

10. How does Paul's message enlarge our view of God?
11. How should we respond to the God Paul is describing?



## THE STORY CONTINUES

### THE LIVING GOD | ACTS 17:16-34

More often than not, our thoughts of God are far too small. It is easy for us to bring God down to our level and refashion him in our image. We imagine that he relates to our world in far bigger ways, but still in much the same ways we do. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Think about God in terms of time and space.

In terms of time, Moses tells us,

*“Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Psalm 90:2).”*

God does not simply have more time than we do, he transcends time. He is at one and the same time fully present in every moment, past, present and future.

In terms of space, David observed,

*“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8).”*

Again, it is not simply that God fills more space than we do, but that he is fully present in every space we might imagine and in any spaces that may exist beyond our imagination.

Taken together that means God is simultaneously present in all places and all times, while we are just barely present right here and right now. God is far bigger and far greater than anything we might imagine.

The people of Athens, as culturally sophisticated as they might have been, had definitely fashioned their gods in their own image. Their gods took on human form and were every bit as fickle and unpredictable as the humans after which they had been fashioned. As Paul walked through the city, he was deeply grieved at how far they were from comprehending the ultimate reality of the living God.

## TWO FAMILIAR WORLD VIEWS (vv. 16-21)

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

<sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."

<sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

1. Why do you think Paul was disturbed by the idolatry in Athens?
2. How did Paul respond to his concern?
3. **Epicureans** believed that the world of the gods had nothing to do with the world of men. The gods were either disinterested or unable to intervene in world affairs. For Epicureans, the highest good was to enjoy life. If they believed in God (or gods) at all, they believed that they were distant, unknowable and uninvolved. They were the forerunners of modern deists, agnostics, and atheists. They emphasized the transcendence of God (or distance of God).

Where do you see Epicurean tendencies in our day and time?

4. **Stoics** believed in the universal soul. God was all and in all. God was more of an energy that pervaded all matter than he was a personal being. For them the highest good was to experience spiritual enlightenment by avoiding extremes and living in harmony with the forces of nature. They were the forerunners of the modern spiritual (new age) movement. They emphasized the immanence (or nearness of God).

Where do you see Stoic tendencies in our day and age?

5. How should we describe the idolatry of our generation?
6. How should we respond?

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIVING GOD (vv. 22-34)

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." <sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

1. How does Paul establish common ground with his audience?
2. What are some of the major differences between the God Paul describes and the gods the Greeks were worshiping?
3. According to Paul, how has God made himself known to all people?
4. Why has God overlooked idolatry in the past?
5. What does God now command all people to do?
6. What would repentance look like for the people Paul is addressing?
7. What does repentance look like for us?
8. How will God deal with idolatry in the future?
9. What is significant about Jesus's role as judge?