

The Knowable God
Acts 17:16-34

Hebrews 3

Hebrews 4

Responsive Psalm 24

This morning we are going to be looking at the final account written here in chapter 17. If you remember from last week we talked about how the structure of Luke's writing of these accounts here in this chapter sort of sets up bookends, showing the reader a range of reactions of the gospel. From one being extremely harsh, and violent, to another being resistant, yet open, and willing to learn, to this one we find here in Athens of an acceptance of all gods, a group that is so open that they likely didn't really stand for much of anything. Last week we talked about the Bereans, and how their reactions really is the christian model for faith and belief. By that I mean, when we are faced with some doctrinal differences, or claims to some biblical truth, that we must rely upon scripture for discernment. We must let scripture itself guide us in finding what is true as we wrestle with various doctrines and beliefs.

Far too often it seems that the Christian community is quick to take teachers and preachers at their word, but those who preach the gospel, and teach the bible are also flawed human beings. And though they may have every good intention, could very well be off base when it comes to their understanding of scripture. Not all false teaching can be nefarious, indeed some is out of ignorance, but I argue, if one is standing before the church and preaching the word of God, they ought not be ignorant to the things of God. And that is why it is important to have an understanding like the Bereans, to be willing and able to test what we hear, to what scripture says. Ultimately it is you that must do this work, to dive into scripture to see what it teaches, so that your belief is not built on what others tell you, but upon the solid rock of the word of God.

This is why it is so important to be in the word, to have a good grasp of it, for in doing so it will guard and protect you against false teachers and false ideas, for the more that you are familiar with the word of God, the quicker you will recognize when something you are hearing is out of place. This is a personal responsibility of each and every christian, we are responsible for our own belief...by that I mean, we must not solely rely on the teachers and ideas of others but must be diligent in reading the bible so that we are not lead astray. I think honestly this is one of the biggest issues in the Christian community today. While there is nothing wrong with having a high regard, or respect to those who stand to minister the gospel, we must be careful that we do not fall to idolizing them. Again looking at the Bereans...the Apostle Paul, one could argue probably one of the greatest and most influential ministers of the gospel....yet the Bereans said.. hmm, let us see if what he is saying is true. It is healthy to have a level of skepticism, but to not let that skepticism become stubbornness and arrogance.

I am pressing this point this morning because I want to point out the importance of personal, individual dedication to the word of God. For the bible is the foundation upon which we stand, the word of God is the final arbiter of truth, and without having a solid foot set upon a solid understanding of the word then we are in danger of being tossed around by various doctrines, taken advantage of by various false teachers, or at the very least..being hindered in our faith and growth due to the lack of understanding God. Our spiritual growth and understanding is our own responsibility...by that I mean, we must grow in our understanding and faith by personal time spent in prayer and in the reading of God's word, and not just rely upon teachers and preachers to do it for you. For by doing so, you open yourself up to being potentially deceived, or at the very least limited and stunted in your personal growth.

Remember Paul's chastisement of the Hebrews? Chapter 5, verse 12. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the simple and basic things of God and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness for he is still a babe. But Solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." We should not be an ignorant people, who are deceived, or taken to chasing various beliefs. As Christians who have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we ought to have a hunger and a desire to know more, to grow more, to understand more. This Christian walk doesn't just stop after the new birth, much like life itself we are to grow, mature, and age within this faith. Having our foundation firmly set upon the word of God. And you will find, as you grow in this faith and understanding of God, you will come to know more and more of what it is to rest in him. The anxieties, and unknowns of this life pale in comparison to his our rest in his Sovereign provided mercies, the more we grow to trust upon his mercy and grace, the greater the peace we will have.

So, we have now looked 2 of the 3 different examples that have been set up for us by Luke here in chapter 17, the arrogant and prideful hard hearted Thessalonians, the skeptical yet dedicated to the truth Bereans, and now this morning we will be looking at a bit more dept into the Athenians. But before we start, let us read our passage starting in verse 16, and reading to the end of the chapter.

So now we find Paul in Athens.. having been sent away by the brethren in Berea for the Jews from Thessalonica had sent men to stir up problems there as well, with the express purpose to cause problems for Paul, but Timothy and Silas remained in Berea for a time, I think the reason for this was because of the urgency behind the need to get Paul out of the city, before these men from Thessalonica found him. So we have Paul, now in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive, and he observes that the city was as verse 16 says, "given over to idols." Paul was inspired by the spirit to preach against the common practice of idol worship and to instead point people to the resurrected Christ. And he did so in the marketplace and in the synagogue reaching out to a wide variety of people who lived in the city. And this brought the attention of two of the major philosophical schools of thought there in Athens. The Stoics, and the Epicureans.

The Epicureans were known for their pursuit of happiness and contentment through detachment from social competition and a denial of divine interference in human affairs, especially the idea of any divine judgment. They believed in many gods, but argued in a deistic fashion, that is to say that the gods took little to know interest into the affairs of mankind and every day life. Consequently they were quite critical of any religion that would localize any gods in temples. As Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun" This sort of sounds like our society today whose every thought is entertainment and self indulgence. Being concerned about our own personal happiness even at the cost of others. It is a very narcissistic way to view the world, that all things exist for your own pleasure and desire.

Then we also had the Stoics, who believed that the human race was one, proceeding from a single point of origin. Through logic and discipline, they sought to live in harmony with the natural order, which they believed was permeated by a rational divine principle. They were essentially pantheistic and thought of the divine being as the World-Soul. Elevating logical thought, and nature to a point of worship. These two different groups were essentially the popular Greek alternatives for dealing with the plight of humanity, in a way trying to find purpose and meaning in an otherwise meaningless world. Understanding these two groups that Paul was engaging with helps us to understand his preaching to them.

It would seem that on some level he starts out showing how there are similarities...he appeals to the Epicureans in stating that God does not dwell in temples, nor does he need the service of man's hands, for he has made the world and all that is in it. He does not need mankind to bring him food, and sacrifices as was accustomed to idol worship, for he is needing of nothing since it is he who gives even the very life and breath to all things. . The Epicureans believing that the gods were unattached to mankind, had no need of mankind, and were not confined to temples would seem to suggest that Paul was appealing to them with this statement. Then in verse 26, he appeals to the Stoics, believing that all of humanity has come from one source, Paul says "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 boundaries of their dwellings. So you have these 2 groups, in the middle of this city that is steeped in idolatry, even to the point of having an idol to an unknown God.. and Paul has taken the core beliefs of these 2 philosophical groups to point out the divine nature, and truth of the one true God.

And while Luke informs us the readers that the mindset of the Athenians was to debate and argue over new things, that does not mean that they were not hostile, or closed minded in their own ways. In referring to Paul and his teaching in the marketplace and synagogues they had little respect for him, it is not as one might think that they saw him as a scholar, or even a wise man and sought to learn and know more from him....it would seem to me that they originally brought them to their midst likely to sort of ridicule and by argument prove him wrong. WE get a sense of this in verse 18 as we see their response..."What in the world is this babbling saying!" The word that we see translated as babbling, was a term used to describe the seed-eating and scavenging of birds.. which quite literally meant, picking up seeds. It was metaphorically, as in insult applied to people who would obtain scraps of information from others and then take them and claim them as their own.

So in short, by the use of this term they were accusing Paul of being an ignorant plagiarist and a religious charlatan. To put it in a modern term, it would be like a journalist who hasn't done any of his own research but instead just regurgitates what he has been told by others and presents it as his own opinion and fact having little to no true understanding behind his words. This was not a group who was truly open to hearing what he had to say.. but rather they were curious.. but saw Paul as foolish, and probably a bit crazy. So as we see in Paul's discourse here at the Areopagus is that he starts out with some common ground, but all the while pointing to the gospel, to Christ the resurrection. He basically meets them where they are at, and builds upon their understanding of who or what a God truly is and then points to this one who is unknown to them, as being the only one and true God.

As we can see by the engraving on one of their idols, they are a people who worship without knowing who it is they are worshiping. These are a people who hold themselves up as wise, as philosophers, and great thinkers...yet they worship without knowing, Paul brings this up by calling the past as a time of ignorance, a time where they were unaware of the one true God...but now that they know, there is a call to repentance and belief. There is even a sense of this today even within the church itself. There is a push back to the idea of the necessity of theology and doctrine, and a desire to not know anything about Christ, but rather to just have an emotional response, and a feeling about him. As Jim said last week, true worship of God comes out of a knowledge of knowing him more, seeing him more, trusting him more. A true emotional response to the gospel is worship, and it is driven by a knowledge of what Christ has done for us, undeserving, sinners who were at times past ignorant of the mercy of God.

And despite our ignorance, our rebellion, and sin...he loved us, and died so that we may know him. Not merely believe in his existence, or to attempt to follow his righteous and moral teaching..but to truly know, and have a personal relationship with. The bible describes this relationship that we have with God as a marriage, he is our husband, and we are his bride...his beautiful prize adorned in his glory. And we can only begin to even grasp the love that he has for us, and the reality of it, is not found in through how we feel about it, for truly we are a fickle people who's emotions change by the day...but rather it is found in his word, in his promises to us, and when we rest upon him...the unchanging, unmovable, ever loving God...we can do nothing more then to worship, he who is faithful when we are not, he who loves us when we are unlovable, he who provides all things for us though we often take it for granted. Our God is not some unknowable God, and our God is not one who sits in earthly temples, nor can be represented by precious gold and gemstones, for his glory outshines all that the earth has to offer.

He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end...in him is all things, and through him all things are done. None of us are left alone to face all that this life brings, we have this God who chose us in him to be a part of his holy kingdom. Think about this for a minute...our God so loved us that he sought us out when we were not looking, he bought us and snatched us out of the hands of Satan with the most precious currency of all...his very life. And he remains faithful to us though we fail time and time again. In the world of false god's and pagan beliefs there is always a seeking of favor, hoping that through our actions we may earn the gods favor so that he may look upon us and bless us and not curse us. . But with our God, we need not worry about such, for we being his children whom he loves and has adopted have his favor already. On the Cross he cried out.. It is finished, the work which he set out to do is done, the redemption of his people had to paid, it is he who by his love and his own work bridged the gap between God and man, so that he may give blessings, and favor upon his people.

This is grace, this is mercy....that God has given an unmerited favor upon not those who earn or deserve it...but to those whom he has loved. This is not a God who sits afar off, no..he is a God whom is knowable, a God who is close, a God who is infinitely involved in our lives. He has not just given us commands and rules to follow so that he may be found happy with us, no...our God has already given us favor, our God is already happy with us, for we are his bride, we are precious in his sight, I ask this morning....do you believe this? Do you understand what it means to have favor and to be loved by this God. There is so much richness and glory here I don't think that we can fully comprehend, The very God who created the universe, who lead Abraham and his people out of slavery and into the promised land, the very God who sent his son so that we may know him, the very God who awakened in you the conviction of sin, and a desire to know him, he has worked all things, throughout all of time to bring you to this very moment, and he isn't going to just leave you alone, in him is found such a great peace and a great comfort that despite our circumstances we still yet praise him. Our soul cries out to him in worship and praise for his glory, and his mercy upon us. This God who is bigger and more powerful then we can even imagine has chosen to look upon us, chosen to give us his unmerited favor, purely out of his own love.

This is the God that we serve, this is the God that we love, one who has loved us, and chose us before the foundation of the world to be his. A God who sent his son to die taking upon himself the righteous punishment for our sinful and rebellious nature, so that we may be found holy and without blame. How marvelous it is to know this loving father, For as Paul said in verse 28, "For in him we live and move and have out being." All things are in him, and all things are through him, we are here because of him, and our lives are held secure in him. What a glorious thought, that our lives are held secure by God. Nothing will happen to us outside of his will, there is no chance, no chaos, where God is concerned.

“For by him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things consist.” As much as the world may desire to deny God, and throughout their lives live in abject rebellion against him...even they can no exist without this God, and even they he holds in his hand..but not as he holds us, but rather he holds them for the day of judgment. For he is not only a loving and merciful God, he is also a righteous God. Even the vessels prepared for wrath, are his, they have been made by him, and are kept by him for his purpose. This is a God to be feared, a God who can not only kill the body, but send the soul to hell, and everlasting torment. That is why the author of Hebrews wrote, “Exhort one another daily, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, While it is said, Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” Repent, believe, call upon this sovereign God, and lay aside your rebellion and sin and believe, and find rest in his grace, and peace within his mercy. For it is only through this God, in whom all things exist that we may find hope, and a life everlasting.