

Katamares: Acts: 17:16–34

17:18 *Some Philosophers Met Paul*

A New God.

Chrysostom: By the term resurrection the Athenians understood a god, for they were accustomed even to worship females.... They called their gods daimones, for their cities were full of daimones. ⁴ Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.18.⁵

17:21 *Telling or Hearing Something New*

Good and Bad Leisure.

Basil the Great: “Be at leisure and know that I am God.” ⁶ To the extent that we take our leisure in matters apart from God, we cannot attain knowledge of God. For who, concerned over the things of the world and immersed in fleshly distractions, can pay attention to discourses concerning God and measure up to the rigid discipline of contemplations so long and great? Don’t you see that the Word that falls among thorns is choked by the thorns? ⁷ Now the thorns are fleshly pleasures and wealth and glory and cares of this life. The one who seeks knowledge of God must become separated from all these things, and, being at leisure apart from passions, thus receive the knowledge of God. For how can contemplation about God enter a mind crowded by thoughts that preoccupy it? Even Pharaoh knew that being at leisure is proper to the search for God, and for this reason he mocked the Israelites, “You are idling about, you men of leisure, and you say, ‘We will pray to the Lord our God.’” ⁸ While this leisure is good and profitable for the one in leisure as it brings peace for the reception of the Savior’s teachings, the leisure of the Athenians was evil, since “they devoted their leisure to nothing more than saying or listening to something new.” Homily on Psalm 45. ⁹

17:22 *Very Religious*

Their Superstition.

Chrysostom: Paul found an altar, on which the words “to an unknown god” were engraved: who was that unknown god but Christ? Do you see the wisdom in changing the name? Do you see the reason he released the inscription from captivity? ... To save and benefit them. What else? Perhaps one might say that the

Athenians wrote these words for Christ? ... They certainly wrote that with a different meaning, but he was, nevertheless, able to change it.... Why did they write it? They had many gods, or rather many demons, "All the gods of the Gentiles are demons," 2 and some of them were native, others were foreign ... They had received some of their gods from their fathers, others from the neighboring nations, such as the Scythians, the Thracians and the Egyptians ... What did they do then? They erected an altar and inscribed it with the words "to an unknown god" in order to signify through the inscription: If by any chance there is another god who is still unknown to us, we will worship him too. See their immoderate superstition! For this reason Paul said from the beginning, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way ... you not only worship the gods who are known to you, but also those who are still unknown to you." Therefore they had written, "To an unknown god." ... The unknown God is none other than Christ. Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.23.3

17:23 *"This I Proclaim to You"*

Our Great Need of Revelation.

Clement of Alexandria: To talk about God is most difficult.... For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual nor number; moreover is neither an event nor that to which an event happens? No one can rightly express him wholly. For on account of his greatness he is ranked as the All and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of him. For the One is indivisible and therefore also is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability but with reference to its being without dimensions and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name. And if we name it, we do not do so properly, terming it either the One, or the Good, or Mind, or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator or Lord. We speak not as supplying his name, but for need, we use good names, in order that the mind may have these as points of support, so as not to err in other respects. For each one by itself does not express God, but all together are indicative of the power of the Omnipotent.... Nor any more is he apprehended by logic. For that depends on primary and better known principles. But there is nothing antecedent to the Unbegotten. It remains that we understand, then, the Unknown, by divine grace and by the Word alone that proceeds from him; as Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious. For in walking about, and beholding the objects of your worship, I found an altar on which was inscribed 'To the Unknown God.' Therefore, the one you ignorantly worship, I declare to you." Stromateis 5.12.4

Using Their Own Witnesses.

Chrysostom: He did not find in the city a holy book but an altar to an idol with the inscription "To an unknown god." The holy Paul, who had the grace of the Spirit, did not pass by but turned the altar with its inscription on its head.... He did not omit what the idolatrous Athenians had written.... We see what great value that inscription produced.... Paul entered the town, found an altar on which the words "to an unknown god" were engraved. What did he have to do? ... Did the words of the Gospels need to be declared? They would have mocked them. Or maybe the words from the books of the prophets or from the precepts of the law should have been talked about? But they would not have believed. What did he do then? He rushed to the altar and defeated them with the weapons of the enemies themselves. And that was what he said, "I became everything to everyone: to the Jews a Jew, to those outside the law as if I were outside the law." ⁵ Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.23.⁶

17:24 *God Made the World*

Creation a Divine Prerogative.

Chrysostom: He says that "the world and everything in it" is the work of God. Do you notice the conciseness and, in the conciseness, the clearness? And what was strange to them? The fact that God made the world. These things, now known to anyone, the Athenians did not know, not even the wise among them. For if he made them, it is clear that he is Lord. Notice what [Paul] affirms as the mark of divinity: creation, which the Son also has. Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 38.⁷

God's True Temple and Its Holiness.

Clement of Alexandria: Is it not the case that rightly and truly we do not circumscribe in any place that which cannot be circumscribed; nor do we shut up in temples made with hands that which contains all things? ... It would indeed be ridiculous, as the philosophers themselves say, for a person, the plaything of God, ⁹ to make God, and for God to be the plaything of art.... Works of art cannot ... be sacred and divine.... And if the word sacred has a twofold application, designating both God himself and the structure raised to his honor, how shall we not, through knowledge, properly call the church "holy," "made for the honor of God," "sacred to God," "of great value," not being constructed by mechanical art ... but by the will of God fashioned into a temple? For it is not now the place but the assembly of the elect that I call the church. Stromateis 7.5.¹⁰

17:25 Giving to All Life and Breath and Everything

The Self-Sufficiency and Generosity of God.

Chrysostom: How was he served by human hands when he was among the Jews? No, it was not by their hands but by their thoughts, since he did not seek those things, as though he were in need. "Shall I eat," he says, "the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" ¹¹ Then Paul says, "Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything." Even this affirmation by Paul, that he is in need of nothing, is not enough. For although this is a mark of divinity, something else must be added. Paul adds, "He himself gives to all people life and breath and everything." These are the two proofs of divinity Paul points to, that he is in need of nothing and that he gives to all people everything. Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 38.¹²

17:27 Seeking God

God Enables the Search.

Chrysostom: "Having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him." He means that they are not forced to go about and seek God or that God determines their seeking of God, not continuously but in "allotted periods." With this Paul shows that even if they sought him they would not find him, although he was as conspicuous for discovery as something tangible in their midst.... "Yet he is not far from each one of us" but close to all people. What Paul means is this. Not only did he give "life and breath and everything," but also the sum and total of everything: he led people to the knowledge of himself, giving us the means through which we can find him and understand him. But we did not wish to seek him, even though he was close at hand. "Not far," Paul says, "from each of us." He means that he is close to all people all over the world. What can be greater than this? Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 38.¹³

Close Even When We Are Far Away.

Augustine: If this were spoken in a material sense, it could be understood of our material world: for in it too, so far as our body is concerned, we lie and move and are. We must take the text, then, as spoken of the mind, which is made in his image, and of a manner of being more excellent, not visible but spiritual. What is there indeed that is not "in him," of whom Holy Scripture says, "for from him and through him and in him are all things"? ¹⁴ If in him are all things, in whom, save in him in whom they are, can the living

live or the moving move? Yet all people are not with him after the manner of the saying “I am always with you.”¹⁵ Nor is he with all after the manner of our own saying, “the Lord be with you.” It is a person’s great misery not to be with him without whom people cannot be. Certainly, people are never without him, in whom he is; yet if a person does not remember him, does not understand him or love him, he is not with him. On the Trinity 16.¹⁶

God’s Nearness.

Origen: “You are near, Lord, and all your commandments are truth.”¹⁷ God says elsewhere, “I am a God who is near and not a God who is far away, says the Lord.”¹⁸ For the power of God is everywhere according to the word of creation and providence. Knowing this, Paul, addressing the Greeks as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, says, “We do not seek God far from us, for in him we live and move and are,” and “the Spirit of the Lord has filled the earth.”¹⁹ He is thus, for his part, close, but if we ourselves make no effort, though he be close, to draw near to him, we will not enjoy his nearness. For this reason, sinners are far from God: “Behold, those who distance themselves from you perish.”²⁰ But the just ones strive to approach God, for he is not present to them just as a creator, but he even shares himself with them: “And Moses alone draws near to God, but the rest do not draw near.”²¹ According to the degree of will and perfection, the one who approaches God is that one about whom Paul says, “The one joined to the Lord is one spirit.”²² Palestinian Catena on Psalm 118.151.²³

17:28 Offspring of God

Bound by the Law of Christ.

Origen: “Being as one outside the law to those outside the law.”²⁴ He came to Athens, he found philosophers, and he did not use the words of the prophets or from the law, but as one perhaps recalling this pagan teaching from a school of rhetoric he spoke to the men of Athens. For [Paul] said, “Just as some of your poets have said, ‘For we are his offspring too.’ ”²⁵ In this place, he was as one outside the law to those outside the law, in order to gain the lawless. It is as if he were to say “I was doing nothing contrary to the law in making this concession to them, but I was keeping myself bound by the law of Christ, in order to gain the lawless.” Commentary on 1 Corinthians 43.²⁶

Sight to the Blind.

Clement of Alexandria: It is clear that by using poetic examples from the Phaenomena of Aratus [Paul] approves the best statements of the Greeks. Besides, he refers to the fact that in the person of the unknown god the Greeks are indirectly honoring God the Creator and need to receive him and learn about him with full knowledge through the Son. "I sent you to the gentiles for this purpose," says Scripture, "to open their eyes, for them to turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, for them to receive release from sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me." ²⁷ So these are the "opened eyes of the blind," which means the clear knowledge of the Father through the Son, the direct grasp of the thing to which the Greeks indirectly allude. Stromateis 1.19.28

17:29 *The Deity Is Not Like Gold*

Unlike Any Human Fashioning.

Ammonius: He teaches that the human mind cannot comprehend God as he is according to nature. Their mouths, which say the deity is of human form, are closed with these words. Indeed, one can mold or sculpt or draw people and images of people, or one can paint the likeness of any earthly thing. God, however, is similar to no human work. According to the word of the apostle, the deity is absolutely undetermined, incomprehensible, without image, incorporeal, not similar to human form or any other thing. Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.29.1

17:31 *The Resurrection Gives Assurance*

The Resurrection: An Offer of Forgiveness.

Ammonius: Surely if God overlooked from the foundation of the world the transgressions committed by people out of ignorance, and he gives to each the forgiveness of transgressions, fittingly did he come among us at the end of the ages, in order that his boundless love of humankind might be received in accord with the measure that he reveals his presence. Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.30.2

The Resurrection: Universal Call to Repentance.

Chrysostom: What? Is none of these to be punished? No, not if they are willing to repent. [Paul] says this not of the departed but of those whom he is addressing. He does not [yet] call you to account, Paul says.

He does not say, "He neglected" or "He permitted," but "You were ignorant. He overlooked." That is, he does not exact punishment from you as from people deserving punishment. You were ignorant. And he does not say, "You willfully did wrong," which is what he showed above when he said, "everywhere to repent." Here he hints at the whole world. See how he leads them away from the partial deities. "Because he has fixed a day," he says, "on which he will judge the world in righteousness." Look, again he uses the expression world, referring thus to humans. "By a man whom he has appointed, by raising him from the dead." See how he again declares the passion by pointing to the resurrection. That the judgment is true is clear from the resurrection, for the latter helps to establish the former. That everything he said was spoken with truth is clear from the fact that he rose again. That they gave to all people this assurance, that he rose from the dead, this is clear hereafter. Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 38.3

The Resurrection of the Body.

Chrysostom: Look, he even introduced the subject of the resurrection of all. For in no other way can the world be judged. The words "by raising him from the dead" are spoken in regard to the body. For this is what was dead, what had fallen. Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 38.4

Teaching As Christ Taught.

Chrysostom: What do you do, Paul? You say nothing about the form of God nor that he is equal to God or anything concerning the splendor of his glory. Indeed the time to say these things had not yet come, but it was enough that they admitted that he was a man. And Christ did the same, and Paul actually learned these things from him. In fact, Christ did not reveal his divinity immediately, but first Christ was believed to be simply a man and a prophet; then he appeared to be what he really was. Catena on the Acts of the Apostles 17.31.5