

The Unknown God

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INTRODUCTION

While visiting Athens, Paul preached on the nature, characteristics and concerns of the One True God (Acts 17:22–23). Significant lessons can be drawn from this discourse that have continuing relevance.

Acts 17:22–23 (NASB95) — 22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Many people are religious. Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects” The Greek word *deisidaimonesteros*, here translated “very religious,” refers to one who is “very fearful of gods, religious, superstitious” (Thomas 1174). While it can be used in a denigrating sense, of one who is “superstitious” or a “flatterer of the gods,” “in the laudatory introduction of Paul’s speech before the Areopagus it must mean devout, religious” (BDAG).

Yet, men often worship in ignorance. Paul said, “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.” The Greek word *agnoēma*, translated “ignorance,” means “to be ignorant, not to know” (Thomas 50). BDAG say it means “(1) to be uninformed about, not to know, be ignorant (of); (2) to pay little or no attention to, not to recognize, disregard, ignore; (3) to fail to understand, with the implication of lack of capacity or ability, not to understand; (4) to be unaware about one’s wrongdoing, lapse/do wrong/sin unintentionally.”

Through the proclamation of the gospel message, we come to know the unknown God (Acts 17:24–31). Let us consider the various points Paul emphasized, making relevant application to our own day and time.

Acts 17:24–31 (NASB95) — 24 “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ 29 “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. 30 “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 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.”

JEHOVAH MADE THE WORLD AND ALL THINGS IN IT.

Despite the denials of atheists, agnostics, and adherents of a mechanistic view of the universe, Sacred Scripture affirms, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1; cf. Psa. 102:25–27).

Genesis 1:1 (NASB95) — 1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Psalm 102:25–27 (NASB95) — 25 “Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 “Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. 27 “But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.

JEHOVAH IS LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.

Having exalted himself against the Lord of heaven, Belshazzar, king of Babylon, faced the consequence of being weighed in the balance and found wanting (Dan. 5:22–28).

Daniel 5:22–28 (NASB95) — 22 “Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, 23 but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. 24 “Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. 25 “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ 26 “This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. 27 “ ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. 28 “ ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”

Waging war against the Lamb, the Roman empire was similarly doomed because they did not understand that Jesus Christ is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14).

Revelation 17:14 (NASB95) — 14 “These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.”

JEHOVAH DOES NOT DWELL IN TEMPLES MADE WITH HANDS.

Dedicating the temple to the worship of Jehovah, Solomon said, “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!” (1 Kings 8:27–29).

1 Kings 8:27–29 (NASB95) — 27 “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! 28 “Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today; 29 that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place.

JEHOVAH IS NOT SERVED BY HUMAN HANDS, AS THOUGH HE NEEDED ANYTHING.

Having collected vast offerings for the temple, David prayed, “But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You” (1 Chron. 29:14–16).

1 Chronicles 29:14–16 (NASB95) — 14 “But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You. 15 “For we are sojourners before You, and tenants, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. 16 “O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build You a house for Your holy name, it is from Your hand, and all is Yours.

JEHOVAH GIVES TO ALL PEOPLE LIFE AND BREATH AND ALL THINGS.

In the beginning, God created man, forming man from the dust of the ground, and breathing into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). He is the maker of all things (Isa. 44:24–26).

Genesis 2:7 (NASB95) — 7 Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Isaiah 44:24–26 (NASB95) — 24 Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, “I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, Stretching out the heavens by Myself And spreading out the earth all alone, 25 Causing the omens of boasters to fail, Making fools out of diviners, Causing wise men to draw back And turning their knowledge into foolishness, 26 Confirming the word of His servant And performing the purpose of His messengers. It is I who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited!’ And of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built.’ And I will raise up her ruins again.

JEHOVAH MADE FROM ONE MAN EVERY NATION OF MANKIND TO LIVE ON ALL THE FACE OF THE EARTH.

All humanity has descended from Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:20). Acknowledging this reality, Malachi said, “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10).

Genesis 3:20 (NASB95) — 20 Now the man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living.

Malachi 2:10 (NASB95) — 10 “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?”

JEHOVAH DETERMINED THEIR APPOINTED TIMES AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THEIR HABITATION.

The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, bestowing authority on whom He wishes, setting the lowliest of men in positions of power, defining the duration of the rule and reign (Dan. 4:17; 11:27; John 19:10–11).

Daniel 4:17 (NASB95) — 17 “This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers And the decision is a command of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes And sets over it the lowliest of men.”

Daniel 11:27 (NASB95) — 27 “As for both kings, their hearts will be intent on evil, and they will speak lies to each other at the same table; but it will not succeed, for the end is still to come at the appointed time.

John 19:10–11 (NASB95) — 10 So Pilate said to Him, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” 11 Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”

JEHOVAH DESIRES THAT THEY WOULD SEEK GOD, IF PERHAPS THEY MIGHT GROPE FOR HIM AND FIND HIM.

Before the foundation of the world, God had a plan for saving mankind (Eph. 1:3–4), involving Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1–3), but extending to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike (Acts 15:15–18).

Ephesians 1:3–4 (NASB95) — 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as

He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

Genesis 12:1–3 (NASB95) — 1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Acts 15:15–18 (NASB95) — 15 “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 ‘After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it, 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,’ 18 Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.

JEHOVAH IS NOT FAR FROM EACH ONE OF US.

Some view deity as distant and remote, but the Lord God hears and heeds the cry of those who trust in Him (Psa. 34:17–18; Acts 10:1–4).

Psalm 34:17–18 (NASB95) — 17 The righteous cry, and the Lord hears And delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Acts 10:1–4 (NASB95) — 1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, “Cornelius!” 4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

JEHOVAH IS THE GIVER AND SUSTAINER OF LIFE: IN HIM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND EXIST, AS EVEN SOME OF YOUR OWN POETS HAVE SAID, “FOR WE ALSO ARE HIS CHILDREN.”

Jesus Christ was the active agent of creation, and the One who upholds and sustains all things (Col. 1:15–17).

Colossians 1:15–17 (NASB95) — 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things

have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

JEHOVAH IS NOT LIMITED BY MAN’S MISCONCEPTIONS: “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.”

Graven images can never capture the essence and grandeur of God (Exod. 20:4–6).

Exodus 20:4–6 (NASB95) — 4 “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

THE LORD GOD (JEHOVAH), HAVING OVERLOOKED THE TIMES OF IGNORANCE, IS NOW DECLARING TO MEN THAT ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE SHOULD REPENT.

Repentance is an essential, universal requirement (Luke 13:1–5; Acts 2:38–40).

Luke 13:1–5 (NASB95) — 1 Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? 3 “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 “Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? 5 “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Acts 2:38–40 (NASB95) — 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!”

THE LORD GOD (JEHOVAH) HAS FIXED A DAY IN WHICH HE WILL JUDGE THE WORLD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH A MAN WHOM HE HAS APPOINTED.

Preaching to Cornelius, Peter affirmed that Jesus Christ has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42).

Acts 10:42 (NASB95) — 42 “And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

We must, therefore, honor God’s Son through faith and obedience (John 5:22–24).

John 5:22–24 (NASB95) — 22 “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, 23 so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. 24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

THE LORD GOD (JEHOVAH) HAS FURNISHED PROOF TO ALL MEN BY RAISING HIM FROM THE DEAD.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter’s message regarding the Resurrected Redeemer was reinforced by credible proofs: fulfilled prophecy, eye-witness testimony, and the confirming signs of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:29–36).

Acts 2:29–36 (NASB95) — 29 “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 “And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, 31 he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. 32 “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. 33 “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. 34 “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 35 Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” ’ 36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

CONCLUSION

Some sneered at Paul’s message, others showed a willingness to listen, and a few believed; to which class do you and I belong (Acts 17:32–34)?

Acts 17:32–34 (NASB95) — 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.