

This morning we are continuing to go through the book of Acts, looking at Luke's account of the 1st century church and what we can learn from it about what it means to know God and be His people. We will be in Acts 17 this morning, as we continue to follow Paul's missionary journeys. We will focus mainly on verses 16-34, but let's begin with a brief tour through verses 1-15 with a few comments.

^{NIV} Acts 17:1 - When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

Notice how whenever Paul enters a city, the first place he goes to preach is the synagogue, explaining to the Jews from the Old Testament that Jesus is the promised Messiah they have been waiting for, who died for their sins and rose again. And as usual, some believe, but many are offended and see Paul as blaspheming God.

*⁵ But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed **them into his house**. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.*

It's not an easy life, always facing opposition and persecution. Certainly nothing worth doing if it were a lie or they didn't really believe it. There is no glory in this ministry. Continuing:

*¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹² Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women **and many Greek men**. ¹³ When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul*

was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. ¹⁴ The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. ¹⁵ The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Notice in verse 11 how the Bereans listen to Paul and then examine the Scriptures to see if what he says lines up with what the Old Testament Scriptures say. This is exactly how to listen to me or any other preacher or author who claims to be speaking for God or teaching the Bible. The reality is that there are a lot of people out there claiming to teach the Bible who really aren't teaching things that line up with what the Bible actually says in context. Sadly for Paul, however, the crowd from Thessalonica follows him to agitate the crowd and force him to leave.

Let's continue:

*¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be **advocating foreign gods**." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

As Paul walks around Athens, he is distressed by the idolatry. Remember that the great sculptures of Athens were also temples and images of pagan divinities. Instead of being a tourist enjoying the wonders, he sees them for what they are – statues to false gods, affronts to the true God. His zeal for God causes him distress. It is right to have a holy discontent when God is mocked.

As he shares the gospel in the marketplace, many of the philosophers in Athens mock Paul for sharing the gospel. They did not believe that Paul's message could appeal to reasonable people. They called him a babbling, someone who cobbles together a philosophy from the scraps of other teachings. But some others want to hear him and invite him to speak about the gospel at the Areopagus.

The irony of this section is that while Paul is mocked for preaching the gospel, his message lives on today, while the Stoics and Epicureans, along with the gods of ancient Rome, have faded into history. Don't be discouraged when you are mocked. Jesus is the truth, and the competing philosophies of today will also fade into history.

Now this is the section I want to focus on today:

²² 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." ³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

As you'll notice, when Paul is not in the synagogue, he takes a much different approach to sharing the gospel. Three things Paul does:

1) He looks for points of connection in their culture

Paul looks for points of connection. He knows that he can not just come out and quote the Old Testament as he would in the synagogue. Instead, he quotes from two of their poets, Epimenides and Aratus.

²⁸ *'For in him we live and move and have our being.'* As some of your own poets have said, *'We are his offspring.'*

And he uses the altar to an unknown god as a springboard to talk about God:

"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.

Paul looks for points of connection in their culture. This is what missionaries do. Perhaps you've heard the story of Don & Carol Richardson, who were missionaries in the 1970's with the Sawi tribe in Indonesia. When they shared the gospel with the tribe, they found that the Sawi were interpreting Judas as the hero because they placed a high value on treachery. The Richardsons weren't sure how to share the gospel in a way that they would understand. But then they learned that when one village wanted to make peace with another village, they presented one of their children to that village as a Peace Child. As long as the peace child lived, there would be peace between the enemies. In this act, the Richardson's saw a metaphor for the gospel – a father giving his son to the enemy to restore peace and bring reconciliation. Jesus was God's peace child.

In many ways, we are missionaries in today's culture. Find points of connection in the cultural narrative, stories, and art of the culture so that you can share the gospel in ways that people will understand. What are the themes you find in movies, in books, in games?

2) He explains to them the God they are searching for

Paul begins by referencing some of their cultural narratives, and then uses them as a springboard to proclaim the true God.

"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.

Listen to Paul's approach. He affirms their spirituality and desire to connect with something beyond themselves. He finds a point of connection. And then he tells them about the God they are searching for. The altar to an unknown God ends up being a great metaphor: you are believing in something without really knowing what it is or why you believe in it.

Let me give you three examples of "altars to an unknown God" that I see in today's culture:

Meaning in life

People all around us are living as if life has meaning and purpose, going to jobs and wondering whether they are living purposeful lives, or going through mid-life crises where they wonder whether they are living a meaningful life. But the reality is that if there is no God, then there is no objective meaning to the world. If we are accidents of evolution, here by the impersonal forces of natural selection and random mutation, who will one day die and be forgotten, and then one day the world will cease to exist, then life at its core has no meaning, no purpose, no significance.

Now, most people who do not believe in God will object to that. They will say "of course my life has meaning. I find meaning in my family, in nature, in my work, in the causes I am passionate about." As the former Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould put it:

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher' answer — but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers ourselves — from our own wisdom and ethical sense. There is no other way.

We are not here on purpose. There is no objective meaning to life, no higher answer to why we are here. And so, says Gould, we are free to construct our own meaning to our lives. To which I would say, yes, you are free to make up whatever meaning you want, but in the end **you're still making it up**. You're still pretending that life is meaningful in the face of objective meaninglessness.

So why do we care so much about meaning in life? Meaning in life is an altar to an unknown God. No one, not even the most militant atheist, truly lives as if there is no meaning in life. We know intuitively that life matters, that this whole enterprise has a purpose, even if we don't quite know what it is. Even those who do not believe in God feel intuitively that there is meaning in family, in work, in causes we are passionate about. There is significance in doing something to help another human being, in working to make the world a better place. We know there is meaning.

We feel that there is a meaning because there IS a meaning to life. We were created; we are not here by accident. We were created to know God. To glorify Him. To enjoy Him forever. To be brought into a love relationship with the God of the universe. To join Him in His mission to bring this world back to Him. There is meaning. And that meaning is greater than anything you can make up on your own, greater than putting your meaning in family, or work, or causes you are passionate about. Because if your meaning is in anything in this world, it can be taken from you. But if your meaning and purpose and significance is in God, it is secure.

The search for meaning, the belief that life is meaningful and not just an accident, is an altar to an unknown God. It is a sign that there is something more. What you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.

Morality & human rights

Most people believe there is right and wrong, and that there is such a thing as human rights, even though once again, if you remove God, these things do not make sense. If we are nothing more than highly evolved animals, then where is the basis for right and wrong? Why do we accept animals killing each other as part of the way nature works, but when a human kills another human, we say that it is wrong? Or think of the secular anthropologist teaching on the one hand that we ought to respect every culture and the way they do things, but on the other hand believing that the way women are Muslim cultures is wrong. Which approach is right? Or worse, what about Hitler believing that Darwin's theory of evolution meant that it was morally right to kill off inferior races and populations of people? Morality and human rights are altars to an unknown God. Deep down, everyone knows that there is a right and wrong, that some ways are better than others, that human beings have dignity and worth.

Your sense of right and wrong, and belief that it is right to impose your perspective on other people who are doing evil is an altar to an unknown God. Again, you have a vague sense that something is real, even if you can not explain why. **What is unknown to you, let me proclaim to you.** Let me tell you about this God. He created us in His image, with an understanding of right and wrong. There is a moral law to the universe. And as beings created in His image, every human being is inherently valuable and worthy of being treated with dignity. That is why we have human rights.

And similarly, your desire that one day there would be justice in the world, that good will triumph over evil once and for all, is also an altar to an unknown God.

***Revelation 21:1-5** - Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every **tear from their eyes.** There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

Eternal love

What about love? That desire you have that someone beautiful would find you beautiful? That someone would choose you and never forsake you? What about that desire that someone would know you completely and not run away but would love and redeem and transform even the worst parts of you? What about the desire for unity, for intimacy, for ecstasy? That is an altar to an unknown God, the one who died for you when you were at your worst, who will never leave or forsake you, whose love redeems and transforms you, who will one day unify you with His beauty forever.

And when you come to a funeral, does it not feel wrong? Does death not feel like a cruel enemy? Do you not feel that love should not end, but should transcend the grave and last forever. It brings to mind Ecclesiastes 3:11:

Ecclesiastes 3:11 - *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

Once again, remove God and that belief is a lie. Death cruelly takes away from you every love you've ever known.

Carl Jung – "Death is indeed a fearful piece of brutality: there is no sense pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event, but far more so psychically: a human being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death. There no longer exists any hope of a relationship, for all the bridges have been smashed at one blow."

But deep down we know that death should not be the end. We know that there has to be more than this. Love, and especially eternal love, is an altar to an unknown God – what you worship as unknown, let me proclaim to you:

The gospel proclaims that Jesus has conquered death. In John's gospel, in the Bible, Jesus was confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus. In her despair, Lazarus's sister Martha came to Jesus and said *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

Jesus declares that the grave is not the end, that love does last forever for those who are in Him.

Hebrews 2:14-15 - *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

Jesus is our champion, defeating death and sharing the spoils of victory with us. Death is not the end. Nor is life after death some impersonal merging with the universe. It is personal. It is love.

1 Corinthians 13:12-13 - *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*

On that day we will experience perfect love, forever.

Christianity, the gospel, makes sense of all the longings of our heart in a way that secularism never could. All around us are altars to an unknown God. Look for the points of connection in the culture and point people to Jesus!

3) **He calls them to repent and believe**

*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.***"

After all this, Paul does not preach some kind of universalism, telling them that their religiosity is acceptable to God. No – he calls it ignorance and tells them they need to repent. They need to change their minds and the direction of their lives. He tells them that they are no longer ignorant, and that they will stand before God one day as the judge.

Hebrews 9:27 - Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,

He challenges them to turn from your idols to serve the true God. If it's true, then it demands your everything. He proclaims the resurrection, and they sneer at him. But it is either true or not. It is not just an idea. Either he rose from the dead or he didn't. If he did, you must believe and give your life to Him.

Many people in this world will not respond to a straightforward gospel. Look for points of connections, altars to an unknown God, and proclaim the true God.