

BATTLE ON MARS HILL

By Todd Core

SCRIPTURE

Acts 17:16-34 (selected verses below)

[16] *“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols.”*

[19] *“They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you’re speaking of? [20] For what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these ideas mean.” [21] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.*

[22] *Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. [23] For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. [24] The God who made the world and everything in it — He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. [25] Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.”*

[30] *“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.”*

OBSERVATION

This passage in the book of Acts has always intrigued me. Paul arrived in Athens and began to look for conversation starters for sharing the gospel. He stumbled upon this idol “To an Unknown God” and used it to share the gospel before philosophers and other interested parties. There are so many applicable truths and observations in this text that relate to our modern times. Let’s try and clarify the truth from this passage with a few observations:

- In v. 16, we notice that Paul looked around this city and was deeply troubled by the fact that the city was full of idols. In Paul’s day, idols would have been handmade statues made in the image of a deity that represented everything from the sun, harvest, wine, and theater all the way to the well-known gods from Greek lore like Ares, Zeus, and Athena. As we have seen from our devotions this week,

idols can take a lot of different forms in our own day. If Paul rolled into Lufkin today, would he find a city of idol worshippers?

- In vv. 19-21, we discover that the culture of Athens was devoted to chasing after new or trendy knowledge. We are not sure if they wanted to know truth or if they just loved getting wrapped up in new fads to debate. In many ways, this reminds me of our own culture, and I think this may be especially true of our digital culture. Instead of searching for truth we are often guilty of just chasing down new ideas to share, debate, meme, or ridicule. In the midst of this pursuit of relevance or trend chasing, truth has become irrelevant and even hard to locate.
- In v. 22, Paul stood up and proclaimed the people to be “very religious.” It is hard to tell if he was being ironic, scathing, or complimentary. The truth is that we are created to worship, and Paul may have been acknowledging this fact. However, he pointed out that they had been worshipping in ignorance and the objects of their worship had been misguided. This is so true in our own day as well. People worship every day and prove themselves to be religious. The major question is whether the object of their worship is worthy or ignorant.
- Another interesting note from this text is the setting of the Areopagus. Scholars believe this could refer to a council of philosophers or an actual hill named after the god of War aka Ares aka Mars. As I was reading this passage in preparation to write this devotional, it struck me that, like Elijah on Mount Carmel in the OT, Paul was waging a “war” of allegiance between the one true God and idol worship before the people. In a sense we still reside on “Mars Hill” waging this same war between false idols and Jesus Christ in our own culture.
- In vv. 23-31, Paul used the inscription on an idol— “To an Unknown God”—to share the gospel. This idol and inscription existed because the people of Athens were afraid of angering a god they had not yet identified. Paul quickly declared that this inscription was proof they had not yet found the one true God who created heaven and earth and who loved them. He also proclaimed that God was elevated beyond an idol that can be shaped by human hands. He implored them to forsake idols and worship this God who is beyond our ability to control or manipulate. He is worthy of our worship alone. He even conquers death. For many of us we need to forsake our pitiful idols of ignorance and turn to Christ who is worthy of praise.

OBEDIENCE

I told you this passage was intriguing. As we emerge from quarantine and the world slowly opens back up, we have a choice before us about our worship moving forward. We

will be confronted with opportunities to fall back into some of our old ignorant idol worship or create new habits and patterns that ensure we worship God in truth. Here are a few ideas for how to be obedient to this text:

- Put yourself in Paul's shoes and survey our city. What idols are people worshipping here? What idols are represented in your own pre-covid life?
- One of the reasons idols were so present in Athens was the pursuit of new trendy things regardless of truth. Ask God to reveal to you what thoughts, trends, or digital fads you are susceptible to getting wrapped up in.
- Think back over this week and make a list of times you could be said to have been very religious in worship for "idols" and then make another list of times you worshipped Christ. What do these two lists reveal?
- Paul charged the Athenians to repent of their idol worship and to forsake them in order to follow Christ. Ask God to reveal to you what areas you need to repent due to false worship practices. Then ask God to show you what habits need to change as our country slowly reopens so that you will not fall into idol worship once again.
- Lastly, share some of your challenges and commitments with your Life Group so you can have accountability and prayer support.

PRAYER

Father, You alone are worthy of our worship. Forgive me for worshipping idols that are empty and ignorant. Restore my heart to worship only You. Help me to remove the traces of idol worship from my life. Help me not to allow things, people, ideas, or fears to sit on the throne of my heart. Show me areas that need to be changed so that I may be a fully devoted follower of Christ. May Jesus reign in my heart, in my church, and in my city. Amen.