

Man's Search for God

*“As I passed by,
and beheld your
devotions, I found
an altar with this
inscription, TO
THE UNKNOWN
GOD. Whom
therefore ye
ignorantly
worship, him
declare I unto
you.”*
—Acts 17:23

WHEN WE CONSIDER ALL the turmoil in the world today, its challenges and problems of such enormous magnitude, we might be inclined to believe that mankind has mostly given up on any real belief in God. Indeed, atheism is on the rise in many parts of the world, with an estimated 500 million claiming no belief in God, according to surveys

done in recent years. Not surprisingly, China and Russia are major contributors to this number, and of the total number worldwide who identify themselves as atheists, over 75% reside in Asia.

Notwithstanding the growth of atheism, the same surveys show that well over 90% of the world's population still believe in some type of deity or supreme being. In one particularly interesting observation, a 2004 survey revealed that of those who responded that they were atheists, 30% also said

that they sometimes prayed. Perhaps this shows that, even among those not professing belief in God, there is seemingly an inborn desire in man to worship and commune with a higher being.

As we look at such things, it is apparent that one of mankind's challenges when contemplating the existence of a deity or supreme being is a general lack of understanding as to who God truly is, what his attributes are, and what his plan is for the earth and its inhabitants. Scholars, teachers, and philosophers, both religious and secular, have weighed in on these matters for centuries, promoting theory after theory. Yet, to many, the various explanations given as to who God is have not been very satisfying to the soul.

We suggest to any who are truly seeking to know more about God that the philosophies and traditions of men first be put to the side. In their place, we recommend that a consideration of what is found in the Scriptures be pursued and studied, to see whether, in its pages, can be found harmonious and reasonable conclusions concerning the one whom so many in the world still desire to worship. If such reasonableness and harmony can be thus found, then we may be enabled to gain a better understanding of the supreme being, his character and his purposes.

ATHENS—A PLACE OF MANY GODS

An appropriate place to start when considering what the Bible has to say about God is the ancient Greek city of Athens, well known in history as a place of many gods. When the Apostle Paul visited Athens near the beginning of the Christian era, he found the people given over almost entirely to the

worship of idols to various deities. It has been claimed that there were more idols in Athens at that time than in all the rest of Greece, and that the Athenians imported the deities and superstitions of every nation, along with their arts, philosophies and learning. A historian once satirically noted that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man.

In addition to the worship of many gods, there were also numerous philosophers in Athens. Two primary groups of these are both cited by Paul—the Epicureans and the Stoics. (Acts 17:18) The Epicureans were followers of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus, and as one writer has stated, “Materialism and sensual selfishness was the ultimate tendency of Epicurus’ teaching.” These, even as many still do today, tended to live according to the phrase, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” The Epicureans graciously, and probably for reasons of personal popularity, did not deny outright the existence of the many heathen gods of the times, but insisted that these really had nothing to do with the creation of the world and what is in it.

The Stoics, on the other hand, more firmly believed in being submissive to natural laws, but were very vague in their philosophy, and they had little or no faith in a future life. They generally attempted to live a morally righteous life, but egotism and pride were at the root, rather than humility. The Stoics also bowed to fate, rather than viewing life’s experiences in the light of divine providence.

It was these two groups of philosophers who called Paul in question. To them he was advocating “strange

gods,” because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. “And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?”—Acts 17:16-19

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PAUL

This furnished Paul with a unique opportunity to set forth some basic truths pertaining to the great and loving God of the Bible, the Creator and ruler of the universe. As Paul was led to Areopagus, or Mars’ hill, the route took him close to a large display of idols, each ascribed to a particular god. When he stood on the hill and faced his audience these idols would be visible in the valley below. Towering above him was the Acropolis on which there stood in all its architectural glory that massive temple—the Parthenon.

Paul made full use of this setting as he explained to the Greek philosophers important facts concerning the God he worshipped, and the “new” religion he was advocating. He began his sermon by reminding them that one of their idols was ascribed “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” Even in Paul’s day, and among the wisest philosophers of the time, there was the acknowledgment of the existence of a God about whom they knew little or nothing.

Paul explained that this “unknown God,” whom they ignorantly worshipped, was the one he now proclaimed to them. He then proceeded to call their attention to some of the characteristics of this unknown God. This was the great and powerful God who had “made the world and all things therein.” Furthermore, this true and living God, Paul explained, “is Lord of heaven and earth,” and

since this was true, he could not be expected to dwell in “temples made with hands.” (Acts 17:24) Here we can envision Paul taking a glance at the magnificent temple which towered above him as he spoke, a temple that housed many gods. His words would indicate that the unknown God he was identifying for them was entirely too great and too glorious to be confined in any structure which could be erected by man, regardless of how beautiful and magnificent it might be.

This is a great truth concerning the God of all glory which is important for all to remember. Man’s finite minds are often impressed by the displays of splendor which are to be seen throughout the world in the various temples, churches and buildings of worship. To the extent that these lift our minds and hearts to the true and living God of wisdom, justice, love, and power, and inspire us to devote our lives to his service, they serve a useful purpose. May we ever realize, however, that the true God of our worship, and to whom we are devoted, could not now be expected to dwell in buildings made with hands any more than in the days of Paul.

King Solomon of Israel recognized this many centuries prior to Paul’s day. Solomon’s temple was probably the most magnificent ever constructed up until that time. Yet, when it was completed, he realized that the great God of Israel could not be confined within its walls, and in his prayer of dedication said, “Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!”—II Chron. 6:18

JESUS' AFFIRMATION

Jesus also affirmed this larger viewpoint of the true and living God. A Samaritan woman raised the question with Jesus as to where God should be worshipped, whether at Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, or Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Jesus' reply did away with the necessity of limiting the worship of God to specific locations. He explained that "God is a Spirit," hence invisible to human eyes, and that the true worship of him is "in spirit and in truth."—John 4:20-24

The word "spirit" is used here in contrast with that which is material and visible. Visible images and representations of God, as in idols, are hindrances to true worship, for the mind concentrates on the image and sees little beyond. God is a living being, but not human, and so far above us that it is impossible for us fully to conceive him. Our minds and hearts should "see" him as the one in whom is centered all that is good and holy. From him, "the Father of lights," comes "every good gift and every perfect gift," the Scriptures declare.—James 1:17

Prayers to this glorious God of love reach him without the aid of temples made with hands, and without the imagery associated with rituals and ceremonies. We can lift up our hearts to such a God at any time of day or night, regardless of place or circumstance. Costly temples may give a temporary sense of awe and reverence, but so much more should the "temple" of the created universe which God himself has provided, and in which we dwell, help us to realize his exalted character and majesty.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that our great God of glory and of love should be worshipped not

only in spirit, but also in truth. There are certain basic truths concerning God which must be known if we are to worship him acceptably. It will not do to conjure up a concept of him based upon our own superstitions or others' traditions and philosophies. The Athenians did this, with the result that they worshipped many idols, but the true God remained "unknown" to them.

The human mind can never know more than a mere fraction of the whole truth concerning God, but that fraction must be veritable if we are to worship him "in spirit and in truth." All concepts of God which depict him as other than a God of wisdom, justice, love, and power, merely hinder true worship. Idols, images, and sacred objects are barriers between the human mind and the glorious and loving God of all creation.

SOURCE OF ALL LIFE AND BLESSINGS

As Paul declared to the Athenians, this true and living God, who is still unknown to much of the human race, does not dwell in man-made temples, "Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." (Acts 17:25) How perfectly plain it should be that the Creator of all life, including our own, does not need anything from us, and that nothing wrought by human hands can be used to induce him to bless us.

God said to ancient Israel, "Every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the

fulness thereof.” (Ps. 50:10-12) We have nothing that we can give to God that we did not first receive from him. “In him we live, and move, and have our being,” Paul said. (Acts 17:28) We are alive only because God gave us life. We are able to move about in the pursuit of life’s responsibilities and blessings only because God designed our organisms to make this possible. Our very existence depends upon the continuance of his loving provisions.

These common blessings of life are showered upon mankind without respect to the degree of appreciation which may be manifested. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus expressed it beautifully, saying: “Your Father which is in heaven ... maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matt. 5:45) The sun and the rain, and all the other elements by which life is sustained, are the handiwork of God. They are beyond our ability either to create or to regulate.

In one sense, it is not difficult to realize why there have been those from time to time who worshipped the sun and the rain. Their failure was that they did not look beyond these to the great God of the universe who created them and pour out their heartfelt devotion to him. David did this, and wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, ... their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.”—Ps. 19:1-5

ONE HUMAN FAMILY

The Greeks were reputed to be a wise people, especially in their philosophies. It has been suggested that the Epicureans and Stoics considered themselves to be somewhat superior to the rest of society, especially those of other nationalities. If they had illusions of this sort, they would not like Paul's bold assertion that the God who was unknown to them had "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."—Acts 17:26, *New American Standard Bible*

Here is a great truth, simply stated, according to the Scriptures. The human family is one family, the offspring of one father, who was created by the God the Athenians called "Unknown." The great Creator of heaven and earth has made "from one man" all the various races and nationalities of humanity. The one man referred to by Paul is Adam. Paul believed in the Genesis record of creation, and in his letter to the church at Corinth he referred to Adam as being the "first man."—I Cor. 15:45

GOD IS NOT FAR FROM US

Paul additionally told the Athenians of God's desire for his human creation: "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; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, For we also are His children. 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 17:27-29, *NASB*

Here two great truths concerning the true and living God are beautifully expressed. He is the fountain of all life. In him “we live and move and exist,” and he wants us to seek him and to know him. Furthermore, as Paul reminds us, in seeking God we are not to think that we will find him in images of gold, or silver, or stone which are fashioned by human hands, for this would imply that the great Creator is something less than his creatures.

God is “not far” from any one of us, Paul also asserts. The apostle is not referring to distance, but to the Creator’s interest and love, and his ability to do for his human creatures all that his wisdom and love sees is best for their eternal welfare. We are not to think of God as being austere and unapproachable. Neither are we to seek him in fear, but with the assurance that he is understanding, merciful and kind.

To find and to know God is a glorious experience in one’s life. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.”—Jer. 9:23,24

GOD’S WAYS HIGHER THAN OURS

We must not expect to find God in our own limited, and oftentimes, short-sighted, concepts of what we would like him to be. Many make the mistake of trying to find God in the midst of the confusion of

a selfish and dying world. They think of the crime, war, accidents, injustices, sorrow and suffering from all causes, and they wonder where God can be found in it all. The truth is that he is found in none of these things, although he has permitted them for a time. If we are to find God, we must look for him apart from all that has been distorted and defiled as a result of the deceptions of mankind which have originated from Satan.

The great God of all creation said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."—Isa. 55:8-11

Truly, God's ways are higher than ours. How beautifully he has illustrated this in his reference to the purpose served by the rain and snow. Short-sighted humans often complain when it rains or snows, forgetting that their very life depends upon the objects of their complaints. However, God in his love does not withhold the rain and the snow because his human creatures, in their foolishness and selfishness, may complain about it. The rain and snow continue to fall and water the earth, "that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater."

“So shall my word be,” the Lord adds. God’s Word is the expression of his plans and purposes for his human creatures. Moses wrote concerning “the days of old, ... When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people.”—Deut. 32:7,8

Such designs of the Creator for his earthly creatures are not understood nor appreciated by the vast majority of mankind. They are born; they experience briefly a measure of joy; they suffer; they die. Most who do think of God usually do so in terms of their own restricted experiences and limited understanding and viewpoints. The majority throughout the ages have not even discerned, as some of the Athenians did, that there is an “unknown God” whom Paul said is not far from any one of us.

However, just as man’s lack of understanding has not hindered the periodic falling of the rain and snow to water the earth, so it has not interfered with the “Word” of God. His detailed plan, set forth in his Word of truth, has been going forward through the ages for the accomplishment of a wise and loving purpose by which he will eventually be revealed to all mankind. Then, all will be enabled to know and serve him with rejoicing. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”—Isa. 11:9

“CURSED IS THE GROUND”

The universal blessings of the rain and snow are today not without their drawbacks, for thorns and thistles are also thereby helped to grow. Here again we see the result of disobedience to divine law. “Cursed is the ground for thy sake,” God told Adam

after he sinned. (Gen. 3:17,18) The Lord has promised, however, that when his Word, his plan, has been accomplished, this also will be changed. "There shall be no more curse." (Rev. 22:3) Furthermore, God promises mankind, "Ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."—Isa. 55:12,13

Because of the "curse," the soil of this planet has been more or less continuously plagued with pests and convulsions of nature, which is not always to be the case. We might also think of the "thorns and thistles" of human experience—the disappointments and sufferings of the people throughout all the ages. These also are to be removed, and they will no longer serve to obscure the people's vision of the true and loving God. On this point, Isaiah wrote: "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces. ... And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation." Nothing shall be permitted to "hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," or kingdom.—Isa. 25:8,9; 11:9

GOD TO BE REVEALED

Throughout all the ages of human experience there has been a searching after God. Yet, few have been rewarded with anything better than to be told

that God is to be found in the imagery of various man-made idols, rituals and traditions. For most, the gods they have thus found have been vindictive and cruel, particularly the wholly unscriptural god of torment and torture.

Eventually, in the Creator's own due time, he will reveal himself to his human creatures. They will see him as one who loves and cares, who is sympathetic and understanding. They will see also an all-powerful God who is able to rid the world of everything which contributes to human unhappiness, suffering, and yes, even death. As Isaiah prophesied, he will "swallow up death in victory," which means that there will be no more sickness, pain or sorrow.

The Apostle John wrote concerning that time, "The tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Rev. 21:3,4) No wonder the people will say, "This is our God; we have waited for him!" Truly they will be glad, and will rejoice in the salvation from death which God has provided through his only begotten Son, Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. ■

"Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.

*You will seek Me and find Me
when you search for Me with all your heart."*

—Jeremiah 29:12,13,

New American Standard Bible