THE UNKNOWN GOD
ACTS 17:16-34
2026-10-18

So as not to wear you out with too much Scripture, I'll review the 1st 15 verses before we get to the Unknown God. Paul ends up in Thessalonica. He went to the synagogue there and on 3 Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. What happened? Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. His greater success was among the Gentiles attached to the synagogue. As we've been hearing throughout Acts, many of the Jews became furiously jealous. They stirred up the rabble and charged the Christian missionaries with preaching political insurrection. They knew full well these charges were a lie: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here…saying there is another king, one called Jesus." On the 1 hand that's quite a stretch; on the other, it's very impressive to see how pervasive this missionary outreach was!

Once again, Paul slipped away under the cover of darkness and ended up in Berea (60 miles west of Thessalonica)—a place we should remember because the Bereans "were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." Now that's more like it! It's my hope that the Berean spirit is alive and thrives in you! Examine the Scriptures every day to see if what I say (and any other preacher) is true and how it applies to your life! Paul didn't just talk about the weather and feel-good morality. He spoke from the Scriptures. The Jews were certain that Jesus was not the Messiah because He had been crucified. To them a man who had been crucified was a man accursed. No doubt, passages like Is. 53 would have been used to set the Bereans on the course of Jesus.

But the messiness isn't over. Envenomed bitterness of the Jews pursues him. From Thessalonica they went after Paul all the way to Berea, no doubt, thinking they were doing the work of God. The message for us: make sure you're on the right side when you say you're doing God's work! Don't make the Scriptures say what you want them to say, but what God is saying. So, guess what? Yup. Paul is escorted out of Berea to Athens where he's waiting for Silas and Timothy. That's where we pick up the story today. Paul's sightseeing (sort of) while waiting.

Imagine yourself sitting in Athens as part of the audience listening to Paul. Paul established a ministry like no other. He traveled over 34,000 miles (50,000 km.) on three missions through southern Europe and Asia Minor and the Middle East, preaching the Gospel. Even with today's modern transportation, efficiencies and comforts, this would still be a considerable challenge!

Christianity and Christians personally often seem to be maligned, ridiculed, backed up on our heels and worse—ignored. When we do make the news, it's often as being dinosaurs in terms of our faith—quaint, but not up to the "proof required" of modern science, or because we're on

the “wrong” side of social issues. Best we be known for what we stand for rather than what we stand against. We’re often portrayed as narrow or intolerant, “holier-than-thou”, with views or beliefs that don’t match life in the 21st century. Obviously, we haven’t got our message out clearly—seen by the world as peculiar, misunderstood and mistrusted at large.

But this is fully to be expected, for the natural world can’t make sense of the supernatural world. The natural world, the world that denies God, is really at war with God—only the terms of engagement aren’t clear and they change swiftly. Jesus warned us that His followers would (not might) be persecuted. Paul tells us (1 Cor. 2:14) that “The 1 without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” So, don’t be surprised at the opposition, at the guerilla warfare out there. After all, Jesus Himself took the unjust, undeserved abuse of the whole world for us, but neither should we lie down and surrender to it. Which brings us to Paul in Athens. In 10 verses, (22-31), he gives an entire sermon. We hear who God is, who we are, what God wants for us and what we need to do/how to respond. Not bad for 10 verses!

Every sermon should have a WOW FACTOR about God, something of hope, encouragement and reassurance, a challenge or change we need to make and a course of action to be taken.

Paul was “greatly distressed” to find Athens full of idols. There were said to be 25,000 public statues in Athens and 30,000 in the Parthenon alone! Imagine that! Petronius, an historian of the time, claimed it was easier to find a god than a person in Athens. How about us? Are we greatly distressed to find our neighbourhood full of idols?

But Paul didn’t let the distress fester. He reasoned with people in the synagogue and in the marketplace day by day with whoever happened to be there. He wasn’t going to miss the opp-ortunity God provided to interact with unbelievers. He spoke out about false gods and teaching.

It didn’t take long for the artillery to be aimed at him. Have you ever been there? A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him and mock him. The Epicureans and Stoics looked like 2 bookends on the world of thought. When studying ancient history, the Romans were known for their organization, orderliness, government and military prowess. But it was the Greeks who were known as the philosophers, the thinkers, the builders of society. And here it is in Scripture: the Athenians had nothing better to do than stand around all day, debating life. We might call them “i-d-l-e” thinkers as well as “i-d-o-l” worshipers. Do you know anyone like that---all talk and no concrete substance or action? You talk about Jesus and they talk about everything and everybody but Jesus. But at least the Athenians were open to hear, unlike many today.

The Stoics believed that everything was God (sounds like New—or not so new—Age. That spirit was dull in matter but it was in everything. What gave humanity life was a little spark of that spirit dwelt in them and when they died it returned to God. Everything that happened was the will of God and so we must accept the laws of the universe, however harsh, enduring pain and hardship without complaining and strive fearlessly toward a world founded on reason. They believed the soul survived the body, but only bodyless and free. Emotionally they remained passive and disengaged. Do you know anyone like that?

The Epicureans, on the other end of the spectrum, believed everything happened by chance and that death was the end of all and that the gods were remote from the world and uncaring. Happiness and pleasure were the highest good—the chief end of man. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die—without fear of judgment or consequence, so live it up. Do you know any people like that? Hmmm, as a society, we are so caught up in this hedonism—the pursuit of happiness and pleasure at all costs. That in itself often becomes the god.

Even today, scientific reason and hedonism are very influential in our society. Paul was "babbling" and "advocating foreign gods" because he was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Interesting, that Jesus was considered the "foreign god" and that preaching the Gospel was considered "babbling". Is that anything like today? Is Jesus being pushed out by our society like He's a "foreign god" who has no business in people's lives or no claim on them?

So Paul, at their urging, went to a meeting at the Areopagus (Athens great town hall for debating) to clarify these strange ideas. Paul meets them where they are. He finds a common point to begin dialogue with them. "I see that in every way you are very religious in observing your objects of worship. I even found an altar: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD"—in case they missed acknowledging or trying to please some god about some thing, like knocking on wood today or crossing your fingers, hoping some good will result. Do you know people like that? But "what you Athenians worship as something unknown" let me tell you about. Today that might not be a statue, but the emptiness inside someone, and Paul says he can tell them not how, but who can fill that void. Are we concerned enough to talk to those to whom Jesus is still an unknown God?

Here's the WOW FACTOR. Listen to the high praise of God from Paul, as he offers this "unknown" God to those who will listen and receive Him, so the "unknown" becomes "known". He's the 1 who made the world and everything in it. He's the Lord of heaven and earth and isn't contained in humanly constructed buildings. He isn't served by our work as if He needed anything. He gives all people life and breath and everything else. From 1 man He made every nation of people, that they should inhabit the whole earth and He determined the exact time and places for their lives. There's a reminder here of Ps. 139, that we're fearfully and wonderfully made, that God's works are wonderful, that there's nothing God does not know, that God's known us since before we were conceived, and that all the days ordained for us were "written" in His book before one of them came to be. Wow! How great is our God? Now that's the big deal about Jesus.

Why did God give all people life and breath and everything else? V. 27: so people would seek Him, reach out for Him and find Him, for He's close to each of us. Here's the purpose of life.

In v. 28 he uses the expression "in Christ". For Paul, this is the great divide in life. Either 1 has Christ or is without Him. There's no 3rd option. In Christ we live and move and have our being. We are to be immersed in Him.

God's not like gold or silver or any stone or image made by humanity. What might those things be today—education, degrees, wealth, career, sex, body enhancing, yoga, meditation, mysticism, your horoscope, consumerism? What's most important to you, or as Jesus said, what you treasure is what you worship. If it's not God, it's idol worship. Spirituality is very much alive today, but if it doesn't have Jesus as the foundation, it is dead.

With the revelation of Jesus, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He's set a day when He'll judge the world with justice—by the man He's appointed, and proved it to all by raising Him from the dead. That's the end of Paul's sermon—full stop.

So what's the application? 1st, do you have a personal relationship with Christ? Have you invited Him into your heart, confessed you're a sinner before God and acknowledged your need for His forgiveness? If not, you can do that' He's sure to say "yes"!

Jesus is still the unknown God and foreign to many people today. Paul made the unknown God known. If you do know Jesus, have you shared Him with the "Athenians" in your world? 1 Jn. 5:12: "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." You can reach out to others, to share life by sharing Jesus. Go into your world this week and do likewise.