

Easter 6
May 21, 2017

"Let the Skeptics Know How Great Our God Is"

ACTS 17:22-31

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. ²³ 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. ²⁴ "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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹ "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. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ 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.

For people who know how the true God is it was a great moment in country music. Carrie Underwood came on the stage in 2011 joined by Vince Gill to sing "How Great Thou Art." By the end of the performance there were tears in her eyes as she powerfully sang with everything she had, "How great thou art." Even the skeptics in the audience stood to applaud her amazing performance. Carrie Underwood gave a powerful witness to the greatness of her God, the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So it was with the Apostle Paul standing on the Areopagus in ancient Athens. Surrounded by skeptics who had half-hearted beliefs in multiple gods he gave a powerful witness to the greatness of the one true God. He powerfully proclaimed the truths that this one true God created the world in which we live, this one true God cares about people, and this true God will judge the world by his Son whom he raised from the dead.

How could Paul be so bold in his Christian faith? You know the answer to that question. Jesus promised to give his disciples the Holy Spirit, and Jesus kept that promise to Paul and he will keep his promise also to us. We don't have to be afraid to stand up to the skeptics and talk to them about the greatness of our true God.

Our God created the heavens and the earth

"Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.'" There were objects of worship everywhere in Athens, statues of gods, altars, shrines to gods. Overlooking the whole city was the great Parthenon, the temple to the goddess Athena. There was even an altar with the inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. A historian

later said there were more gods in Athens than there were men.

These people were very religious but their religion was a belief in many different gods whom they did not take very seriously. Read the mythology of the Greek gods and you will find their gods often interacted with human beings and with each other in capricious ways. The stories abounded with gods tricking other gods. More powerful than the gods were the Fates or luck or chance. Yet as shallow as these gods were, Socrates was put to death by being forced to drink hemlock 400 years before because he did not support belief in the gods.

Earlier in this chapter it says the Apostle Paul was greatly distressed to see the city was full of idols. He is moved to stand up and speak about the true God because he wanted these people to come to the forgiveness and peace and hope of everlasting life that can be found only in Jesus our Savior. That's the way it is when you love people and you want to see them in heaven with you even though they have their own strange views of God and what he expects of them.

Perhaps you have encountered people who have created their own views of God that are so far removed from the true God you have come to see revealed to you in his Word. I have heard people describe God as "the man upstairs." I have seen a movie where he is called, "The Force." A woman named Sheila described her god in this way: "I have not gone to church in years, I have my own little god inside of me and I call it 'Sheilism.'" Another person says, "I don't have to worship God in church on Sunday. I can find him in the mountains and on the beach." And yes you have run into people who believe in luck. You have heard people say, "I can thank my lucky stars." And still others refer to some powerful force that made the wonders of our world as "Mother Nature."

The true God is not a god that is fashioned by human hands or created in the minds of people. He is the creator of the universe. Paul told the skeptics in Athens, "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 human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives life to all men and breath and everything else." And so we sing, "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, Consider all the works thy hands have made." The evolutionists tells us we are just chance configurations of atoms in the slipstream of the universe. We share our convictions with each other that God created the heavens and the earth. We also look for opportunities to boldly confess these skeptics in our community, in our circle of friends, and in our families.

It is hard to imagine a highly intellectual city such as Athens where people offer their little gifts to different shrines and statues and altars throughout the city to support their gods and to receive help from them. But then we travel to places like the Silicon Valley or Washington DC or Hollywood and ask what kind of gods have people made for themselves in their minds. Cosmologist Stephen Hawkins recently talked to students at Cambridge University and shocked the scientific community with somewhat obscure references to intelligent design even though he claims to be an atheist. He recently said, that there was a God-like force that played a role in the creation of our Universe, approximately 13.8 million years ago.

I wish that I could wake up every morning and sing with passion and conviction, "How great thou art!" All too often our sinful human flesh leads us to doubt how great our God is in providing for all our needs and in working out everything for our good as promised to us in Romans chapter 8. Oh how we love to hear the words from our God in Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." We trust this promise and then we falter. We find ourselves praying as the man did who came to Jesus for help, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." Over and over again our God, the true God, reminds us he is the one who created the heavens and the earth. And he is the one who is control of our lives. Thank God I am not bringing offerings to some strange God in on the streets

of Athens or forming my own view of God in the as I sit in my home here on the Central Coast of California.

Our God personally loves people

Paul has more to say to the skeptics in Athens. "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." The true God is not some god with the name of Zeus or Aries or Poseidon or Athena who doesn't really get that involved in the lives of people. The true God made the first human beings. He watches over the lives of people directing their affairs throughout the world. Psalm 46 says, "He breaks the bow and shatters the spear and burns the shields with fire." He allows people to experience wars, and earthquakes and even personal illnesses so that they will seek after him. Stephen Hawking is being deeply affected by the near death experience of his much loved brother.

What does the true God want for all people? Paul says, "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 of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." It is only in God, the true God, that we can find life, that we can live in him. He wants people everywhere to find that eternal life that can only be found in him and in his plan to rescue them.

Carry Underwood was not ashamed to sing the verse, "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 sharing, He bled and died to take away my sin." Paul was not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for he knew it was the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. He told the people of Corinth, "For I was resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Our God, our awesome God has given us the privilege of carrying in our hearts and on our lips these words from Jesus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Someone once asked me, "Do think if I was the only person in the whole world that ever sinned would God have sent his Son to die just for me?" Knowing how great the love of our God is, I believe that God would personally do that just for me.

Our God will come to judge all people

Paul pleaded with the people of Athens to repent of their sin before it was too late. He told them not to think of God as an object of gold or silver or stone. Such a view of God is way too small. God puts up with the foolishness of people in their vain idolatry, but only for so long. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." It wasn't just the people of Athens who needed to repent and change their thoughts about God. It was the people of Corinth and Rome and the far corners of the world. He wants all people everywhere to repent. Jesus told his disciples he would give them the Holy Spirit to help them witness to him "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the world." The people of India who have more gods than the people Athens need to repent. The people in this community who have their own little god inside of themselves need to repent and see the true God before it is too late.

Paul gave a bold witness to the judgment that was coming. "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof to all men by raising him from the dead." There is a day coming when people will be raised to life again and they will have to stand before God for their sins. Justice will be served. It will be served by someone who died and was raised to life again. That person is God's Son.

I have been privileged to serve as a pastor in the ministry for over forty years of my life. Looking back I wish I had been more like Paul and the early Christians in the way they witnessed to Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Paul didn't say, "The Greeks will laugh at me if I witness to Jesus resurrection from the dead." For the rest of their lives these skeptics would recall that day on the Aereopagus when a man named Paul told them to repent and turn to the true God because they would be a judged by a man whom God raised from the dead. Carrie Underwood witnessed to the judgment to come when she powerfully sang to the crowd as it stood on its feet: "When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation, And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow, in humble adoration, And then proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art!" Amen.