

WORSHIPING THE UNKNOWN GOD

– ACTS 17:16-34. – JULY 25. –

Golden Text: – "God is a spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." – John 4:24.

ST. PAUL awaited the coming of Silas and Timothy at Athens, then the center of the world's culture, intelligence and worldly wisdom. Athens boasted that in one century of its intellectual dominance it had sent forth more intellectual giants into all the world than all the rest of the world had supplied for five centuries. Jerusalem had been the center of true religion, as Rome was the center of the world's imperial authority, and Athens was the world's intellectual capital. We can imagine St. Paul walking through the streets of that great city, admiring its architecture, the most wonderful of the world, listening to some of the scientific teachers of that day and noting the numerous monuments with which the city was fairly crowded. Pliny, the historian, notes the fact that about this time Athens contained more than three thousand public statues and a countless number of lesser images in private houses. Of these the majority were of gods, demigods and heroes. He notes the fact that in one street there stood before every house a square pillar carrying upon it the bust of the god Hermes. Every gateway and post carried its protecting god. Every street had its sanctuary.

No wonder we read that Paul's spirit was stirred within him as he beheld so intelligent a city wholly given over to idolatry, apparently utterly ignorant of the true God. The longing seized him to tell these worldly-wise men of the great Creator and his wisdom, justice, love and power. He found the Jewish synagogue as usual and there he reasoned with the Jews and with devout persons and in the market places he talked with all who were willing. Our translation says *disputed*, but it is generally

admitted that this word does not well represent the thought of the original, which rather signifies *conversed* or *reasoned*. Disputes, in the ordinary sense of that word, are of little value, usually accomplishing little good.

Some called him a babbler, implying that there was neither reason nor sense in his presentation, but others thought more favorably and were curious to have a formal discourse. So in the Lord's providence the way was open for him to deliver a discourse on the Plan of the Ages amongst the wise men of the earth on Mars Hill, probably in the great structure known as the Parthenon. This must have seemed a favorable opening to the Apostle to find intelligent people really inquiring respecting the Gospel he had to proclaim. However, the curiosity of the Athenians, like that of some of the worldly today, was superficial. They wished to keep abreast of every new theory, but particularly that they might the better defend their own position to which they were already committed.

YE ARE TOO RELIGIOUS

Our common version reports the Apostle to have begun his discourse by accusing his hearers of being too superstitious. However true the statement might have been it would have been an unwise one, as it would have prejudiced and offended his hearers from the outstart and needlessly. We do well, therefore, to translate the word too religious, instead of too superstitious. And this translation fits well with the discourse which followed. For the Apostle proceeds to show that by the images erected they recognized innumerable gods and that in addition he had seen one altar to the unknown God. This was being over-religious in one sense of the word – unwisely so. Reason should have taught them what Revelation teaches us, namely, that there is but one living and true God. The mind that roams about and grasps innumerable gods is truly over-religious and under-wise.

"TO THE UNKNOWN GOD"

The inscription on one of the altars, "To the unknown God," became the text of the Apostle's discourse. He preached the true God and Jesus Christ whom he had sent. He showed Divine justice and its requirements, which we, as the fallen race of Adam, are unable to meet; that thus we are under condemnation and unworthy of eternal life. He showed that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to be our satisfaction price, to redeem us from the condemnation of death and to grant us resurrection privileges. He explained that this [R4410 : page 172] true God was neither stone nor wood, nor were there any such representations of him, but that, as our Golden Text declares, "They that worship him must worship him in spirit and in Truth." He drew their attention to a greater God than they had ever thought of. He showed the length and breadth of the Divine love – that it was not confined to one nation or people, but that God had made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined the appointed season in which they should come to a knowledge of himself, according to the place of their residence; because he desires that all should seek him and that feeling after him they should find him.

How true! The Lord has revealed himself to some of us and has drawn us to a knowledge of himself and to opportunities for still further knowledge and grace. Yet many are still in ignorance, his time or season for their being brought to a knowledge of the Truth having not yet fully developed. He is being found by those who desire to find him; those who are out of accord with sin; those who are feeling after God with a desire to find him. To this class alone does he appeal. How glad we are that, after having gathered the "elect" of this Gospel Age, he will ultimately cause every knee to bow and every tongue to confess, and the knowledge of the Lord to fill the whole earth!

The Apostle, in speaking to philosophers, spoke from [R4410 : page 173] the standpoint of reason, instead of attempting to discuss the matter from the standpoint of Divine Revelation, as he would have done had he been speaking to a congregation of Jews or Christians. Thus to the barbarians and to the stoics of Athens, he became a philosopher that he might the better assist them to the true philosophy and the Plan of the Ages. For instance, had he been speaking to the Jews or Christians he might have noted the fact that all out of Christ are out of Divine favor and under Divine condemnation; but in addressing these philosophers he stated the truth from another standpoint. He called attention to the fact that in one sense of the word the entire human family are brethren and all of them God's children, or offspring. Note the logic of the matter. If humanity be the offspring of God, as his children they should in some degree resemble him. And that being true the gold and silver and stone images must be very poor representations of the true God. Man himself, as the child or offspring of God, would better represent him, especially in the higher elements of his character.

"THIS IGNORANCE GOD WINKED AT"

Paul anticipated the question of his hearers – Why do you come around now to tell us of this God? If he is our Creator and we are his children why did he not long ago send us a message? And are we responsible for not having worshipped him, when we knew him not? The Apostle's answer is, You are not responsible up to the present time. Such ignorance or idolatry God winked at or let go unnoticed, because until now his great plan had not reached that stage of development which authorized the sending of the message to you. Now the message is for you. God has sent it. He commands all men everywhere to repent – of sins, all unrighteousness, and to come back into harmony with himself.

It may be asked, Why tell men to repent at that time more than previously? We answer, that the Apostle explains why, by saying that *now* God commands all men everywhere to repent because he has appointed another day of judgment. In the first judgment Adam on trial was found unworthy of eternal life and was sentenced to death. His entire race shared in his death penalty. But now in due time Christ had redeemed Adam and his race from that death sentence and thus opened the way for the appointment of another day of judgment, of trial for life or death eternal. This second trial or day of judgment would not be merely for those who would be living at the time, but would have to do with all of the race, of every nation, people, kindred and tongue, "All men everywhere." This would imply an awakening of the dead. Otherwise the millions who have already died could never have God's grace and could never have an opportunity or participation in it. The proof that this all was God's intention and that he was able to raise the dead St. Paul points out as already demonstrated by the fact that the One who redeemed the race by his death had risen from the dead and in due time would be prepared to carry out all the provisions of the Divine Plan in dealing not only with the living, but the dead of the race and giving to all a gracious opportunity for eternal life; – and the blessed opportunity of this was now presented to those who heard.

SOME MOCKED AT THE RESURRECTION

No other religion than that of the Bible teaches a resurrection of the dead. All others teach that death is a deception – that when men die they really become more alive; when they lose consciousness, they really become more intelligent. Only the Bible teaches in accord with the voice of our sense that the dead are dead and "know not anything." Only the Bible teaches that a future life is dependent upon the resurrection of the dead. Only the Bible teaches that the redemption of the dead is

dependent upon the death of our Lord Jesus. Only the Bible teaches that the Redeemer must come again the second time – not again to suffer, not again as the man, but as the Lord of life and glory on the spirit plane to change his elect Bride to his own nature, and to associate her with him in his Kingdom glory, and to establish amongst men the reign of righteousness long promised, and for which we pray, "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven."

The philosophers of that day at Athens, like the philosophers of our day and of every epoch, sneered at the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Some of them denied a future life entirely; others held that human life persisted and is indestructible. All were in opposition to the Bible teaching of a *sentence* of death and *redemption* by death and a *resurrection from death*. All interest in the teaching of the apostles vanished for the majority when they learned that the entire philosophy rested upon the resurrection of the dead. To the worldly mind nothing seems so irrational and unreasonable as this feature of the Christian religion. This doctrine today is proving a test to many. Few can receive it. Yet all who do not receive it are very certain to stumble into some of the pitfalls of error which the Adversary is permitted to arrange now for the stumbling of all who reject the counsel of God.

NOT MANY GREAT OR WISE

Nevertheless the Apostle's mission was not in vain, for we read that "certain men clave unto him" – stuck to him. The Truth is a magnet which has a drawing power upon hearts of a certain character. The Apostle did not expect to convert many of those philosophers. He knew that not many wise, rich, great or learned according to the course of this world could come in amongst those whom the Lord is calling at the present time to constitute the Bride of Christ. He knew that their time to hear the message

would be during the Millennium – in that day of judgment or trial of which he had just been telling. Some of those who declined to hear further said: "We may hear you again on this matter;" but if the Truth did not appeal to them at once it is quite doubtful if it would do so later.

Does not this same principle hold true to-day? Is it not still true that the Lord is seeking a "little flock" only? Is it not still true that acceptance of the Truth indicates those who are drawn to the Lord and guided by his holy Spirit? and that inability to see its beauty and force is an indication of unworthiness of it? Let us be content, if possible, to find and to bless with the Truth those whom the Lord our God has called and drawn, and let us be content to leave the others for his "due time" after having put the Truth before them. The condemnation of death will continue upon all except the household of faith until the time for the establishment of the great Kingdom. Then Israel will be blessed under the terms of the New Covenant; the blood for the sealing, the blood of Christ, is now being prepared in the sufferings of the Head, in which the Body is permitted to share. Then, under the provisions of that New (Law) Covenant, the blind eyes of Israel will be opened and their deaf ears will be unstopped and reconciliation made complete to them. Evidently this privilege of reconciliation will be open to all the world of mankind who, by becoming proselytes, may share the blessings of that New Covenant with Israel. And how glorious will be our privilege if we are found faithful – to be sharers with our Lord in putting that New Covenant into execution, and, as its Mediator, blessing Israel and the world!

OUR GOLDEN TEXT

We do well to keep continually in mind the thought that God, with whom we have to do, is a spirit being of unlimited power; that he can read the very thoughts and intents of our

hearts and that any worship or service that we could render, that he could accept, must be honest-hearted – rendered in spirit and in truth. He seeketh only such to worship him, and of this class there are but a few at the present time. After the Covenant of Grace shall have gathered out all the household of [R4410 : page 174] faith, the Royal Priesthood and the Great Company of antitypical Levites, then, as a means of extending God's favor, the New Covenant will witness the thousands of the world *coerced* to righteousness – that all may be enabled to see, to experience the love of God and the blessings of righteousness, to the intent that all who will may come into heart harmony with him and proportionately experience Restitution, the re-writing of the Divine Law in the very character, the very being. Yet in the end, even with the world, only such as worship God in spirit and in truth will be finally approved and be granted life eternal beyond the Millennial Age.

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