**Paul’s Answer to Superstition**

(Acts 17:22-34)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A man bought a *really* expensive car one day, and didn’t want anything to happen to it. So he insured it, of course, but being a superstitious man, he also asked a priest, a rabbi, and a Muslim cleric to *bless* the car. The Muslim prayed over it, the priest sprinkled holy water on it, and the rabbi cut off the end of the tailpipe. Probably 8 days after he bought it.

Speaking of being superstitious, here in Acts 17 the Apostle Paul has just been asked to speak on Mars Hill, the place in Athens where all the Greek philosophers got together to discuss philosophy and religion. Paul began his message in verse 17, where we read:

**“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious” (Acts 17:22).**

Now to begin with, it sure looks like Paul is starting his message by *insulting* these Athenians. After all, how would you like to be told you’re too superstitious?

But one of the definitions of the word *superstition* is “excessively devoted.” And we know that that’s the meaning of the word here, for Paul went on to say,

**“For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, hHm declare I unto you” (Acts 17:23).**

The word “devotions” there is a reference to how *devoted* they were *to their idols.* Back in verse 16 of this chapter, we learned that the city of Athens was “wholly given to idolatry,” and history says they had 30,000 idols.

So here in verse 23, Paul was telling the Athenians that he’d been walking past their *idols,* when he found this *altar* to the unknown God. And an altar was the things that pagans would park in front of their idols to have something on which to *sacrifice* to their idols, as we see when Ezekiel wrote about

**“...their *altars*...the place where they did offer sweet savour *to all their idols”* (Ezekiel 6:13).**

But the altar that *Paul* came across *wasn’t* parked in front of an idol, because it was dedicated to the *unknown* god. So it was parked in front of *nothing.* At least that’s how I read it.

And I think that’s what Paul meant when he told them they were *excessively devoted.* He was saying, “You guys have 30,000 gods, but you’re afraid there’s a god you don’t know about yet, so you built an altar to him to make sure you cover all the basis!” But Paul saw this as what we could call an “in,” and said to them, as it were, “Let me tell you about this God that you *admit* you don’t know.”

Now the reason Paul picked this way to approach them was seemingly to avoid what happened to Socrates. The Greeks *executed* Socrates for trying to introduce *new* gods to the Greek pantheon of gods. So Paul is saying, as it were, “I’m not trying to introduce a new god, I’m telling you about the *unknown* God you’re already worshipping!” Can you see how that would save his neck?

And he wasn’t being insulting here either, in saying they worshipped Him “ignorantly.” The word *ignorant* just means to be *unaware* of something. Isaiah prayed,

**“Doubtless Thou art our father, *though Abraham be ignorant of us”* (Isaiah 63:16).**

Abraham was ignorant of Isaiah and the rest of the people of Israel *because he was dead,* and couldn’t see them from his place in Paradise. So it wasn’t insulting to Abraham to say he was ignorant of the Jews, and it wasn’t insulting for Paul to tell the Athenians they were ignorant of the God who they just hadn’t heard about yet.

And the first thing Paul *told* these Gentiles about God is something we read about in verse 24 of our text:

**“God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24).**

Now there’s a very good reason why Paul started his message by taking these Gentiles back to the truth of Genesis 1:1, where we know that

**“In the beginning, *God created the heaven and the earth”***

You see, *after* God created the heaven and the earth, He spent the next 2,000 years trying to get the Gentile nations of the world to worship Him. But as Paul wrote centuries later,

**“...when they knew God, *they glorified Him not as God...”* (Romans 1:21).**

So after 2,000 years of trying, that passage goes on to say that God *gave up* on the Gentiles, and made a *new* nation out of Abraham, the nation Israel.

So in taking the Athenians back to *creation,* Paul was taking them back to their roots, so he could retrace their steps and show them where they went wrong.

It’s kind of like what *Stephen* did after the Jews crucified Christ. He began his address to his people in Israel by saying,

**“…Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory *appeared unto our father Abraham…”* (Acts 7:2).**

Stephen took the Jews back to *their* roots in Abraham, so he could retrace *their* steps and show them where *they* went wrong. He went on to remind them of how their forefathers had rejected Joseph, then Moses, then all of their prophets, and then they themselves had rejected Christ.

And that’s what Paul planned to do with these Gentiles on Mars Hill. He intended to retrace their steps and show them where they went wrong. He starts in the verse we just read, when he said God “dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” You see, that was the *first* place ancient men went wrong when it came to worshipping God. Wherever men lived in ancient times, they built God a local temple to live in.

But God doesn’t *need* a house to live in to stay warm and dry as we do, so He never asked anyone to *build* him a temple—not even the Jews! When David decided to build God a temple, God told him,

***“Shalt thou build Me an house for Me to dwell in?*...In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel *spake I a word...* saying, *Why build ye not Me an house of cedar?”* (II Samuel 7:5,7).**

God never asked anyone to build Him a temple. But if you ask Google where the oldest temple in the world is located, you’ll find that it’s in Turkey, and that it was supposedly built 11,000 years ago.

Now we know that date is wrong, for the Bible says that the world is only 6,000 years old. Science dates things using carbon dating, and Noah’s flood throws their readings off for anything *before* the flood.

But the point is, all the ancient temples in the world testify that it didn’t take men long to start building God *temples* to live in. So that’s the first place that ancient men went wrong.

Paul tells them about the *second* place they went wrong in the next verse of our text, where he said of God:

**“Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25).**

Now worshipping God “with men’s hands” means worshipping Him *with idols.* Isaiah 2:8 says,

**“Their land...is full of idols*...the work of their own hands...”***

That means Paul is telling the Athenians that God can’t be worshipped with idols. But ancient men made *plenty* of idols, just as they made plenty of temples. Ask Siri where the world’s oldest *idol* is located, and she’ll tell you about an idol in Russia that they say is 12,000 years ago. It’s not, but the point is: after ancient men began building God *temples* to live in, it didn’t take them long to decide they needed an *image* of God to put *in* their temples, because they figured God needed something to *represent* him in their temples—as though He needed any thing, as Paul says.

And as Paul *also* says in verse 25, God’s a *giver,* He’s not a “need-er.” He “giveth to all, life, breath, and all things.” Well, hey, if God can *give* all things, that must mean all things are His to give, so what could He possibly need? What are you going to give the God who has everything? Sounds like a Christmas shopping problem to me. Of course, the answer to that question is that you want to give *yourself* as a “present” to the Lord (Rom.12:1).

But Paul says there in verse 25 that the first thing God gives *us* is “life” itself. Google the question of how life began if you’d like a laugh, and you’ll see that science says two cells bumped into one another and merged, and then kept duplicating for some unexplained reason. But they can’t tell you who *made* those two cells in the first place, or why they suddenly felt the urge to merge.

But can’t you just picture how it might have gone down? One cell might have looked at another and said, “you’re the cutest cell that I ever did see. I sure would be delighted with your company, *c’mon and do the cell house rock with me.”*

I’m having a little Elvis fun with this idea, of course. But if you believe that that’s how life got started, I have a bridge I’d like to sell you. The Apostle Paul *tells us* how life began when he says that God gave us life “and breath.” He’s quoting Genesis 2:7 there, where the Bible says,

**“...God formed man of the dust of the ground, *and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;* and man became a living soul.”**

When that happened, God gave us *life.* And He gave us “all things” when He created the world *and all things in it,* and then made Adam king of the world.

And speaking of how God made us, Paul went on in his Mars Hill address to say,

**“And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” (Acts 17:26).**

Now here we have to ask why Paul would bother to tell the Athenians that God made us all of one blood? And I think the reason is that, not long after the creation of heaven and earth, Satan muddle things up and made men of *two* kinds of blood. Genesis 6:1-4 says,

**“...*when men began to multiply on the face of the earth...*the sons of God saw the daughters of men...and they took them wives of all which they chose. *And...there were giants in the earth in those days.”***

Those “sons of God” there were *fallen angels* who mated with women to try to pollute the seed of men so Messiah would be born a demonic *mutant.* But as it says a few verses later in that passage,

**“But Noah...was a just man and perfect *in his generations”* (Genesis 6:8,9).**

Noah wasn’t perfect *in his conduct,* for nobody’s perfect. He was perfect *in his generations.* That is, he and his family didn’t allow themselves to mingle with those fallen angels.

But the rest of the world did, and that made men of *two* kinds of blood, half human, and half human-half demon.

But in Acts 17:26, Paul is talking about how God made all men of one blood *again* by killing off those giants with the flood so Messiah could be born in all purity of generation. But letting all of that happen in the first place was ancient man’s *third* mistake. The women should have said no to those fallen angels, and the men should not have stood by and let it all happen.

And listen, those Athenians could have easily figured out what Paul was alluding to, for their Greek gods were always sleeping with women and having children with them, and producing a mongrelized breed of beings known as *demigods,* which were half human and half god. So Paul wouldn’t have lost the Athenians with that story, even if he told them more of it than what Luke recorded.

Next, after God made all men of one blood again, verse 26 says that God “determined the times before appointed.” And the word “times” in Scripture often has to do with what Daniel said about God in Daniel 2:21, where he said of Him,

**“...He *changeth* the times...*He removeth kings, and setteth up kings.”***

After the flood made men of one blood again, a new king of the world had to be appointed, and it wasn’t going to be Jack in the bow of the Titanic. It was *Noah.* He was the king of the new world when he stepped off that ark, and all men came from *his* blood.

And Paul told the Athenians about this because he knew that *it too* was something to which they could relate. You see, according to Greek mythology, there came a day when Zeus decided to flood the world, so a demigod named Deucalion built an ark that enabled him and his wife to survive, and they repopulated the earth. It’s easy to see how the Greeks plagiarized from Scripture, as we talked about in our last lesson. But the point is, they believed that all men came from *his* blood, instead of from Noah’s as we believe. So the Athenians would have agreed with Paul in this as well. I can just picture them saying, “Okay, Paul, we’re with you so far. Just don’t start talking about anything crazy, like the resurrection of the dead,” as we know he later did. That’s where he lost them, as we’ll see in a moment.

But here, this leads us to ancient man’s *fourth* mistake when it came to worshipping God. Because after Noah stepped off the ark, we read that

**“God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, *and replenish the earth”* (Genesis 9:1).**

Is that what Noah’s descendants did? Did they spread out and replenish the earth? No, two lousy chapters later it says,

**“...the whole earth was of one language...and they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower...*lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”* (Genesis 11:1,4).**

They didn’t *want* to spread out and replenish the earth. They wanted to hunker down and build a city and a tower *in one single location.* So what did the members of the Trinity decide to do about that? The Bible records the conversation they had amongst themselves in Genesis 11:6-9, where we learn,

**“...the LORD said...let us go down, *and there confound their language,* that they may not understand one another's speech...Therefore is the name of it called Babel...*and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth*.”**

When they refused to scatter abroad upon the face of all the earth, God *made them* scatter by confusing their language. You can’t build a tower if you ask the guy next to you to hand you a hammer and he hands you a saw instead. You can’t build a tower *or* a city that way.

So they all scattered like God wanted, and established *nations* in the earth. That’s why Paul made *mention* of “nations” a moment ago in verse 26. Did you know that there *were* no nations until God scattered men abroad upon the face of the earth? There wasn’t any *need* of nations until God made Noah king of the world, and established human government to *govern* those nations in Genesis 9:6.

And the new existence of those new nations explains what Paul said at the *end* of verse 26 when he said God determined “the bounds of their habitation.” Now I have to tell you, I’ve heard a lot of strange interpretations of that verse, including the one that says we shouldn’t have gone to the moon, because God limited the bounds of our habitation *to the earth.*

The *real* way God established the bounds of our habitation was by dividing our language. If you make it so men can’t communicate, they settle in different areas and the boundaries set themselves. They set themselves when men set up borders *around* their nations, and sometimes even Checkpoint Charlie-type places of passage between them. Do you remember that famous interchange between the nations of East and West Germany in Berlin?

Paul went on to tell us *why* God set the bounds of our habitation in nations in the next verse of our text:

**“That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27).**

God separated men *to get them to seek Him.* You see, God knows that when men live together in cities, it makes them *stop* seeking Him. How? Well, when ancient men said, “let us build us a city and a tower,”

**“...the LORD said...now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have *imagined* to do” (Genesis 11:6).**

Well, what did God think they’d imagine to do if they lived together? We don’t have to guess, because after God stopped them from building a city at the Tower of Babel, they built cities *in their nations* instead of remaining spread out as God wanted. Then,

**“...when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God...*but became vain in their imaginations,* and...changed the glory of the uncorruptible God *into an image made like to corruptible man...”* (Romans 1:21,23).**

Once men began grouping together in cities, they stopped seeking God because they decided that *they* were gods! When men live together, they start telling one another how smart they are, and end up concluding that they are *so* very smart, they must be the *real* gods, so they should build idols *to themselves,* in images made like to corruptible man. The Greeks were famous for their statues that glorified and deified the human form.

Well, I’d certainly call that “vain,” as Paul put it, wouldn’t you? God made man in His image, and man decided to return the favor by making God in *their* image!

Now if they’d remained scattered abroad, they would have sought the Lord instead, by feeling after Him, as Paul said. That begs the question: What kind of person has to feel after someone to find him? A blind person, of course. Or someone who’s *in darkness.* And isn’t that how the Bible describes unsaved men, as blind and in darkness?

That means unsaved men have to feel after the Lord in their blindness and darkness if they wish to find him. But I can assure you, you have a much better chance finding God by feeling after Him in darkness than if your neighbor is telling you that you don’t have to find God because you *are* god.

*Especially* because, as Paul says, God isn’t far from every one of us. Do you remember what David said about that? He prayed,

**“Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? *or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?* If I ascend up into heaven, *Thou art there:* if I make my bed in hell, behold, *Thou art there.* If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; *Even there shall Thy hand lead me...”* (Psalm 139:7-10).**

I’d call that “not far from every one of us,” wouldn’t you?

Now compare that to what you learned about the Greeks in school. They thought that all the gods lived *far away* on Mount Olympus, *the highest mountain in Greece,* and that they only came down here to earth when they felt like slumming it. They thought the gods were so far off, they needed to make *images* to them to bring them *up close and personal.* And then, suddenly there’s this Paul guy telling them that the *unknown* god they worshipped *was close at hand,* and that they didn’t need an idol to bring *Him* up close and personal.

To prove that he was talking about their unknown god, Paul quotes some of their *known* poets in Acts 17:28:

**“For in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring.”**

Now first of all, what’s Paul mean when he says that in God “we live, and move, and have our being”? Well, you wouldn’t *have* any being unless God created you, right? And since He did create you, you not only live and have your being, you can also *move around,* as even a dumb thump Greek poet has to admit.

Now here I pause to point out that Paul quoted some *unsaved* poets here, just as I do when I quote the songs that modern day poets write. I Christians sometimes object that Paul only quoed unsaved poets when he was talking to unsaved men, but Paul quoted *other* unsaved men in talking to a saved man in Titus 1:12, where he talked to Titus about the Cretians, saying,

**“...*a prophet of their own,* said, the Cretians are alway liars...”**

So if it is your conviction that preachers shouldn’t quote anyone except believers, we’ll just have to agree to disagree. I find that it tends to wake people up when I’m preaching, if I happened to have been responsible for putting them to sleep.

But to get back to Paul’s point here, God did create us—but He *also* created rocks, and a whole lot of other things that *don’t* live, or move around. As he said, we are a special *kind* of God’s creation, because we are His “offspring.”

Now this is one of the verses that people use to say that we are all children of God, so it doesn’t really matter what you believe about God, for we’re all His children anyway. But Paul told the Galatians,

**“ye are all the children of God *by faith in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:26).**

There Paul makes it clear that it *does* matter what you believe about God. His point here in Acts 17 is that we are all God’s offspring by virtue of *creation.* That’s the context here.

When the Lord was born, Luke wrote out His family tree in Luke 3. Here’s a truncated version:

**“Jesus...being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli...which was the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, *which was the son of God.”***

Adam was the son of God by virtue of creation, just as those fallen angels were called sons of God by virtue of *their* creation. And since we are all the offspring of *Adam,* we are *also* the offspring of God.

But creation can only give us *physical* life. If you want the *eternal* kind of life that the Bible speaks of, you have to have faith in Christ Jesus, and the blood that He shed to pay for your sins.

And that’s where Paul was going with all this. But before He got there, he finished his thought in verse 29:

**“Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device” (Acts 17:29).**

Paul's point is that if we are the offspring of God—and offspring tend to look like their fathers—then why would anyone think that God is a graven image, made of something that's not alive and moving around?

Well, by now, I’m sure Paul has these Greeks thinking that he just might be right because, after all, he’s quoting Greek poets. So the apostle moves in for the kill in verse 30:

**“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).**

Now *winking* at something is a figure of speech that means to *overlook* something, or *ignore* it. When a grandfather is babysitting his grandson, and the boy does something he knows his parents wouldn’t approve, he’ll look to his grandpa to see if *he* will disapprove. If Grandpa winks at him, that’s his way of saying that he’s going to overlook and ignore it, and not punish it.

And that’s the meaning of “wink” here as well. For 2,000 years before this, God overlooked idolatry in the Gentiles, as Pau told another group of Gentiles a few chapters ago when he said,

**“God...in times past *suffered all nations to walk in their own ways”* (Acts 14:15,16).**

You say, “Why would God let Gentiles walk in idolatry?” The answer is, He planned to get the Jews saved and then use *them* to tell the Gentiles to repent of their idolatry. So God didn’t punish idolatry in the Gentiles. But when *Jews* messed with idols, God told Ezekiel,

**“...*say unto the house of Israel,* Thus saith the LORD God; *Repent,* and turn yourselves *from your idols...”* (Ezekiel 14:6).**

God didn’t suffer *Jews* to walk in idolatry. But He let Gentiles do it—*until Paul was made an apostle.* After the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision on the road to Damascus and saved, him, he testified,

**“I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: But shewed...the Gentiles, that *they* should repent and turn to God...” (Acts 26:19,20).**

And after Paul finished telling these Athenian Gentiles to repent, in a roundabout way, he went for the jugular in verse 31 when he said they should repent,

**“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).**

Here I should point out that they knew full well what “man” Paul was talking about, for earlier in this passage they said they’d heard Paul preach “Jesus and the resurrection.” Plus, it says of the Lord Jesus,

**“...He...touched him...and immediately the leprosy departed from him. And...so much the more went there *a fame abroad of Him*...” (Luke 5:13-15).**

The news of the amazing healer in Israel got around to all the world. And if the Greeks heard of the Lord’s *works,* they may also have heard some of His *words—*like the ones He spoke in John 5:22,27:

**“...the Father judgeth no man, *but hath committed all judgment unto the Son...*because He is the Son of man.”**

Now you’d think it would be the other way around. We like to see a few gray hairs on the head of the judge when we go to court, for we know with age comes wisdom, and sometimes a degree of mercy as well. But God the Father knew that if *He* judged men, that men would say, “Who are You to judge me? You don’t know what it was like down here. It was pretty hard to say no to sin, you know.”

They could say that to the Father, of course. But they couldn’t say that to the Son, for He was tempted to sin *but didn’t.* God doesn’t judge us on the curve, as some of the merciful teachers you may have had in school. But even if He did, the Lord Jesus Christ ruined the curve by scoring a 100% on the test *of life.*

But if the Athenians heard that this miracle-worker said He would judge the world, they probably would have believed it because of the stupendous miracles He was able to perform. But when they *also* heard He’d been crucified, they no doubt thought, “Well, I guess we’ll never be judged then!” But when God raised the Lord from the dead, He assured the world that the judge of the world was very much alive, and would be judging them after all!

But instead of striking the fear of God into the hearts of the Athenians, as Paul had hoped, what do we read happened instead?

**“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter” (Acts 17:32).**

Some of the ones assembled on the learned hill of the Areopagus mocked, and others shined him on, as we would say today. They’d never seen anyone rise from the dead, so they didn’t believe in it.

But Paul did manage to snag a few souls, as we see in the final two verses of our text:

**“So Paul departed from among them.**

**“Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17:33,34).**

In some of our earlier lessons, we saw crowds and multitudes get saved in response to Paul’s preaching, but the learning of the learned men on Mars Hill seems to have prevented very many of them from believing. But while “not many wise” are called, *some* wise are called. And if you’re glad you’re among the few who have believed in our own day of much-vaunted wisdom, why not take the time to thank God for it *right now?*