

**Acts Series**  
September 2006  
Good news @ Midweek  
Prepared by Mike Southwick

## Paul's Second Missionary Journey Part IV

### *Taking the Gospel to Athens*

(Acts 17:16-34)

#### Introduction:

1. Modern pictures of Athens:



#### **Mars' Hill**

On his visit to Athens, Paul gave a speech to the learned men of the city at the Areopagus (Mars' Hill).

Mars' Hill is a prominent site located 140 ft below the Acropolis and in Paul's day was the meeting place of the main governing body of the city. While some think that Paul's appearance here indicates some sort of judicial proceeding, most see the reference as only the location of his preaching (Acts 17). [www.bibleplaces.com](http://www.bibleplaces.com)



The Acropolis of Athens



Central Athens



Downtown at night

2. Background on the city of Athens:

- The city of Athens was, in its hey day the center of Hellenism
  - 1) During the days of **Pericles** (461-429 B.C.) many of their famous buildings were constructed and during that period the Greeks were renowned for their art and architecture.
  - 2) Athens was home to a University that housed some of the greatest philosophical minds since Solomon (**Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle**).
  - 3) Athens was also a sort of “**religious center**” for the pagan world, and most if not all so called “gods” were deified and worshipped there in some fashion or another.
  - 4) The two main religious philosophies that emerged from this era of Greek influence was; \_\_\_\_\_ (founded by Epicurus) and \_\_\_\_\_ (founded by Zeno).
  
- In the days of Paul (and the early church), the city of **Corinth** had become the main commercial and political center of the Greek world. However, **Athens** continued in its cultural and religious influence on not just the Roman occupiers but also the entire world at large. The three significant philosophical positions that Paul faces while in Athens are:
  - 1) The \_\_\_\_\_ were materialists in nature, and the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain was the chief goal of man. They believed in “gods” but we are not accountable to them – leading to a sort of “Atheism”.
  - 2) The \_\_\_\_\_ who were “**Pantheists**” (the gods are in everything) and believed our chief goal was to master ourselves and strive to “feel nothing” (a sort of **nirvana**).
  - 3) The \_\_\_\_\_ who rejected “spiritual things”

3. Paul faces two significant challenges while in Athens (Acts 17:16-21):
  - The indifference of the Jews in the synagogue along with their outright rejection of Jesus as Messiah.
  - The “**philosophical differences**” from a culture that was neither “monotheistic” in their religious beliefs nor morally accountable for their actions.
  
4. With these challenges in mind, Paul sets out to preach his famous sermon on what many conclude was “Mars Hill” (west of the Acropolis). It was there Paul will appeal to them that the altar they constructed with the inscription; “*To An Unknown God*”, was proof they in fact believed God existed.
  - This “Unknown God”, Paul declares to be the God of all, the creator of all, and completely knowable.
  - The Greek philosophers who listened to Paul were (much like today) confused by the facts and the Apostle Paul will attempt to use their own reason and logic to point them to Christ.
  - Take note of Acts 17:30-31; “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead”
  
5. Do you see any similarities to the challenges that Paul faced in Athens to the challenges we face with the unbelieving world of our day?
  
6. Ironically; after Paul delivers this message to the people of Athens, he does not return to them on any future missionary journeys. We also have no formal record of a church forming there as was the case in other cities.

### A God who is Known (Acts 17:22-23)

1. Those to whom Paul spoke were both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Their reasoning skills were obvious from their dialogue with Paul and also the historical record of the Athenian people.
  - They at least had some interest in the pursuit of knowing God in that they had a belief in the \_\_\_\_\_.
    - 1) They had objects or things they worshipped
    - 2) They even had an altar with the inscription; “**To An Unknown God**”, which by their own admittance meant there was a God (among all of their other deities) they did not know.
    - 3) Paul will use the opportunity to preach to them that this “*Unknown God*” (to them), is the **Known God** to all people and everything; for He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and there are no other God’s but Him.
2. We don’t want to overlook the significance of Paul’s introduction
  - The fact that he acknowledges their reverence or fear for their varying “deities” (objects of worship) does not mean Paul condones or embraces their religious practices. He is merely seizing the opportunity to acknowledge their belief in something greater than themselves.
  - Their “objects of worship” were not gods at all – but actually imposters, evil spirits or demons. How do we know this? (Exodus 20:3-6)

- It was the Athenians recognition of a possible “Other Deity” that they may have been unaware of, that Paul chooses to emphasize. (Acts 17:23)
  - 1) The emphasis that Paul makes is on their \_\_\_\_\_ of the One True God, not on the altar itself.
  - 2) Paul’s logic and reasoning is clear; the “Unknown God” they acknowledged is the One True God (and only God) they must worship.
  
- 3. The Athenians may not have denied God’s existence, but they were a long way from knowing Him. This is the message of the Gospel and Paul will use this opportunity to declare that simple truth to a group of people who were intelligently confused.
  - Where does belief in God begin? (Hebrews 11:6)
  
  - How does God reveal Himself? (Psalm 19:1, Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 95:1-7)
  
  - What is the Bible’s response to those who deny God’s existence? (Psalm 14:1)
  
  - Just because a person denies the existence of God does not mean He doesn’t exist – they are merely confused by the facts! (Deuteronomy 4:35, I Kings 8:43, I Chronicles 28:9, Psalm 9:10, John 17:1-3)

## A God who you can Know (Acts 17:24-31)

1. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:24a)
  - Paul starts with the basics; the God that they worship in ignorance (The Unknown God) – is “The God who made the world and all things in it”.
  - This ran contrary to what most Athenians believed:
    - 1) The **Stoics** taught that everything was a part of God (God in everything – **Pantheism**), and therefore God could not create something that was already Himself.
    - 2) The **Epicureans** taught that all matter was eternal and had no beginning nor was it created.
    - 3) The **Cynics** – well they just didn’t believe what they could not see or prove.
  - What evidence exists that reveals to us that God is the creator of the world and all things in it? (See Acts 14:15, Psalm 24:1, Genesis 1-2, Psalm 146:5-6, Isaiah 40:28, 45:18, Jeremiah 10:12, 32:17, Zechariah 12:1, Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:16, Revelation 4:11)
  - What evidence is offered by those who do not believe that God created the world and all things in it?
  - Paul declares (along with the entirety of God’s Word) that God is the creator of all things which means it runs contrary to any other theory, opinion, or belief that attempts to prove otherwise. In addition Paul will continue to show that God is not just a “**first cause**” (as some teach), but He is Ruler, Lord, and Master over all that He has created!

2. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:24b)
- Paul continues to show that this God they worship in ignorance (The Unknown God) is not only the creator of the world and all things in it, but He is also “Lord of heaven and earth”.
    - 1) The teaching that some sort of an “intelligent designer” who created the world and then left it to itself to evolve does not match with what Paul teaches here, nor does such a teaching agree with the entirety of Scripture. (Genesis 14:19-20, Psalm 24:1-10, Psalm 103:19, Daniel 4:34-35, Daniel 6:26-27)
    - 2) Why is it that some will believe in a god, or even many gods – but so many people struggle with believing in The God as creator and ruler over all?
  - Since He is creator and ruler over all things; He does not need a man made temple or shrine to dwell in.
    - 1) Even Solomon (perhaps the wisest man on earth) realized the very temple that He constructed as a place of worship and consecration to the God of the universe was not the dwelling place of God for he said this; “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built” (I Kings 8:27)
    - 2) David understood this when he said; “where can I flee from your presence.....” (Read all of Psalm 139:1-12)
    - 3) The attempt by the Athenians to understand this “Unknown God” by paying tribute to a shrine was to place God equal to their “other gods” and Paul proceeded to show the folly of their belief.

3. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:25)
- Paul declares that God is above all things human (something the Epicureans would have agreed with), but he goes on to state that He is \_\_\_\_\_ and does not require human intervention nor human sustenance. (See Psalm 50:9-12)
  - The second part of verse 25 might have found some agreement from the Stoic philosophers who believed their goal was to sort of align themselves with creation, but they too lacked the complete understanding of the One who gives and sustains life which is The One True God. (Romans 104:14-15, Romans 11:36, James 1:17)
  - Paul, finding some common (philosophical) ground, proceeds to point the Athenians to an understanding of God.
4. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:26)
- Since God created life, He also \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ it.
    - 1) Paul uses the creation of \_\_\_\_\_ (“one man”), as way to declare the intentions of God who determines the course of human life.
    - 2) This would have rattled the Athenians to be told that mankind was somehow not left to his own self determination or random chance and fate.
  - Paul’s claim; “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation”, would have caused a probable stir among the Athenians.
    - 1) It is God, who has in His “omnipotence” (all powerful), determined the course of history.
    - 2) Check out these verses – Daniel 2:21, 36-45, Deut. 32:8



5. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:27-29)
- Why does God reveal Himself to mankind? (Acts 17:27, Romans 1:19-20)
    - 1) This “self disclosure” by God should drive mankind to “grope for Him”.
    - 2) The only God known to man is not “unknown”, but is fully revealed through \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ revelation, and human \_\_\_\_\_. (Romans 2:14-16, Romans 1:18-32)
    - 3) The fact is God is completely knowable and “not far from each one of us”.
  - To sort of seal the deal on this point; Paul quotes a couple of their own respected poets (Acts 17:28):
    - 1) The Cretan poet **Epimenides** said; “for in Him we live and move and exist”
    - 2) **Aratus (from Cilicia)** said; “For we are also His children/offspring”.
  - This acknowledgement by these Greek poets add credence to Paul’s proof that God does in fact reveal Himself to mankind in such a way that we clearly understand where we came from.
    - 1) Paul is not embracing the idea that mankind in some way possesses the same elements of deity (as if we are “gods” ourselves) that God possesses, but he is declaring that our origin (our very life and breath) comes from Him.
    - 2) As such (taught by their own) we are accountable to God

- The conclusion that Paul comes to is very clear; “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.” (Acts 17:29)
  - 1) We (having been created by God) have in us the innate desire to worship God.
  - 2) Our worship of God (the creator of all) is to be on His terms and not ours. He (the Divine Being) does not exist in anything formed by man since man himself is a created being. (See Romans 1:22-23)
  - 3) Paul is telling them that their idol worship is in complete error and although they may have done it in ignorance, they (along with the entirety of mankind) were accountable to properly worship the Known God!
  - 4) Paul will now make an intentional shift that forces the Athenian people to no longer plead ignorance and it all centers around \_\_\_\_\_ and their need to \_\_\_\_\_ of their sinful behavior and pursuits.
  
- 6. He is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all things (Acts 17:30-31)
  - Mankind has always been without excuse (for God has revealed Himself through natural revelation – Romans 1:18-20), “but He is now declaring through the message of the Gospel; that “all people everywhere should repent”
  - Why does mankind need to repent and what does he need to repent of?

- Paul now sets up his conclusion by declaring two important things:
  - 1) A day of \_\_\_\_\_ awaits them in which they cannot escape.
  - 2) The requirement of repentance rests on their acknowledgment and acceptance of Jesus Christ who took upon Himself the sins of man in order to reconcile man to God (**atonement**), and rose from the dead.
  
- What exactly is this Day of Judgment that Paul is talking about?
  - 1) Jesus declared this in John 5:22-27; “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. Truly, truly, he who hears My words and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Truly, truly, I say unto you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself, and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man”.
  - 2) The Apostle John writes these words in Revelation 20:11-15; “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.....and if anyone’s name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire”.

- How does a person avoid this judgment?
  - 1) By \_\_\_\_\_; “Therefore having overlooked the time of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30)
  - 2) By \_\_\_\_\_ in Jesus; “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)
  
- What evidence or proof does God provide that death was conquered and sin was atoned for? (Acts 17:31)

**A God you shouldn't ignore (Acts 17:32-34)**

1. Paul's declaration of the resurrection produced a few varying responses:
  - Some \_\_\_\_\_, probably because they did not believe in a bodily resurrection as they felt no need to resurrect this mortal body.
  - Some went away, probably perplexed and confused and wanting to hear more on the subject.
  - Then there were others (two mentioned by name) who believed and joined Paul (perhaps as disciples).
    - 1) **Dionysius** (a member of the Athenian council)
    - 2) **Damaris** (a woman)

2. All in all, this visit by Paul did not seem to produce a large crop of believers and followers of Christ.
  - Perhaps it was their arrogance and pride that prohibited them from embracing the simple truth that they needed a Savior.
  - Ironically, we have no record of a church being established in Athens, neither during this visit by Paul, nor do we have record of one being established later. **The real fruit of Paul's labor comes when he visits Corinth.**

**Closing Comments:**

1. I personally believe that the ministry of Paul may have had a larger impact than what may be recorded here (strictly speculation based on God's Word not returning void).
2. The sad commentary is that many of the Athenian people may have either been too proud, unwilling or considered themselves too sinful to repent – leaving themselves open to the judgment of God.
3. Perhaps the events recorded here in Athens are a striking parallel to much of our society today and shows we have much work to do!
4. What is your sense of the effectiveness of Paul's ministry in Athens?