

READ Acts 17:16-21

When visiting a new city for the first time, it isn't unusual for anyone to take some time simply walking around the city while taking in the sights and sounds of this new place. This is especially true for larger cities such as Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, or even Knoxville here in Tennessee. In each of those cities, it wouldn't take long for a person to quickly catch a vibe concerning what these cities are all about. Seeing musical murals, music stores, honky-tonks, and an endless number of southern restaurants of all sort would quickly clue anyone into the fact that Nashville is deep into country music and good southern cooking. Much of the same could be said of Memphis from a Blues and BBQ perspective. In Chattanooga a person would quickly see the emphasis up on nature and enjoying the great outdoors, and Knoxville's downtown area screams of its college town vibes. The same could be said for cities across this country, and it could even be said of cities during ancient times.

The example we have before us is that of Paul during his time spent in Athens. As Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy to meet him in this famous ancient city, Paul quickly realizes what Athens is all about, and it is all about idolatry. One writer even offers the translation describing what Paul saw as a "veritable forrest of idols" (Whycherley). Just as we would probably partake in the music, food, and culture of cities we might visit today, so does Paul immerse himself into the idolatry, but he doesn't do so to participate. No, instead we find the Apostle seeking to reason with Jews, God-worshippers, and anyone who would listen concerning Jesus and the resurrection.

This teaching of Paul's concerning Jesus and the resurrection quickly caught the attention of those gathered together. They were unfamiliar with this teaching, so they bring Paul into the middle of the Areopagus where he is set up to testify concerning this "*new teaching*" he was espousing. Yet, Paul isn't interested in presenting something new to those who were gathered. In fact, he is going to speak to them concerning something they knew but did not know at the same time. He is going to introduce them to the Unknown God, and he is going to persuasively and logically reason with them concerning His necessary nature and how they ought to respond to such truths.

This year we are taking a closer look at God and seeking to know Him, who He is, His divine nature, what He has done for us, and what He expects for us as His people. One of the most important and yet most difficult characteristics of God for us to know is that of His necessary nature. By necessary nature I mean His independent and non-contingent (Shane Scott) nature. I believe the Apostle Paul does a tremendous job in arguing for such on God's behalf from this text, so I would like for us to use our time of study this morning in examining what we have here and what it leads us to know concerning God's necessary nature and the impact it ought to have on us.

Paul's Areopagus Address (Acts 17:22-34)**A. "extremely religious in every respect" (vv.22,23)**

1. As Paul launches into this incredibly well argued speech, I want us to take a deeper look into why Paul claims Athens as a religious city and how he even arrived at the opportunity to speak as he is. To begin with, the presence of idols of many different materials, shapes, and forms is the most obvious evidence for such religiosity in Athens. Though by Paul's time Athens was not as political power it once was, the city still served as an important center for learning, and it served as museum of sorts for what was Greek culture in decades and centuries past. (Witherington *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 513) Religion and philosophy were staples of the Greek culture, and this continued emphasis in Athens is seen in the presence of Epicurean & Stoic philosophers who approached Paul to debate concerning what he was teaching.

2. The Epicureans were followers of the teachings of Epicurus who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries BC. He was a man whose beliefs were founded upon the materialist atomic theory of which Democritus was one of the earliest philosophers to hold to such. This is important to recognize because the view of the Epicureans concerning the Greek pantheon of gods, represented by the idols in Athens, would say that even they were material in nature. (Witherington 514) The Stoics were also materialists as they believed that the essence of God and the soul were made up of atomic matter. (Witherington, p. 514)
3. This type of thought is also seen in the writing of a man named Cicero who lived just a generation before the birth of Christ. He contented that *“the notion of a god without a body is incomprehensible, for a bodiless deity would of necessity lack sensation, and also wisdom and pleasure, all of these things are comprised in our conception of deity.”* (*The Nature of the Gods* 1.12) If everything that exists, even the gods, had bodies...then what would happen after death? Some ancient Greek teachings held that there was an afterlife as is portrayed in the *Odyssey* where Home speaks of the semi-conscious souls who simply drifted around in the underworld. Many saw the worst of living conditions in life as being better than such an existence. (Bell *Exploring the New Testament World*, p. 126) Others, the Stoics included, did not believe in an existence following death which is at least consistent with the belief that everything in existence is comprised of living matter.
4. All of these background understandings of the religious belief of those in Athens helps us to understand why they took such issue with Paul introducing *“foreign deities”* (**Acts 17:18**) and new teachings such as the resurrection. History tells us just how serious they took such a thing as it recorded that even the famed philosopher Socrates was put on trial and eventually killed for not giving proper respect to the gods of Athens and leading the youth astray with strange teachings. With this being understood in history, it might be no surprise that Luke would record this event in such a way that the trial of Socrates would be brought to the minds of the ancient recipients of this text. Here is a Socratic-type figure who also speaks against the gods of Athens and introduces a new but not new god to the people. We might think on the surface that Paul is being kindly escorted to this place where he can share this teaching with purely curious ears, but instead we might do better to imagine this as being a situation, like others in Acts, where Paul is forcefully ushered to give an account for what he has been teaching publicly. It stands to reason that Paul is therefore brought to this area, the Areopagus, to stand before a council and the present crowd in order to present an initial hearing of his *“new teaching.”* (**17:19**)

B. “as though He needed anything” (vv.24,25,29)

1. What therefore does Paul speak of as he stands before this gathered audience? We’ve already seen that he notes their religiosity and some of the background information that comes from it, but we want to now key in on what he focuses in on which is the *“Unknown God”* for whom an altar had been built and dedicated. (**17:23**) It seems Athenians had worshipped this Unknown God to some degree, but Paul says that such worship was done in ignorance for they were worshipping a what without knowing the who it was that they worshipped (Polhill, Acts, p. 372), and it was necessary for him to make known the truth concerning this Unknown God.
2. Paul’s first major point consists of the claim that it is this God who is responsible for *“the world and everything in it — He is Lord of heaven and earth...”* (**17:24**) This very Jewish concept of the existence of heaven and earth or the seen and unseen is the foundation for everything that will follow in Paul’s address at the Areopagus. Paul has been looking around at all of these material idols, but he wants those listening to recognize that even they are only made possible for the One who brought matter into existence. How silly for them to then think that He could truly be contained in a shrine or an idol.

3. This is precisely one of the key issues with idolatry, and it gets to the logical reason why it is blasphemous for God to be depicted in a created image when He himself is the only reason that image is even possible. The uncreated God cannot be contained within a created image, and Paul even goes so far as to say that He has absolutely zero need for such to exist. He does not need, is not dependent, and is not contingent on the presence of a material idol, image, or statue. In fact, the essence of who He is cannot even begin to be contained or expressed in that which is material because He himself is immaterial. This conclusion is further emphasized by what Paul states in **17:29**, *"we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination."* He exists outside and apart from that which He created. Paul firmly claims this Unknown God as being the source for all of creation and in need of nothing from the creation itself. He gives everything that is needed for the existence of the creation without needing anything at all in return.

C. "For in Him we live..." (vv.26-28,30,31)

1. Paul expounds upon these claims for God as the source of all things by stating that He is the one who has brought about the proliferation of mankind through one man or one blood that He bought into existence. The obvious allusion of Paul is that to **Genesis 1 & 2** and the creation story of Adam. This again would go against the beliefs of the Athenians who claimed their origin could be traced back to the soil of their own land of Attica (Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, p.382) Yet, Paul makes the strong claim that not only is God the source of all humanity, but He is also sovereign over the affairs of mankind towards the purpose of causing men to seek Him out as the Creator God. His plan for such an outcome is certainly playing out in this moment as Paul is informing them about the Unknown God they desired to worship.
2. Thus we can see Paul's contention that the God who created all of humankind and appointed their times and places of living (possible Tower of Babel reference) is now desiring to bring all of humanity back together unto Himself. (Witherington, p. 527) Therefore, He is not far from mankind, but He is near to mankind in His desire for them to seek, find, and serve Him. He is not only giving us everything we need to live, as Paul says even your own poets would claim (**17:28**), but He also gives that which leads to seeking out and finding Him. The Stoics would claim that nature is the most obvious evidence for a Creator (Witherington, p. 528), but nature alone wouldn't lead mankind to a knowledge of the Unknown God Paul is now making known.
3. In fact, what we see as being the current state of mankind in their search for God is a reaching out which more than likely should be understood as being akin to the groping of a visually impaired person or a person in the dark fumbling around. This paints a not so great picture for mankind and is Paul's way of showing the predicament the Athenians and others found themselves in. Though God is near them and desiring to be found, they have not done such because the natural revelation of God isn't enough to securely find Him. Add on top of that the understanding that God is not like humankind in being material in nature, and we're seeing exactly the type of problem these people were facing. They were in the depths of the times of ignorance that God had once overlooked, but now such ignorance was not going to be overlooked because of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel.
4. This Christological revelation of God's will for mankind to be reunited within His family through Christ was now demanding that all people should repent because this Christ would also come and judge the world. The proof of such was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to ascend to His heavenly throne alongside the Unknown God who has now made Himself known in a way unlike ever before through Jesus the Christ. Though He could have still be known through prior revelations in nature or through Israel and the Law, God was now making Himself known in the fullest sense since the Garden of Eden.

D. "When they heard about the resurrection..." (vv.32-34)

1. Yet, this incredible opportunity to know the one true God of creation was disregarded by some who were gathered there because it was made on the basis of the resurrection. No one should be surprised in these particular people mocking and ridiculing the idea of the resurrection since Apollo taught as the founding of the Areopagus, "When the dust has soaked up a person's blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection" (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* p.647,648) This traditional teaching along with the teachings of the Epicureans and Stoics all but guaranteed such a response from many of those gathered on this occasion.
2. Yet, we also see a response that might have left the door open for more discussion down the road as some said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." Could this be genuine interest even if they were not convinced at this moment? That could be the case, but it is also possible that this was more of a dismissive and sarcastic response being closer to the meaning of, "enough for now, perhaps another time" (Witherington, p.532)
3. However, we fortunately do see a third group of people emerge from his polarizing speech. There were some who ended up joining Paul in belief upon God, Jesus as the Christ, and the resurrection. "*Dionysium the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them*" (17:34) are all said to have been persuaded by what Paul said. Both ends of the spectrum are shown to be impacted by Paul's message. Literally from the most respected in the community, an Areopagite, to the least, a woman, the Gospel took root and faith was accomplished and acted upon. Yet, let's recognize that though many, probably most, rejected what Paul was offering, those seeds of the Gospel had been planted, and we do not know what fruit of faith might have been produced later at the watering of another disciple and increase given by God. Whether or not they were willing to accept what was spoken, every person gathered on that day now knew of the incomparable nature of the Unknown God. He stands wholly apart from the idols of the city as the only necessary, independent, and non-contingent God.

From this text, we come to know about God:

1. He simply is.

- a) This statement is where the rubber meets the road in regard to God's necessary nature, and it begins to take shape by what Paul states in the middle of the Areopagus. By stating that God does not live in shrines made by hands and is not in need of being served by human hands, Paul is making the claim that the God he is proclaiming is completely independent and necessary in nature. This is set apart from the reality of the Greek gods who would not be known in anyway if it were not for their shrines or the worship offered to them. Their reality is completely supported by these things which themselves are made or done by humans hands, but the same isn't true for the God whose natural creation itself is a testimony to His existence. Last week we considered **Romans 1:18-23** to support this idea, but we could also look to such a text as **Psalm 19:1-6** as evidence for such.
- b) Yet, we have so many today who give such great effort to deny the existence of such an independent and necessary being which only leads to issues when trying to explain why we are even here in existence ourselves. For decades those who are leading within the scientific community have held to the notion that everything we know just happened to come from a random ball of matter that just happened to explode 13.8 billion years ago. But even such a theory fails in upholding the very laws of physics and thermodynamics that are promoted by the same individuals. Such inconsistencies are sought to be worked around by some such as Stephen Hawking who would claim that matter is simply eternal and uncreated which itself continues to violate what we know about matter and the natural world.

c) What is the solution to these dilemmas? Though it takes faith in that which is not seen though is believed based upon evidence of what is seen (**Hebrews 11:1**) by contention is the existence of a God who is Himself not material and therefore not in need of something to bring about His existence. He simply is and therefore has the power and ability to bring about the creation of all that is. Science can't explain it and idols can rival it, but from what Paul says in this text, we have to take it up on faith that He simply is.

2. We are only because of Him.

a) If we're willing to acknowledge and accept the notion of God simply being, then we should be able to work logically to Paul's next point that we only are because of Him. We are a part of the natural material world that He created and set in motion in the beginning as is laid out for us in **Genesis 1 & 2**. Unlike God, we would not be if it were not for Him causing us to be from the beginning. We would not be if He did not sustain us by providing us with everything that we need in order to survive.

b) While there are many things that separate us from being like God, there is possibly nothing more fundamental than this. We are because of Him, but He simply is. I know it can cause our minds to spin and heads to hurt simply thinking of such a truth, but it is something we must acknowledge and be appreciative for towards Him. We might like to think that we are where we are because of what we have done for ourselves, but in truth we would not even be at all if it were not for God causing such to be reality.

3. We will continue on only because of Him.

a) Yet as we noted within the text, God created us and designed our existence in such a way that we would be able to recognize His presence through the natural revelation which would lead us to pursue Him. However, we know that the evil one has been hard at work doing everything he can to lead us away from God and a recognition of our dependance upon Him. In fact, we can clearly see in the beginning that the temptation of the serpent was to get mankind to think that we could be great without depending upon God (**Genesis 3:1-7**). He led the woman to think that God was only hindering her from her full potential, and thus she sought to be all that she could be without Him. This of course was foolishness for even that which would supposedly make her like God was itself created by Him.

b) Such issues of rebellion continue to plague mankind even today as we think that we can be everything we can be apart from Him. We fail to reach out and find Him, and yet as Paul says in Athens, those times of ignorance He has overlooked are no more being overlooked. He is holding everyone person accountable for their own rebellion. However, we again see our dependance upon Him by recognizing that He alone has made a way for us to live on beyond the grave through repentance and turning from self to Him. We are only here because of Him, and we will only continue on into eternal life because of Him.

Main Point/Conclusion: *In every way we are fully dependent on the totally independent God. In Him alone can we have life now and forevermore.*

Just as there were so many who did not know the God of creation, so are there so many who fail to know Him. But possibly even more sad and disappointing is the reality that there are many who claim to know Him who fail to totally depend on Him or who believe He depends on them. Such foolishness and pride will only lead to disappointment and destruction. May we learn from Paul's strong teaching in Athens to not only know the necessary God, but to devote ourselves fully to depending upon Him for all things that pertain to this life and eternity. He'll be there in eternity regardless, the only contingent matter is whether or not we will live and reign with Him as a part of His people.