

Sunday, March 1, 2026 | Missio Dei

Week 12 | Acts 17:22-25 | “The ‘Unknown God’ Made Known, Pt. 1”

READ: Acts 17:22-34 (ESV)

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ ²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from 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.

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In today's passage, we see this played out in Athens. Despite their robust philosophical framework, whereby they claimed to *divine* meaning from the universe, they were, ironically, ignorant of the *Divine*. This is evidenced by their altar to the 'unknown god.' But, thankfully, where the philosophes were totally ignorant, Paul was well-informed. He makes the 'unknown god' known.

Nevertheless, information without transformation is a dead end. As we will see, it isn't enough to know God's identity; he must be known intimately. To truly know God is to be changed by Him, a realization that begins with repentance. Do not kid yourself. A true study of the doctrine of God begins by dealing with that which has separated us from God: *sin*. We cannot help but confess our sin when you've come to know the one and only God.

Vs. 22 – Luke says Paul was “[standing in the midst of the Areopagus](#).” And, as we discussed last week, this is either a reference to the place, aka Mars Hill, or the council, or both. The point here, though, is simply that the apostle was in the heart of Athens, at the birthplace of philosophy. On one side, you have friends of wisdom, and on the other, a friend of the Word incarnate.

Paul begins by addressing his audience respectfully as “[Men of Athens](#).” That the males were the predominant gender is likely. However, since one of the people to be converted is a woman (cf. vs. 34), we can assume the audience was a mix of men and women.

Paul says, “[I perceive that in every way you are very religious](#).” The Greek term Paul uses here (*deisidaimōn*) is used nowhere else in scripture. And it means, “having or showing or expressing reverence for a deity.”¹ And though it can have a connotation of “superstitions,” scholars agree that Paul's usage here is akin to devotion; he was saying they were a highly devout group.² So Paul wasn't being condescending, but, in a way, complimentary. Speaking about his own Jewish faith, Paul once described himself saying, “[if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless](#)” (Phil 3:4-6). The apostle knew better than most what religious devotion looked like, and he saw the Athenians as kindred spirits in this way.

¹ Rick Brannan, ed., [Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#), Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

² DBAG (2000), 216.

And the Athenians weren't just religious, they were "in every way...very religious." This is somewhat hyperbolic, but its effect is obvious. They were so pious that there was very little that they could do to become even more pious.

Vs. 23 – To illustrate the Athenians' extreme piety, Paul says, "For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship." As we talked last week, Athens was full of idols. In fact, it was the idolatry that spurred Paul to proclaim the gospel in its streets. A last first-century novelist, Petronius, said, "Our country is so infested with divinities that you can more easily meet a god than a man." He was speaking specifically about Naples, but it's just as applicable to Athens. Richard E. Wycherley, a renowned scholar of ancient Greek architecture, stated that Athens was "a forest of statues." Paul was making an observation which would've been apparent to all.

But rather than picking out one of the gods who had a name, Paul says, "I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'" Because the Greek culture was polytheistic, the assumption was that there were multiple gods. In fact, whenever Greek culture encountered a new deity with similarities to one of their own, they'd incorporate that god into their religious worldview, a process historians refer to as "syncretism." As such, the question, "How many Greek gods were there?" is impossible to answer. While it's generally recognized that there were twelve main gods—e.g., Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, etc.—there were many "earth" gods and demi-gods, and, given a particular region, even they would've been considered on par with the so-called "main gods." But the point is, given this worldview, it made sense to create an altar "to the unknown god" to act as a placeholder so that, if a new god was discovered, the Greek people could say that, while they didn't know the god's name, they had been worshipping him/her. As such, an altar dedicated to the "unknown god" was common throughout the ancient world and not a specific characteristic of Athens.³

So far, Paul hasn't said anything that would've shocked his audience. That is, until he said, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." The apostle confirmed their suspicions that they had left a god out of their pantheon. There was one more God that they forgot to include: Yahweh. And then what follows is a thorough exposition on the doctrine of God.

Vs. 24-31 – As far as I can tell, there are **thirteen** doctrines of God within Paul's sermon:

³ F. F. Bruce, "Unknown God," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), [1219](#).

- 1.) **Divine Origination** – Paul says Yahweh is “the God who **made** the world and everything in it.” A purely materialistic explanation of the universe is logically inconsistent. To *not* believe in a Creator, one must believe in at least **five** miracles: (1) something came from nothing, (2) order from chaos, (3) life came from non-life, (4) reason from non-reason, and (5) morality from matter. All of these factors imply that the material universe is not the sum-total of existence. There must be an immaterial from which the material was created.

When Paul spoke to these Athenians, he was likely paraphrasing Gen 1:1, which says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” **The origin of the universe is not a product of chance but creation.** This would've resonated with Paul's audience. On the one hand, they too believed in a high power that created all things. But on the other hand, each group would've taken issue with Paul's claim: there weren't many gods, as the Epicureans believed, but one; and God was not a homogeneous force that could express itself in various forms, as the Stoics believed, but a personal being. And that one divine personal being created the universe.

- 2.) **Divine Dominion** – Paul says Yahweh is the “**Lord of heaven and earth.**” God did not make the universe, set it on its course, and then let entropy take the wheel. He is the ruler “of heaven and earth.” God alone has authority. God said of mankind, “**Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth**” (Gen 1:26). We were the stewards of creation, not by merit, but by delegation. We were endowed with authority by the Creator, who is the supreme authority. There are no gods above God.

Furthermore, remember what the Athenians said of Paul's preaching: “**He seems to be a preacher of foreign [emphasis added] divinities**” (Ac. 17:18). They thought the apostle was speaking about strange gods, ones from a “foreign” territory. But Yahweh is not just the God of Israel, nor of Paul; he is “**Lord of heaven and earth.**” Deut, 10:17 says, “**For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.**” This was no “foreign” god. Yahweh was the God of the Athenians; they just didn't realize it.

- 3.) **Divine Aseity** – Paul says Yahweh “**does not live in temples made by man.**” There is no box, be it literal, metaphorical, or theological, that can contain God. He transcends all things. The Lord is wholly different and unlike anything in this reality and so cannot be contained by anything, let alone in “temples made by man.” Finite beings such as

ourselves cannot hope to contain an infinite being like God. Anselm expressed it, God “is through himself and from himself whatever he is.” This means we don’t actually know exactly what God is, nor will we ever fully grasp his divine substance. Walter Elwell, editor of *the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, often said, “All theology is approximation and then is followed up with better and better approximations.” Though there are bad and good theologies, even the best theology is still unfinished. There is always more to know and learn about God. Isaiah 66:1-2 says,

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.”

Maximus the Confessor said, “Whoever has seen God and has understood what he saw, has seen nothing.”⁴

- 4.) **Divine Independence** – Paul says Yahweh is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything.” Job asked, “Can a man be profitable to God?” And the answer is, of course, no. What can you give God that he does not already have? According to Greek mythology, the gods needed ambrosia and nectar to retain their divine states. They were depicted as cosmic toddlers with high-maintenance emotional and physical requirements who *needed* unending attention. In contrast, the Lord says,

“If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps 50:12–15).

When we’re in trouble, we can “call upon” God and he “will deliver” us. And, in return, we ought to “glorify” God. God is **independent** of creation, but creation is **dependent on God**. God needs nothing from us, and we owe everything to him. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Not because God needs our worship, but because he deserves it. And not because we have to, but because our greatest good in life is found when we bring him the most glory.

- 5.) **Divine Beneficence** – Paul says Yahweh “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” God is our benefactor. Our life, breath, and everything else we have have

⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *In Epistula Dionysii 1*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857-1886), 4:529A.

been provided for us by the Lord. We do not own anything. In response to the rising popularity of Jesus and his own declining popularity, John the Baptist said, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27). Whatever we have, it has all been given to us.

Isaiah 42:5 describes God as the one “who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it.” We owe our lives—the very breath in our lungs—to God.

Soli Deo Gloria

Video Description:

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