

From Ignorance to Knowing

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Date: 22 October 2023

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[0 : 0 0] This man doesn't really need an introduction because he's already well-known and well-loved in our church. But Andrew Rimm has been with us in our church for the last two years. He is in his final year of study at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

And as you guys know, if you were at our last membership meeting, he just began his pastoral internship, which lasts about eight months to 12 months. Because it's a time when we, as a church, basically try to encourage him and build him up and also assess him as a pastoral candidate in his teaching, preaching ability, but also in his character that meets the requirements of 1 Timothy 3.

And so he's been doing great in all those ways so far. And today is his first opportunity to preach for us. So if you would please welcome Andrew to come preach for us. That'd be great. Can you guys hear me all right?

Awesome. Good morning, everyone. Like Pastor Sean said, my name is Andrew. I'm a pastoral intern here at Trinity Cambridge Church and a current seminary student as well.

This is my first sermon here at Trinity, and it's really such an immense joy and honor to be sharing God's word with you all. So, Sean, also thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share God's word with everyone here.

[1 : 1 9] Let's jump right into it. So our passage this morning will be coming from Acts chapter 17, verse 16 to 34. If any of you don't have a Bible and would like one, please raise your hand and one of our members can give you a Bible to read through the passage with us as well.

Please join me in prayer as we pray for the reading of God's word. Father God, it's by your will.

Lord, it's for your glory that we exist. Lord, you're the creator God who created us.

You're the Lord of all created things, all things existing in this world. And because of that, you're worthy to be praised. Lord, we ask that your word this morning strikes and pierces our heart as the sword that it is.

That it convicts us of the idolatry that's all around us. And drives us to desire you more than anything else in this world.

[2 : 3 6] Lord, I'm of so much inadequacy. My words are not enough without you.

Lord, I need you. Lord, we need you. Be ever so present in our midst.

Convict our hearts. And we ask that your spirit fill our hearts with faith. A faith to make your name, the name of all names known to our world, Lord.

A faith to make the name of Jesus so present in our lives through our words and our actions. We thank you, Lord. We love you.

And we pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please stand with me as we read Acts chapter 17, verses 16 to 34.

[3 : 4 3] 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 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 babbler wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

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. Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

[4 : 49] 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 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. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all 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. 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.

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.

[6 : 09] The times of ignorance God overlooked. But now, he commands all people everywhere to repent. Because he has fixed the 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. 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 Dionysus, Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. We're starting to enter a season here in Cambridge where we're starting to really see all the fall and autumn colors.

I was just looking outside of Kalo and just seeing all sorts of different leaves just falling all over the ground. It's a really pretty sight. And it's definitely a sign that we're entering that part of the year where we're about to get absolutely barraged by wave after wave of different holidays.

[7 : 25] One of these holidays that is fast approaching us is Halloween. We've talked about it through Fall Festival. And we can see it all around us with these different decorations, jack-o'-lanterns, witches' cauldrons, coffins, all sorts of stuff decorating people's homes and their yards and all that.

For most people, Halloween is just another commercialized holiday. It allows them to indulge in candy, wear our funny costumes and all that, and go to attend parties to celebrate Halloween with each other.

There are others, however, who celebrate Halloween with more insidious motives. Like Sean said, I attend a school called Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

It's up in the North Shore. And the next town over to it is the town of Salem. In the town of Salem, they have a rich history of witchcraft, of pinning witches down and accusing witches, hence the very famous story of the crucible.

And within that town of Salem, there are people there who treat Halloween not as a lighthearted costume party, but as a pagan festival that celebrates the dead, the spirits, and even the devil.

[8 : 43] Throughout Salem, you can observe witch museums, fortune-reading divination shops, and satanic temples scattered throughout the town. And they all seem to glow brighter and grow even livelier as the Halloween season comes upon us.

You can see people attending these satanic temples for worship. You can see others going into shops to buy charms and hexes. You can see others building bonfires at the beaches in North Shore to dance around them in a manic sort of frenzy.

And you can even see strangers coming onto our seminary campus, whispering curses under their breath. Seeing such a sight as a Christian should outrage us, if not deeply trouble us to our very core.

But we shouldn't be feeling this way only on Halloween or other secularized or paganized holidays. Even in our day-to-day lives, if we look carefully enough, idolatry is all around us.

There are people who are actively practicing pagan rituals or believing in religions that do not honor our God. There are also atheists and agnostics who do not believe in a God, but instead choose to worship themselves, and seeking self-gratification and pleasure as the ultimate goal of their own lives.

[10 : 06] There are buildings all around us that glorify the imagination and the handiwork, the mind of man. All these things in being prioritized over God are examples of idolatry, whether we recognize it or not.

We as believers should feel cut to the heart about the idolatry that's around us, the idolatry that happens around us daily. And we should desire for God to change our community, to change the hearts of the idolaters, to repent and pledge their allegiance to him.

We should want Jesus instead to be worshiped and honored with our every being and with our everything. And so this is going to be the main point of our passage and a reminder for all of us today who are in the midst of all sorts of idolatry in our community.

Christ's death and Christ's resurrection demands our repentance to the one true God. I'll be dividing my sermon up into three different parts.

The first point is many gods made by man. My second point being the unknown God made known. And my final point being Christ, the resurrected, pointing to the one true God.

[11 : 24] So I know that many of y'all know that we are currently going through a sermon series in Revelation. So this seems like a very sudden departure, almost like a filler episode in our series here.

But I truly believe, and by God's providence, this passage is just so relevant to our Revelation story. That we are surrounded by temptations around us.

That we are surrounded by idolatry around us. And we're called to persevere amidst all these things that threaten to take away God from us. And so we come to this passage here in Acts.

I'll give a bit of background since this is a filler episode and we don't really know much of the background maybe. See? So, leading up to Acts chapter 17, the apostle Paul and Silas have been traveling through Macedonia.

Ministering the gospel in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. And bringing both Jews and Gentiles to Jesus. However, in the city of Berea, there were some jealous Thessalonian Jews.

[12 : 30] Who in their jealousy stirred up the crowds and forced Paul to flee from Berea. To the city of Athens all by himself. Paul's departure from Athens sets the stage for what we are about to read.

What we have read. And in the following passage, Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him in Athens. The writer of Acts, Luke, now documents the events that transpired in Athens.

As Paul comes across a city filled with idols. And so we see in verse 16, 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. Athens was historically well known for its multitudes of temples, altars, and statues.

Back in the 6th century BC, the city of Athens had been hit by a plague, an illness, that was afflicting everyone in the city. And so the Athenians, they asked a priest by the name of Epimenides to come and help them.

[13 : 34] Because he was known allegedly to be favored by the gods. And so Epimenides, he travels from Crete all the way to Athens to help them. And with him, he brings a flock of sheep.

He brings the sheep into the central part of the city and he releases them. And he tells the Athenians, wherever these sheep go to lie down, wherever these sheep decide to find a nice patch of grass and eat the grass, he said, build an altar there.

Build a temple there and worship an unknown god. So that that god may be appeased of its anger. And so the Athenians did that.

They followed these hungry sheep all around the city. And wherever the sheep decided to take a break, they would start building temples there and start worshiping at these altars. And lo and behold, the city of Athens was restored to health from this, apparently.

How ridiculous is this? That the city of Athens was so desperate in wanting to be healed, they were willing to follow these wayward, ignorant, hungry sheep to find their own gods.

[14 : 47] That was 600 years ago before Paul arrived in Athens. By the time Paul came to the city, first century Athens was estimated to have at least 73,000 statues and altars of gods.

To put this into perspective, New York City has around 2,200 billboards scattered across the city and about 800 monuments and statues also throughout the city.

So we'll add those two up to about 3,000 different statues and monuments and billboards advertising all sorts of different things. Imagine walking through Times Square. You're going through this forest of electronic LED billboards flashing all sorts of different things.

Celebrities, clothes, jewelry, music, all sorts of things. It's enough to give you whiplash. You're trying to look around. You see all these towering monuments. And you're just so bewildered.

This is a crazy city. It just does not sleep. Athens had 20 times more the amount of statues, monuments, and altars scattered throughout the city.

[15 : 53] Paul, seeing this city full of idols, seeing how the Athenians were just going to every single one of these temples and worshiping their gods, was provoked in the spirit.

Church, how many of us are provoked in spirit by the idols that surround us? All around us, people worship money. They worship fame. They worship relationships, sex, and their own personal gain.

Here in the Boston and Cambridge area, we take great pride in our own intellect, in intellectualism, perhaps even to an idolatrous amount. Even some of us here in this church as believers, we may not know it, but we may be idolizing things in our lives.

When we open our eyes and see all these things, our spirits should be provoked in seeing idolatry because it takes glory that's due to God and ascribes it to something else.

Like Paul, we should see these idols and desire for God to change our hearts and the hearts of those around us to instead look to God. And so Paul, he's surveying the city of Athens and sees all these idols.

[17 : 10] He's provoked in his spirit and so he takes the opportunity to reason in both the synagogues and the Agora, the central marketplace of Athens with the people there. Luke's narration of this Acts passage, it more so focuses on Paul's interaction with the Gentiles.

Paul's in the central marketplace, the Agora. Paul is said to have occupied that marketplace every day and he was able to engage with the people in the central square.

And his words were not going unnoticed as a group of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers approached him. Verse 18. I'll briefly gloss over the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers' beliefs a bit later, but what particularly sticks out in this verse is the mixed reaction of the people who listened to what Paul was proclaiming.

Some of them reacted negatively, calling Paul a babbler, an ignoramus. They're like, what are you talking about, man? Like, we don't know what this God is. You're out of your mind.

They chose to ignore him. However, others took an interest in what was said because Paul seemed to be introducing a foreign divinity, a new God who seemed to be without a temple or altar in Athens.

[18 : 29] Verse 19 to 20. And so they took him and brought him to the Areopagus saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? The Areopagus or Mars Hill was the location of the Supreme Court of Athens in which the Areopagus Council would govern over the city.

One of the functions of Areopagus at the time was to oversee the customs that the people of Athens followed, including their worship of certain gods. The Greeks and the Romans, they took very seriously the worship of gods and cults.

And so when a citizen wanted to introduce a new deity into the city, the citizen had to appear before the Areopagus Council and the council was to decide whether the God was worthy to be worshipped in Athens.

Anything that the council deemed as blasphemous or as an act of impiety would result in severe punishment as far as even death as decreed by the Areopagus.

Philosopher Socrates himself was sentenced to death here. As he was found guilty by the council for impiety and corrupting the youth with his ideas.

[19 : 44] And so those in the Agora, that central marketplace, who heard Paul proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection saw it as a necessity to bring Paul to the Supreme Council of Areopagus so that they may hear more about this Jesus and determine whether he is indeed worthy for worship.

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. Verse 21. Luke's observation here of the Athenians and the foreigners, it seems like a rather innocuous statement, a bit of a random statement actually.

It sounds like the people of Athens, they just enjoyed spending their leisurely time talking about what's new in the city. Imagine two of your friends going to Tate or to one of the cafes here and just chilling there with a cup of coffee or pumpkin spice latte and talking about stuff like, oh my gosh, did you hear about Taylor Swift, the Ares tour?

Or did you watch the basketball game last night? Or the state of our economy? They're all new things. Yeah. And so it sounds like Athens is that type of people.

The Athenians are that type of people just wanting to hear something new all the time. But that's far from the truth. Luke's observation instead goes to show that the Athenians were serious about what information was being disseminated in their city.

[21 : 15] Upon realizing that Paul was preaching and proclaiming of a new God, they brought Paul to the Supreme Court, the Areopagus, and essentially placed him on trial for introducing this new God of his.

Paul's life was at stake in this trial. Since there was a potential consequence of death if his proclamation of Christ sounded blasphemous to the council's ears.

And so Paul appears before the Areopagus council. He's summoned there. And what we read next from verse 22 is Paul's address to the council of Areopagus. This will begin my second point, the unknown God made known.

Verse 22, So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Paul begins his speech by addressing the people of Athens and commending them for their religiosity and their piety, being most religious in every way.

Paul goes on to explain why he commenced Athenians, saying, For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God.

[22 : 35] Paul has seen all these temples. He's seen all these altars and all these statues scattered throughout Athens. And he understands how important the worship of gods was to the city.

During his survey, Paul comes across an altar dedicated to an unknown God, which was inscribed into the altar. And so Paul then makes this statement, What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul uses this altar as his starting point to share about the one true God, Yahweh, to the Athenians. It's important to note here that Paul is not saying to the Athenians, The unknown God that you guys worship, that's Yahweh.

The unknown God of the Athenians is one of many gods in the Greco-Roman consortium of deities. In other words, the Athenians are worshipping an unknown God in a pantheistic, in a polytheistic context.

Not a monotheistic one. To identify Yahweh as one of many gods would be a severe ontological error because God is the one and only true God.

[23 : 50] The greatest commandment as written in Deuteronomy 6, verse 4 proclaims, Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

If Paul were to identify Yahweh as one of many gods, he would not be loving Yahweh with his all, with his everything. He would be divided in his devotion and he would not be obeying the greatest commandment.

This ontological issue is also relevant in our modern culture today. There is this westernized notion that Yahweh and the Muslim Allah are the one and the same.

because Christians and Muslims believe in Abraham, they believe in Moses, they believe in the Old Testament, and even in the existence of Jesus. Both religions are categorized, therefore, as Abrahamic religions for those similarities.

However, Muslims do not, they do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. In fact, the Quran views the notion of God as having a Son, as blasphemy.

[25 : 03] If you ask some of the most devout Muslims, they would absolutely hate the idea that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. How can we be worshiping the same God if such an important attribute and a core person of our triune God, Jesus Christ, is rejected by the Muslim faith?

It's not possible. Our God, Yahweh, is one, and our God is unique. To equate His nature to the nature of other gods, including Allah, is a grave mistake.

And so what Paul is trying to say to the Athenians is that they have been ignorant of the one true God, Yahweh. And so Paul is going to make the unknown Yahweh known to them.

in the following set of verses, Paul, he identifies points of agreement, but also points of contradiction as part of his apologetics to his audience.

His audience being the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Areopagus Council, and the rest of the Athenian crowd in order to proclaim Yahweh to all of them. While Paul first finds points of agreement with the Athenians, he is not agreeing with them in order to fit Yahweh into their own philosophical or religious ideas.

[26 : 25] Paul's contradicting the beliefs of the Athenians and he uses scripturally based statements to set apart Yahweh from the Athenians' idols.

And so Paul begins his introduction and defense of Yahweh in verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

Paul first states that Yahweh is the creator of the world and everything in it. This means that all things inanimate like the stars, the skies, the lands, and the waters were created by Yahweh.

And all things animate like plants, animals, and human beings were also created and designed by Yahweh. Everything that exists, living and non-living, is the result of the handiwork of Yahweh, the Lord God.

And so Paul emphasizes then that Yahweh is the Lord of heaven and earth, meaning that he has dominion and control over everything that is in and between the expanses of heaven and earth.

[27 : 35] Through this emphasis, Paul is contradicting and challenging the values of Greco-Roman polytheism. The Athenians would have believed that their gods ruled over only specific domains of influence.

For example, there's Zeus, the god of the sky, the god of thunder, or Poseidon, the god of the ocean and the seas. Zeus has no control or influence over the seas. He has no influence over the fish that swim in the seas, while Poseidon himself doesn't have any influence over the skies or the winged creatures in the skies.

But Paul is asserting here that Yahweh is the one true creator of all these domains, all these things, and his lordship is over all these dominions. The creation narrative in Genesis 1 attests to this truth that God was the one who created all things from nothingness.

His lordship is over all these things. In the final part of verse 24, Paul says that God does not live in temples made by man. If Yahweh is the creator of all things, and if he has infinite authority and dominion over all things, such a powerful God can't be confined into structures made by human hands.

The Stoics and the Epicureans would have agreed to Paul's assertion here. The Stoics were convinced that the gods did not live in temples that were constructed by humans because they were of one essence with nature.

[29 : 07] The Epicureans also believed that the higher powers were uninvolved with human activity and therefore did not participate in any worship or sacrifice from humans.

Therefore, they would not want to dwell in these altars and temples of sacrifice. But Paul isn't building his argument here of God and agreeing with these Greek philosophies.

His assertions are biblically informed. Isaiah chapter 66 verses 1 to 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.

Scripture affirms that God created all things and in his infinite power he can't be contained in these man-made structures. Verse 25, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.

[30 : 12] God doesn't need our services. He doesn't need our sacrifice. He doesn't need anything that human beings can offer to him. While the Stoics and the Epicureans would once again agree to this point, Paul makes this assertion once again not to appeal to their philosophical values but to make a scripturally based point.

Psalms 50 verses 12 to 13 illustrates Yahweh proclaiming, If I were hungry I would not tell you for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?

Because God is the creator of all things he is self-sufficient not needing anything or anyone else to sustain him. As a matter of fact Paul states that God gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Once again this is a biblically based assertion. Genesis 2 in the creation narrative Yahweh formed man from dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living creature.

Isaiah 42 also proclaims of God of God's creation the creator of the heavens who stretches them out who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it.

[31 : 37] If Yahweh is indeed the one who creates the one who gives life and the one who sustains life for all of mankind how can we not give him the recognition and the worship that he deserves?

Our very existence is wholly dependent on him from start to finish. And God made from one man every nation verse 26 and God made one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of the dwelling place.

Paul's now making it very clear to the Athenians that he's proclaiming of the God of Israel the God of the Jews Yahweh. Any educated listener in the Areopagus would know of Jewish cosmology and would recognize Paul's reference to the creation account that God created one man Adam as the original ancestor of all creation of all humankind.

This one man would lead to the entire human race who would inhabit all the face of the earth and this one man would give rise to every nation that dwelled on the earth.

However God isn't just a distant God. He doesn't just remove himself to the background to let humans determine their own fates. Paul states that Yahweh had determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

[33 : 04] God is not only Lord of all creation but he's also Lord over all the history of the human race. Nations will appear and disappear over time and the boundaries of the nations and cities will constantly change.

Yahweh in his sovereignty is the one God who oversees all these changes and he determines the times in which the nations will see their rise and their fall.

The Stoics and the polytheistic Athenians they would have believed that every nation and boundary was governed by a higher being. However they believed that each of these nations were governed by different gods.

Paul contradicts them by saying that there is only one God who rules over them all and that is Yahweh who created all human beings and subsequently created all nations.

There's a song that we at here at Trinity Cambridge like to sing called Ancient of Days. This song it refers to Daniel chapter 7 in which the prophet Daniel he sees this vision of four terrifying beasts.

[34 : 15] Four beasts each representing a tyrannical nation. However each of these nations are destroyed and stripped of their dominion by the Ancient of Days the Lord God Yahweh.

This can only be done by the Almighty God the Lord of all nations and human history the Ancient of Days. As the lyrics proclaim though the nations rage kingdoms rise and fall should I sing this?

There is still one king reigning over all none above him none before him all of time in his hands for his throne it shall remain and ever stand all the power all the glory I will trust in his name for my God is the Ancient of Days.

The God that is proclaimed by Paul is not only the creator of all humans he is the sustainer and the sovereign Lord over all the life of mankind and all the history of nations.

And so Paul goes on to reason in verse 27 and Yahweh created humans that they would seek him and hope to find him. Paul remarks that Yahweh created human beings so that they would naturally desire to be in fellowship with him.

[35 : 36] In Genesis Adam and Eve we're in direct fellowship with God in the Garden of the...