

Paul's Second Missionary Journey: At Athens--Acts 17:16-34

by J.R. Miller

Paul's sermon to the Athenians emphasizes the need to seek and find the true God, who is the Creator and sovereign Ruler of all things.

Scripture: Acts 17:16

Topics: "True Worship", "Idolatry"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes Paul's mission in Athens, where he was deeply troubled by the city's idolatry and the spiritual emptiness of its people. Instead of admiring the art and architecture, Paul focused on the souls lost in worshipping false gods, declaring the true God who created the world and does not dwell in temples made by hands. He challenged the Athenians' beliefs, asserting that God is not like the idols they fashioned and that all nations are equal as His offspring. Paul called for repentance, highlighting that ignorance of God is no longer acceptable now that the truth of Christ has been revealed. His message was a powerful reminder of the need for true worship and the pursuit of the living God.

Transcript

Paul did not go to Athens as a tourist, nor as a student of art; he went there as a missionary, carrying the gospel of Christ. "He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols!" No wonder his spirit was stirred within him. Among others he encountered certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, some of whom were curious to know what this "babbler" would say. Others decided that he was a setter forth of strange gods, because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. They took hold of him, therefore, and brought him into the Areopagus--a council of the first men of Athens, a sort of court--not for trial, however--but that his opinions might be presented.

Athens was full of splendid temples and magnificent works of art--but these temples were the shrines of idols, and these works of art were worshiped as gods by the people. However, Paul had not a word to say about the fine architecture or the wonderful statues he saw. His soul was so full of the compassion of Christ, that in such a place as Athens the one thing he saw was that perishing souls worshiped idols, instead of the true God. He forgot the beauty in his pity over the delusions, amid which souls were perishing, and could not but speak out of the fullness of his heart.

Utterly alone, he did not hesitate to declare Jesus Christ in the face of the world's wisdom and culture, and to present the truth of the gospel in the presence of those who almost certainly would have only sneers and contempt for what he said. Paul began his address in a courteous way, referring to the apparent devoutness of his hearers. He then spoke of an altar he had seen as he passed through the city. "I found an altar with this inscription, to the UNKNOWN GOD." It was said that it was easier in Athens to find a god than a man. Although there were so many gods, with temples and shrines everywhere, yet the people's hearts were not satisfied. They still reached out after some other god, and since nothing that they knew of or could conceive of, would answer their cravings, they had set up this altar to an unknown god.

It may be safely said that in Athens heathenism had done its very best. Literature, art, poetry and philosophy had attained their proudest heights. If any people ever had an opportunity to test the value of "culture" the Athenians certainly had. If there is enough in learning and in art and in philosophy to meet the needs of human souls--it ought to have been proved there. Yet what do we see? Amid all this beauty, with thirty thousand gods, the people were still unsatisfied. Paul's words are very suggestive--he brings them the God for whom unconsciously their hearts were crying out. He says, "Whom therefore you ignorantly worship--him declare I unto you!"

He then proceeds to declare to them 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 built by hands." One of the Athenian schools taught that there was no God, that the world was formed by 'chance'. Another taught what is called Pantheism--that all things were God and God was all things. Then there was a popular mythology, a system of fables and fancies about a great many gods and goddesses.

Paul taught that there was a God, that there was only one God, and that he was not only Creator--but sovereign Ruler and Dispenser of all things. He taught that God is a spirit and, "dwells not in temples made with hands." He thus swept away all idolatry and declared every splendid temple about him to be vanity. He declared also that the true God is not "worshiped with men's hands, as though he needed anything." The Greeks brought costly offerings in food and drink, as though the gods required such things. The true God, said Paul, needed no such attention. Instead of requiring men's gifts to keep them alive, he is the Giver of all the things that men need to keep them living.

Next he declared that all nations were alike, springing from one source, offspring of the one God. Thus he struck at the pride of the Athenians who claimed to be a superior race by themselves. He taught also the great truth of divine providence which extends to all creatures and to all their actions. This teaching was in the face of the Athenian belief in the doctrine of 'chance'.

Paul taught further that it was the duty of all men to find the true God. "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." This is a vivid description of men in the natural state, without the gospel. They know not God--but they have a great hunger for God, stretching out their hands in the darkness and trying to find him.

Paul quotes to the Greeks, one of their own poets who had given expression to a truth which belongs also to the very heart of the gospel. "As some of your own poets have said, We are his offspring."

Paul accepts this truth--that we are the offspring of God. This means more than that God is our Creator. Rocks, trees, flowers and birds were made by God--but they are not God's offspring. That which distinguishes man from all other creatures is that he is made in the image of God. God breathed into him his own life, and man became a living soul. "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."

Accepting this truth which they themselves admitted, Paul showed how unreasonable it was to suppose that God would be like idols of gold, silver, or stone, fashioned by human skill. Thus again Paul attacked idolatry, showing how false, how unsatisfactory, how unreasonable, it was. God had always been very patient with men in their ignorance and sinfulness; but now a new dispensation had been introduced. "In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent!" Before the light of divine revelation had broken on the earth--God dealt with men pitifully and patiently, bearing with them in their sinfulness, overlooking their ways. But now Christ has come--and all men are called to repent!

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