

Sunday, March 8, 2026 | Missio Dei

Week 14 | Acts 17:27-34 | "The 'Unknown God' Made Known, Pt. 3"

**READ:** Acts 17:22-34 (ESV)

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,<sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.<sup>26</sup> 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,<sup>27</sup> 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,<sup>28</sup> 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.'<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,<sup>31</sup> 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."

<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."<sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst.<sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

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:

- 1.) **Divine Origination** – Paul says Yahweh is “the God who **made** the world and everything in it.” The origin of the universe is not a product of *chance* but *creation*.
- 2.) **Divine Dominion** – Paul says Yahweh is the “Lord of heaven and earth.” 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.” “Whoever has seen God and has understood what he saw, has seen nothing.”<sup>1</sup>
- 4.) **Divine Independence** – Paul says Yahweh is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything.” God is **independent** of creation, but creation is **dependent** on God.
- 5.) **Divine Beneficence** – Paul says Yahweh “gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” God is our benefactor. We owe our lives—the very breath in our lungs—to God.
- 6.) **Divine Anthropogeny** – Paul says Yahweh “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.” While he wanted to emphasize humanity’s **shared origins**, he also wanted to emphasize humanity’s **divine origins**. Every man, woman, and child, no matter their melanin levels or dialect, is made in **the *imago Dei***—the image of God.
- 7.) **Divine Providence** – Paul says Yahweh has “determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” History is the handiwork of God’s providence. At his decree, nations rise; at his direction, nations fall. The end was determined before the beginning (cf. Isa. 46:10).
- 8.) **Divine Accessibility** – Paul says humanity “should **seek** God, and perhaps **feel** their way toward him and **find** him.” Since God “does not live in temples made by man,” he is accessible to all. You don’t need to worship in this temple or on top of that mountain (cf. Jn. 4:20-26). You need not go on a pilgrimage to gain admittance to God. He is accessible wherever you are.

When we speak of **Divine Accessibility**, we mean that God is **relationally** open to his **creatures**. Though closely related to **Divine Proximity** (pt. 9), accessibility does not focus on God's location in space but rather on his **openness** to approach. Someone can be physically close yet emotionally, mentally, or relationally distant. The barriers to encountering God are not insurmountable. He is not cold; he is approachable. He is not hiding; he is out in the open. And he desires that we come to him and call upon him (cf. Deut. 4:7).

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

Now that Christ has come, it takes no great effort on our part to access God. Paul says, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoiced in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). We can meet with God right where we are.

In fact, we need not wonder whether God is close, since he is self-evident to those with eyes to see. Romans 1:20 teaches us, God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So [men and women] are without excuse.” God is “perceived” in nature. David said,

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps 19:1-4).

All of mankind has some innate sense that God exists. God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccl. 3:11). Every man, woman, and child could, ***if they truly desired***, “feel their way toward him,” and they would likely (“perhaps”) “find him” (cf. Jer. 29:13). Why many do not believe is a matter I will discuss shortly. But scripturally speaking, this much must be said: ***God is accessible to all who are truly seeking and feeling their way toward him.*** We must not allow voices to convince us otherwise.

***To do so would be to believe the very lie by which many have deceived themselves.*** God is always available. He is never too busy. He never plays coy. When we speak to God, it is not a long-distance call—***it is a local call.*** So local that we need only speak, and he hears us, because he is in the very room with us. And not only is he in the room with us, but he also ***genuinely desires communion with us***, so that we might—rather than hide from him—walk with him “in the cool of the day” once more (Gen. 3:8; cf. Gen. 17:1).

- 9.) ***Divine Proximity*** – Paul says, “Yet he is actually ***not far*** from each one of us.” Paul then quotes the philosopher, Epimenides of Crete, who said, “In him we live and move and have our being.” In its original context, Epimenides was speaking, of course, not of God but of Zeus.<sup>2</sup> To be clear, ***Paul wasn’t conflating the two***, as if God was Zeus and Zeus was God. His point is being applied more broadly.

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<sup>2</sup> Keener (2014), 3:2658.

Interestingly, this point would've really resonated with the philosophers. These three ideas—life, motion, and being—were central concerns of ancient philosophy.

When it came to life, philosophers sought to understand what *animates* living things. Aristotle (*De Anima 415b*), "The soul is the cause and principle of the living body."

When it came to motion, they asked *what* set the world into motion and whether that motion could ever *cease* or would *continue for eternity*. Aristotle (*Metaphysics XII.7*), "If everything that is in motion is moved by something, there must be a first unmoved mover."

And when it came to being, they wrestled with the nature of existence itself, wondering whether reality was truly what it *appeared* to be or perhaps an *illusion*. Plato (*Sophist 244a*), "The greatest and most important problem is what being itself is."

Furthermore, when philosophers spoke of human beings living, moving, and being in the divine, they were essentially saying that God *pervaded everything*.<sup>3</sup> This was more an idea championed by the Stoics, given their pantheistic viewpoint, rather than by the Epicureans. A Stoic thought that all matter was, in some sense, a part of the divine. God, in their view, filled and constituted the universe itself. In pantheism, *there was little difference between that which makes up God and what makes up reality*; the two were essentially identical.

However, this pantheistic view of God is utterly at odds with Christianity. As we'll discuss with **Divine Intangibility**, God is a "spirit"; he is immaterial. He is not composed of any substance within this reality. And as we discussed with **Divine Aseity**, God mustn't be equated with anything inside reality since he "does not live in temples made by man."

However, where the apostle and the philosopher agreed was that *you cannot escape God*. We "live" in him. We "move" in him. And we derive our "being" in him. He is always ever-present, or as the theologians say, omnipresent. Because of God's omnipresence, God is everywhere. There is no where we go to escape the presence of God. Psalm 139:7-12 says,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3:2659.

“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.”

God has been wrongfully characterized as the 'Big Man Upstairs'. He is not only upstairs; he is downstairs. God is here, and God is near; he “is actually not far from each one of us” (cf. Psa. 145:18). Even in our pain, the Lord is near. Does not Psa. 34:18 say, “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit”? Speaking on this very phenomenon, CS Lewis said,

“We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned before, polytheists thought of the gods as distant and uncaring. Pantheists viewed the divine as permeating everything, but it remained mostly impersonal. In both views, the divine was by and large inaccessible. But the God of the Bible was a personal being distinct from his creation, yet one who wanted a relationship with it. The Lord wants to know us personally; he wants to be sought by those made in his image.

If God is accessible and in the proximity of each and every human being, then why are there so many people who either don't believe in God or are trusting in the wrong god? The problem isn't with God; it is with us. This is why, after James says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you,” he immediately follows up that statement, saying, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (Ja. 4:8). People may say they're seeking God. They may say they are feeling out for God. But they don't want to clean their hands. They don't want to purify their hearts. They're “double-minded,” saying one thing but doing and believing something else. God is accessible to all. The question is, will you give him access to your heart? Will you allow him to come in and change you? As the old preacher's adage goes, “When you come to Christ, come as you are; once you do, you will not stay as you are.”

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, CS, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: MacMillan, 1962), 93.

10.) **Divine Intangibility** – Paul quotes a poet, Aratus, who said in his poem *Phainomena*, “For we are indeed his offspring.” If we live, move, and have our being in God, what does that make us? “God’s offspring.” And if we are God’s offspring, then, Paul says, “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.”

God does not have a body. John insists, “No one has ever seen God” (Jn. 1:18). The Lord is incomparable to everything. He cannot be contained nor reduced to a mere physical image. **This is why Catholic icon veneration is wrong.**<sup>5</sup> When someone, in worship, kisses a cross, kneels before a painting, or lights candles, they aren’t worshipping God. Icons aren’t “windows to heaven” but to hell.<sup>6</sup> To do so would be to misrepresent God, making him less than what he is. **Calling any image “sacred” is to deconsecrate the Divine.** This is why the second commandment carried such a severe penalty (cf. Ex. 20:4-6). Notably, the woman at the well made this mistake when she insisted that God could only be worshipped in a single place: Mt. Gerizim. Jesus told her,

“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23-24).

God does not have hands or feet or a physical form; he is “spirit.” As we discussed with **Divine Aseity**, Yahweh is not a God *inside* “the box” but the One who stands *outside* reality and cannot therefore be fully comprehended by any system *inside* “the box.” **The greatest “imagination of man” is still far too small to imagine all that God is.** Remember, Paul’s “spirit was provoked within him as he saw that [Athens] was full of idols” (Ac. 17:16). The idols were the **catalyst** that inspired Paul’s sermon at Mars Hill. Any attempt to make an image of God is such a grievous sin that we ought to condemn idols in every street.

The closest approximation we have is the human being, since we are all, as Paul points out, “God’s offspring.” The Stoics would have appreciated this line. As we mentioned earlier, they believed the divine permeated the entire cosmos. Everything—including themselves—was thought to share in this impersonal divine substance. Paul, however,

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<sup>5</sup> Ortlund, Gavin, “Is Icon Veneration a Big Deal? What Most People Miss,” November 13, 2024, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoU4PO5d6kQ>, [accessed March 12, 2026].

<sup>6</sup> Ortlund, Gavin, *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 190.

means something very different. God is not an impersonal force diffused throughout the universe; he is a personal being who created each one of them. Humanity reflects something of him, but he is greater than the whole human race combined. Parts of us do not define him. He defines us.

- 11.) **Divine Forbearance** – Paul says, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Sinners aren’t judged immediately for their sin. Why? Is the lack of immediate punishment a tacit approval of sin? No. It is because God, being eternally patient, overlooks “the times of ignorance.”

In Romans 3:25, Paul says that God, “in his divine forbearance...passed over former sins” in the OT because he looked forward to Christ’s death. The sacrificial system could never take away sins (cf. Heb. 10:4); the “blood of goats and bulls” was never intended to be propitiatory. Those lesser sacrifices always anticipated a greater sacrifice to come. And so, God “passed over former sins” and overlooked “the times of ignorance,” knowing that Christ would be “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2).

And the same is true today, albeit the sacrifice is no longer in the future, as it was for those in the OT, but in our past. God, right now, turns a blind eye to sin to give “all people everywhere [time] to repent.” Peter talks about this very thing when he says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pe. 3:9). God puts a “redemptive pause” on judgement, knowing that there are still those who will repent that have yet to do so. Before, you may have said, “I didn’t know this.” But now, you cannot. The “times of ignorance” have long since passed, and it is high time you repent. This is a divine command. We ignore it at our own peril.

- 12.) **Divine Retribution** – Paul says Yahweh “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.” God, as the ultimate Judge, will eventually administer justice by giving some people exactly what they deserve—eternal damnation—and others what they do not deserve—eternal life. This day is not a moving target; it has been “fixed” by God. The timing of this day is a mystery. Jesus said, “No one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Mat. 24:36), when Judgement Day will occur. But, rest assured, it is not a matter of if but when. And when the Lord judges the world, he will do so “in righteousness.” In Gen 18:25, Abraham asked, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” And, of course, the answer is yes. He will always do what is just. The Psalmist says,

“Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.' Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness” (Psa 96:10).

In a 2020 lecture, **John Lennox**, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the University of Oxford, speaking on this very passage, said, "We need to have a big picture. No one will understand the resurrection or Jesus unless they have a huge picture... He [Paul] starts with creation and ends with the final judgment and everything else in between. And that's the sweep we ought to be aiming at."<sup>7</sup> **Just as reality has both a beginning and an end, so do we.** The writer of Hebrews says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9:27). Divine retribution is coming for us all, one way or another; it is unavoidable.

And God will judge “**by a man whom he has appointed.**” This, of course, is a reference to **Jesus Christ.** Jesus said in Jn. 5:22-23, “For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”

And if Jesus judges “for the Father,” **this is a clear affirmation of the triune nature of God.** For who else can judge in God’s place if not God? God the Father will judge the world “**by a man,**” aka God the Son/the Incarnate Word. In response to those who call sinners to repentance, some reply, “**Only God can judge me,**” as if that were better. Such a thing will be far worse. And it will be Jesus Christ, God the Son, who will enact the judgement. This will be a truly unenviable moment for many.

- 13.) Divine Vindication –** Paul says Yahweh “has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” By “raising [Jesus] from the dead,” God made it unmistakably clear to all people that Jesus holds the office of Divine Judge. **Christ was *authenticated* by the most extraordinary event imaginable: *conquering death itself.*** In the opening lines of Romans, Paul says that Jesus Christ, our Lord, is “**declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness *by his resurrection from the dead* [emphasis added]” (Rom. 1:4).**

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<sup>7</sup> FEUR Videos, “John Lennox – Paul a Mars Hill, Acts 17,” September 8, 2020, *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXiTE\\_fg-yA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXiTE_fg-yA), [accessed February 28, 2026].

Psalm 16 is messianic, meaning that within it, there are details that describe the messiah. And among those descriptions, David speaks about resurrection when he says,

“My heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psa 16:9-11).

You see, Jesus did not raise himself from the dead, though that was indeed within his power (cf. Mar. 5:21-43; Lu. 7:11-17; Jn. 11:1-44). God the Father raised God the Son. And this is an important distinction to make because, when God raised Christ from the dead, it was like a signal to all that everything Jesus did and said was approved by God. Jesus did not approve himself. That was done by God. And if he were approved, he must be the messianic king who would eventually rule the world. The bodily resurrection is divine vindication—God’s stamp of approval—on all that Jesus did.

Socrates is dead.

Plato is dead.

Aristotle is dead.

Alexander the Great is dead.

Genghis Khan is dead.

Napoleon Bonaparte is dead.

The Buddha is dead.

Mohammad is dead.

Gandhi is dead.

Jesus was once dead, but he is now alive. And “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

**Vs. 32-34** – Interestingly, the response to this is much the same as before (cf. vs. 18-20), but with one notable exception:

As before, there was **contempt**. Luke says, “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.”

As before, there was **curiosity**. Luke says others said, “We will hear you again about this.” And, understandably, given somewhat lackluster response, it is no surprise that “Paul went out from their midst.”

However, this time, there was a new response: **conversion**. Luke says, “But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## **Video Description:**

### **Missio Dei | Week 14 | Acts 17:27-34 | “The ‘Unknown God’ Made Known, Pt. 3”**

We’ve been slowly rehashing Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill, noting how every word he spoke was anchored in the doctrine of God. He took the altar to the ‘Unknown God’ and used it to introduce the Athenians to the only God who can truly be known.

Lord willing, we reach the finish line today. And, as we’ll see, the climax of this doctrinally rich sermon demands a decision. Paul didn’t come to Athens just to share ideas; he came to issue a warning: to repent in light of the coming judgment, or remain in ignorance and face the consequences.

This is always how it is when one is confronted with the true and living God. A person will either be changed forever, being raised to walk in newness of life, or they’ll remain as they are, not knowing they’ve sealed their own fate.

## **Sermon Manuscript:**

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