

# The Message that Turns the World Upside Down

## A Five Part Series from Acts 16 & 17

### Part IV – Declaring the Unknown God

(Acts 17:14-29)

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6/12/08

Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

#### I. Introduction ó

- A. This morning we will continue to examine ðThe Message that turns the world upside down.ö In speaking of the Gospel as weöve been considering it in the context of Acts 16 and 17 where Paul brings the Gospel to Macedonia (present day Greece) on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. Iöve titled this 4th segment, ðDeclaring the Unknown Godö for this inscription, “...***To the Unknown God...***” is that which Paul found upon an altar in Athens among all the other idols and altars erected there. And Paul uses this observation to segue or as a spring board to preach the Gospel to the Athenians on Mars Hill.
- B. We will examine much of this famous discourse wherein Paul reasoned with them concerning the folly of their religious notions (their idolatry no less). Specifically, we will consider Acts 17:14-29 with plans to address the conclusion of Paulø’s sermon on Mars Hill in more depth in the 5<sup>th</sup> and final part of this series.
- C. So our emphasis today will be a consideration of Godø’s description of the idolatry that was rampant in Athens at this time. And my objective is to help us to find therein how this description applies to all of us by nature, i.e. ó prior to God-given faith and repentance.
- D. So let us consider how God was unknown to you and to me, as He is initially unknown to everyone without exception ó for we all enter this physical world in spiritual darkness. And accordingly, letø’s examine whether the God Paul declares, the God which the Spirit reveals under this specific message of the Gospel that turns oneø’s world upside down ó Has this God been made known unto you? As our Lord prayed in John 17:3, ð***And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.***”
- E. And we canø’t honestly conclude that we know Him, unless it can be said of us as God said of the Thessalonians through Paulø’s letter to them, how they “...***turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.***” (I Thess. 1:9).
- F. Today we will pickup with Paulø’s departure from Berea and his arrival in the famous city of Athens. Athens was famous for its university and as a gathering place for philosophers and the well educated.

II. Exposition of Acts 17:14-21 ó I will comment on these verses as I read through them. (Read Text Acts 17:14-21 ó commenting as outlined below):

A. Verse 18: Notice they said that Paul õset forth strange godsö ó i.e. ó unlike the other gods that were worshipped in the city of Athens. And notice the reason ó it was that he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection. Now consider that Paul's one message (that he dare not deviate from) was Christ and Him crucified ó as He had written to the Corinthians, *õFor I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.ö* (I Cor. 2:2). And note that he had set forth in Thessalonica as recorded earlier in Acts 17:3 how that *“...Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead...”* Then we know that his message was specific in that it set forth the very righteousness which Christ established in His life and death and that therein is God revealed! In the conclusion to the sermon delivered on Mars Hill, he makes this clear that you must possess a righteousness that equals that of that one whom He raised from the dead.

B. Verses 19-21:

1. Areopagus & Mars hill refer to the same area (Ares = Mars). In any event, they were brought to this house of judgment at Mars hill, not to be legally tried as there had been no charge brought but to satisfy their natural curiosity.
2. Now consider that this õdoctrineö as it is called in verse 19, Paul's one message, õthe wordö of the Gospel, was *“...strange to their ears.”* And that is the case to all of us when we first consider the issue of how could a holy God be just and still save me, a sinner. It is strange for the scriptures make it clear that the way that seems right to us by nature is a way that ends in death. (Prov. 16:25). We, like the Philippian jailer, imagine we can do something to save ourselves and so the message of pure, sovereign grace is strange to our ears.

C. Reading of Acts 17:22-29 ó Part 1 of Paul's sermon: (Read through and then comment later)

1. Verse 22: õtoo superstitiousö means õtoo religiousö for their idols were everywhere. This reminds us that õidolatryö ultimately has to do with religion, not money as an idol, fame as an idol, etc. Paul is voicing the observation of the city that so troubled him ó how it was *...wholly given to idolatry* (vs. 16).
2. Verse 23 ó
  - (a) He starts where they are by commenting on their own altar with the inscription, *“TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”* Now Paul indicates that they worshipped this god, but in ignorance. I believe this to be reflective of the truth that most in our day worship a god that they attribute with many of the things that we naturally understand must be true of essential deity by definition. Many, like the Stoicks for example, believe in a god who created the world.

Verse 23 (Con't):

- (b) Even so, Romans 10:1-4 tells us that to be ignorant of what Christ accomplished (His righteousness) is to be lost. Many in our day who remain ignorant or not submitted to His righteousness as their only hope of salvation (i.e. ó who do not know God as He is truly revealed in the person and work of Christ), they do worship a god that they consider to be the creator, to be omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, etc.
- (c) And yet when it comes to where their hope lies for acceptance before this god ó what they truly are relying upon to eternally save them ó by implication, their doctrine actually stands in contradiction to these very attributes that they presume to attribute unto God ó things that nature itself reveals must be true of deity.
- (d) And so this unknown God is in reality one that religious men and women have contrived, an idol of their imagination that is in fact altogether different from the true and living God.
- (e) And so Paul begins where they are, in their admitted worship of an unknown god. They, like many today seemed to be covering their bases. So many imagine that we all worship the same God. Many imagine, ðIf you're interested in religion, you're okay.ö But just as Christ told the woman at the well in John 4, ð***Ye worship ye know not what.***”

### III. Verses 24-29 / Idolatry exposed by the light of nature itself

#### A. Verse 24: God is not bound by man.

- 1. God doesn't dwell within the bounds of man-made temples (or imaginations). I.e. ó This God that made the world can't be bound by man. He can't be limited to dwell in temples or places of man's design.
- 2. Here Paul expresses something of the infinity and immensity of an omnipresent God who cannot be bound or limited by man. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of how men falsely assume today that God is bound or limited is reflected in their worship of a God who cannot save (to use God's description of idolatry as given through the prophet Isaiah in Isa. 45:20). This describes the popular God of today's religion ó a God who cannot save, who is indeed limited unless you do your part, who actually needs your decision, your acceptance, your buy-in to presumably complete the deal and thereby merit a blessing of which one would have grounds for boasting in direct opposition to the glory of God in Christ.

#### B. Verse 25: “***...as though He needed anything...***”

- 1. Consider the contrast between the religion of grace (salvation conditioned on Christ alone) and the religion of works (salvation conditioned on the sinner). This verse shows that in worshipping the true God, men do not give anything to him that can be of any use or service ó for He is all sufficient and stands in need of nothing

Verse 25 (Con't):

The issue is not whether you will let Him enter your heart, etc., but rather how can a holy God accept me a sinner.

2. He is called ðEl Shaddaiö which translates to ðGod all sufficient.ö If God needed anything from you, He would not be all sufficient so all perfection would not be in him ó See how ludicrous, (even by the light of nature in consideration of essential Deity), it would be to imagine that God needs you to act to achieve His will!

C. Vs. 26a ó All born of Adam, “*...made of one blood...*” ó You wise philosophers, etc., you have nothing to offer God over anyone else. You (& I also says Paul) need an understanding of a God hitherto unknown to you.

D. Verse 26b: ðí *hath determined the times before appointed.*” This God of whom we read in Isaiah declares ðí *the end from the beginning*” (Isa. 46:10) has determined all things. God created time, and He providentially controls time or Heø not God at all.

E. Verse 26c: Man is bound by God.

1. He has determined the boundaries of your life ó of your lifespan on this earth. He determines the bounds of our habitation ó when we will live, where, how long, etc.
2. And He puts His people where you are today ó under the sound of His Gospel. Did you have anything to do with your own natural birth? You have no more to do with your own spiritual birth either.

F. We see here solid reasoning that should have caused us to turn from the false notions of a man-centered religion so typical of fallen humanity ó and yet we need Godø grace to reason aright, spiritually speaking.

G. Verse 27 ó And so, knowing all this ó

1. We should seek God as He is revealed. We have cause to and it is reasonable to do so. Heø given you physical life and appointed its time even now.
2. But notice that Paul adds “*...if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from everyone of us.*” Heø communicating that, ðeven you most wise ones cannot see Him apart from grace ó and you have nothing to offer, not even your learningö which he has shown to be flawed. And so we see it is impossible for men, by a mere contemplation of the perfections of God & the visible works of creation and providence, to find God.

Verse 27 (Con't.)

3. But what we do see here is that by the light of nature, men can and should know that there is a God and only one God who made all things. And thereby men should see the folly of their idols in contrast to this one creator. Thereby, we are indeed responsible to seek God as He is revealed.
4. And yet it is also suggested here how very dim and obscure the light of nature is since those who have nothing else to direct them are like persons who ðfeelö or grope in the dark after a god they cannot see. And after all their searching and groping, there is only a ðhaplyö (a peradventure, a may be) ó that they find him.
5. Though he is not far ó by His immensity and omnipresence but also by His very life supporting power and goodness in the blessings of providence. And oh ó today ó He is brought near in the gospel. (As God said in Isa 46).

H. Verse 28: His offspring by creation and soí

I. Verse 29: So then as such, we ought not to think He can be fashioned by us ó either as physical idols or by our own devices / including an idol of the imagination of our own fallen, sinful natural minds. (Turn to Isa 45 and quote 2 Cor. 10:4-5)

IV. Closing: Read Isa 45:21b-22. This is the God who is revealed by Jesus Christ and the resurrection which testifies that His work of righteousness is that by which all shall ultimately be judged. For thereby, based solely upon that righteousness, is the one true God revealed as both a just God and a Savior.

That is the God that is unknown to most of this world, but who also is the one Paul declared in this, his message that turns one's world so upside down ó so upside down as to cause born again sinners to heed the command to repent given in the conclusion of Paul's sermon in vs. 30.

As God said through the prophet Isaiah ó look unto Him, a just God and a Savior, and be ye saved. May God grant you the mercy and grace and draw you to look unto Him as He is uniquely revealed in Christ's Person and work, so that you too may behold Him ó the God who is initially unknown to all of us. Look unto Him ó a just God and a Savior.

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself ó the Bible.

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