

Repent before the Unknown God

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 17:16-34 / March 1, 2026

Introduction:

Our passage today covers Paul's teaching in the Areopagus at Athens and what happens is more than historical record; it's a model of courageous clarity in a culture confident in its own wisdom. According to legend, Athens was named after a competition between Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Poseidon, god of the sea to become the city's patron deity. All the gods gathered King Cecrops and the people for Athena and Poseidon to offer gifts to win their hearts. Poseidon went first, splitting the earth open by striking his trident against a stone. Out flowed an impressive salty spring that formed. Then, Athena knelt and pressing her spear into the soil caused an olive tree to rise from the ground. Her gift wasn't as dramatic, but it was enduring, providing wood, oil, food, light, and trade for generations. Cecrops chose Athena and Athens became known by devotion to its gods and pride in its wisdom. Flourishing in the arts, literature, and philosophy, it remained a representation of Greek culture after the Roman conquest, being likened to a museum of Greek thought and worship. It is said to have contained around 30,000 statues of gods, and only a small population of around 10,000 around Paul's time. A Greek geographer Pausanias later said, "it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main street of Athens than to meet a man" (Description of Greece, 1.17-29). In this context with similarities to our own, Paul responds with gospel passion and clarity. Therefore, we should listen carefully to his words and consider why they still matter today. Follow the story arc Luke presents to see his main point. First, notice the problem and rising tension given in verses 16-20, where we see,

The Provocation of the Spirit

Pay attention to how the stage is set. Look at verses 16-17, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." Luke tells us that, while Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy, "his spirit was provoked within" from the sheer volume of idols in Athens. The term for "provoke" is used throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament to speak of God's indignation at Israel's idolatry, so we are meant to see righteous anger. Family, is this our response to idolatry? Not only the idolatry of false gods, but the idols of the heart. Get closer to home. Are you troubled by the idols of your own heart? Those ruling desires that come from a love for things in the world. 1 John 2:15-16 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world." Idolatry should deeply grieve us. However, pay attention to how Paul responds in verse 17, "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, 'What does this babblers wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." He doesn't go around condemning the Athenians through protest and insults, but moves to reason with them, not only in the synagogues, but also in the marketplace. And what is his focus? Underline the end of verse 18, "He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." Kent Hughes says, "Every idol demonstrated the Athenians' hunger for God, but it also testified to their spiritual emptiness" (Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 230). See what this is showing us. Their idolatry moved Paul to see their spiritual need. Often, the anger we see believer's having towards the world today, even when righteous, results in disgust and condemnation, rather than broken hearts over people's need for Christ. The Spirit not only moved Paul's heart to be troubled by idolatry, He moved Paul to see people's true need and share hope. Before we continue, consider who engages with Paul and what they determined in verse 18. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers represent two main philosophies in Athens. Epicurean's focused on pleasure and living life with no pain, superstitious fear, or anxiety over death.

They believed in the gods but viewed them as having no interest in mankind's affairs. A motto by an Epicurean named Diogenes summarizes their belief system, “Nothing to fear in God; Nothing to feel in death; Good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] can be endured.” (Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, pp. 204–5). The Stoics believed in a supreme being but saw that god existing in everything, promoting life in harmony with nature and reason because everything was determined by fate. As they respond to Paul, some choose to write him off as a babbler, which suggests he peddled philosophy and religious ideas without understanding them. Others charged Paul with the same charge that led to Socrates’ demise. Notice, then, what they do in verses 18-20, “And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’” Luke’s language indicates Paul was taken by force, so this was not for casual debate. Their words may suggest a desire to understand, but their actions and charge indicate opposition. Note how the tension rises as the provocation of the Spirit leads Paul to finding himself in conflict again. Then, Luke moves to the climax and resolution in verses 21-31, where we see,

The Proclamation of the Unknown God

Follow the narrative flow in verse 21-23 and note how Paul tailors his message to his audience. Look there with me, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’” The climax to the conflict is interesting, as Luke describes the nature of those in Athens as people who merely enjoyed entertaining new stories and ways of thought. This shows Paul us addressing people with no interest in truth. Paul’s address, as the resolution, opens by sarcastically pointing out their vain religiosity as they even had altars dedicated “To the unknown god.” Instead of pursuing truth, they covered every possibility—down to worshiping a god they did not know. Yet Paul uses that to proclaiming the unknown God to them. This climax and resolution reveal Luke’s central point is how the truths Paul proclaims confront those who have little concern for knowing the true God. If we are to understand this moment, we must lean in and carefully consider the three truths Paul shares about the true God. First,

1) The True God is Self-Sufficient

Paul starts by addressing their understanding of God. Look at verses 24-25, “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Note his phrasing. In saying, “The God” who is “Lord of heaven and earth,” he makes two clear points. First, there is one God over all things, not many gods like the Greeks believed. Second, God is distinct from all things, not only as creator but as Lord of all things. Following this, Paul emphasizes God’s self-sufficiency. He emphatically states the true God doesn’t dwell in anything made by human hands and needs nothing from mankind. Why? Because He gives us everything. The unknown God they worshipped is neither bound to His creation, nor disinterested in human affairs. Further, He is not in need of anything because He stands over all things and gives everything His creation needs. Though Paul doesn’t quote Scripture to share these truths, it certainly influenced his arguments. Isaiah 42:5 says, “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it.” Isaiah 66:1-2 says, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord.’” We must understand that God is self-sufficient. He dwells outside of all things and rules over all things, needing nothing from us, and giving us everything we need.

Second, Paul proclaims,

2) The True God Created All People to Know Him

Following clarity of who God is, Paul turns to why we exist. Look at verses 26-27, “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” Pause there. Drawing from the story of creation in Genesis 2 and Deuteronomy 32:8, Paul combats Greek thought by affirming mankind’s common ancestry and God’s providential governance of all nations. This establishes God’s creation of them while showing He has been present and active throughout human history. Note the purpose for God’s activity in verse 27, that the nations would seek Him and “feel their way toward him.” The picture is of someone feeling their way through a dark house, missing something right in front of their face. Church, God has always been present so mankind might find Him in the darkness. In Christ, He came even closer. Notice how Paul continues in verses 27-29, “Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” To solidify God’s nearness, Paul appears to quote two Greek poets. Many believe the first quote is from Epimenides, written around 600B.C. In his poem Cretica, he has Zeus’ son, Minos, say, “They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever, For in thee we live and move and have our being” (M.D. Gibson, ed., *Horae Semiticae* X, p. 40). Interestingly, Paul uses this same poem in his letter to Titus. The second quote is from Aratus, a 3rd century Stoic author, who says, “It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring” (*Phaenomena* 5). Paul isn’t suggesting they are correct in asserting Zeus’ supremacy but showing how their own authors agree with his message that God is near to those He created, desiring for them to know Him. Though he engages with Greek poets, Paul’s words again spring from Scripture. When recognizing God’s providence in what happened to him, Job says, “Who among all these (speaking of all created things) does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.” We must understand that God created all people to know Him. Rather than being aloof from us, He has involved Himself in the affairs of human history to lead people to Himself. Lastly, Paul proclaims,

3) The True God Commands Repentance

Every presentation of the truth about God includes a required response. Look at verses 29-31, “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Because we are formed in God’s image, it is foolish to think anything we create is Him. Therefore, any image formed by man is only our imagination. Family, everything mankind sets above God as the object of their affection, focus of their time, or work of their hands is an empty idol. Paul, then, gives the charge, telling them there was a time when God overlooked the ignorance of idolatry, but now he commands repentance from it. We must know God no longer accepts ignorance. And why is repentance needed? Though Epicureans thought humanity was moving toward extinction and Stoics thought we will be absorbed into the cosmos, both were wrong, and are still wrong today. All of history is moving towards a fixed day where the one God appointed, Christ Jesus, will judge all people. This is confirmed by Christ’s death and resurrection, because He is the light that shines in the darkness to disclose God’s nature and bring us to Himself. For those who trust in Jesus Christ, His sacrificial death will save us from God’s wrath to come. But for those who don’t trust in Jesus, they will be thrown into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Because of this, the true God commands repentance. Repentance that doesn’t just mean turning from bad things we do. It means repenting of the idolatry in our hearts. Turning from placing the things of this world above this true God. Turning from ignorance to embracing truth.

Repenting of seeking satisfaction in any and all created things by turning to this self-sufficient God who gives us everything that we may know Him.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes to lead us, let's consider how the trailing action guides our response. Look at verses 32-34, "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." Three responses are given. Some who don't believe Christ's resurrection assures them of coming judgement mock Paul, while others delay dealing with the truth. Both are left in unbelief. Yet some believe and join Paul, one named was a member of the Areopagus and the other a woman. In this trailing action, Luke's emphasis falls on the responses of those who don't believe, to call us instead to believe and join Paul. Do you believe there is one true God who created you to know Him? Do you believe He will judge the world in righteousness? Is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ your hope for salvation? Have you turned from the idols of your heart to serve the living God? That's the main call of this passage. But I also see an implication for all who believe and have joined Paul in this room. Family, God's primary purpose in creating you is for you to seek Him and know Him. We all desire purpose in life, don't we? Many even desire to know God's purpose for their life. But that often only means vocational or familial purpose. It isn't wrong to desire these things, but they are not your primary purpose. God will accomplish His purposes in this world through the grace He gives to you, and that may be through vocation or family, but His purpose for you is to deeply know Him and be satisfied by Him. Let Paul's words call you to press into that purpose today and seek to know the one who created you and gives you everything you need. Would you pray with me as we respond to God's Word together?