**The Forgotten God**

Acts 17:22–31

**A small majority (64%) of Millennials absolutely believe that God exists (Pew Research), but very few of them (13%) believe spirituality is important (Thom Rainer). That means the largest generation of Americans that has ever lived possesses the fewest believers. God is being forgotten!**

**Introduction**

A. When a society forgets about God, it always leads to some form of idolatry and immorality yet a desire for God continues to burn in the heart of every person – Romans 1:18–32; Ecclesiastes 3:11.

**“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ” (Unknown).**

**“What else does this craving, this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself” (Blaise Pascal).**

B. When Paul arrived in Athens, he was given the opportunity to preach Jesus to various groups (Jews, Gentiles, Epicureans, and Stoics) who had missed or forgotten the true God – Acts 17:16–18.

**Epicureanism was founded by Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–271 BC). Epicurean atomic theory denied the need for a personal, rational creator of the universe, but Epicureans did believe there were gods; those gods were, however, removed from and unconcerned with the natural realm. Human existence was thus a chance happening. They trusted their senses and felt that the purpose of life was to attain happiness—which they defined as freedom from the fear of the gods and of death.**

**Stoicism was founded by Greek philosopher Zeno (336–263 BC). It was a reaction against Epicureanism. Rather than existence being the product of the chance collision of atoms, Stoics believed there was a rational mind (God, Reason, Logos) that permeated and structured the universe. Human souls were considered sparks of the divine. People should therefore seek moral and social good for themselves and others. Yet Stoics also believed “God” was subject to “Fate” and that human free will was an illusion. The purpose of life, then, was simply to seek virtue because it was the search that was worthwhile, not the end.**

**Paul confronts both philosophies in his sermon.**

C. The message about Jesus and the resurrection was foreign to the Greeks, so they “asked” Paul to speak before the Areopagus – vv. 19–21.

**The Areopagus (Mars Hill) refers to the physical location or to the council that met there. The latter is probably in view in Acts 17. The Areopagus was a group that judged legal, cultural, and religious matters. Though Paul was probably not on trial in Acts 17, the occasion appears to be a formal statement of belief. This speech was probably interrupted when Paul brought up the resurrection of Jesus, the point of confusion and contention for the Greeks (see 1 Corinthians 1:22–24).**

**The Greeks had called Paul a seed-picker (babbler) and had mocked him saying, “What would this babbler say, if he could say anything that made sense?”, but Luke essentially reverses the insult and attributes it to the Athenians (Acts 17:18, 21).**

**An Unknown God**

A. Paul began by acknowledging that the Athenians were very religious. This was likely an attempt to connect with his audience – Acts 17:22.

B. The spirituality of the Athenians was ill-informed, as was demonstrated by the rampant idolatry in their city – v. 23; see v. 16; Romans 1:21–23.

C. Yet Paul was able to find common ground with them, introducing them to the true God using one of their own pagan altars – Acts 17:23.

**The One and Only God**

A. The intent of Paul’s sermon is to show that there is only one God and that he is transcendent and sovereign over all creation – Acts 17:24; see 14:15.

B. God—unlike idols—cannot be confined to the natural realm because he is the Creator and Sustainer of it – 17:24–25; see 7:48–50.

C. God—again unlike idols—is self-sufficient and sovereign over the universe, even and especially over mankind – 17:24–26; see Genesis 1:26–28.

D. The creation provides people a glimpse of the divine. God has revealed himself in this way so that people might seek him – Romans 1:20; Acts 17:27.

**The verbs translated “grope” and “find” are in the optative mood. That means the Athenians search for God was but a wish apart from additional revelation (v. 31).**

E. God is above us but is also near us. (Our existence demonstrates this.) God wants to be found by his creation – Acts 17:27–29; see Jeremiah 23:23.

**“To deny God’s transcendence and deny his immanence is to arrive at deism. To deny his transcendence and affirm his immanence is to arrive at pantheism” (Theopedia).**

**The quoted poet is Aratus. Though the original referent was Zeus, Paul adapts the quotation and applies it to God.**

F. To sum up, the one and only God is our Creator and our sustainer, he is far but also near, and unlike false gods (idols), he is alive and active.

**A Call to Repentance**

A. Though God allowed the Gentiles to abandon him, but he never wanted them to leave and invited them to return – Acts 17:30; see 14:16–17.

B. The command to repent applies to all people everywhere because the offer of salvation is universal – 17:30; see Luke 24:46–48; Titus 2:11–14.

C. That Jesus has been raised from the dead proves that he is the Savior; but it also proves that he will be the Judge – Acts 17:31; see 10:40–42.

**Conclusion**

A. The preaching of the resurrection of Jesus created the opportunity for Paul to speak to the Areopagus and ended it – Acts 17:32; see v. 18.

B. Many of the hearers immediately dismissed the possibility of resurrection yet others were more open-minded; some of these were willing to hear more and others were ready to believe – vv. 32, 34.

C. These same groups exists today. There are those who reject God, those who continue to investigate, and those who accept him. To which do you belong?

**“God did not make us because He was bored, lonely, or had run out of things to do. He created us to be the objects of His love! Sometimes our actions make us unlovely, but we are never unloved. And because God loves us—we have value. And nobody can take that value away. God's love revealed at Calvary fastens itself onto flawed creatures like us, and for reasons none of us can ever quite figure out, makes us precious and valued beyond calculation. This is love beyond reason. And this is the love with which God loves us” (C. S. Lewis).**