

## THE GOD WHO SAVES AND SATISFIES

Acts 17:16-34

Some noble Christian brethren in Berea escorted Paul to Athens, the capital of Greece. As they left him, Paul told them to have Silas and Timothy "come to him with all speed."

While waiting for the arrival of his two missionary companions, Paul made a tour of observation through Athens, which had long been a great center for literature, art, sculpture, culture, philosophy and religion. He was shocked by the multiplicity of gods which were in evidence in the homes, on the streets, in the parks, in the temples and in the magnificent Acropolis. It has been said that there were more than thirty thousand man-made gods in the city. This fact caused Petronius to start the witticism that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.

The scenes which met Paul's gaze in this great heathen city made him so heartsick that he could not remain silent. He immediately cried out against the corruption and wickedness of the people. Stirred with abhorrence that this great center of culture was given to idolatry, Paul exposed the emptiness of their idol worship and the worthlessness of their numerous altars. Their personal need of Christ, Whom Paul knew, loved and served, constituted a great challenge to the Apostle. Earnestly desiring to do something for the salvation of these people, Paul reasoned with all who would listen to him, both in the synagogue and in the agora or market-place.

The agora was an open square in the heart of the city where buying and selling took place. It was also the place where new opinions were expounded, and where philosophers and traveling orators found a ready audience. Paul moved about in the market-place, questioning and reasoning with all who would listen to him. There Paul attracted the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans denied that anything was created, and claimed that everything came by chance. They taught that pleasure was the supreme good and that pain was the chief evil. To them a resurrection and the future life were impossible. The Stoics were pantheists, who held that might and deity were inseparable. They declared that virtue was the chief good, but their theory was not confirmed by their practice. They emphasized the importance of insensibility to pain and pleasure.

The Epicureans and Stoics forgot their mutual jealousy for the moment and made common cause against Paul. Considering Paul to be a quack, they called him a babbler, which means a "picker-up of seeds." This word was used for the birds that hopped about picking up seeds out of street refuse. It was a slang word used to describe a person who frequented the market-place and picked up a scrap of information or a crumb of learning here and there and attempted to palm it off as an original thought. As applied to Paul, when they spoke of him sneeringly and contemptuously, it meant, "What would this picker-up of seeds, this chatterer, this empty talker, this ignoramus, wish to say, if he could pick up enough words to get off an idea?"

Some recognized that Paul was a religious teacher. To be a proclaimer of a foreign deity was a grave offense, since the Roman law did not permit the introduction of a new religion. On this very charge the Athenians had voted the hemlock for their greatest citizen, Socrates. They mocked Paul because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. Some of them were so ignorant of what Paul meant that they thought he was talking about a couple of deities. They thought that Jesus was a god and that resurrection was a goddess, and the wife of Jesus.

They took Paul "unto Areopagus" for examination concerning the legality of his teaching, which was quite new to this cultured, university city. In response to their request for a full explanation of his religious views and teachings, Paul delivered one of the greatest messages of his ministry, and one of the greatest discourses recorded in the Word of God. Dr. Robertson described Paul's sermon as "a masterpiece of real eloquence on the greatest of themes." Snowden said, "in courtesy, adroitness, philosophy, logic, polish, and power, it is one of the masterpieces of oratory." Paul sought to commend the gospel of Christ to the Greeks by proving it to be the fulfillment of their age-long yearning for God.

In the midst of the multitudinous array of altars which the Athenians had erected to their gods, Paul had observed one on which they had placed the inscription, "To The Unknown God." It was as if they had said, "We have temples to many gods whose anger we are seeking to placate, but it could be that there is another god of whom we do not have any knowledge, so let us rear an altar 'To The Unknown God.'" They wanted to be sure not to slight or offend any deity whom they might have overlooked, so they erected this altar. The inscription which they placed thereon was the pathetic confession of the Athenians that there was a God, but that they did not know Him. Notwithstanding all the erudition of these philosophers, the true God was still unknown to them. It is a tragic mistake to assume that God is to be known through human investigation and discovery.

Using this inscription as a starting point, Paul began the polite and pleasing introduction to his memorable sermon on Mars' Hill with the respectful salutation, "Gentlemen of Athens." Then he tactfully proceeded to the courteous and complimentary ascription, "I perceive that in all things ye are very religious." He readily gained their attention by thus commending them for a distinction of which they were intensely proud, namely, their religiousness or their efforts to worship.

Paul preached about the true and living God, Who was certainly unknown to the Athenians. Notwithstanding all their erudition, these philosophers had never heard about Him. It is always a tragic mistake to assume that God is to be known by human investigation and discovery.

Paul considered it a joyous privilege to tell the Athenians about the God Who was unknown to them, but so well known and so dearly loved by him. He told them that God had not been made by human hands, as their gods had been.

Paul declared that God was the Creator, the One Who made heaven and earth and all that is in them. Therefore, He was far greater than any god of whom they had ever heard. All other gods had been made by men, and were therefore lower than man. Neither was this creative, active, purposeful and powerful God confined to any temple made with hands.

To the Athenians Paul preached that God is not only the source of all life, but He is also the preserver and sustainer of life. He gives life and breath to every living person. He controls the forces of the universe and He can do with them as He pleases. He has power over mankind. All human actions, whether present or future, are dependent upon the will and power of God. Not only is God our creator and sustainer, but He is also our benefactor. As benefactor He is the bestower of life and all of its blessings, both temporal and spiritual. God is nearer to us than we realize. "In him we live, and move, and have our being."

Having learned the glorious truth of the impartiality of God, Paul cheerfully and forcefully taught that God is no respecter of persons, that He does not have any favorites, and that He loves all men of all races. He preached that all men have been placed on God's earth by His power, are governed by His will and are dependent on His mercy. All of them need Christ Jesus as their Saviour. He can save them and will save them when they repent of their sins and believe on Him as their Saviour. He can satisfy every need of their lives.

Things seemed to go well with Paul until he preached the resurrection of Christ. The wise men of Athens refused to accept his teaching on this subject. Some of them became infuriated and a great confusion resulted. Even to this day Satan is not greatly disturbed at the preaching of a dead Christ, but he is always strongly opposed to the gospel of the resurrection. What a pity that so many Christians please him by their failure to proclaim the resurrected and living Christ!

The resurrection of Christ is the very heart of His gospel and the pivotal point in Christianity. All of His claims rest upon the glorious doctrine of the resurrection. The Jews feared the resurrection of Christ and saw to it that a heavy Roman guard was placed about His tomb. The early Christians found their greatest inspiration in the resurrection of their Lord. Christ's resurrection was the center of Paul's preaching. Furthermore, Christ's resurrection was the proof of His deity, the basis of the Christian faith and the guarantee of our resurrection.

Those who listened to Paul's sermon on the resurrection were characterized by one of three attitudes:

1. Derision -- "some mocked."
2. Delay -- some said, "We will hear thee again of this matter."
3. Decision -- "Certain men clave unto him, and believed."

No sermon is a failure if it results in the salvation of a single soul.

While those who believed on Christ as a result of Paul's sermon were few in number, one of them was a man of prominence and considerable influence -- Dionysius, one of the judges, and another was an aristocratic woman by the name of Damaris. After all, Paul's preaching of the resurrection was quite effective and successful.