

“The Imperative of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ”

Introduction:

Let us begin this Resurrection Day message from God’s Word with the reading of two verses from a sermon that the Apostle Paul delivered to a pagan, Gentile, crowd in the public arena of Mars Hill in ancient Athens Greece. We read the record of Acts 17:30 and 31 that the apostle declared to the crowd gathered before him,

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30f)

These few words, in which Paul declared that God “commands to all men everywhere”, is what we may term, the imperative of the resurrection. What God had done in and through Jesus Christ demanded a response of all people at all times and in all places. The one great sovereign God, who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, had sent His Son into the world on a great mission. The world had been in rebellion to Him since the beginning. The sinful world lie under His wrath. And this Creator God had appointed a day, even the Day of Judgment, when, according to His holy justice, He would compensate all people for all their sins that they had committed in His world. Paul declared that his hearers may be absolutely convinced that this Day of Judgment would come, for God had raised Jesus Christ from the dead, who would be the Judge on that great Day of Judgment.

But God had purposed in Himself that the world would not utterly perish due to His judgment upon them, but that He would save a people from their sin, save them from His eternal wrath upon their sin. It was His purpose to restore a sinful people to Himself, in a close, intimate, and eternal relationship with Himself, which they would enjoy eternally in a new heaven on a new earth. But given the inability and unwillingness of His people to bring remedy to themselves, God assumed the task Himself. He sent His Son into the world in order to do for His people that which they could not do for themselves. The eternally begotten Son of God came into this world, joined to himself our human nature, and had become one of us. And then through His own faith and obedience, Jesus lived out a life of perfect righteousness before His Father. God had purposed that through faith in Him through His Son, He would pardon them of all their sin and grant to them the gift of righteousness. Through the death of Jesus Christ on His cross, God paid for the penalty of sin upon His people. And through His gift of righteousness through faith, He would equip His people to withstand divine scrutiny on the Day of Judgment. And so it was, that this God/Man gave His life as a sacrifice to pay for their sins when He suffered and died upon His cross, thereby securing the everlasting redemption of His people. But it was upon His resurrection on the third day and His consequent ascension into heaven and enthronement as the God/Man on the very throne of God, that the work of His life and His death imposed an obligation upon every member of the human race. This is what Paul set forth as an imperative, as a command to all people everywhere. Paul declared,

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30f)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ places a responsibility and a great accountability on every one of us who can hear and intelligently receive the news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ imposes an imperative upon you and upon me, indeed, upon every man and woman and child. We are to repent of our sin, and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord, to whom God the Father gave all kingly

authority over heaven and earth. And to those who do so, and who live out their lives having done so, they are granted the free and full forgiveness of sins and they will most assuredly escape condemnation on that Day of Judgment. When they come before King Jesus on the Day of Judgment, they will be exonerated of their sin through faith in Jesus Christ. The outcome of that judgment for them will be their grand entrance into the everlasting Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

I would like us to consider in some detail this passage of Acts 17, in which this sermon of the Apostle Paul is recorded. It is important for us to consider the entire context, so let us read Acts 17:16 through verse 34.

¹⁶Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babbler want to say?”

Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

¹⁹And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? ²⁰For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

²²Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: ²⁴“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ ²⁹Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. ³⁰Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

³²And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” ³³So Paul departed from among them. ³⁴However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:6-34)

In order to assist us in our study, consider this outline:

1. Paul proclaimed the gospel to every creature. (Acts 17:16-18)
2. Paul proclaimed the “unknown” God to them as the knowable God. (17:19-23)
3. Paul declared the “unknown” God as the Creator of all things. (17:24-25)
4. Paul declared that God is the Ruler over all things. (Acts 17:26-29)
5. Paul admonished his listeners of their ignorance of the true God and exhorted them to forsake what they had formally believed and practiced. (Acts 17:30-31)
6. The people react and respond to Paul’s declaration and reject his admonition. (Acts 17:32-34)

I. Paul proclaimed the gospel to every creature. (Acts 17:16-18)

We read that when Paul arrived to Athens, he began to preach Jesus Christ in every place to everyone that would hear him. His concern for the souls of the people, even while he was appalled by their gross idolatry, moved him to stand forth and proclaim Jesus Christ, even though his companions in the gospel had not yet joined him in that city.

¹⁶Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babblers want to say?”

Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

The Apostle was in the middle of his second missionary journey, in which he had ventured into Europe from Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey). He first had travelled across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, which lie on the coast of Macedonia (Acts 16:11ff), where he began a church with the conversion of Lydia and her household, and the Gentile jailer and his family, who were converted through the witness of Paul and Silas, held in custody. Then Paul and Silas travelled westward to Thessalonica, founding another church. Leaving there after a brief period of evangelistic ministry, he travelled southward to Berea and then arrived later in Athens, where we find him in the passage before us. Wherever Paul travelled, he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. We see that he did so when he had arrived in Athens. We read that he first proclaimed Christ in the Jewish synagogue and then to the Greeks in the marketplace, and then finally, he preached Christ on Mars Hill in the Areopagus before some of the more “intellectual” citizens of Athens.

Athens was one of the greatest cities of the Roman Empire. It had once been the center of civilization, particularly when Alexander the Great ruled the world. Here is a description of Athens in Paul’s day written by **F. F. Bruce**:

Athens, although she had long since lost her political eminence of an earlier day, continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity. The sculpture, literature and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have, indeed, never been surpassed. In philosophy, too, she occupied the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. In all these fields Athens retained unchallenged prestige, and her political glory as the cradle of democracy was not completely dimmed. In consideration of her splendid past, the Romans left Athens free to carry on her own institutions as a free and allied city within the Roman Empire.¹

We read that the Apostle Paul, the “Hebrew of Hebrews” and “as to the law, a Pharisee” had come to Athens. Can we imagine his assessment of what he saw? Again, here is **F. F. Bruce**:

To-day, when we visit Athens and view the workmanship of the great architects and sculptures of the age of Pericles, we are free to admire them as works of art; to no one nowadays are they anything more. But in the first century of our era they were not viewed simply as works of art: they were temples and images of pagan deities. Temples and images of pagan deities were no new thing to a native of Tarsus, but this native of Tarsus (i.e. Paul) had been brought up in the spirit of the First and Second Commandments. Whatever Paul may have felt in the way of artistic appreciation, the feeling that was uppermost in his mind as he walked here and there in Athens was one of indignation: the beautiful city was “full of idols”,

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 348f.

dedicated to the worship of gods which were no gods—for “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God” (1Cor. 10:20).²

Now wherever Paul went, he preached the gospel. He proclaimed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is not to say that the content of his sermons was always the same, that he preached the identical sermon before any crowd. Rather, whenever and wherever Paul proclaimed the gospel, he did so with consideration given to the background and capabilities of his hearers. After he assessed the spiritual condition and the knowledge of spiritual truth of his hearers, he then brought them to understand who Jesus Christ was, that He had been crucified in order to atone for sinners, and that He was raised from the dead and was enthroned as the Lord of heaven and earth. Therefore, depending on whom it was that he was addressing, he would shape the content of his message. We read in Acts 17:17 that Paul initially reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue of Athens. This was his common practice in the town or city to which he travelled. Paul could assume in the Jewish synagogue that his hearers already knew and believed much of what he would proclaim to them. There were primarily Jews in the synagogue, but also there were also present some Gentiles who had heard and believed the Hebrew Scriptures and gathered weekly with the Jews in the synagogue. Paul knew that this gathering knew of the true God of the Hebrew Scriptures, that the true God is the Creator and the Sovereign Ruler (King) of all of His creation. He knew that they knew God’s law, which reflected and revealed God’s holy nature and which revealed to them their sin and His wrath upon them for their sin. He knew that they knew this true God had promised to send a Savior, even the Messiah, who would redeem them from their sin and restore them unto Himself through an everlasting covenant. Paul could stand before these Jewish people in their synagogue and declare to them, Jesus of Nazareth is this promised Messiah whom God had sent to die by crucifixion but that He was raised and enthroned as the promised Son of David over the long-anticipated Kingdom of God.

But we also read that when Paul left the Jewish synagogue that he went into the market place of Athens. There he spoke “with those who happened to be there” (17:17b). Paul could not assume that these people were informed of the truth of God’s Word as those in the synagogue a few minutes beforehand. These marketplace people did not have the world view of the Jewish people shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures. These people in the marketplace embraced the worldview and the belief systems of the world in which they lived and moved.

Athens was the center of philosophical thinking of the day. It was in the marketplace that Paul encountered “certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.” These were the two most popular philosophies at that time. These people saw and interpreted the world from the perspective advocated by these two philosophical, even religious, thought systems. Paul tailored his message to proclaim God’s Word to these Athenians differently than when he had declared the Word of God to the Jews in the synagogue. **Matthew Henry** made this point:

We have here St. Paul’s sermon at Athens. Divers sermons we have had, which the apostles preached to the Jews, or such Gentiles as had an acquaintance with and veneration for the Old Testament, and were worshippers of the true and living God; and all they had to do with them was to open and allege that Jesus is the Christ; but here we have a sermon to heathens, that worshipped false gods, and were without the true God in the world, and to them the scope of their discourse was quite different from what it was to the other. In the former case their business was to lead their hearers by prophecies and miracles to the knowledge of the Redeemer, and faith in him; in the latter it was to lead them by the common works of providence to the knowledge of the Creator, and the worship of him.

A wise assessment of the ones we are addressing will enable us to present the Word of God to them in a more appropriate and understandable manner. We should ask the Lord to help us understand the social and cultural context of those we desire to tell the gospel, and then ask Him to help us apply the Word of God to their mind, affections, and will, trusting the Holy Spirit to bless His Word to accomplish a work of grace in their souls.

² Ibid, p. 349.

We read that Paul had encountered certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (v. 18). *Who were the Epicureans?* The founder of this movement was Epicurus, who lived in Athens from 342 to 270 BC. He advocated the best way to view the world and live life was to live for pleasure, to be free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears, which included the fear of death. It advocated a life of peace. Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods, but held that they in no way were involved in the day to day existence of people.

Who were the Stoics? They were followers of the philosophy of Zeno, who lived from 340 until 265 B.C. He was, therefore, he was a contemporary of Epicurus. The worldview and philosophy of life of the stoics were to live in harmony with nature. They emphasized the primary role of the intellect, the mind, and the self-sufficiency of man. Zeno advocated that God was a “world-mind” that permeated all living things. He was, therefore, a pantheist. The Unitarians would be present day close cousin of the philosophy of stoicism of the first century. Stoicism advocated a high standard of morality, as well as a high sense of duty. But Stoics were also a prideful people. They believed strongly in their self-sufficiency and their own ability to live according to their standards of morality. A modern English poet, **W. E. Henley**, expressed the philosophy of stoicism in this poem:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unquenchable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced or cried aloud.
Under the blungeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matter not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the maser of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.³

It was to these rather self-assured and arrogant Athenians from both the Stoic and Epicurean schools of philosophy that Paul preached Jesus Christ and the resurrection. Regardless of whom Paul addressed, he eventually arrived to the declaration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We see this in the descriptive reaction of those who heard Paul in the marketplace. We read in verse 18,

And some said, “What does this babblers want to say?”

Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

On the one hand they discredited Paul and dismissed him as a babblers. On the other hand their curiosity was aroused. And so we read in **verses 19** through **21**:

¹⁹And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? ²⁰For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we

³ Ibid, p. 350. This is Henley’s poem, *Invictus*.

want to know what these things mean.” ²¹For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

When those that have thought and lived according to one world view, are confronted with an entirely different world view, their reaction is commonly as these Athenians. They said that Paul was proclaiming “strange things to our ears.” We tend to examine and evaluate what we hear people tell us based on what we have always heard and believed. It is a relative rarity to find a man (or woman) who will seriously question his own belief when he hears something “new” or “strange.” As we have said many times, “It is harder to unlearn than it is to learn.” The Lord Jesus spoke of this when he said of those who heard Him,

³⁶...“No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. ³⁸But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. ³⁹And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’” (Luke 5:36-38)

There is a resistance on the part of those who have been long indoctrinated into a system of belief that they have always assumed to be true. It is the Holy Spirit who alone can reveal the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ to such ones so that they are turned from their former ways of thinking and living to set them on the course of following Jesus Christ in faith and obedience.

But regardless of to whom we speak, we are to proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified, buried, risen, and enthroned. The Holy Spirit will use this message of the gospel to convert sinners anywhere and everywhere to the true one God and His Son whom He sent into the world to save sinners. Paul declared elsewhere, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Paul proclaimed to these people that God had raised His Son Jesus Christ from the dead and had enthroned Him as Lord, as the promised King over the long awaited but now realized Kingdom of God. Paul declared that all people everywhere were responsible and accountable to Jesus Christ the Lord. But Paul’s confidence in his proclamation was in the power of God to convert sinners to faith in Jesus Christ through this gospel, which he proclaimed openly and widely.

In the same way, regardless of who it is with whom we speak, we are to proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified, buried, risen, and enthroned, who alone can enable guilty sinners to be admitted freely into the glorious Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit will use this message of the gospel to convert sinners anywhere and everywhere to the true one God and His Son whom He sent into the world to save sinners.

II. Paul proclaimed the unknown God to them as the knowable God. (17:19-23)

We read that these “wise” men in their own eyes took Paul and escorted him to the top of Mars Hill where everyone would be able to hear him and engage him in his teaching of these “strange things.” We read of this in **verses 19** through **23**:

¹⁹And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? ²⁰For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

²²Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you...

The Areopagus on Mars Hill was viewed as a formal, high court by the people of the ancient world. In earlier centuries, during the Greek Empire, the Areopagus was the center of political, religious, and moral thought and proclamation. After the political power of Greece waned, it retained even in the first century an authority in the minds of the people in matters of morality and religion. Even in the days of the Roman Empire it was regarded as a place of great power and influence. It was both a great honor and a great privilege for Paul to speak in this place. But there is a sense that these men were putting Paul on trial, not with legal liability, but it was a place in which Paul's ideas could be heard, critiqued, and a demand would be placed on Paul to justify his assertions. An older expert in Pauline studies described it this way:

The scene described in vv. 18-34 seems to prove that the recognized lecturers could take a strange lecturer before the Areopagus, and require him to give an account of his teaching and pass a test as to its character.

When they took him to the court to satisfy the supreme university tribunal of his qualifications, they probably entertained some hope that he would be overawed before that august body, or that his teaching might not pass muster, as being of unsettling tendency.⁴

Paul began his address by acknowledging that they were a very religious people. As he had walked up the hill he had passed idols on his left and right, which represented many different gods and goddesses. He even saw one idol that had been dedicated "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." They wanted to be certain that they had given due reverence to all gods. And so, in order that they not miss or neglect inadvertently an important god, they had made an idol in case they were ignorant of one.

The story is told that several centuries before this time, there had been a great pestilence of some form that had plagued Athens. In fact there was an early church father, Theodore of Mopsuestia (A.D. 350-428), who commented on an inscription he had found which told of this event. During this pestilence, the Athenians consulted a wise man, Diogenes Laertius, who advised the Athenians to release a flock of both white and black sheep from the Areopagus, and at the spot each sheep stopped to graze, there they were to offer that sheep as a sacrifice to a god of that specific place. It was said that these anonymous altars could be seen all over this hill in Athens even in the early 3rd century AD.

Paul references one of these altars and began to preach to these people about the one true God of the Bible. Now it is important to recognize that in doing so Paul was not legitimizing their worship of this idol by this people. Paul's point of emphasis was that they believed in a god that they did not know, one of which they were ignorant. It was at this point of contact that Paul addressed them. They believed that there was a god who existed, but they knew nothing of his nature. Paul would declare to them who this God was and what He was like. Paul was making the unknown God knowable to them.

Now just as these Athenians were ignorant of the true God—they did not know Him or what He was truly like, so is everyone who is born into this world. This is a foundational principal of biblical Christianity: **We cannot know the one true God unless God reveals Himself to us.** There are two reasons for this inability that characterizes each of us. *First, there is the problem that God is an infinite spiritual being and we are finite physical beings.* This renders us unable to know God in truth. There is a vast, even infinite distance between who God is and who we are. There is nothing created and physical which can accurately or fully depict or represent Him to us. Every effort to portray God as fully God is blasphemous, for it fails to do so. All idolatry, according to the Second Commandment, is a manifestation of people who do not love God, who actually hate Him. The commandment reads,

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exod. 20:3-6)

⁴ William Mitchell Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), p. 247.

God is infinite in all of His attributes and He is unchangeable in all of His dealings. He is too vast for our comprehension. He is too holy for our abiding in His presence, even seeing His presence as He is in truth is not possible for us. God Himself said, “man shall not see me and live” (Exo. 33:20).

The second reason we cannot know God is because we are sinners, and sin has rendered us unable to know Him through our own reason or effort. The Word of God teaches us, “There is none that seeks after God.” That would mean, of course, that sinful man unaided by God’s grace will not seek after the true God. When the true God begins to reveal Himself to fallen man, but who is void of redemptive grace, he is as Adam and flees from God and attempts to hide himself from Him (Cf. Gen. 3:8).

Because of our two-fold inability, we are finite and sinful, if God is to be known to us and by us, God must reveal Himself to us. It is a work of God’s grace in illumination that He reveals Himself to sinners. God must show us what He is like by what He has done and does. And He must reveal Himself to us by communicating to us through His Word that He has imparted to us. And this revelation of the true God can only be mediated to us so that we know Him through Jesus Christ His Son, whom the Father sent into the world. It is only through Jesus Christ, because He had joined unto His divine nature our human nature, that He enables us to know the true God. Only through Jesus Christ are we able to have a relationship with God that we can experience and enjoy.

Our Lord Jesus Himself affirmed the inability that we have as finite, sinful creatures to know the true God apart from Him. He said these words:

“All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Matt. 11:27).

III. Paul declared the unknown God as the Creator of all things. (17:24-25)

Paul introduced this unknown God by declaring, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth...” (Acts 17:24). One of the ways in which God has revealed Himself to His creatures is through what He has done. His works include knowing Him through His work of ***creation***, but also through His works of ***providence***, that is, His ongoing governance of the world through history. In these few words Paul declared both of these ways in which God manifests to the world who He is. Again, Paul declared, “God, who made the world and everything in it”—He is the Creator. Then He said, “since He is Lord of heaven and earth”—He is the Ruler, the Governor, or the King of His creation.

With respect to His creation the Psalmist cited the witness of the creation itself to the existence and glory of God that is declared every day and every night.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
²Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
³There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard. (Psa. 19:1-3)

The creation bears witness to God who made all things.

God’s works of providence also bear witness of His existence, who He is and what He is like. However, His works of providence are not always that easy to interpret or understand. This is what Moses meant when he wrote,

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deut. 29:29)

And so, although God controls all things that occur in His world--this is the meaning of His providence-- much of what He does and why He does what He does is hidden from our eyes. This is because He wants His people

to trust His Word, not because they see how things work out for their good, but because their God has directed them to believe certain truths and act in accordance with His laws, even in the absence of evidence that doing so will benefit them. We are to obey His Word because He has said it, not because we have come to see how it will benefit us from doing so.

Paul went on to declare that because God was the Creator of all things, nothing that God has created or nothing that man might fashion, can be a means to worship Him or to render the honor that we owe Him. This is His declaration in **verses 24 and 25**.

“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. ²⁵Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.”

Our God receives nothing from us that in any way contributes to Him, that is, adds to who He is in His essence. We speak in terms that sometimes might lead us to think otherwise. We speak of “giving glory” to God. And, yes, the Holy Scriptures speak of God’s people giving God glory. But we should recognize that we are not adding to God something that He currently lacks. He is infinite in His glory. When we give glory to God what we are doing is confessing our understanding and appreciation of His glory and expressing praise and thanksgiving to God for His glory. But we are not adding anything to His essential glory. God is the giver. We are the recipients of all that is good that comes from Him, including our “life, breath, and all things.”

IV. Paul declared that God is the Ruler over all things. (Acts 17:26-29)

Not only did God create us, but He governs us also. He is Ruler over every aspect of our lives in the world which He made. God is sovereign over the history of the world that He had created. Paul declared of our God:

²⁶And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ ²⁹Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.

These people did not know the one true God. They did not see His presence among them. They did not know who He was or what He did. Their superstition had moved them to give some devotion to this “unknown God.” But all of their efforts were futile; they were worse than useless. They had been dishonoring God, though they had apparently been quite sincere and in a measure devout. And remember, these people whom Paul was addressing were self-confident, rather arrogant, and was presuming that Paul was “this babbler” of “strange ideas.” But they were clueless. They were ignorant religionists who thought themselves quite wise and quite well off, or at least, more than most people in the world.

Paul declared that God had made them. This, of course, is in accordance with what the Holy Scriptures declare that God made us in His image and after His likeness. What does this mean? This expression has been a matter discussed and debated a great deal over the centuries.⁵ It essentially signifies man’s unique ability to know God and recognize and reflect the glory of God in his existence. Linked with this is the idea that man is God’s representative on earth to rule over his creation on his behalf.

God set man in the world as the sign of his own sovereign authority, in order that man should uphold and enforce His--God’s--claims as Lord. Earthly monarchs too have the habit of setting up images of

⁵ For a discussion of the issues involved, see the article by C. F. H. Henry, “The Image of God” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp 545-48.

themselves in their kingdom as signs of their sovereign authority--it was in that sense that Israel thought of man as the representative of God.⁶

This necessitates that man was created originally “like” God in that he was pure and rational, capable of thinking intelligently and rationally, and living in a manner consistent with God’s holiness. When God was about to create man, we have recorded His speech, “Let us make man in Our image, according to our likeness.”

But not only did God make us, but in His sovereign will He has established us in His world according to His will. He determined where we live and to whom we are related. He has determined the time of our birth and the time and manner of our death. All aspects of our lives are under His sovereign and wise control. You are not here by accident. The parents you have was not by chance or accident. You do not live in this place at this time by accident. We must consider these matters very carefully before we take matters in our own hands and not yield to the Lord God who made us and directs us in His world to accomplish His will.

Paul declared that this God whom they did not know “is not far from each one of us.” We do not see Him. We may not be cognizant that He is near us. But in actuality God is Spirit and there is no place in His creation where He is not fully. He is not part here and part in heaven. He is Spirit and He is everywhere in fullness. David knew this, as should we. He wrote,

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.

²You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.

³You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.

⁵You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?

⁸If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me. (Psa. 139:1-10)

Again, Paul declared that God “is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Understanding this will enable us to develop a healthy fear of God that will guard our steps and keep us from much sin. If we were vividly aware that God is present with us, we would be much less likely to sin in what we foolishly think is in secret or darkness. Let us be mindful of this always, that He is not far from each of us. “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. (Prov. 15:3).

Paul then declared every person’s dependence upon God for life and its meaning. We read in **verse 28**, “for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’” God created us and therefore we owe our life to him as a child owes his life to his father.

Paul cited two ancient poets who affirmed this understanding of peoples’ relationship to God as their Creator. The first was a man named **Epimenides** who was from Crete. He wrote a poem in which he gave this line: “For in thee we live and move and have our being.” Paul also quoted a pagan poet, named **Aratus**,

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 146f.

who wrote a poem in which he described the relationship of people to the Greek god, Zeus. Aratus wrote, “We are also his offspring.” Paul was affirming what these poets had advocated. But Paul, of course, was arguing that all people owe their existence to the one true God who made them.

V. Paul admonished his listeners of their ignorance of the true God and exhorted them to forsake what they had formally believed and practiced. (Acts 17:30-31)

Paul proclaimed this word to them,

“Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. ³⁰Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Paul declared that this understanding of God as the Creator and the Ruler of His creation should correct their faulty faith and their sinful worship. True worship of God is not to be devised or shaped by fallen man’s imagination or efforts. The true God is to be worshipped in the manner that He has prescribed in His Word. Paul declared that God had formerly put up with this nonsense, but no longer. He declared that the resurrection of Jesus Christ brought a new and different way in which God addressed these ignorant ways to worship. He declared that now Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, people should be mindful of their most certain judgment before the Lord Jesus on the Day of Judgment that is most certainly coming upon the world.

Paul declared that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent.” To repent is to change your way of thinking and living in order to conform to God’s will. We initially repent of sin when we are converted to Jesus Christ. We then begin a life characterized by repentance as we are taught the Word of God and apply it to our lives. We are constantly repenting. We come to see in our thinking or living some error, some sinful attitude, or some sinful action. We acknowledge its sinfulness, and turn from it to the Lord, attempting by His grace to conform our thinking and living to His will.

Now in many places in the Bible, this command to repent is connected with faith (Cf. Mark 1:15). We are to believe the gospel and repent of our sins. But here the command to repent encompasses or includes faith in what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. And God the Father has enthroned Jesus as Lord, as King over the Kingdom of God. In the certain but indefinite future this Lord Jesus will summon the entire world to come before Him in judgment. The outcome of this judgment will be either salvation or damnation. God now “commands all men everywhere” to repent. He calls on me to repent of my sin. He calls upon you to repent of your sin. He calls on all people everywhere in all places to repent of their sins, even as they look for the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. All people everywhere are to be attentive to this matter, that there is a day that God has appointed of the general judgment of all mankind over which Jesus Christ will serve as Judge.

Paul wrote elsewhere warning his readers of the judgment to come.

⁵But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: ⁷eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; ⁸but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness-- indignation and wrath, ⁹tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; ¹⁰but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹For there is no partiality with God. (Rom. 2:5-11).

Paul declared that God “will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained” (Acts 17:31). What does it mean to judge the world “in righteousness”? It means that God has an objective standard by which He will administer justice according to the same standard to everyone. This standard of righteousness by which you and I will be scrutinized and examined on the final Day of Judgment is the law of

God, which is a reflection of His holy and righteous nature. Our lives will be judged by that standard of His law, including every word we have spoken, every thought that has coursed our minds, every attitude we have ever exhibited, every act that we have ever performed in this life. And we will be judged by His law. The outcome of this judgment is either damnation or salvation. Thanks be to the mercy and grace of God, the sins of true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will not condemn them on that day. Their faith in Jesus Christ exonerates them from God's condemnation, for Jesus Christ both paid their debt to God's justice when He died and His life of righteousness is credited to them through faith. Their works scrutinized will, nevertheless, determine the outcome of their judgment. Our works will either affirm that we were true believers in Jesus Christ in this life, or our works will reveal us to be hypocrites, Christians in name only, who will not inherit salvation.

True believers in Jesus Christ need not, nor should they fear the final judgment. We read of them in Hebrews that they have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who will deliver them from their sins on that day. We read of God's promise,

...now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. ²⁷And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, ²⁸so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Heb. 9:25)

We also affirm God's declaration,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. (Rom. 8:1f)

VI. The people react to Paul's declaration and reject his admonition. (Acts 17:32-34)

³²And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." ³³So Paul departed from among them. ³⁴However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

There were two responses to Paul's proclamation. Some mocked Paul in unbelief. A few, however, joined and "believed" what he had declared to them. Here we see that the command to repent in verse 30 included their faith also. They had repented of their sin and unbelief, having embraced Jesus Christ as their Lord.

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."
(Heb. 10:23).
