

THEISM

The Unknown God

If you were alone in a foreign city, awaiting the coming of friends, you'd likely look around to discover what you could about the place. That's what the Apostle Paul did when he came to Athens (Acts 17:16-35). But what he saw disturbed him. He saw a city filled with idols. Some have said there were 30,000 of them – perhaps more idols than people. And this was in the most educated city of the Greco-Roman world. Had you been there then and seen this, what kind of impact would this discovery have made upon you? What would you have done?

Paul did not think himself only one person who could do nothing about idolatry. On the contrary, he reasoned in the synagogue and disputed daily with those who happened to be in the marketplace. When he encountered Epicurean, Stoic and other philosophers, they thought he proclaimed foreign deities to them because he talked about Jesus and the resurrection. They took him to the city's ruling body, and requested that he tell them more about what they thought were strange things. Paul's initiative had gained him a hearing. Had you been there then and been given this opportunity to speak, what would you have said?

Paul's speech to the Athenians consisted of introductory remarks and a description of the living God. In his introductory remarks, Paul focused on their acknowledgment that they worshipped an "unknown God." Paul then declared, "Him I proclaim to you" (23). As Paul described the living God, he contrasted Him to their idolatrous ideals and practices. ***Paul described God as creator and Lord.*** "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (24). ***Paul described God as provider.*** "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things" (25). ***Paul described God as ruler.*** "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (26). ***Paul described God as wanting people to seek him.*** "So that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (27). ***Paul described God as progenitor.*** "For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising" (28-29). ***Paul described God as judge.*** "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." (30-31).

At this point, Paul's speech was interrupted. The idea of a bodily resurrection was too much for these Athenian philosophers. They could not reconcile human experiences with the concept of a bodily resurrection. Some mocked Paul and his teachings. Others said they'd hear him again. However, a few believed.

The Athenians were not the only ones in biblical history who have not known God. The Old Testament describes many people who did not know God. The ancient Egyptians did not know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and therefore refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt. When God through Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he sent plagues against the Egyptians, all of which were attacks against their many and various gods. When the Israelites

came into the land of Canaan, they overthrew, by the hand of God, nations who did not know God. During their history, the Israelites themselves often forgot God. A notable illustration of that fact is the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al regarding who was God (1 Kings 18). The prophet, Hosea, declared that in his time there was no knowledge of God in the land (Hosea 4:1). The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar did not know God until he learned about him from Daniel (Daniel 1-4). These are but a few examples.

Wherever God is unknown, idolatry and immorality tend to prevail. Idolatry deifies human attributes and the powers of nature. People make idols in their own image. Idolatry entertains and amuses. It appeals to human rivalries and ambitions. It ministers to the artistic works of mankind. However, idolatry hinders a correct understanding of human nature. Since man was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; 9:6), man must first know God's nature in order to know his own nature. Associated with a lack of knowledge about God is the lack of truth and mercy (Hosea 4:1).

Because God is not known, swearing, lying, killing, stealing and adultery break all restraints (Hosea 4:2). When people do not retain knowledge of God, God gives them over to debased minds to do things that are not fitting. Although they know the righteous judgment of God that those who practice such things are deserving of death, they not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Idolatry is destitute of moral power and offers no hope or reward for a better life. With idolatry and immorality come cultural decline and destruction. The land mourns (Hosea 4:3). "With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction" (Hosea 8:4, ESV). When people turn away from God, God turns away from them, but when people turn back to God, God receives them back (Hosea 4:6; 2 Chronicles 15:2-4). God requires that everyone repent (i.e., turn away from idolatry and know God) because he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

Like Paul, we can see idolatry all around us. Idolatry and its consequences exist throughout the world. Although idols may be physically most evident in nations that follow Hindu and Buddhist religions, idolatry also exist in other forms. In Africa, animism (i.e., ancestor worship) is a form of idolatry. In secular societies of the Western World, including the United States, idolatry exists in the forms of naturalism, materialism, hedonism, scientism, statism, etc. In world history, an adequate knowledge of the true and living God has rarely existed in a country, or in its leaders. Surely no one will affirm that God is now well known in our world, in our country, or even in our respective communities.

Like Paul, we may observe that our world is "very religious," yet without knowledge of the living God. Since God is not sufficiently known, can we not also, like Paul, inform our world about the God who created and provides for us, who rules and directs human circumstances, who wants us to grope after him and find him, and who will one day judge us in righteousness? Can we not, like Paul, call upon our world to turn to the living God and to repent? We should not be surprised, however, if we, like Paul, discover that not many turn to believe in the true God. Nonetheless, "since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). May we be like Paul, who, when seeing people trusting in idols, did not hesitate to declare the message of Jesus and the resurrection.