

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.*

(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)

TUC #07-1318

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December 18 , 2013

The Sermon from Mars

Probably one of the clearest gospel messages in scripture comes from Mars, nearly 2,000 years ago. Well, not the planet Mars but Mars Hill in Athens, Greece. Mars Hill is the Roman name for Areopagus that was north-west of the Acropolis in Athens. Areopagus was named based on the Greek god of war *Ares*; the Romans called this god *Mars*. The King James Version is one of the only translations to refer to this location as Mars Hill; all others refer to it as Areopagus (Acts 17:22).

Supposedly, there is an ancient proverb that says there were more gods in Athens than men. Considering all the statues, temples, and shrines in Athens, it seems to be a very appropriate characterization of the idolatry in that region in the days of Paul. It was into this environment that Paul ventured on his second missionary journey.

As Paul was in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, Luke tells us that Paul's spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. Not one to waste time, Paul went about reasoning with all those he encountered in the synagogues and the market place. He even engaged the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers that liked to tell and hear something new. Truly, Paul had a new message for them, **Jesus and the resurrection**, and it piqued the interest of some. It was a strange message. Some said he was a proclaimer of strange deities; however, there was enough Greek curiosity to want to know what the message meant. It is within this context that Paul was brought to the Areopagus or Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-21).

(22) So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. (23) "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23 NASB)

The Athenians were religious, but not in the sense that we might think. Mitchell's New Testament words verse 22 as such: **I continue watching and observing you people as [being] most reverencing of the animistic powers** (or: more religious than usual in regard to the distribution of demons [Hellenistic concept and term: = animistic influence]). *Animism* is the belief that natural phenomena and objects, such as rocks, trees, the wind, etc., are alive and have souls, and the belief in the existence of spirits and demons. Out of thinking like this came the underworld of the gods, even angry gods, the Greek hades of fire and torment (hell), and the immortality of the soul. Some of this infected Jewish thought and, unfortunately, infected Christian thinking, even to our day.

Seeing an altar to an unknown god, Paul saw this as an opportunity to shatter their ignorance by proclaiming to them who this unknown god is. He challenged their idolatry by presenting the truth.

(24) "The God making (forming and constructing) the ordered system and arrangement of the universe, and all the things within it – this One continuously being from the start: Lord of heaven and of earth (or: this Owner and Master, repeatedly and progressively being the subsisting and originating source, the under-beginning, of sky and land) – **is not now** (or: habitually) **taking up residence within handmade shrines, sanctuaries or temples!**
(25) "Neither is He continuously attended or habitually served by human hands – as constantly being in want, or having a need, of something – He Himself being the One constantly giving to all (all men; or: all things) **life and breath and all things** (or: everything; the whole [universe])! (Acts 17:24-25 JMNT)

Paul establishes that there is only one Owner and Master of the universe or of the whole or of all things. There is one God who is responsible for the ordered system and arrangement of the universe and everything in it. Consider the import of this truth. This means that God is responsible for all that transpires within His creation, whether it is good or evil, whether it is powers or principalities in the seen or the unseen. As Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth: [there is] **one God, the Father, from out of the midst of Whom [is] the whole** (or: [are] all things) – **and we [directed and proceeding] into Him** (1 Corinthians 8:6 JMNT). Men think they must give something to the gods to appease them and to serve them, but Paul blasts this away by declaring that the Owner of the whole is the very one who gives life to all in His creation. Not only this, but He is constantly revealing Himself (Romans 1:20) and giving to all things. **The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; the world and all it contains, You have founded them** (Psalm 89:11).

Paul then brings God into the history of nations; all in agreement with Daniel that **it is Heaven that rules** and that **the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows on it whomever He wishes** (Daniel 4:26, 32).

(26) and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, (27) that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; (28) for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' (29) "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. (Acts 17:26-29 NASB)

Mitchell's New Testament uses the expression *ethnic group of mankind for nations and family or offspring for children of God*. **Even as certain of the poets down among you people have said, 'You see, we are also a family of the One** (or: we even continuously exist being a race whose source is the One; or: we also are His species and offspring; we are even a family which is composed of the One and which is the One) (vs. 28 JMNT). Paul didn't agree with the Greek poets that all are of the family or offspring of God, *just* to win an argument. No; he said it because it is a truth. In his circular letter, Paul made the point regarding the family of God: **I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name** (Ephesians 3:14-15). I have heard Christians scoff at the idea that all of mankind are of God's family or are His children. Paul disagrees. Don't you see the good news in this? If God's family extends to all, don't you think God as the Father of all is determined to see all His family return to Him, even if it takes ages or even the lake of fire to do so? If not, then why was the Lord **pleased to crush Him** (His Son) **by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God** (Isaiah 53:10; Acts 2:23)? God is not far away from any one of Adam's race. **"For you see, within the midst of and in union with Him we continuously live, and are constantly moved about and put into motion, and continue existing"** (vs. 28 JMNT). What is mankind to do? Change your thinking; change your mindset!

(30) "Indeed then, upon looking over, seeing above and perceiving on behalf of the times of this ignorance, in regard to the present conditions and situations, God is presently and progressively passing along [other MSS: bringing back] this announcement to mankind (for humanity): all men everywhere are to be progressively changing [their] thinking and continue with a changed mindset! (Acts 17:30 JMNT)

Why? **"Because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead"** (vs. 31).

This is the good news. God has raised up from among the dead a Man, the Second Man, the Son of God and of Man. This was a phenomenal message in that day. No one had ever declared that God raised a man from the dead to ascend into heaven, and that within this Man the whole of mankind would be judged and made alive. But what is our message today? Have we lost sight of this good news? After all, Christians have billions upon billions going to hell and a much smaller company going to heaven upon death. This is not the gospel. Hollywood portrays men coming out of the grave as zombies and all sorts of other grotesque creatures. Resurrection as a phenomenon is being continually trashed, even by Christians. One died for all; consequently, all died. The good news is that in Christ all will be made alive. God has fixed a day! Let us press on toward this day, progressively changing our thinking. **This mortal must put on immortality** (1 Corinthians 15:53) all because of a Man's resurrection.