

## Where Does God Live?

Psalm 11, Acts 17:22–34

Paul has arrived in the city of Athens. He is alone. Silas and Timothy have sent him on ahead while they finish up some matters in Berea, where Paul's presence had become a flashpoint for Jewish opposition. As Paul looks around Athens—the cultural and intellectual center of the world—he is deeply disturbed by the large number of temples to the so-called gods of the Greek pantheon. The worship of idols was big business in this intellectual city! Paul's response is to preach the gospel—no surprise here! He preaches in the synagogue and in the marketplace, in an effort to reach both Jews and Gentiles.

Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers heard him and dismissed him as a babbler—literally a “seed picker,” an idler who makes a living picking up scraps, somewhat akin to a person who picks up bottles and cans in order to collect a cash deposit—as he was not an accredited philosopher or card-carrying member of their guild. Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them *Jesus* and the *resurrection*—Ἰησοῦς and Ἀνάστασις—strange gods, so they thought, who were not part of the Greek pantheon. The truth of the gospel fell on deaf ears—ears that were not regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Paul would later explain that “the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). As we preach and witness, how we need to pray that the Holy Spirit would go before us and open hearts to the gospel.

Paul's preaching stirred up controversy, and he was eventually brought before the Areopagus—Greek for “Mars Hill,” the rocky hill in Athens, near the Acropolis, where the Athenian supreme tribunal and court of morals was held.<sup>1</sup> Some people would have been terrified at the thought of being hailed before a court, but for Paul it was an opportunity for the Gospel to get a wider hearing. The divinely-ordained method of spreading the truth is through *preaching*. Here, then, is Paul's memorable address before the Areopagus.

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god.” Here is his introduction. As Paul had walked the streets of Athens he had taken note of all the heathen temples, each constructed to honor a god or goddess of the Greek *pantheon* (a word meaning *a temple dedicated to all the gods*). Here was not some obscure provincial village but an elite, world-class city, home to philosophers and intellectuals, that was devoting considerable resources and money to the worship of heathen gods. This was money that could have been used to buy food for the children or improve their standard of

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<sup>1</sup> Easton's Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

living, but instead was going to build and maintain heathen temples, priests and sacrifices. Obviously the people of Athens *believed* in their gods; they supported their religion by their wealth. People spend their money on things that are important to them; one can gauge a person's priorities by how he spends his money. Obviously food, clothing and housing are essential. But beyond these essentials, what does a person spend money on? Status symbols, expensive clothing, electronics, vacations? What about religion? The church is supported by the voluntary tithes and offerings of God's people. These monies go to support the worship of God, the ministry of the Word, religious education, and diaconal ministry. Are these worthy causes important to a people? If they are, they support them with their money. The Christian gratefully gives to the church because the God of heaven is important to him. He understands and joyfully accepts that his chief end is to glorify God, and he wants to glorify him with his time and treasure. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). An idolater worships self and keeps his money to himself.

Think of a pagan in an out-of-the-way place in Asia, India, Africa or South America. He wants to get ahead in life, he wants his standard of living to increase. So he offers a sacrifice to a heathen god, hoping that this so-called god will bless him and make him richer. But his god is actually a figment of human imagination. It does not exist. Last week we referred to Psalm 96:5, "all the gods of the peoples are *idols*, but the Lord made the heavens." As we observed last week, the Hebrew word translated "idols" literally means *worthless*—of no value. Heathen idols are worthless; they cannot answer prayer, they cannot save, they cannot take a person to heaven, they cannot take away sins, they cannot make a sinner acceptable in the sight of a holy God. They are a bad investment; a wise person will spend no money on heathen idols. But the God of heaven saves! He answers prayer! He is alive. He is the one with whom we have to do. He is the one before whom we will one day stand. If he is really important to us, then we will joyfully give him our time and treasure. And if we do, he promises to open for us the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing, such that there will not be room enough to receive it. Do we believe this? Has the God of heaven changed our heart and brought us to himself? Has he given us a heart to know him and love him and serve him and stand in awe of him? Has he given us the joy of our salvation? Has he filled us with his Spirit? God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). Let us give generously, knowing that it is not money wasted, that by casting our bread upon the waters, we shall find it again after many days.<sup>2</sup>

Paul says, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious." There are three categories of adjectives: positive, comparative and superlative

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<sup>2</sup> Eccl. 11:1

(think of *good, better, best*; *good* is positive, *better* is comparative, *best* is superlative). When Paul says, “You are very religious, the word translated “religious” is not just positive but *comparative*. It is as though Paul is telling the Athenians, “You are not just religious, but more religious than most; if being religious is commendable, then you are right up there.” But being religious is not commendable in itself; just being religious will not get a person into heaven. Worshiping a false idol does not count. God says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”<sup>3</sup> It is morally required of every person on earth that he worship the true God, and no other. The true God is the God of the Bible, the God who has spoken in Holy Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. A person who worships a false god may be very sincere; he may sincerely believe with all his heart that he is doing the right thing. But being sincere is not enough to get a person to heaven. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”<sup>4</sup> The true God requires that we come to him through the only Mediator—Christ.<sup>5</sup> The one who comes to him he will in no wise cast out.

As Paul wandered about Athens he took note of all the heathen temples. There was one altar that particularly stood out to him. It had the inscription “To the unknown god.” It is as if the Athenians wanted to cover all their bases. They worshiped the gods of the Greek pantheon—gods and goddesses such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo and Artemis. Athens was named in honor of the goddess Athena. But what if they had missed a god? What if that god was the right one—the key to their happiness? They wanted to cover all their bases, so they constructed one more altar with the inscription “To the unknown god.” But the God of heaven masterfully rules and overrules all human actions. The anonymous craftsman who engraved the words “To the unknown god” on that heathen altar had no way of knowing that in the providence of God his words—words that he had freely chosen himself in his own mind, engraved by the free and uncoerced action of his mind and hands—would be used by the great theologian Paul as his point of connection with his idol-worshiping audience. We can all be thankful that the God of heaven works all things for his glory and his peoples’ good. “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”<sup>6</sup> The true God of heaven was unknown to the Athenians, but he would be unknown no longer. Paul uses an inscription on a heathen altar to connect with his audience. In the words of the King James Version, “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ex. 20:3

<sup>4</sup> Prov. 14:12

<sup>5</sup> 1 Tim. 2:5

<sup>6</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism 11, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

Now it is essential to worship the true God, and to worship him knowingly. Jesus said, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). To worship God ignorantly is to worship other so-called gods *more* than the true God, or to worship using idols of gold, silver, brass, wood and stone. Tragically, the worship of heathen idols sometimes involves indecent and inhumane practices such as cutting oneself, dancing around naked, or offering human sacrifice. In times of great apostasy the Israelites even burned their own children on heathen altars. God warns, “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.”<sup>7</sup> Heathen worship is not pretty, and it is unacceptable to the God of heaven, who wants us to worship in the Spirit and according to the truth revealed in his word. The priests of Baal whom Elijah challenged on Mount Carmel cried, “O Baal, hear us,” and cut their flesh with knives and lancets, till blood gushed out from their wounds.<sup>8</sup> But they were not to be commended for their sincerity but rather pitied for their gullibility; their worship was unacceptable because it did not conform to the word of God but originated in the mind of man. Such “will-worship”<sup>9</sup> can never be acceptable to the God of heaven. “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul then begins to proclaim to the members of the Athenian supreme tribunal the true God—the God of heaven: he is the Creator, he is Lord of all, and he does not live in temples made with hands. He is preaching to gentiles who are hearing about the true God for the first time. Here are men who have no knowledge of Scripture, in contrast to the Jews, who gathered in the synagogue every Sabbath day to hear the Scriptures read. So his sermon is not filled with scriptural allusions, but it *is* filled with Scripture truth. He begins the body of his message with the bold statement, “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.” Let us consider the three elements, first,

### **1. God is Creator.**

In contrast to the Greek gods of Athens—petty, self-absorbed, power-hungry—the true God is the Creator, who made the world and everything in it. This, of course, is how the Bible begins: with the creation story. If all things and all people

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<sup>7</sup> Deut. 18:10

<sup>8</sup> 1 Kings 18:28

<sup>9</sup> Col. 2:23

<sup>10</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 21:1, <https://opc.org/wcf.html>

are the special creation of almighty God, then life has meaning and purpose. We humans were created in order to have fellowship with the God of heaven. Every life is important; none is to be discarded. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We do not need to find meaning for ourselves but to seek the God of heaven, who gives us meaning.

Some people struggle with feelings of inadequacy; they do not feel loved or appreciated or needed. If that person is you, then take heart! God has a purpose for you! Jesus said, “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus came to give us life—abundant life here on earth, eternal life that begins here on earth and continues forever into eternity future. When sorrows come—and come they will in a sin-cursed earth—they are not without meaning, for we “sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.”<sup>12</sup> In the midst of our sorrows we can know that our loving Savior has a *purpose* for us; he has destined us for *glory*, and whatever evil happens to us in this vale of tears is ultimately for our good. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Dear saint of God, you *are* needed! Every member of the body of Christ is necessary to the good of the whole. The hand cannot say to the eye, “I have no need of you.”<sup>13</sup>

The problem with the theory of evolution is that it cannot explain how *something* arose out of *nothing*, or how *life* arose out of *non-life*. See that rock out in the parking lot? How long do you think you would have to look at it to see it turn into a living thing? You would be waiting for a long time! In the beginning there was only God. No creature was around to witness the momentous event recorded in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” God *spoke* all things into existence. He began with no raw materials; all things were created by his mighty word. God is the great Creator, the one to whom all men are ultimately responsible.

## **2. God is Lord.**

Because God is the Creator, therefore he is *Lord*—absolute master—of heaven and earth. This is a lesson that must be learned by every son and daughter of Adam. When Adam sinned, death came upon all men. All of us by nature are rebels, in rebellion against the God of heaven. We come into this world by birth, thinking that everybody *else’s* chief end is to make *us* happy, and cater to our every need. All of us by nature are self-centered. As little babies, we thought that the world owed us a living. We became indignant when people didn’t march at our orders. All children need to learn—as do we all—that the world doesn’t revolve around us; the God who created us is Lord of heaven and earth. All of us need to learn

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<sup>11</sup> John 10:10

<sup>12</sup> 1 Thess. 4:13

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 12:21

submission to the one true God. His eternal Son the Lord Jesus Christ said truly, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” His are the keys of the kingdom, which are given to the elders of the church to admit penitent sinners and exclude the impenitent from the kingdom of Christ—and if they *remain* impenitent, from heaven itself. The wicked ultimately will be cast into outer darkness reserved for Satan, his demons and all who die without Christ.

Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and his word is to be obeyed. The other day Norma and I attended her high-school class reunion, where she met a lady who had attended church with her long ago when they were young. She and her friend enjoyed talking and reminiscing with one another and had a pleasant conversation—until Norma brought up the topic of abortion and how it is the murder of an innocent human in his or her mother’s womb. Norma’s friend stopped her and said, “While I do not promote abortion, I believe a woman has a right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.” Norma was shocked. How could this woman, who attended church with her when they were little, have come to believe such a lie? Sadly, the woman and her husband attend a church where the word of God is not fully honored. Lip service is paid to Jesus, but people feel free to accept those parts of the Bible that they like and reject those parts that they don’t like. But the Lord of glory doesn’t allow us that option! If we come to him we must deny ourself, take up our cross and follow him. We must acknowledge him as Lord of our thoughts, plans, actions and future. We are duty-bound to reject every idol and every thought that exalts itself against the knowledge of God and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. When Christ says, “God made them at the beginning male and female,”<sup>14</sup> that settles it for the Christian. Gender is not a construct that a person chooses, but something that is determined by the God of heaven at conception. There are not a multiplicity of genders to suit every whim, but two and two only: male and female. No surgeon or hormone regimen can change a male into a female, or vice versa. And when Christ, the Lord and giver of life, says, “Let the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God,”<sup>15</sup> he means “Let the little children *come* to me”! No human has the right or authority to prevent a little child from coming to Christ by snuffing out his or her life in the mother’s womb. No government on earth can legitimately take innocent human life. Christ is Lord of all, and nobody on earth has the right to disobey him.

### **3. Where does God live?**

Paul continues the main body of his sermon by declaring that God “does not dwell in temples made with hands.” There were plenty of temples in ancient Athens, each to a different god of the Greek pantheon. But the true God does not

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<sup>14</sup> See Matt. 19:4

<sup>15</sup> See Mark 10:14

live in manmade temples! Where does God live? The Bible tells us that God is a Spirit. He is not physical, as are we. He is not confined to one time or one space as we are. He is omnipresent; that is, present everywhere. “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth.”<sup>16</sup> Nothing can be hidden from his eyes. He says, “Do not I fill heaven and earth?”<sup>17</sup>

But specifically, where does God live? He answers this question in Isaiah 41, where he says, “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend... Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”<sup>18</sup> Here, God speaks to the covenant people, his servants, his chosen ones. He addresses them using the singular pronoun “thee” (אַתָּה). He calls them his seed (עַרְוָה, singular)—“the seed of Abraham my friend” (אַהֲבָה)—lit. “my lover”! The word is used of the father-son relationship (God tells Abraham: “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou *lovest*,” Gen. 22:2). It is also used of the husband-wife relationship (“Isaac ... took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he *loved* her,” Gen. 24:67). Brothers and sisters, we are called to *love* the Lord with all our hearts. Are you a lover of the Lord? Does he mean more to you than anything in the world? Do you love the lover of your soul? You should!

God is speaking to Israel—his elect people, his church. He addresses them with the singular “you” (KJV: “thou”). Why is this important? He is addressing the covenant people collectively; he is not speaking to individual Christians. It is to the church that God says, “Fear not; for I am with thee.” If you are a confessing member of the church who truly loves God, then this is for you: “Fear not; for I am with thee.” *Here* is the place where God lives—in his *church*! It is to the church that Paul writes, “That Christ may  *dwell* in your hearts by faith.”<sup>19</sup> And with his presence we need not fear anything—not threats from the government, not the results of an election. Our future is in *his* hands, and it is secure!

Who is the true God? First, he is the Creator. The creation—the heavens and the earth—are the work of *his* hands. The gods of the nations do not have this distinction; they are not the *creator* but *creations* of the human mind. They are not eternal; rather, they have a beginning. The true God is *eternal*. Second, the true God is *Lord* of heaven and earth. He is the one to whom all of us owe our allegiance and loyalty. Third, the God of heaven and earth lives in the hearts of his people; he does not live in temples made with hands. If you belong to him, then he lives in *your* heart, and you need not fear. Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Chron. 16:9

<sup>17</sup> Jer. 23:24

<sup>18</sup> Isa. 41:8, 10

<sup>19</sup> Eph. 3:17