

“Domine, volumus Jesum videre,” John 12:21.

“Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam,” Mark 9:24.

ACTS 17

²²Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. ²³For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, ‘To an unknown god.’ Now what you worship as unknown—this is what 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 made with hands. ²⁵Neither is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives all people life and breath and everything they have. ²⁶From one man, he made every nation of mankind to live over the entire face of the earth. He determined the appointed times and the boundaries where they would live. ²⁷He did this so they would seek God 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, ‘Indeed, we are also 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 formed by human skill and planning. ³⁰Although God overlooked the times of ignorance, he is now commanding all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he appointed. He provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”



In the history of thought, before Socrates, great effort was made to answer the One Big Question: *What is reality made of?* Many ideas were proposed, including dirt and hair and numbers. One philosopher, Heraclitus, proposed that everything always changes, like fire, so it must be fire that makes up reality. Another thinker, Empedocles, decided there were four different elementals, earth, fire, wind, and water, that make up everything. Still another philosopher, Democritus, proposed tiny uncuttable pieces of matter called “atoms.”

After Plato and Aristotle came on the scene, with complicated philosophies about forms and spirits and purpose, philosophy declined. But there were still big

questions. A major one was how to have something called *ataraxia*, which means an “untroubled heart,” or “peace of mind.” It’s a similar Greek word Jesus used when He told His disciples not to be troubled at heart in John 14. Philosophers leading up to the time of Jesus and Paul wanted to know how to be at peace – how to be untroubled at heart?

The answer of the Epicureans were to seek pleasure, which they defined as the absence of pain. They loved to eat, drink, and be merry. For them that was the goal of life. They believed in atoms, and even smaller particles than atoms, and so they were ahead of their time. But they took their knowledge of the physical world to mean that sensory pleasures were the key to happiness, untroubled hearts, and peace of mind.

The Skeptics answered that all knowledge is untrustworthy. Cicero summarized a founding Skeptic thinker like this: “He knew nothing, not even his own ignorance.” They knew nothing, not even whether they knew nothing. One of their famous teachers, Pyrrho, believed in nothing so strongly that he would walk on the edge of cliffs and in the path of horses without any worry or fear. He ironically lived a long life, to the age of 90. Skeptics thought that believing in nothing was the key to happiness, untroubled hearts, and peace of mind.

Then there were the Cynics, who believed in living according to nature, seeking indifference to society’s expectations and goals. They embraced simplicity, but challenged conventional thought. They even challenged people in the street. The most famous Cynic was a man named Diogenes, who lived in a barrel and was rude to everyone (even to Alexander the Great). Cynics believed that resisting society and living by nature was the key to happiness, untroubled hearts, and peace of mind.

Finally, the Stoics were perhaps the strongest philosophy in Athens and the most influential philosophy in the Roman world. They believed that reality was made up of earth, water, wind, and fire, and that ‘breath,’ a combination of wind and fire, acted upon earth and water as if the ‘breath’ were god. This god planned and organized the universe in a cycle of changes, according to the Stoics. They also believed that virtue is knowledge, and the passions like grief, joy, hope, and fear, always get in the way of virtue. They accepted inevitabilities, and they thought that fighting their emotions was the key to happiness, untroubled hearts, and peace of mind.

A recurring theme in all these philosophies was that, if you wanted to think clearly, you had to be alright with death and unafraid of your own life's end.

Meanwhile, leading up to the time of Paul, there were famous poems by widely-known men like Aratus, who sang about the gods, stars, and astronomy. Or Epimenides, friend of Pythagoras, who supposedly fell asleep for 57 years, woke up as a great poet and prophet. Some called him one of the seven great thinkers. Aratus and Epimenides and scores of others praised the gods and still made altars and statues to them, even in a time of intelligent thinking.

It was against this backdrop that Paul was invited in Athens to preach to the followers of all these philosophies and religions. He was not there to tell them the Levitical laws of the Old Testament, or to appeal to Old Testament prophecies as proof that Jesus Christ was their Savior from sin. Paul used what these people knew in order to move their hearts and minds into the unknown. He was there in Athens so wise and fools might **get to know the "Unknown God."**

And Paul could tell that, after all this thinking, Athenians did not yet have happiness, untroubled hearts, and peace of mind. Do you know how Paul knew that? After walking among their gods and altars, he noticed one altar that was dedicated to an unknown god, a catch-all, a question mark of the conscience. If they had possibly made a mistake, the people of Athens wanted to be sure no god was left out. No idol was to be ignored, or else they might lose that god's blessing and face its judgment. The people of this melting-pot culture in Athens were still stricken and assaulted by the very thought they didn't yet know what was important in life. And it tortured and troubled their hearts and minds.

So Paul preached. He preached in the synagogue and he preached in the market. He was even invited to a hearing of the philosophers, a court called the Areopagus, to preach. That is the sermon before us. He sure preached, all right.

To those who believed in a physical, material reality, Paul preached an unknown God we want to reach out and touch. To those who believed that nothing certain could ever be known, Paul proclaimed an unknown God whom they could discover through observing creation and in our consciences. To those who believed in a breath of air and fire, Paul proclaimed an unknown God who put the breath of soul in everyone. To those who believed in a divine plan, Paul preached the unknown God who cared for them and determined their times. To the superstitious poets, Paul quoted their words back to them about the unknown

God, who is true and living. To the challengers of society, Paul preached the unknown God who will judge society and calls man to repent. To those who believed in physical pleasures, like eating, drinking, playing, and cavorting, Paul preached the unknown God who loves them but calls them to repent and put their sins on Him. To those who thought death was just a dispersal of atoms, Paul preached a God who designed the atoms and who determined their deaths.

- To those who were resigned to ultimate death, Paul preached the unknown God who was also man and was raised from the dead.
- To the troubled, Paul proclaimed the unknown God who has taken care of them all along.
- To those who deified something they never knew, Paul preached a God who always knew them.

This is the God who always knew you, too. He governs all His creatures in such a way that He permits them to carry on their own activities. But nothing exists by its own powers. All things live and breath by God's preserving activity. Nothing happens in the world without God's will and influence. If God withholds His power, the action of His creatures will cease. He has put a piece of that understanding in your heart from the start. We call it the natural knowledge of God. His provisions and directions always end in a glorious goal, to His praise.

So God has led you here today to this message. He has good news for you. In a melting pot of colliding thoughts and philosophies; people conjecturing and hollering at each other about what they do know or don't know; people freaking out about what should be done in a pandemic. Worse, in your sin, you may believe you are unknown to God in a vast and infinite universe. In an infinite universe and an Almighty Father, here's little you. Your Almighty Father of an infinite universe has answers for you, not the least of which that He loves you. He forgives your sins and removes your troubled conscience. He loves you and shows that love in becoming a man for you and dying for you. He has given you proofs that it wasn't all in vain and that He is the living God. He wants you to be with Him on the day of judgment so that He can say, "By faith in my Son, you repented of your sin and I don't see its ugliness any longer. I see Him, and so I see you, I love you, and I want you to join me in this perfect place." In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.