

The Other Side of the Gospel

Acts 17:30-34

Introducing God, Part 8

Auguste (ougest) Rodin (roudane) was a relatively obscure artist living who died in 1917.

And yet today, there are few sculptured works of art as well-known as Rodin's work called, *The Thinker*.

It's the sculptor of a man hunched over and deep in thought – and he actually happens to be thinking about all the lost who are entering into eternal judgment.

The man is actually only a portion of the entire work which he entitled, "The Gates of Hell" and the entire piece stood nearly 20 feet high. If you were to see the original design, this man would actually be sitting on top of the doorway that leads into the chambers of Hell. Around him are scores of people who are shown having entered their eternal judgment.

Rodin intended to capture the first section of Dante's epic poem on the afterlife, published in the 1320.

And Rodin would spend 37 years working on it and never fully complete it.

Rodin would later write – after this piece had made him world famous – and I quote, "What makes my *Thinker* think is that he thinks not only with his brain, [but] with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils, [his] compressed lips, [and] with every muscle of his arms, back, and legs – [even] with his clenched fist."

Study this work of art in its original context – and you are led to think deeply about the wrath of God and a place called Hell.

Frankly, if there are any attributes of God that are *least* appreciated, they would be the attributes of justice and wrath.

Many people would dismiss them entirely and focus only on His love and mercy.

But the truth is – these attributes are just as real.

- Study the illustrations of God's wrath in the Old Testament accounts of the garden and God's judgment on Adam and Eve (**Genesis 3**);
- Study the horrific, global flood where God drowned the entire human race except for 8 people who believe His word and boarded the Ark (**Genesis 6**);
- Watch as God's wrath is unleashed in a storm of fire and brimstone upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (**Genesis 16**)

This is the other side of God.

Most people today agree with the idea of a Heaven to enjoy; but most of them disagree with the idea of a Hell to avoid.

Ellen G. White, the revered prophetess of the Seventh Day Adventists, wrote in her work entitled, *The Great Controversy*, that the idea of Hell came from the Devil himself. She writes, "The prince of darkness, working through his agents, represents God as a revengeful tyrant . . . how utterly revolting is the belief that as soon as the breath leaves the body, the soul of the [unrepentant] is consigned to the flames of hell."¹

In other words, God would never create a place of torment for unrepentant people.

The trouble is, Jesus spoke more often about torment and the wrath of God than about Heaven.

In John's Gospel, as only one of many illustrations, Jesus said, *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36)*

Study the Old Testament in this regard and you'll discover that there are more than 20 different words that express the idea of God's wrath.

There are 600 passages that describe or illustrate the subject of God's anger; which led Arthur Pink to make the observation that if you took out your concordance, you would find more references in Scripture on the anger and fury of God than on His love and tenderness.

J.I. Packer writes, "One of the most striking things about the Bible is that both Old and New Testaments emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath."

Now you can hide your head in the sand – as the world truly does – and imagine that none of it exists.

John Lennon sang with that response in mind in his famous song, Imagine. With lyrics like these; Imagine there's no Heaven; it's easy if you try; no hell below – above us only sky.

In other words, there is no eternal state either way – so don't worry about not making it into Heaven and definitely don't worry about going to Hell.

A.W. Tozer wrote that this vague hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become deadly opium for the consciences of millions.ⁱⁱ

The question boils down to this – what do the scriptures teach? What does God's word say? In fact, what does God the Son say about it?

Study the scriptures and you'll discover that Jesus taught:

- the place of torment is a real, physical place (Matthew 24);
- it's a place to be avoided at all costs (Matthew 5);
- it's a place of enforced separation from His presence (2 Thessalonians 1);
- it's a place of darkness, filled with weeping and the grinding of teeth, obviously in pain (Matthew 8);
- it is far worse than death (Matthew 10);

- punishments will vary in severity (Matthew 11);
- it's an eternal place of no return (Luke 16).

The church really shouldn't be unclear about this.

In fact, one author wrote, "People are driven from the Church not so much by stern truth that makes them uneasy as much as by weak compromise that destroys credibility; we need to recover the truth about Hell and carefully include it in our Gospel witness."ⁱⁱⁱ

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, said a generation ago, "This is no age to advocate restraint – the church today does not need to be restrained, but to be aroused, to be awakened – for she is failing the world [in not warning it of coming judgment.]"^{iv}

The church might wanna make God appear less offensive; they might wanna sweeten the gospel so more people take a sip – but in the end they fail to do what Jesus did, over and over again, warning people of the coming judgment.

So let's be clear – because we understand the stakes are so eternally high. Let's spell it out, as clearly as the Bible does.

C. S. Lewis once heard a young man preach and he preached on the subject of judgment. He concluded his message by saying, "If you do not receive Christ as your Savior, you will suffer grave eschatological ramifications!" Lewis asked him after the service, "Did you mean that a person who doesn't believe in Christ will go to Hell?" "Yes" the young man said. To which Lewis responded, "Then say so!"^v

The Apostle Paul is about to speak the truth about a coming judgment and the wrath of God.

Turn to Acts chapter 17 one more time.

Paul has nearly finished his introduction in Acts chapter 17 of the Unknown God. He has been describing some of the attributes of this true and living God to this Athenian High Court.

- He is the creator of the universe;
- He is transcendent – above all of creation
- Yet He is immanent – that is, personally involved in all of His creation;
- He is the maker of mankind from one original man;
- He is sovereign over the nations – determining their borders and the length of time they actually exist.

Paul has laid all this out as background as he moves toward his verdict – his conclusion.

And it's important to give some background information, right? Especially in a pre-Christian world, like the one we're now living in. Just as Paul didn't start with judgment here in Athens, but with background about the character of God, so should we.

I have this humorous illustration of what happens when you don't provide enough background.

James Woolsey, Director of Central Intelligence told the following story a few months ago at a conference on global organized crime.

A really funny incident took place when FBI Agents were conducting an investigation at the San Diego psychiatric hospital for medical insurance fraud.

After hours of reviewing thousands of medical records, the dozens of agents worked up quite an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a pizza parlor across the street to order dinner for all of his colleagues.

The following telephone conversation took place and was recorded by the FBI who was in the process of taping all incoming and outgoing phone calls.

Agent calls and then says: "Hello. I'd like to order 19 pizzas and 67 cans of coke."

Pizza Place: "Where would you like them delivered?"

"Across the street at the Psychiatric Hospital"

"You want 19 pizzas delivered to the psychiatric hospital?"

"That's right."

"And who are you?"

"I'm an FBI agent."

"You're an FBI agent?"

"That's correct, there are a number of us over here and we've been working around the clock all day and we're starving."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, and oh, by the way, deliver the pizzas around at the back entrance because we've got the front doors locked."

The Pizza guy said, "I don't think so!" And hung up.

I guess so! Having provided all the background of information about the Unknown God, Paul now moves toward this eternal verdict of a coming judgment.

Now he brings up this other side of the Gospel.

Let's pick it back up at *verse 30, here in Acts 17. Therefore* – that is, on the basis of all I've said, here's the verdict – *Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent.*

This is not, by the way, Paul's way of saying that God has chosen to overlook sin. Paul actually uses a play on words here – the word for ignorance is the same word translated Unknown, earlier for their altar to the unknown God.

In other words, all this time you've been worshipping the unknown God out of ignorance, God has mercifully left you unpunished. He could have already brought judgment because of your unbelief, but God is actually gracious and longsuffering and merciful in withholding His wrath from being poured out with pure and holy justice.

Paul is effectively saying to these Athenians, "You're still alive – the judgment of God hasn't happened yet . . . and since you're alive there is still time to repent."

Do it now . . . why? Notice further in *verse 31. Because He/God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness.*

In other words, judgment is coming! Paul isn't just talking to the Athenians – notice how Paul refers to *the world*. God is going to judge the world.

And would you notice that God has determined a date – a time – for judgement. And the term Paul uses for *judgment* is in the future tense and it refers to a future point in time when He will judge the world,

In fact, this word for judge carries the legal technical nuance in Paul's day of being arrested and brought to trial.

In other words, one day the world will be brought into court and the judge will be God's Son – which is what Paul says next – notice, *He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man (capital M – the God/Man), whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.*

Let me push the pause button in this exposition for a moment. The Bible actually talks about more than one judgment in the future tense.

There is a judgment of all believers. Paul calls this the Bema – we refer to it as the Bema Seat of Christ.

The Bema was the place where victorious athletes were awarded their laurel wreaths for having run their race. The Bible is very clear that this

judgment will be for the purpose of determining all that was profitable in a person's life and worthy of rewarding (1 Corinthians 3).

Paul writes further in *2 Corinthians 5:10* ***For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed – or rewarded – for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether profitable or unprofitable.***

Keep in mind, this judgment has nothing to do with whether or not you're getting into heaven; first of all, nobody gets into heaven by doing profitable things; so the fact that you're being rewarded for profitable deeds proves you're already there.

Secondly, the rewarding of the individual believer is the outcome of this evaluation;

- the believer will be judged on how they ran their race;
- how they brought glory to God
- through mundane acts of service in the home
- and in their family
- and at their job as they worked diligently
- and in their church as they served the body
- and in their world, delivering the gospel, watering and planting and sowing the seeds of the gospel
- perhaps dying a martyr's death;
- perhaps serving the church faithfully as an elder

These are all mentioned in scripture as rewardable deeds.

And then, following this evaluation, the believer will serve Christ accordingly in the Kingdom, in their assigned and honored position.

This judgment will take place sometime after the rapture of the church – I believe at the end of the Tribulation period when all the spiritual fruit from someone's life can be effectively tallied and rewarded.

Here's why I believe that; imagine if the rapture of the church took place tomorrow – your testimony would linger, wouldn't it? There would be neighbors and friends and family and fellow students who knew you and knew that you were no longer around.

The Book of Revelation tells us that an incredible multitude of people will believe the gospel during the Tribulation – from every tongue, tribe and nation; it'll be a period of spiritual harvest as God calls Israel to repentance and faith as a nation.

All that to say, it's possible that something you are doing or saying could trickle down through time and even into the Tribulation period and bear spiritual fruit that is rewardable at the Bema seat of Christ.

And since the purpose of the Bema seat judgment is to reward the gospel and the character of Christ in and through your life, God will more than likely wait until the end of human history as we know it, preceding the Millennial Kingdom, to reward His church.

Many of you listen to J. Vernon McGee on the radio. He's been with the Lord now for 30 years. And one of his desires was to be on the radio during the Tribulation, after the church was raptured. He had a strong desire to be used by the Lord as long as his radio program could be aired – even during the Tribulation.

He wanted to irritate the anti-Christ, as only J. Vernon McGee could. Actually, he wanted to be a part of the final harvest of spiritual fruit for the glory of Christ.

And do you know, there are more people listening to him on the radio now than when he was alive.

So the reward for the spiritual fruit of his labor has yet to cease.

There's another judgment described in scripture; and that future judgment is the one Paul is referring to here in Acts 17. It's the judgment of the Great White Throne.

This judgment is for unbelievers only. If you're there, it'll be eternally too late for you. The books are opened and God reveals how every man and woman's life proves their rebellion against God and the idolatry of their heart in worshipping themselves.

This is an awful moment that takes place just prior to the destruction of the universe and the recreation of a new heavens – a new universe – and a new earth (Revelation chapter 20).

Every unbeliever from all of human history will stand before this Judge.

Now Paul tells the Athenians here that the Judge happens to be the God/Man whom God the Father raised from the dead.

So, Jesus Christ, God the Son, is gonna sit as Judge over all of humanity who refused the plan of God through blood atonement that looked toward the cross – and all who refused the plan of God through the blood atonement looking back to the cross.

And after their own personal judgment by Christ Himself – having been hailed into the courtroom of God – they will be sent to Hell forever.

Now when Paul delivered this verdict, the most popular opinion in Athens is to this day the most popular opinion in America – that death ends your existence.

People in Paul’s generation – and here in Athens – often had these letters written on their gravestones; n.f.n.s.n.c. It was an abbreviation for the Latin phrase, translated into English – I was not, I am not, I care not.^{vi}

I was not . . . I am not . . . I care not.

And Paul announces the other side of the gospel – the bad news – the terrible truth!
You’d better care!

- mankind is not moving toward extinction – as these Epicurean philosophers thought;
- mankind is not moving toward absorption into the cosmos – as these Stoics thought;
- mankind is moving toward an appointment with the risen Christ who will be seated on a terrifying white throne.^{vii}

And they are not heading for some kind of reunion with all their friends either.

A man once told Pastor and author, Tony Evans, and Evans added it in his book on the attributes of God, which I have enjoyed reading from – A man once told me, “I’m not into that hell stuff. I don’t believe in the wrath of God. But even if hell is true, I’m going to turn the place around because all my friends are going to be there. We are going to go down there and have a party.

Evans responded to this man, “Listen do me a favor; when you get home today, turn on a burner on your stovetop and wait until it gets really hot. Then sit on that burner and try to get a party going at the same time.”

Evans concludes, “This man didn’t understand that hell has no fellowship, no parties, no get-togethers; God will eternally quarantine all those who [rejected Him] in the pit of the universe, [in a place] called hell.^{viii}

And what was the reaction of Paul’s audience this day? The same responses in every country and in every generation – and there are three of them:

a. First, some ridiculed

Verse 32. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer.

The language here indicates that their sneering didn’t begin right when Paul mentioned the resurrection; Paul is actually finished with his message and now some begin to sneer.

The verb to sneer can be translated, to scoff – literally, to mock.^{ix}

In other words, Paul’s message was immediately followed by jeering and mocking as Paul no doubt wondered if anybody’d heard anything he’d actually said.

b. Secondly, while some ridiculed, others procrastinated

Notice *verse 32b, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.”* Some of the members of this Athenian Supreme Court wanted to hear more from Paul at a later time.

We have no indication that Paul ever returned to the Areopagus – this Hill where these men sat in council.

c. Some ridiculed; some procrastinated; thirdly, some believed and were saved

Notice *verse 34. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

Some believed – and were rescued from the future, eternal, horrific, unremitting, unrelenting, wrath of God.

We’re not told anything about *Damaris* and we’re not given the other names of those who became Christians.

We’re only left with this one name, from *verse 34 – Dionysius the Areopagite.*

In other words, Dionysius belonged to the council that sat on this hill, The Areopagus. A member of the Supreme Court of Athens believed and joined this new church.

He had heard, by the grace of God . . . he had heard and believed.

James Montgomery Boice tells the story of something that happened in a church pastored by one of his assistants. He retells the story in his commentary, *The Gospel of John*. A man lived next door to the church in St. Paul, Minnesota.

He did not want to go to church. In fact, he refused all invitations to attend. However, one week the church had a series of special meetings featuring exceptional music. The neighbor heard the music and was so taken with it that he decided to go in and hear it. He reasoned to himself, “I’ll just go in for the music and then leave before the sermon.”

So in he went and sat down near the back of the church. When the musical portion of the evening was over and the pastor stood to preach, this man realized he was hemmed in by a packed auditorium . . . there was no way he could get out without being noticed.

So he thought to himself, “I’ll just do the next best thing – I’ll put my fingers in my ears so I can’t hear him.”

So there he sat with his fingers in his ears. However, God had already been at work in this man’s heart through the music – the lyrics, the gospel, the praise and glory to an eternal Savior.

And God had a plan that very night for this man’s conversion. It wasn’t long into the sermon, Boice writes, that a little housefly began to buzz around this man’s nose. The man ignored the fly as long as he could. But finally that little fly buzzing around his nose got to be just too much for him. He took one hand and swatted at that fly – and at that very moment, the pastor said, “He that hath ears to hear let him hear what God says.”

His hand froze in midair . . . and he listened . . . and believed . . . and was saved.

Some ridiculed . . . some procrastinated . . . some believed with ears to hear . . . and were saved by the grace of God.

Around 100 years after this event took place in Athens, a church leader in Corinth mentioned in one of his letters that Dionysius became the first elder in this church that would take root and grow in Athens.^x

A church whose pastor was a member – more than likely, a former member, of the Supreme Court of Athens – a place where the unknown God was introduced and some of His attributes explained and a warning of His coming wrath delivered – and an invitation to repent extended.

And Dionysius . . . and others . . . were saved. Paul has simply described God as the Creator – the sovereign Ruler; the Lord of the Universe and the Nations of Earth – and the coming Judge.

And that was enough . . . that was enough . . . and some believed.

This is the gospel you must introduce to the Athens where God has placed you. And listen, He is still the unknown God – He is the unknown God. And your world will still respond in the same way.

In spite of that, let’s go into our Athens as ambassadors – delivering even this other side of the gospel – knowing that some will ridicule you . . . some will put you off until another time . . . but some . . . some . . . will have ears to hear . . . and they will believe by the grace of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/3/2016 by Stephen Davey
© Copyright 2016 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved

i Quoted by Dixon, p. 121

ii Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News* (Victor Books, 1992), p.25

iii Dixon, p. 186

iv Adapted from Dixon, p. 186

v Dixon, p. 13

vi Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 742

vii R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Crossway Books, 1996), p. 234

viii Tony Evans, *Our God Is Awesome* (Moody Publishers), p. 244.

ix Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 309

x Adapted from Schnabel, p. 743