

May 29, 2011  
Easter 6

*"Showing Skeptics the Greatness of Our God"*

### **ACTS 17:22-31**

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**P**aul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image made by man's design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

A few weeks ago, someone sent me an e-mail that had a link to Carrie Underwood singing "How Great Thou Art." She was accompanied by Vince Gill on the guitar. Her voice soared as she gave glory to God for his greatness in creation and his grace in saving us. By the end of the performance tears were in her eyes. The camera showed people in the audience totally taken in by her performance. They had an opportunity to hear about the glory and grace of God from the voice of a talented artist.

In the words we have just read we see the Apostle Paul standing up before skeptical philosophers in Athens and talking to them about the glory and the grace of the one true God. We can learn from the way Paul spoke to these heathen skeptics. The Holy Spirit is with us to speak the truth in love to the people of our generation who are skeptical about religion and God's love for them.

Have you ever run into someone who is very skeptical about believing in the Lord or coming to worship him? Sure you have. "I don't want to come to church because the church is full of hypocrites." "I don't want to come to church because all they want is my money." "I have my own view of God and I don't want someone telling me what I should believe." Let's see how Paul showed the skeptics in Athens the greatness of our God.

#### **Point to the glory of God**

"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see

that in every way you are very religious.” When Paul walked through the city he was greatly distressed by the large number of idols to false gods. Today, we are amazed at how religious people are in our land. They may not have idols in their homes made by human hands, but they have their own ideas of God made by human minds and hearts. In his book, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah describes an interview with a very religious woman named Sheila. She said, “I believe in God. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It is ‘Sheilatism.’ Just my own little voice.” On a recent morning drive radio broadcast an economist commented on how successful companies learn how to tap into the feelings and of people who are working for them because we are a very spiritual society. People are spiritual but they want God on their terms just as the Greeks had their different idols for their gods.

In his walk through Athens Paul noticed that the Greeks even had an altar with the inscription: “To an Unknown God.” Can’t you hear the Greeks saying: “Maybe we missed a god. Let’s put up an altar to the unknown God just in case we missed one.” They made sure all their bases were covered. Paul uses this as a bridge to talk to these people about the one true God. “Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.” Notice how he starts talking to people where they were at. He shows that he understands their desire to be religious. He shows he cares about them. How important it is for us to listen to people first and hear their story and then step in to show them the glory and grace of the one true God.

Paul is not ashamed to share the glory of the true God. “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by hands.” God is not some nebulous creature called Mother Nature. Our world did not evolve by chance. Our God is the Lord who made heaven and earth. We are privileged to talk about the Lord by describing the glory of his creation whether it is the vastness of the universe or the complexity of so called simple cell. In his book, “The Language of God” Francis Collins who headed up the Genome Project describes how he went from being a skeptic and agnostic to believing in a designer by what he saw in the complexity of the human cell especially the DNA.

The God who created the universe does not live in temples made by human hands. He is an awesome God. He fills the universe in which we live. He is with us right now as we worship and he is with us when we sit down to lunch in our homes. The Psalmist said, “Our God is in the heavens, he does whatever he pleases.” How different this true God is from the hand-made idols of the Greeks or the gods that people develop today in their human minds and hearts. Romans 1 says: “They worship created things rather than the creator.”

The Greeks believed they could receive blessings from their gods by serving them and worshipping at altars designed for their gods. Paul says of the true God: “And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men, life and breath and everything else.” If you were to visit Athens today you can still see the famous Parthenon, a temple to honor the gods of ancient Greece. God is not like a chicken that you feed to get eggs or a cow that you feed to get milk or a dog that you walk to keep it happy. This is a very small view of God. Our God is the one who gives life to people. People do not give life to God.

Here is how the prophet Jeremiah describes the foolishness of those who worship gods they create with their own hands or in their own minds. "For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree from the forest, and craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; for they can do no harm nor can they do any good" (Jeremiah 10:5)

Before you become too critical of these Greeks for their small view of God, think of how often we fail to see how great our God is. We sing, "How Great Thou Art" on Sunday but then fall back in trusting our own resources and strength instead of in the Lord. In Psalm 46 we confess, "God is our Refuge and Strength an ever present help in time of trouble," but then we forget what a great Refuge our God is. The Lord speaks to us in this psalm and tells us, "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Our God is full of glory because he creates the world. He also very personally involved in our lives. I have in my library a very interesting book by Francis Shaffer with the title, "The God Who Is There." The God who created us is not far off and distant and unconcerned about people as often was the case with the gods of the ancient Greeks. Notice now how Paul shows that the true God wants to be close to people and love them.

### **Point to the grace of God**

"From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps find him, though he is not far from each of us. For in him we live and move and have our being as some of your poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" The true God formed man from the dust of the ground. The true God brings new human beings into the world through the act of conception and birth. The true God determines the times and places for people to live. Our God is not passive. He is actively involved in our lives. Again I quote from Psalm 46 "He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire." God wants people to reach out to him and find him. He wants them to come to see how they can be his offspring and dear children through the gift of Jesus his Son.

This past week I was reading from Isaiah 55 and was impressed at how this chapter tells us how much God wants to reach out to people and save them. Listen to how Isaiah pleads with the whole human race to seek the Lord while we still have the time. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord for he will have mercy on him." God is there working in the lives of people to bring them to his mercy, his unfailing life and compassion. That's a message of hope that we are privileged to share with people.

Yes, we have a message of hope for the world. The Lord our God gives people a certain time of grace in which to repent and turn to him. Paul tells the Greeks, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." When it says that God overlooked such ignorance it does not mean that God will let some people

escape the judgment to come. God overlooks such ignorance by postponing judgment day or even their day of death to give people more opportunities to believe. He wants everyone to sing with Carrie Underwood and with us, And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in, That on the cross my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin." God heard the prayers of the people who died this past week in the deafening roar of the tornadoes. He heard the prayers of those who prayed and confessed, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Because Paul loved these people, he had to tell them the truth about judgment day. "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." God has set the day when he will judge the world. He has not revealed this time to us, even though there are some who claim that judgment day is coming October 21. God knows also how many heart beats of time you have left in this life. The world desperately needs to know that judgment day is coming and it is real and it will involve all people. Then Paul drops the bombshell. "He has given proof to all men by raising him from the dead." When they heard about Jesus rising from the dead they laughed and sneered. The resurrection of Jesus does that to people. Either it becomes the rock upon which they build their faith or it becomes a rock that crushes them as they laugh and walk away.

Lord, grant us the Holy Spirit to not just sing, "How Great Thou Art" but to also bear witness to this fact by showing people the greatness of God that created them and the grace of God that saved them. Amen.