

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE UNKNOWN God

(Acts 17:15-34)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 23

1. A review of the circumstances.

Paul a refugee - desired companions (15) - how a missionary waits (16) - a city of gods - greatly provoked (16) - making use of opportunities (17) - a good babler (18) - itching ears (20-21) - before the supreme court (19) - the philosophers (18) - very religious (22) - what different men see (23)

2. The being of God (23-24).

3. The nature of God.

A. A spirit (25, 29).

B. One person (24-25).

C. Self-sufficient (25).

D. Omniscient (28).

E. Omnipresent (27).

F. Omnipotent (26).

4. The habitation of God (24).

5. The dominion of God (24).

6. The created work of God (24).

7. The origin of man (26, 29).

8. The fact of sin. You need to repent because you have sinned.

9. God accessible to all (27).

10. God wants men to seek Him (30).

11. God calls men to repent (30).

12. God will judge the world (31).

13. Proof in the resurrection of Christ and the Gospel (31).

14. The results (32, 34).

Paul was a refugee when he entered Athens. He had been a convict at Philippi. He had fled by night from Thessalonica and was in danger of mob violence when he hurried away from Berea. A refugee in the most intellectual city of the world! Would he fear to speak to these cultured people? Paul feared neither Jew nor Greek. No sooner had he reached Athens than he went, first into the synagogue, then into the market place, teaching Christ.

DESIRED COMPANIONS

Paul sent back word with those who had brought him to Athens requesting Silas and Timothy to come to him as quickly as possible. Here we get a glimpse of the human side of Paul. Like other men he desired associates in his work. Jesus had told His disciples to go out two by two, and it was well that He did so as there is an added force in the testimony of two or more. Moreover, Silas was the special messenger from the church of Jerusalem to explain the decrees to the various synagogues of Jews concerning the law.

A MISSIONARY WAITING

We have here an example of how Paul waited: **“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry”** (17:16). While Paul waited at Athens for Silas and Timothy we are told something of what he did. He did not take lodging with some devout person and rest in quiet until his friends should appear. He started working. That was nearly always the way Paul waited. If he had but a day or a week to stop at a place he was busy preaching or encouraging the brethren. He was beseeching men night and day with tears to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

A CITY OF GODS

The city of Athens was filled with idols. An ancient writer has said: “On every side there were idols, images and temples,” and another with a touch of humor remarked that, “at Athens it was easier to find a god than a man.” As Paul entered the city one of the first sights which would confront him was the great Parthenon standing upon the rocky height of the city, and before it the huge bronze statue of Athena with its beaming crown standing as though it were aflame. This was the goddess of wisdom. It was thought that she exercised a special care over the city which was named after her. As he passed along the streets he would see many altars on which men had left their offerings; one to Hermes for protection while traveling, another to Aesculapius that a sick child might be recovered; a hunter to Artemis that he might have skill in the chase, or a soldier to Zeus that he might have courage in war.

GREATLY FAVORED

All this pained Paul in spirit. He was provoked almost to a rage. It was a righteous anger, for the more godly a man is the more he is angered at the sight of false gods. What was his astonishment when he saw an altar with the inscription, “To An Unknown God”, an evidence of their extreme superstition.

They thought that they might have failed to present an offering to some god and as a precaution they erected an altar that he might be appeased. Oh to think, said Paul to himself, of all the images, altars and temples, of the cost of life and blood, of the deception of the multitudes, when the way of life, of joy and peace and comfort might be had simply for the asking, since Jesus Christ paid the price of our redemption with His own precious blood! The question came to Paul again and again as he walked about the streets and as he observed the conditions, how could he get a hearing so as to awaken the great, proud city to the fact that all these gods were mere dust and stones of the earth, and that the Living God was near if the people would but receive Him?

USING OPPORTUNITIES

Paul went first into the synagogue of the Jews. As far as the record goes there were no favorable results. The Jews had evidently made little or no impression upon elite Athens. The philosophers seem to have known nothing of their teaching. If they had known the teaching of the Jews Paul's declaration concerning the resurrection would not have seemed so new and strange to them. This is an example of the weak impression a formal religion makes upon an intelligent city. Intellectual Athens was first awakened by a stranger. This stranger was an earnest missionary. He gained the ear of the philosophers by first talking with the common people.

Wherever Paul could find devout men he talked with them. He talked with those whom he met in the marketplace every day. There would be men of all classes and trades arguing concerning their wares. There would be those who were buying fish from the Aegean, or woolen goods from the Greek hill-villages, or purple cloth from Tyre, or beautiful glass vessels from Sidon, or earthen jars or dishes. There would be those who were selling cheese, olives and bread to the women, others selling parchment and vellum and wax tablets to the university students. There would likely be those who were selling slaves to the highest bidder. That Paul did not merely talk shop to these people is evident from the fact that when the philosophers approached him they wanted to know what he had been saying of strange gods. We are told distinctly that he had been preaching: "**Jesus and the resurrection**" (17:18).

A GOOD BABBLER

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers wanted to know what this babbler was saying. A babbler was a teller of tales. There were travelers, entertainers, who made their living by telling tales. Paul had been telling tales, or stories, about Jesus Christ. He had evidently told the people that He was both God and man, because he had spoken of Him as a God and had spoken of Him as one who died and rose from the dead.

ITCHING EARS

"(For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing)" (17:21). They said to Paul: **"thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean"** (17:20).

At first glance this might seem like an ideal audience. It was composed of men who wanted to hear about new religious ideas. This was a very different class of listeners, however, from those at Berea. These were men who wanted to hear something novel in religion: something that they could grasp with the intellect and which would furnish them with a new theory to discuss. Such hearers are among the hardest to convict of the need of a Saviour, and of accepting Him in humble faith.

THE SUPREME COURT

They took hold of Paul and brought him to the Areopagus, asking him to speak and tell them of his new teaching. The Areopagus, or the hill of Mars, was the place where the supreme court met. It does not appear that Paul was brought there for trial, but rather to a place where the philosophers could give him a quiet and more dignified hearing. They took him to the very place where Socrates had been taken, tried and condemned about four hundred years before. When we are told that "they took hold of" Paul, it does not mean that they dealt with him violently. They led him as a policeman guides a tourist, not as he compels a prisoner. The glory of Athens had departed ere Paul's day. The philosophers were not in earnest even concerning their own gods. They did not condemn Paul because he disagreed with them, they simply sneered at him. As far as the reception of the Gospel was concerned it would have been better if they had been more in earnest even though they had persecuted him.

PHILOSOPHERS

Athens is still remembered on account of its philosophy. The two principal schools of philosophy which existed at the time of Paul were the Epicureans and Stoics. The followers of Epicurus taught that the highest good is to be found in pleasure. Their leader had intended that they should seek a high type of pleasure. They should strive to be free from physical pain and mental unrest. The philosophy of the Epicureans had degenerated - as it was inevitable that such a philosophy should degenerate - until in the days of Paul they sought pleasure in lust. In religion they were virtually atheists.

The stoics, who had been followers of Zeno, taught that the highest good was virtue. They did not, like the Epicureans, seek to avoid pain; they despised it. They taught that man should "live agreeably to nature." They urged men to look out to the laws of nature and seek happiness in conforming to them. Theirs was an unnatural sternness which has some admirable qualities about it and which produced some heroic men who bravely endured persecution. They were virtually pantheists in religion. Their philosophy and practice had also degenerated in the days of Paul. They were far from virtuous and were well-nigh materialists.

Philosophy had an opportunity through a period of more than three hundred years to produce its best in Athens. But what had it produced? Had it elevated the ideals of the people? Had it raised the standards of morality? Had it purified the social order? Instead of progress there had been decay. Instead of purity there have been immorality.

The ultimate word of the Epicureans was lust, and of the Stoics suicide. In describing the Athens of that period, W.M. Taylor says: “Men tell us that the world is to be elevated by culture, and turn away from the Gospel as a vulgar thing; but let them look below the surface of the Athens which Paul visited, or the Rome which Nero rules; let them study the Italy of Leo X, and the France of Louis XIV., and they will find that art, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, may all be cultivated to the highest extent, while morally the heart is a cage of unclean beasts, and socially the community is reeking with rottenness. So true it is that **‘the world by wisdom knew not God’**“ (*Paul the Missionary*, p. 262).

Writing of the same period, on *The Life and Epistles of Paul*, Coneybeare and Howson say: “The Greeks spent their life in worthless and frivolous amusements. Their religion, though beautiful beyond expression as giving subjects for art and poetry, was utterly powerless, and worse than powerless, in checking their bad propensities. Their philosophers were sophists; their women might be briefly divided into two classes, - those who were highly educated and openly profligate on the one side, and those who lived in domestic and ignorant seclusion on the other. And it cannot be denied that all these causes of degradation spread with the diffusion of the race and the language. Like Sybaris and Syracuse, Antioch and Alexandria became almost worse than Athens and Corinth. But the very diffusion and development of this corruption was preparing the way, because it showed the necessity, for the interposition of a Gospel. The disease itself seemed to call for a Healer. And if the prevailing evils of the Greek population presented obstacles, on a large scale, to the progress of Christianity, - yet they showed to all future time the weakness of man’s highest powers, if unassisted from above; and there must have been many who groaned under the burden of a corruption which they could not shake off, and who were ready to welcome the voice of Him, who took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses” (p. 10).

VERY RELIGIOUS

Paul said, as he stood in the midst of the Areopagus: “**Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you**” (17:22-23). Paul addressed the Council, the philosophers, and the other curious listeners courteously, tactfully and inclusively. If we look carefully into the summary of his address which is preserved in this chapter we find that he covered a wide field of theology.

It is interesting to note what different men see in the same city. Paul does not emphasize or even speak of the things which made an impression upon other men. He does not even mention the history of the Athens or its works of art. Speaking of Paul, the atheist Renan, says that the ugly little Jew dealt abusively with Greek art by called the statues idols. The worship of the true God or a false god was all the same to Renan. He could rejoice in nothing higher than the works of man. It was but a few years after Paul lived that a traveler by the name of Pausanias visited Athens. He filled six volumes in describing Greece and gave more space to Athens than any other city. He describes the approach to the city, her temples, her statues, her altars, and her art. He tells us that there were altars to an unknown god. His description is of the external and the material. Paul knew that Athens could not last if she did not give attention to the spiritual, and with the spiritual not centered in material deities, but in Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God.

He therefore began at once to tell the Athenians, not of their past or present glory, but of the glory, the power and the mercy of the true God.

THE BEING OF GOD

Paul points out to his hearers that God cannot be known as other gods are known. He is a God who can be known. He is a real, living, exalted, powerful God. He existed before the world because He made it. He is higher than the heaven because He is Lord of Heaven and earth.

THE NATURE OF GOD

God is a spirit, reasoned Paul, for He does not dwell in temples made with hands nor is He served by men's hands. We ought not to think of God as one graven by art from gold or silver or stone. He also inferred that God is one. It did not require one god to make the world, another to place life in it and another to control it. There is not one God who rules in Heaven and another on earth.

The one Almighty God did all this.

- He is the object of our worship and the Author of our life.
- He indicated moreover that God is self-sufficient.
- He does not need to be served by the hands of man.
- He does not need to have sacrifices of food placed before Him.
- He needs nothing that man can give, but is able to give everything to man.
- He is omniscient and omnipresent and omnipotent. He is so wise that
- He knows all that is going on in the world and so powerful that He can control every nation on earth. He is in every place, **“For in him we live, and move, and have our being”** (17:28).

THE HABITATION OF GOD

God does not dwell on earth, declared Paul. He may not be found on Mount Olympus or in the Parthenon or in the temple of Demeter. The whole earth and heaven cannot contain Him. He is to be found in every place where men dwell on all the face of the earth, **“he be not far from every one of us”** (17:27), and yet He is also in Heaven. It is futile to think that you can confine Him within any finite bounds. We cannot limit Him as to His place of dwelling or comprehend the bounds of His abode.

THE DOMINION OF GOD

God is supreme. He is Lord of everything in Heaven and in earth. He determines the territory, the successes and reverses of every nation of men “on all the face of the earth.” He rules all in His providence. As Paul enlarged upon this point he may have pointed out some historical illustrations in order to prove it.

The history of Egypt, Assyria, Chaldea or Persia or even of their own nation, the then decadent nation of Greece, would have served as evidence that God rules all the nations. Why would they not see this fact? Why will not we see it today?

THE CREATED WORK OF GOD

God made the world and all things that are therein, declared Paul. The world did not come into existence by a natural process, it was made by God. All forms of life which are in the world did not come into being by the working of nature, but by the power of God. Epicurus had taught that the whole universe came to exist as it is as the result of “a fortuitous combination of atoms.” In his school there was no Creator, nor was there any moral governor. The Athenians held, and that with pride, that they had sprung from the soil of Attica. Paul stood before their proudest and most intellectual men and told them that all such theories were wrong. The world and its fullness was made by God and belongs to God. In our day, notwithstanding our boasts of progress in science, those who reject the Bible and look upon nature as self-evolving are but little in advance of the philosophers of Athens two thousand years ago.

Even Napoleon, though his religion was nothing of which to boast, could see in the universe the hand of God. When he was returning to France from the expedition to Egypt, a group of French officers engaged in a discussion concerning the existence of God. They were on the deck of the vessel sailing over the Mediterranean Sea. As they had imbibed the infidel spirit of their time they were unanimous in their denial of this truth. One at length proposed to ask Napoleon his opinion upon the subject. He was standing alone engaged in silent thought. When he was asked the question, “Is there a God?” he raised his hand and pointing to the starry firmament, simply responded, “Gentlemen, who made all that?”

THE ORIGIN OF GOD

God **“hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth”** (Acts 17:26). We are the offspring of God, said the apostle. The Athenians, the Hebrews, the Romans and the barbarians were all derived from the same source and that source was God. One nation does not have a higher origin than another, if we wish to trace our genealogy far enough back, all are of one blood. Man was created in the beginning by God.

Before Paul’s day the philosophers had their theories of man’s evolution. There is no adequate proof of the theory of the evolution of man today, it is a philosophy at the present time as it was then. Moses was opposed to this theory, Jesus was opposed to it, Paul was opposed to it, and the facts of science are opposed to it. The facts of science in the hands of skeptics can be misinterpreted and turned into a false philosophy in our day as they were in the days of long ago.

The Greek poets, Cleanthes and Aratus, came nearer to the Christian view than the materialist of today. Paul could agree with them in that they said man was the offspring of God. Cleanthes had written:

“Hail Zeus! for unto thee
Behooves it mortals in all lands to call
We are thine offspring.”

Aratus, who was of Cilicia, Paul’s own province, had written:

“Zeus fills all the city streets,
All the nation’s crowded marts; fills the watery deeps,
And heavens: every labour needs the help of Zeus.
His offspring are we.”

THE FACT OF SIN

When Paul said that God had been willing to overlook man’s former ignorance, but now called men to repent, he indicated that man was guilty of sin. There is no need of repentance if there is no sin. Not only did the intellectual men of Athens need to realize that they were sinners, but we need to realize that fact concerning ourselves. Canon Shore once said: “I saw lying side by side in a great workshop, two heads of metal. The one was perfect - all the features of a manly noble face came out clear and distinct in their lines of strength and beauty; in the other scarcely a single feature could be recognized - it was all marred and spoiled. ‘The metal had been let grow a little cool, sir,’ said the man who was showing it to me. I could not help thinking how true that was of many a form more precious than metal.” Every soul that was made in the image of God is stamped with sin and the image is marred. As the Psalmist says, we have sinned with our fathers, we have done wickedly.

GOD ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

God can be found if men will feel after Him. He is not far from us. He is not like the gods of silver or stone which are found in one place only, perhaps far distant from us. He is not like the god which may be said to be located on some distant mountain. He is with us and may be found by every one of us.

GOD WANTS MEN TO SEEK HIM

Paul says that men should seek God. Isaiah urged men to seek the Lord while He may be found and to call upon Him while He is near. We are not imposing upon God when we seek Him and try to follow Him. By so doing we are conforming to His will. Christ loved us so much that He laid down His life for us. Does it not seem strange that there are so many who are not drawn to Him? So many that will not even hear, let alone heed, the Word of God? We find Him, He comes near to us, yes, into our very hearts, when we believe on Him.

GOD CALLS MEN TO REPENT

God “**now commandeth all men every where to repent**” (Acts 17:30).

Paul told these people that God would not continue to overlook their idolatry and wickedness of various kinds forever. He commanded them to repent. What! these nobles, judges, intellectual leaders who were idolized by their fellow citizens repent? That was exactly what the lone witness for God said in that proud city which boasted of the superiority of its citizens - repent!

Repent! Was the call of John the Baptist as he warned the learned and honored rabbis of Jerusalem. Repent! was the warning of Jesus as He spoke to the Pharisees, Sanhedrim, priests, governors or publicans. Paul had taken up the message and was heralding it up and down the world, in Asia, Europe and the islands of the sea - repent! No Matter who he may be, philosopher, scholar or hero, if he is to have access to the throne of the living God, he must repent because he has sinned and come short of the glory of God.

After an earnest sermon by a distinguished minister dealing plainly and pointedly with sin, one of the church officers came to the study of the pastor and expressed himself somewhat as follows: "We do not want you to talk as plainly as you did about sin, because if our boys and girls hear you talking so much about sin they will more easily become sinners. Call it a mistake if you will, but do not speak so plainly about sin." The pastor took down a small bottle of strychnine, marked Poison, and showed it to his visitor, saying, "I see what you want me to do. You want me to change the label. Now suppose I take this label off and substitute another, say, essence of peppermint, do you see what happens? The milder you make the label the more dangerous you make your poison. Jeroboam changed the label and the more easily led Israel into the sin of idolatry. Sin is the same deadly poison whatever label you put on it, but the milder you make the label the more likely people are to be beguiled." It is better to declare plainly that all are sinners and that all, rich and poor alike, need to repent of every sin.

GOD WILL JUDGE THE WORLD

"he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained" (Acts 17:31).

- There is no doubt of the fact.
- There is no doubt about the time.
- There is no doubt about the one who is to serve as judge.
- There is no doubt about the standard of judgment.

Though we do not know the day, it has been appointed. Christ will be the Judge. All will be judged according to the righteousness of God.

Would the judges of the Council who sat on Mars' Hill be judged? Would all virtuous stoics be judged? Would all the children of Abraham be judged? Paul omitted no part of the Gospel because of the honorable position of many of those who composed his audience.

He warned them that all would be judged in righteousness by Jesus Christ. Paul had told them that Christ had come to be their advocate, to deliver, to seek and to save, but if they rejected Him He would judge them in righteousness.

A lady who needed legal advice was told to consult a lawyer. She kept putting it off, and when she went to him finally and began to state her case he said: "Madam, you are too late. I cannot be your advocate, for I have been appointed your judge." Will it be necessary for Christ the judge of all the earth to apply any such words to us? If He is not our advocate woe be to us when we stand before a righteous God!

PROOF IN THE RESURRECTION

Paul offered proof of what he said by stating an historical fact. Christ had been raised from the dead. Christ who arose from the dead has the power to raise all men and bring them before His judgment seat. Since Christ has been raised we have assurance of immortality and that all shall be raised who have been called dead. From the first, as Paul talked to the men of Athens he preached Jesus and the resurrection. He had shown to them that the resurrection was an assured fact. He had told them that our faith is not in vain since we know that He has risen. Some mocked at the suggestion of the resurrection. That is natural for the materialist and the atheist. Such an attitude, however, does not change the fact, nor will it lighten the verdict at the day of judgment. How much better to believe with Paul that Christ has risen from the dead and has become the first fruits of them that sleep.

THE RESULTS

Those who heard Paul may be divided into three classes: those who mocked; those who procrastinated and those who believed. These groups are commonly found where the Gospel is preached today. There are many who mock; there are many who procrastinate, and there are few who believe. Among those who believed in Athens were two who were politically or socially prominent. One of these was Dionysius the Areopagite, and the other was a woman by the name of Damaris.

The cold atmosphere of those who worship the intellect is always one of the hardest places for the minister or the missionary. They feel that they can trust their minds to tell them all that man needs to know concerning God and concerning religion. They are too proud to humble themselves and to repent. Probably the greatest difficulty with the Athenians was not that which they expressed outwardly when they mocked at the idea of the resurrection, but that which demanded of them humility of heart and change of life when Paul called upon them to repent. There is many a man who is ready to give an intellectual consent to the Gospel who is not ready to repent. There are many who will accept a form of religion which demands no repentance. God calls upon all men to repent. It is a sad but evident fact that few will heed the call.

FUTURE SUCCESS

The future of the church at Athens was much greater than might be supposed from the brief record here.

The history of the Christian church points out remarkable results in Athens. The church at Athens had some noble names upon its roll, among them some who were martyrs to the faith. Within the next century after Paul's appearance at Athens these men were in the church there; Publius, Quadratus, Aristides and Athenagoras. It is said that during the next century the church there was strong and pure, and in the fourth century Basil and Gregory were trained in the Christian schools of Athens. We cannot always determine the results of the work of a missionary within a few months or even within a few years. When some are converted, though there may be many who will procrastinate and others who will mock, yet the work of the Lord will go on and the Gospel will triumph in the end.

CHRIST THE WAY

How long would Athens have been in finding Christ if Paul had not gone there with the Gospel and if no other had gone bearing the glad tidings? Would their philosophy finally have made its way upward until they became Christ-like and the city was regenerated? In the days of Paul, after more than three hundred years of intellectual philosophy they were more degenerate than in the years gone by. It is well for us to remember that man by searching can not find God. It is well for us to remember that men cannot find the highest truth from worldly systems though they may have much truth in them. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. No man can come unto the Father except through Him. If therefore we would regenerate a city, a nation or a world let us preach Christ. If we would show men that Christ is their Lord and Saviour let us prove to them that He has risen from the dead.

DO NOT MOCK

Those who mocked did not injure Paul but they refused eternal life for themselves. How dangerous it is to mock now, for the day will come when the mockers shall tremble and seek to hide from the wrath of God! How dangerous it is even to procrastinate, for the call may come at any moment, as it came to the rich man of old, and find us unprepared! He had been planning for great things. He thought that he had enough laid up for his soul, but the call came unexpectedly, **“this night shall thy soul be required of thee.”** We beseech you, if you have not made your peace with God do not allow this day to pass, nay do not allow this hour to pass without confessing your sins to Christ and asking him for pardon. There is a judgment day set; there is a Judge appointed, and He will judge you for all the deeds done in the body; He will bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

“Once to every man and nation comes the
moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the
good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering
each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the
sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that

darkness and that light.”

- *The Present Crisis* - Lowell.

QUESTIONS (Acts 17:15-34)

1. How did Paul come to be in Athens?
2. What companions did he desire?
3. For what was Athens noted?
4. Why were the people hard to reach with the Gospel?
5. What is meant by the Areopagus?
6. For what did the Epicureans and Stoics stand?
7. Had philosophy elevated the moral standards of Athens?
8. What effect had the worship of many gods had upon Athens?
9. What determines that which shall engage the interest of a man in a strange city?
10. What were some things which Paul taught the Athenians about the nature of God?
11. About the habitation of God?
12. About the dominion of God?
13. About the creative work of God?
14. About the origin of man?
15. About the necessity of repentance?
16. About the judgment?
17. What is the best proof that Jesus is the Christ?
18. Into what three general groups were the Athenians divided as a result of Paul's preaching?
19. What tendency is there to worship the intellect today?
20. What does history indicate as to the results of the Gospel upon Athens? May results be determined in a few weeks or months?

~ end of chapter 31 ~

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