Sacrifices were offered to the gods, but to no avail. Then Epimenides, also a famous priest of the cult of Zeus on Crete, suggested that **the Athenians** had possibly offended an **unknown god**. He ordered that a number of sheep be released **in Athens** and that wherever they lay down, a sacrifice should be offered to an **unknown god**. **Altars** were built and sacrifices were offered. Soon the plague ended. When **Paul** visited **Athens**, one of these altars was still standing. **He** used it as a point of

reference in preaching before **the council of leading Epicureans and Stoics.**⁴¹⁵

Therefore what you worship without knowing, this I proclaim to you (17:23b). Paul was using a Jewish method of teaching, going from the known to **the unknown**. What was known was that **they had an altar to an unknown god**, so as far as **the Greeks** were concerned there was some **god** out there that **they did not know**. Paul was in essence saying, "I'm going to tell you who this **unknown god** is." Thus Paul could not be convicted of introducing a new **god** that would violate Roman law since **he** claimed that **their unknown god** was the very **God** he represented, and that **they** worshiped **Him** without realizing it. However, **he** did not use the TaNaKh in **his** speech because it would have been irrelevant to those highly educated pagans. This was **his** first speech to a totally pagan **Gentile** audience. Instead, **he** used **their** own beliefs as a hook to gain **their** interest in **the One True God**. **The Epicureans** attacked the superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while **the Stoics** stressed the unity of mankind and its relationship with **God**. What Paul did was to side with **the philosophers**, and then demonstrate that **they** didn't go far enough. **He** was not introducing a new religion, but something that was very, very old.⁴¹⁶

The Athenians had taken the first step in that they were supernaturalists. It is obviously impossible for those who deny **God's** existence to know **Him**, since **anyone who comes to God must believe that He is and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (11:6b)**. No one will search for a path to a destination they believe does not exist. And they must have believed there was a **god** (among all their deities) whom **they did not know**.

The Bible does not offer formal arguments for **God's** existence. **His** existence is ultimately a matter of revelation and faith (**John 1:18** and **20:29**). Such faith, however, is not a blind leap in the dark but is founded on fact. It is true that while **God's** existence is not provable in the sense of a scientific experiment or a mathematical equation, it is rational and logical in a cause-and-effect world.

The Bible reveals powerful and convincing evidence for **God's** existence. (**Psalms 19:1**); (**Romans 1:19**). A plan requires a **Planner**, a program requires a **Programmer**, and design requires a **Designer**. This is the essence of the theological argument for **God's** existence: the order and complexity of the universe could not have arisen by random chance as the evolutionists propose. The Bible also presents truth in **Psalm 94:9** the psalmist wrote: **He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?** Intelligence comes from **Intelligence**, and moral judgment from a moral **Being**. To argue that they came from dead matter is the height of **foolishness**. Only **God** can

create life out of nothing and **in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)**.

Since the evidence for **God's** existence is so overwhelming, the question arises as to why there are atheists. The Bible teaches that the reason is not intellectual and rational, but moral and spiritual. King David wrote: **The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."** That the foolishness in view is moral, not intellectual, is clear from the rest of the verse: **They are corrupt; their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good (Psalm 14:1)**. Atheism's rejection of **God** appeals to people who wish to avoid judgment for the sinful lifestyle. **Paul** makes it clear that the matter of rejecting **God** is willful and due to the love of sin (see the commentary on [Romans A1 - The Evidence Against the Pagan Gentile](#)).⁴¹⁷

Recognizing Who God Is

Having established that **God** exists and be known by mankind, **Paul** introduces **the council of the Aereopagus** to **Him**. Having established that **God** exists and can be known, **Paul** introduces **his** hearers to **him**. **The emissary to the Gentiles** presents **God** as **Creator, Ruler, Giver, Controller** and **Revealer**. In each of these ideas, **Paul** challenged key **Greek** ideas.

Creator: The God who made the world and all things in it (17:24a). This aimed at **the Stoics** and spoke against the eternity of all matter, and was not the demiurge, or a cosmic being, which was the viewpoint of **Greek** philosophy. **The Athenians** had 30,000 gods, so **Paul's** statement challenged that statement.

Ruler: Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by hands, like the Parthenon in **Athens (17:24b)**.

Giver: Nor is He served by human hands (like the Parthenon overlooking **the city**), **as if He needed anything**. This was an appeal to **the Epicureans**. Because **God** was totally self-sufficient and didn't need any offerings to make **Him** happy, **since He Himself gives to everyone life and breath and all things (17:25)**. This statement was for **the Stoics** and against **the Epicureans** who placed **God** totally outside the universe.

Controller: From one He made every nation of men to live on the face of the earth. This **God** is the direct **Creator** of humanity. This also challenged certain **Greek** ideas. **The Athenians** claimed to have sprung up from their native soil. But **Paul** said, no, **God** was **the Creator**, and the whole human race sprang up from one man. **Having set appointed times and the boundaries of their territory**; therefore, Greece has no special place in

the world (17:26). **God** controls human history.

Nothing in your life happens by chance. It's all for a purpose. Most amazingly, **God** decided *how* you would be born. Regardless of the circumstances of your birth or who your parents are, **God** had a plan in creating you. It doesn't matter whether your parents were good, bad, or indifferent. **God** knew that those two people possessed exactly the right genetic makeup to create the custom "you" **He** had in mind. They had the DNA **God** wanted to make you.

While there are illegitimate parents, there are no illegitimate children. Many children are unplanned by their parents, but they are not unplanned by **God**. **His** purpose took into account human error, and even sin. **God** doesn't ever do anything by accident, and **He** never makes mistakes. **He** has a reason for everything **He** creates. Every plant and every animal was planned by **God**, and every person was designed with a purpose in mind.

God's motive for creating you was **His** love. The Bible says: **Long before He laid down earth's foundations, He had us in mind, and had settled on us as the focus of His love (Ephesians 1:4a The Message).** **God** was thinking of you even before **He** made the world. In fact, that's why **He** created it! **God** designed this planet's environment just so we could live in it. We are **the focus of His love** and the most valuable of all creation: **God decided to give us life through the word of truth so we might be the most important of all the things He made (James 1:18 NCV).** That is how much **God loves** and values you!⁴¹⁸

Revealer: They were to search for Him, not turn away from Him as the Gentile nations had done. **But, perhaps grope around** in spiritual darkness **for Him and find Him.** So **God** can be found if we reach out and search for **Him by faith (Hebrews 11:6).** **Yet** indeed, **He is [indeed] not far from each one of us, for "In Him we live and move and have our being."** That is the evidence of **God's** nearness. This is not **Stoic** pantheism, but real immanence, or existing in all parts of the universe. **As some of your own poets, such as Epimenids, then Aratus, and Cleanthes, have said, "For we also are His offspring."** **Since we are His offspring, we ought not to suppose the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an engraved image of human art and imagination (17:27-29).** Since the connection between **God** and mankind is the life derived from **God**, then it is foolish to represent **the image of God** with **idols** that originate in the mind of mankind, and crafted by human hands.

Recognizing What God Has Said

Although God overlooked the periods of ignorance by the Gentiles before the coming

of **the Messiah, but now** (Greek: *nun* meaning *now as to the new things*) **He commands everyone everywhere to repent.** Before **Christ, the Gentiles** were only held responsible for natural revelation (**Romans 1:18-32**), but now they are responsible for special revelation, meaning that **God** has come with full knowledge. **For He has set a day on which He will judge the inhabited world in absolute righteousness** (see the commentary on **Revelation Fo - The Great White Throne Judgment**), **through Jesus Christ, a Man whom He has appointed. He has brought forth evidence of this to all men by raising Him from the dead (17:30-31).**

At that point **Paul** was interrupted and could not finish **his** presentation of the gospel. **Now when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to mock him** because **the Greeks** believed that the soul was eternal. But they had no concept of **the resurrection** of the body. This scoffing came from **the Epicureans** who denied both the resurrection and immortality of the soul. **The Stoics**, however, were unconvinced, but were more open minded, and said: **We will hear from you again about this**, but with no real intent to do so. This was an official dismissal of the matter. The same division noted earlier between open and closed-minded **Jews**, is not seen among **Gentiles**. **So Paul left from their midst**, never to return to **Athens** again. **But some men joined** (Greek: *kollethentes* meaning *to stick like glue*) **with him and believed - among them Dionysius (a member of the council of the Areopagus), a prominent woman named Damaris, and others with them (17:32-34).** Although it is said occasionally that **Paul** was unsuccessful in **Athens**, this verse proves the contrary. **For seeing that - in God's wisdom - the world through its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased - through the foolishness of the message proclaimed - to save those who believe (First Corinthians 1:21).**

When you contrast the seeming meager results in **Athens** with the great harvests in Thessalonica and Berea, you might be tempted to conclude that **Paul's** ministry there was a failure. If you do, you might find yourself drawing a hasty and false conclusion. **Paul** was not told to leave, so we assume he lingered in **Athens** and continued to minister to many unbelievers and a few believers. Proud, sophisticated, **wise Athenians** would not take easily to **Paul's** humbling message of the gospel, especially when **he** summarized all of **Greek** history with the phrase **the periods of ignorance**. The soil there was not deep and it contained many weeds (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Et - The Parable of the Soils**). But there was a small harvest.

And after all, one soul is worth the whole world.

We still need witnesses who will invade the sophisticated academics and present **Christ** to

people who are **wise** in their own eyes, but ignorant of the true **wisdom** of gospel. **Not many are wise according to human standards, not many are powerful, and not many are born well. Yet God chose the foolish things of the world so He might put to shame the strong (First Corinthians 1:26b-27).** But some *are* called, and **God** may use **you** to call them.

Take the gospel to your “Athens.” Be daring!⁴¹⁹

Lord, You have commanded that Your teachings be kept diligently (Psalm 119:4). Thus, I must be watchful and watch over my soul closely, so I don't forget the things I have seen or let them slip away from my heart and mind as long as I live. May I be faithful to teach Your Word to my children and grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9), encouraging them to never grow tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up (Galatians 6:9).⁴²⁰