

ST. PAUL AT ATHENS

– *JULY 16. – ACTS 17:16-34. –*

ATHENS THE INTELLECTUAL CENTER OF THE OLD WORLD – IMAGES OF THEIR GODS EVERYWHERE – PREACHING IN THE PARTHENON – THE ESSENCE OF THE APOSTLE'S DISCOURSE – THE BASIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHINGS – THE TRUTH REJECTED BY THE WORDLY-WISE – GREEK PHILOSOPHY STILL HOLDS SWAY OVER THE MULTITUDE – ONLY A FEW BELIEVE THE TRUTH.

"In Him we live and move and have our being." – Verse 28.

WHILE Silas remained with the Bereans to strengthen and establish them, as Timothy had remained at Thessalonica and Luke at Philippi, St. Paul went on alone to Athens, then the center of the world's culture, intelligence and wisdom. It was a college city, where resided the most eminent philosophers of the world, as instructors in its great colleges, to which came the world's brightest and ablest thinkers. Athens boasted that during one century of its intellectual dominance it had sent forth more intellectual giants than all the rest of the world had supplied for five centuries. Jerusalem had been the center of true religion; 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 in 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, declares that about this time Athens contained more than three thousand public statues and a countless number of lesser images in private houses. He notes the **page**

199 fact that in one street there stood before every house a square pillar supporting a bust of the god Hermes. Every gateway and every post carried its protecting god. Every street had its sanctuary.

No wonder we read that the Apostle's heart was stirred within him as he beheld so intelligent a city wholly given over to idolatry, apparently ignorant of the true God! The longing seized him to tell these worldly-wise men about the great Creator and His Wisdom, Justice, Love and Power. As usual, he found the Jewish synagogue; and there he reasoned with the Jews and with devout persons. Moreover, he talked daily in the market places with all who were willing. Our translation says that he disputed; but scholars generally admit that this word does not well represent the thought of the original, which rather signifies conversed or reasoned. Disputes, in the ordinary sense of the word, are of little value and accomplish little or no good.

Some called the Apostle a babbler, implying that there was neither reason nor sense in his presentations. Others thought more favorably, and were curious to have a formal discourse. So in the Lord's providence the way was opened for St. Paul 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 about the Gospel which he was proclaiming. 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, particularly that they might the better defend their own position, to which they were already committed.

THE ATHENIANS 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; for it would have needlessly prejudiced and offended his hearers from the outstart. We do well, therefore, to translate the word by the phrase too religious, instead of too superstitious.

The Apostle proceeds to show that by the images which they had erected they recognized innumerable gods, and that in addition he had seen one altar to the Unknown God. This was being overly 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 many 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 God had sent. He showed Divine Justice and its requirements, which the fallen race of Adam are unable to meet. He demonstrated that thus all mankind are under condemnation as unworthy of life everlasting. He showed that God so loved the world that He sent His Son to be our Satisfaction-price, to redeem mankind from the condemnation of death and to grant them resurrection privileges. He explained that this true God was neither stone nor wood, nor were there any such representations of Him, but that "they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." – John 4:24.

The Apostle thus drew the attention of the Athenians to a greater God than they had ever thought of. He showed the length and the breadth of 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 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; for He desires that all should seek Him, and that, feeling after Him, they should find Him.

How true this is! To some of us the Lord has revealed Himself, 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 arrived. He is being found out 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 to know that after having gathered the Elect of this Gospel Age, He will ultimately cause every knee to bow and every tongue to confess, and will spread the knowledge of His glory to fill the whole earth!

The Apostle, in addressing philosophers, spoke from the standpoint of reason, instead of attempting to discuss the matter from the standpoint of Divine Revelation, as He would have done if he had been speaking to a congregation of Jews or of Christians. Thus to the Stoics and other learned men of Athens he became a philosopher, in order that he might the better assist them to the true philosophy and the Plan of the Ages. For instance, had he been speaking to 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 argument. If humanity are the offspring of God, they should, as His children, resemble Him in some degree. This being true, gold, 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 character.

"THIS IGNORANCE GOD WINKED AT"

St. Paul anticipated the questions of his hearers – "Why do you come here now to tell us of this God? If He is our Creator, and if we are His children, why did He not send us a message long ago? Are we responsible for not worshipping Him, when we knew Him not?" The Apostle's answer was, You are not responsible up to the present time. Such ignorance and idolatry "God winked at" – let go unnoticed; for until now His great Plan had not reached that stage of development which authorized the sending of the Message to you. Now God has sent the Message to you. He commands all men everywhere to repent – of sins, of unrighteousness – and to come back into harmony with Himself.

The question may be asked, "Why tell men to repent at that time any more than previously?" We answer, 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 was on trial. He was found unworthy of everlasting life, and was sentenced to death. His entire race has shared in his death penalty. But now, in due time, Christ died to redeem 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 everlasting.

This second trial, or Day of Judgment, would not be merely for those who would be living at the time, but **page 200** would have to do with all the race – 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 for participation in it. The proof that all this was God's purpose, and that He was able to raise the dead – St. Paul points out as already demonstrated by the fact that the One who had died to redeem the race had arisen 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 with the dead members of the race, and giving to all a gracious opportunity for eternal life. Moreover, this blessed opportunity 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 other religions teach that death is only a deception – that when men die, they really become more alive than before death; that when they lose all consciousness, they really become more intelligent than formerly. Only the Bible teaches in accord with the voice of our senses 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 Christ. Only the Bible teaches that the Redeemer must come again the second time – not to suffer again, not as a man again, but as the Lord of life and glory on the spirit plane to change His elect Bride to His own nature, to associate her with Himself in His Kingdom glory, and to establish amongst men the Reign of Righteousness long promised, 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 persists and is indestructible. All were in opposition to the Bible teaching of a sentence of death, of a redemption by death and of a resurrection from death. All interest in the Apostle's teaching 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 so unreasonable as this feature of the Christian religion. Today this doctrine of the resurrection is proving to be 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 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." 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 now calling to constitute the Bride of Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29.) He knew that their time to hear would be during the Millennium – in that Day of Judgment, or trial, of which he had been telling the philosophers. 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 whether the same Message would do so later.

Does not this principle hold true today? 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? Is it not still true that inability to see the beauty and the force of the Truth 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. Let us be content to leave the others for His due time (1 Timothy 2:5,6), after we have 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 Natural Israel will be blessed under the terms of the New Covenant, the blood for the

sealing of which – the blood of Christ – is during this Age being prepared in the sufferings of the Head, in which the Body is permitted to share. (Col. 1:24.) Then, under the provisions of that New Law Covenant, the blind eyes of Israel shall be opened and their deaf ears unstopped, and reconciliation be made complete for them, and for the world through 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!

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