

Sunday, April 9, 2023

# I Am Made All Things To All Men, That I Might By All Means Save Some. (1 Corinthians 9:22)

Paul's Sermon On Mars' Hill – Part 2

Last time, we went over Paul's stay in Athens. He was alone, and when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry, his spirit was stirred in him (that is, he was going through some righteous indignation, distress and vexation at the sight of God being dishonored in such a way). I have learned in the meantime that the Greek word that is translated "wholly given to idolatry" is unique to the New Testament. Some commentators say that the idea is "submerged in idols" or "a forest of idols." Paul had been to many cities, but there was nothing like Athens in terms of idolatry. So being stirred in the spirit, Paul disputed in the synagogue and in the market, and after having a run-in with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, they brought him to Areopagus (Mars' Hill) to hear him defend his doctrine. That is where we left off.

I chose 1 Corinthians 9:22 as the title of this sermon because Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill is an excellent specimen of Paul being made all things to all men. When he disputes in the synagogues with the Jews, he takes the approach of proving to them from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. When he preaches to pagans, he takes a different approach. The underlying message is the same, but the approach is very different. I think this is instructive for us. We have to deal with a lot of different people, from atheists to phony Christians (and everything in between), and while we cannot compromise the message one whit to accommodate another person, I do believe that we ought to be of the same spirit as Paul – "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

**"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. 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, him declare I unto you. 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; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 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; 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: 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. 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. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to 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. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 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 17:22-34)**

Paul begins with “THE UNKNOWN GOD” of the Athenians (v. 22-23), and then proceeds to declare to them the true and living God – the God of creation and providence (v. 24-26). Having declared the true God, he tells the Athenians how they ought to be responding to that God (v. 27-31), and then we see how the Athenians actually respond (v. 32-34).

### **“TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”**

**“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. 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, him declare I unto you.” (Acts 17:22-23)**

This sets the tone for the whole sermon, and I think it's an ingenious way of starting. You might have heard the phrase “meet them where they are.” Well, Paul meets them where they are here – they are steeped in idolatry, and he uses his observations of that as a springboard to launch into his sermon. He starts by telling them that he has perceived that they are too superstitious. Now, this sounds like an insult. The underlying Greek word, though, is actually ambiguous in meaning – it could mean “too superstitious” (negative meaning) or it could mean “very religious” (positive meaning). He could have meant it one way, and they could have taken it the other way. I tend towards thinking that he is purposefully taking advantage of the fact that the word is ambiguous as he starts the sermon. There may also be a little irony thrown in. (I know that I've certainly done things like that when talking to people.) Here, I think his message is something like this: “I've seen all of your idols and temples – I can tell that you are super religious people – in fact, you're so religious, you even have an altar that says 'TO THE UNKNOWN GOD' just to make sure that you have all your bases covered.” Whatever the case, there will be no ambiguity by the end of the sermon – they will understand how ludicrous their idolatry is and that God requires them to repent of it.

Now, this “UNKNOWN GOD” altar has an interesting story behind it. Several hundred years earlier, there was a plague in Athens. To appease the gods, at the advice of the philosopher Epimenides, they set a flock of sheep loose. If a sheep stopped by an existing altar, they’d offer the sheep as a sacrifice to whatever god was associated with that altar. If the sheep stopped somewhere else, they would erect a brand new altar “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” and offer the sheep there. Also interestingly, this Greek word translated “unknown” here is where we get our English word “agnostic” (Latin: *ignoramus*). Now, he could have come in with guns blazing and said, “you guys are a bunch of ignoramuses.” And there’s certainly a time and a place for that. To the Athenians, though, who fancied themselves to be the most educated and enlightened of all human beings, that might not have gone over very well. But I say the way he approaches it is ingenious. His message is, “by your own admission, you don’t even know the god that you’re supposedly worshipping. By your own admission, you’re doing it out of ignorance. So, allow me to tell you about the true and living God, this God that you say that you don’t know.” Let me also make the point here that there is a world of difference between knowing ABOUT God, and knowing God. There might be people listening today who know a lot of facts about God, but who don’t know God – to them, He remains the unknown God.

### The God of Creation and Providence

**“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; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; 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 17:24-26)**

The approach that Paul takes with these pagan idolators is to introduce God to them as the God of creation and the God of providence. He starts by identifying God as the creator of all things, and the Lord of heaven and earth. You would think that such a self-evident thing wouldn’t even need to be said, but when you have Epicurean and Stoic philosophers muddying the waters with their theories (similar to how modern-day “philosophers” do), sometimes you have to just state plain, simple truth. In this one statement, he annihilates the foundation of both the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophies. Similarly, in this environment in which we find ourselves today, you have to cut through all the rhetoric and go back to the fundamentals of creation: “From the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.” (Mark 10:6).

God didn’t just create the world and all things in it, but He is Lord of it all. That means He owns it, He decides what’s going to happen with it, He sets rules and laws in it, He is the Master of it, He requires obedience and reverence from the inhabitants of it, etc. This truth about God should show you the absurdity of idolatry. Men are forever trying to reduce Him

and confine Him to their own limits. “If I don’t understand the infinite God, then I’m going to reduce Him to something that I can understand. If I don’t like the Lord of heaven and earth, then I’m going to fashion something that I do like.” If you need examples, look no further than the so-called “Holy Week” celebrations that went on across the world in this last week, and their bizarre idolatries. By comparison, they make idolatrous nonsense like Easter bunnies and Easter egg hunts look tame.

He says that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men” for the purpose of dwelling on the face of the earth. He’s created and populated the whole world with humans, and we have all descended from a single source. And He “hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.” That means He’s planned it all out. He’s determined who’s going to live where and at what time, boundaries of nations and empires all the way down to the boundaries of each individual person, etc. It’s all orchestrated by the God of Providence for His glory. This ought to give you a sense of reverence and thanksgiving, and remove all discontentment and envy and covetousness from your heart. Additionally, we see here the folly of things like racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, etc. The Athenians were known to believe that they were superior to everyone else, and that sin still runs rampant among people today. When you look around and see the variety of human beings that God has populated the world with, you should see it as a work of God.

When confronted with the Creator and Sustainer, though, the perverse mind of the idolater flips everything on its head – instead of worshipping Him, the creature creates a new god, “breathes life” into this new god, and worships this new god with the work of his own hands. It is an attempt to confine and domesticate God, making Him dependent on us and allowing us to set the rules and have control. And isn’t this the thing that humans have done since the very beginning? “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5). It is nothing less than rebellion against God.

And remember that an idol is anything that you put in the place of the true and living God. Anything that takes the place of God in your affections. Anything that you put your trust in instead of God. Anything – including covetousness and those idols that you have set up in your hearts (see Colossians 3:5, Ezekiel 14:3). But this is the exact opposite of how things ought to be, if you would truly consider that God is the Creator and the Lord and the Sustainer of all things. You didn’t make Him – He made you. You don’t set the rules – He does. He doesn’t dwell in temples made with your hands – He inhabits eternity. He doesn’t need anything from us – we need Him. The fact that we are alive is because He gave us life. Every breath that we take is because He gave us that breath. The fact that we are where we are is because He put us here, and set the bounds of our habitation. In fact, everything that we have

is because He gave it to us. [Side note: the last time we saw the phrase “dwelleth not in temples made with hands” was in Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7, where Paul held the coats of those who stoned him. I believe these words were etched in Paul’s mind from that sermon. You never know what little part of a sentence that you say might stick in an enemy’s mind, who turns out to be one of God’s elect.]

### How We Should Respond

**“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: 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. 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. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to 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 17:27-31)**

Remembering that these Athenians are steeped in idolatry, and Paul is addressing that sin, how should they respond to these things that Paul has been telling them? Well, the passage identifies three things: seek Him; abandon all idolatry; and repent.

Why has God made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth? And why has He determined the times before appointed? And why has He determined the bounds of their habitation? There are a lot of ways to answer those questions, but the answer given in this passage is “that they should seek the Lord.” This is the purpose of God doing those things. When you look around and see that work of God in creating and distributing humans across this planet, and when you see His almighty hand in providence, it should cause you to seek Him. Instead, evil humans become discontent and murmur about their lot in life. They become envious and covet the things of their neighbor (their possessions, their natural gifts, their lot in life, etc.). They attribute the falling out of events as being the result of “blind fate” or “Mother Nature.” They become involved in wars and fightings (James 4:1-5). They ignore the fact that they are made of “one blood” and fixate on issues of race and nationality, turning those things into idols of pride, contention and double standards (as if the color of our skin or the place we were born is something that we did). And the list goes on. I say the purpose of all the creation around you, and all the things that you see happening day by day, is “that they should seek the Lord.” But nobody truly seeks Him! What I mean by “truly seek” is that they might seek after Him to gratify some selfish desire, or scratch some itch of curiosity, or allay some fear, or get some benefit from Him, but nobody seeks HIM. “There is none that seeketh

after God.” (Romans 3:11). It’s not for lack of evidence that nobody seeks Him – it’s because human beings are totally depraved. “Ye must be born again.” (John 3:7).

So, Paul says that the purpose of God’s creation and providence is “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.” (v. 27). The meaning is “God’s intention is that you would seek Him, and perhaps grope around like a blind man and find Him, even though He’s not very far away from you.” There are definite parallels between this and Romans 1. For example:

**“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” (Romans 1:20-21)**

The implication of all this is that the natural man does not truly know God and does not know how to find God. He might grope around and acquire some knowledge about Him, but he immediately perverts that knowledge and turns to idolatry. In all that, he is without excuse. Why? Because “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen” and “he be not far from every one of us.” Although he OUGHT to be diligently seeking God, the reality is that he only acquires enough knowledge of God to condemn himself.

How do we know that God is not far from every one of us? “For in him we live, and move, and have our being.” Where does life come from? God. Where does movement (including time) come from? God. Where does the fact that you even exist come from? God. He’s right there – every breath, every movement - your very life and being depends on Him. Incidentally, there are some subtle things here that show us a little bit about Paul. He knew what was going on. He was well-read. He knew his audience. These issues that he mentions here were among the biggest questions that these super smart philosophers were grappling with at the time – where does life come from? Where does movement come from? Where does our existence come from? Paul answers it all in short form. And he does it by using a poem written by none other than the philosopher Epimenides (the same guy who was responsible for the altar “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”). You see how he interweaves all this and speaks to them in their own language? The poem is called “Cretica” and it is about Zeus: “*For in you we live and move and have our being.*” (Incidentally, a few lines earlier in this same poem, it says “*Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies*” which Paul references in Titus 1:12). He then throws another one of their philosopher-poets at them – a man by the name of Aratus (who had come from the same region as Paul, but pre-dated him by about 300 years). The poem is called “Phenomena” and was also about Zeus: “*For we are indeed his offspring.*” Wicked people can

certainly provide insights and truths, and we can surely see what they have to say – but be careful. These guys said the right things but applied them to the wrong god. Truly, this is an example of being “all things to all men” on Paul’s part – finding common ground and using the familiar language of their own poets to teach them about the true and living God.

That brings is to, what does Paul mean when he says that we are the offspring of God? You have to be cautious that you don’t sentimentalize this and misrepresent what it means to be a child of God. This passage is talking about creation – every human is the offspring of God in the sense that He created every human. But don’t forget that when it comes to redemption, the Bible is clear that there are two families in this world – the “children of God” and the “children of the devil.” (1 John 3:10). So I say, don’t be like the false preachers in this world and misrepresent what it means to be a child of God. As always, context is key. Paul’s point in this passage is to show the folly and stupidity of idolatry. God created us – we didn’t create Him. We are His offspring – He is not our offspring. As such, don’t think of God as someone whom you have created, or someone whom you have conjured up in your own mind, or someone who must conform to you. I mentioned earlier that idolatry turns everything on its head and makes the creature sovereign over the Creator. The creature wants to limit God, tame God, blame God for being so hard to find (“though He be not far from every one of us”), dethrone God, and replace God with our own inventions.

It is the ignorance of their idolatry that God, in times past, has winked at. It is not a wink of approval. It is not a wink of letting them off the hook. It is a wink in the sense of “overlooking” for a season. It is similar to what Paul and Barnabas said on another occasion, when speaking to another group of heathens who were trying to worship them as gods:

**“Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” (Acts 14:15-17)**

The idea is that God didn’t severely punish them for their idolatry, but He rather allowed it to happen, for His own good reasons. The general way that God dealt with the heathen nations was far different than how He dealt with the nation of Israel when it came to idolatry.

**“And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever**

**much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.” (Luke 12:47-48)**

So, “the times of this ignorance God winked at.” But things are different now! Now that the Son of God has walked among us, there will be no more excuses, no more exceptions, no more overlooking. He has revealed God in a way that nobody had ever revealed God before. God commands all men everywhere to repent. That is, “turn from these vanities unto the living God!” The only rational thing to do is seek God! Turn from your idolatries! Repent!

And why 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.” I received an email a few weeks ago from a very intelligent seminary student. She told me that if you warn people that they need to repent because Judgment Day is coming, then that is unbiblical and contrary to the gospel. If only Paul had consulted this seminary student before speaking at Mars’ Hill, he wouldn’t have made such a grievous error as to tell them to repent because Judgment Day is coming! There is a day appointed. It is certain. It is unavoidable. It is inescapable. God will judge the world by that man whom He hath ordained – that is, none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. By His resurrection, the Lord demonstrated that His work has been accepted, and He is qualified to judge the world in righteousness.

**“For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son...For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.” (John 5:22, 26-27).**

Brent likes to remind us of inconvenient truths. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an inconvenient truth. It is a historical event (in fact, assuming that Jesus was crucified in 30AD, it was on this very day 1,993 years ago that He rose). It is the evidence and confirmation that the Lord will judge this world in righteousness. There is nowhere to hide and plead ignorance and call him the “Unknown God” any longer. His resurrection is right there, looking you in the eye. There is a lot to be said about the resurrection of Christ. He was raised for our justification, for example (Romans 4:25). But He was also raised to judge the world in righteousness. The only question on that day will be, are you justified by faith in the risen Christ? Or will the risen Christ righteously condemn you for rejecting Him?

### **How The Athenians Did Respond**

**“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. 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 17:32-34)**

Well, the sermon comes to an abrupt end as soon as Paul mentions the resurrection. Either Paul purposefully ended it, or it caused such an uproar that he was unable to continue. But whatever the case, we see three of the most common responses to gospel preaching: mocking, intellectual interest, and believing. Always, the most amazing thing is when someone actually believes. Here, we have a couple believers named – Dionysius (who was shockingly one of the judges on the council to which Paul was speaking), and Damaris.

This sermon on Mars’ Hill is a wonderful thing, and as I mentioned last time, it is very timely for the ignorant, idolatrous generation in which we live. It’s short, and it wouldn’t hurt anyone one bit to commit it to memory. I’d like to conclude by answering a common charge against this sermon by phony Christians. The charge is this: Paul is not preaching the gospel in this sermon. He doesn’t mention Jesus by name. He is hyper-focused on the sin of idolatry. He doesn’t tell people that they need to put their faith in Jesus. He’s preaching condemnation, not forgiveness. He’s preaching fear, not grace. Etc. They go on to say that this sermon was a failure on Paul’s part, because only a few people believed, and he learned his lesson and never preached any more sermons like this again. And I say to all that, balderdash. Those are the same charges these same people make against this church on a regular basis. If a person says Paul is not preaching the gospel here, then their definition of the gospel is simply wrong. It is, in fact, good news (gospel) that God is the Creator of the universe, the Lord of all things, the Sustainer of life, the Ordainer and God of Providence, and the Righteous Judge of the world. It is good news that He’s given you space to repent before the Judgment Day. The gospel is multi-faceted, and you don’t have to say everything there is to say about it every time you open your mouth. Instead, we are to be “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). This sermon is Paul showing us what it means to be all things to all men, rightly dividing the word of truth, using discernment to tell people what they need to hear.

**“For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)**