

# *Something's Missing* "The Search"

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**Digging Deeper**

*Something's Missing*: "The Search"

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## **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Text(s)**: Acts 17; Matthew 6:31; John 17:3; Philippians 3:10; Proverbs 8:17; Jeremiah 31:33-34; and others throughout.

## **Introduction to the Series, "Something's Missing"**

Within the first weeks after the birth of child, she learns to experience the world through a myriad of sensations. We are free to say, I think, that the child *knows* the world at the most basic level, although unreflectively. What the child *knows* in the earliest moments after delivery is that the world outside has lost the secure, nurturing, and warm sensations of the womb. The abrupt departure brings abrupt changes where "Something's missing." Of course the *knowing* of the newborn lacks the abstraction, the language, the reasoning, and the evaluation of the adult. However, the child, so situated, *knows* how to cry when hungry, wet, neglected, tired, or without the touch and smell of a parent. The child knows these things and knows when they are missing, lost, or slow in coming. Similarly, the unpleasantness of loud voices, startling movements, and inflicted pain produce the first-order reflexes of displeasure. Should loss of settledness persist, the infant knows that "Something's missing." And she knows all of these things with a kind of intuition that precedes thought or reflection. When life is not quite right, the child knows "in her gut" and "in her bones" that "Something's missing." These realities are simply the plain truths of pre-reflective consciousness. As the child becomes an adult, in due course, the deficits grow to include a fresh awareness that things are *not quite right* with human beings in the world; that things are *not as they should be*. "Something's missing."

"Something is missing" is a sentence that states a *reality about an unknown*, a peculiar situation to be sure. "Is" affirms the truth of this "missing" Something without knowing anything about what the "thing" might be. Two truths cling to the sentence: one is about *absence* and the other is about *existence*. "Something" indicates the vagueness of the missing reality, a sort of naïve faith that what is absent exists without a concrete sense of the thing's properties and identity. All of this analysis is well and good, but for the ordinary person, "Something's missing" also has emotional content. Perhaps the awareness begins with a dull sensation at the visceral level, and then proceeds to conscious thought that asks, "There must be something more than what I have come to know. What do I lack? How can I be complete? Where is my life going? Which resources will fill what is missing? Who can I love?" Human beings discover that they are *questioning* persons who are not content to have the world as it is, but imagine the world as it could be.

None of these experiences are merely random expressions of material organisms. They are instead the deep-seated longings of creatures that are aware of themselves, others, and the world. Within the context of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the longing for life on better terms, on more fulfilled terms, is the intentional work of the Creator God who makes possible the discovery of *missing things* and the destiny of maturing persons. We are here, says this tradition, by divine appointment, implanted with that often vague yet real desire which strives for what philosophers call "the Good," the highest reason for what is and what is becoming. St. Augustine framed the human longing this way:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you – we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you (St. Augustine's *Confessions* (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5)).

And so the desire to pursue what is missing is the “God shaped vacuum” in the human heart, learned early by the infant and leaned into by the adult. The respected 17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal knew that “something’s missing” when he wrote:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* VII(425))

From the earliest writings of the biblical witnesses, we hear the echoes of the “*missing* thing” in the work of the Creator.

1. God forms the human from the dust of the ground as the master work of a potter, faces His lifeless masterpiece, notes what is *missing*, and then: “breathed the breath of life so that the human becomes a living soul” (Genesis 2:7).
2. God engages His new creation in meaningful work and realizes what is *missing* when He utters the words, “It is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a partner for him” (Genesis 2:18).
3. God confronts the loss of His human partners who have gone *missing* in the garden groves, and grieved by the loss calls out with fatherly concern, “Human where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

### **Introduction to This Week’s Study, “The Search”**

Biblical faith knows the grief of *missing* things from the perspective of their Creator, the One who formed His human companions “for Himself” and will not rest until they are made fully complete within the purposes of His love. Implanted in the very nature of things is the seed for finding *what’s missing*. In his lovely book, *Simply Christian*, N. T. Wright unpacks the process by which human beings become aware and engage with the fulfillment of the “inner void.”<sup>1</sup> He says<sup>2</sup> we hear “echoes of a voice” calling to us from many directions. To hear these echoes correctly is to hear the voice of God. By encouraging people to pause and focus on these echoes, we can help prepare them to hear a case for the truth of Christianity, if a case needs to be made at all.

One of those echoes is *justice*. Everyone hears it, even children. Let one child get to stay up later at night than another, and you’ll hear it: “That’s not fair!” We want things to be right, to be in proper order, but we live in a world so often out of order. Racism, religious oppression, laws which serve only the powerful: we can multiply examples. We try to bring about justice, but it slips through our fingers. Some say the echo we’re hearing is just a dream, that there can be no justice. Others say there is such a thing as justice, but it’s from another world and cannot be attained here. Still others say it’s the voice of *someone* speaking to us from elsewhere. God is calling to us, telling us what is right and wrong, and bidding us to pursue justice.

*Spirituality* is another echo. Wright tells a parable of a dictator who believes it isn’t safe to have water coming from so many sources in his kingdom, so he decides to cover with concrete all the land that once was marked by springs and provide one water source for all the people. This is safer, he thought. It’s controlled. In time, however, the waters of the springs begin to break through the concrete, and soon they erupt all over the place. The water in this parable is spirituality, and the dictator is the philosophy that has shaped our culture for a few centuries, that of naturalism. As much as the “dictator” of naturalism hates it, spirituality is breaking out all over these days. Many religions are now practiced in America. Spirituality and the supernatural are regular themes on TV and in the movies. Bookstores sell scads of books on the subject. It’s cool to be spiritual. Why has this happened? People are hearing something, although many aren’t hearing it correctly. Wright says that the formerly “hidden spring” of spirituality “[points] away from the bleak landscape of modern secularism and toward the possibility that we humans are made for more than this” (p. 20). There is more to us than what can be studied scientifically.

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Rick Wade offers a useful summary of the “echoes” identified in Wright’s book. <https://probe.org/echoes-of-a-voice/>

After dealing with spirituality, Wright turns to *relationships*. He wonders, “How is it that we ache for each other and yet find relationships so difficult?”(p. 29). It’s obvious that we are made to live in relationships with other people. In the realm of relationships, we hear the echo of a voice telling us something very important about ourselves. We find our meaning in the context of a society, small or large, including intimate relationships; maybe especially so. Marriage is still popular even though so many marriages end in divorce. Many couples just live together in an attempt to avoid the messiness of divorce. We seek good relationships, but plan on failed ones.

And even good relationships including marriages have to end, because death, that great separator, comes to all. We fear it, but we can’t do anything about it. Not only marriages struggle, but so do larger societies, especially democratic ones. We want to trust people, indeed we have to. But we’re let down and cynicism is bred. Wright says that in Britain, more people vote on reality TV shows than in elections. What keeps driving us to be so closely involved with other people despite all the risks?

What about the echo of *beauty*? Is beauty important to people? Not everyone is a patron of the arts, to be sure. But people put time and money into making their homes attractive places to live. Even a person who doesn’t care about such things will be found outside on Saturday washing his car. Yet for all our love of beauty, we find it difficult to capture. Artists paint canvas after canvas trying to get it right. Beauty is transient and incomplete. The common belief about beauty is that it is in the eye of the beholder. But if that says it all, then nothing is beautiful in itself. Shared experiences of beauty with other people are just happenstance; their subjective response just happens to accord with ours at the moment.

What explanation does Christianity offers for those “echoes of a voice” we’ve been discussing? The bottom line is this: The death and resurrection of Christ provides a context within which these things come to fruition, where His creation will not be ultimately frustrated by the fallenness of the world. One of the central motifs of Wright’s book is *the meeting of heaven and earth*. When he speaks of heaven, Wright is speaking of the supernatural realm where God is; he has in mind more two different realms than two spatial locations.

Wright describes three views of the way God and the world relate. Option 1, he calls it, is the belief that God and the world are identical; what is called pantheism. Option 2 is the belief that there is a great gulf between God and the world, what has been called deism. Option 3 is the belief that, while God and the world are distinct, their realms meet and even overlap at times. In Christ, heaven and earth meet in their fullest, most profound way. Jesus, the full embodiment of God, became man; Emmanuel, God with us, is what Isaiah called Him. “In listening to Jesus,” Wright says, “we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along.”(p. 92).

In his ministry and his death, Jesus took on the powers of darkness. The victory He won didn’t only serve to get us into heaven. In defeating evil he won a victory over injustice, spiritual deadness, broken relationships, and an ugly world among other things. His victory applies to us. Being a Christian isn’t about leaving this fallen world behind to join God in a disembodied state way out there in heaven. Jesus has set us free and made us new creations, empowered by His Spirit to work at restoring creation in the here and now. We know that this work won’t be completed until Jesus comes again and establishes a new heaven and new earth. However, we are to enter into His victory now. “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus prayed (Matt. 6:10). Jesus is the one who both makes sense of our longing for justice, spirituality, relationships, and beauty, and who makes them possible.

So what do we do? How do we discuss all of this with others who are seekers like ourselves? People who won’t hear a case made for the truth of Christianity might be open to hearing what it has to say about such significant matters as justice and relationships and others. People have to see them being worked out in our own lives individually and corporately.

In 1 Cor. 3:16 Paul tells us that we are individually temples of the Spirit. In Eph. 2:21 he says that the whole church forms a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was where God dwelled among His people. Now, we are God's temple, the place where God dwells. In us because of the Spirit within us, heaven and earth meet. And the Spirit, who is our constant companion, enables us to continue Jesus' work, to "begin the work of making God's future real in the present." (p. 124).

*When we participate in the life of the church*, we read and speak the Word; we engage in worship and prayer; and we partake of the Lord's Supper. In all these things, we declare that God is engaged in this world. And as a result, God's Spirit is at work through us to set the world to rights. *Justice* should be demonstrated by the church, and it will be complete one day. We discover true *spirituality*, and that we can partake in both the earthly and heavenly realms, because we are body and spirit. Both parts of our nature find their fulfillment in a proper relationship with God. We are given a new *relationship* with God, and the Spirit works in us to show the love of Christ to others and hence to establish and maintain good relationships with people. And through the *church*, the Spirit works to restore *beauty* to this world and to free it from corruption. One day God will restore beauty completely in remaking creation to be what it is supposed to be.

As Christians, Wright says, we are "workers for justice, explorers of spirituality, makers and menders of relationships, creators of beauty." (p. 189). "We are called not only to listen to the echoes of the voice . . . but to be people through whom the rest of the world comes to hear and respond to that voice as well." (p. 218). When people see us living this way, maybe they will stop long enough to listen to our reasons. And we discover for ourselves that "Something's *missing*" in the "echoes of a voice" which lie out and beyond us but have also now come to be among us.

Immanuel Kant, the 18<sup>th</sup> philosopher of the Enlightenment, began his weighty book, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787)<sup>3</sup>, with three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What should I do?
3. What may I hope?

He wrote his work at a watershed moment in the history of western thought when science was making huge gains for human material happiness, and when religious faith struggled to keep the big questions of meaning and purpose at the center of human understanding. His questions move the seeker beyond materialism to matters of the spirit and the moral life. Together, as our discussion begins this week, we join *the search for what's missing*.

### **What..., What..., What...? (Matthew 6:31-34)**

<sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup> "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:31-34).

It's a simple text, though difficult to apply. Robbed by worries over tomorrow's treasures, we forget that God is indeed our heavenly Father "who knows you need them." But unlike pagans, we are not to "run after them," a fitting metaphor describing the frantic pursuit of material things. We are to replace covetousness with child-like trust, and start living like children of the King whose kingdom and righteousness are our first concerns. Do we doubt that our Father would not neglect His own who put Him first? Jesus does not choose complicated "treasures" to illustrate our worry. These are life's necessities: food, drink, and clothing. As Jesus illustrates in the preceding verses, all of nature has God's attention, even those orders of creation which cannot think or imagine (birds and flowers). Do we imagine God pays less attention to us?

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. By Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1781, 1787]).

This is a text about seeking, about “the *Search*.” It reveals that humans may very well seek the *missing* “something” in all the wrong places, reminiscent of the 1980’s song of the same title.<sup>4</sup>

*Well, I've spent a lifetime lookin' for you;  
singles bars and good time lovers were never true.  
Playin' a fools game hopin' to win;  
and tellin' those sweet lies and losin' again.  
I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places,  
Lookin' for love in too many faces,  
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces  
of what I'm dreamin' of.  
Hopin' to find a friend and a lover;  
I'll bless the day I discover  
another heart lookin' for love.  
And I was alone then, no love in sight;  
and I did ev'rything I could to get me though the night.  
Don't know where it started or where it might end;  
I turned to a stranger just like a friend.  
I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places,  
Lookin' for love in too many faces,  
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces  
of what I'm dreamin' of.  
Hopin' to find a friend and a lover;  
I'll bless the day I discover  
another heart lookin' for love.  
Then you came a knockin' at my heart's door;*

*You're ev'ry thing I've been lookin' for.  
No more lookin' for love in all the wrong places,  
Lookin' for love in too many faces,  
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces  
of what I'm dreamin' of.  
Now that I've found a friend and a lover;  
I bless the day that I discovered  
you, oh you;  
lookin' for love in all the wrong places,  
Lookin' for love in too many faces,  
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces  
of what I'm dreamin' of.  
Now that I've found a friend and a lover;  
I bless the day that I discovered  
you, oh you;  
lookin' for love in all the wrong places,  
Lookin' for love in too many faces,  
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces  
of what I'm dreamin' of.  
Now that I've found a friend and a lover;  
I bless the day that I discovered  
you, oh you; lookin' for love*

Of course the romantic theme dominates the lyrics, but if we imagine human beings seeking for the highest love and the greatest good, then the relevance of the lyrics for the seeker’s quest extends beyond the limits intended by the writers. The “you” becomes, on a higher level, the “Something” that’s *missing*, that which is discovered, that is found, after many false starts, disappointed relationships, and “too many faces.” Think of the theme in terms of the “echoes of a voice.”

Jesus knew that the seeker who is driven by anxiety is prone to accept things that will not last, do not satisfy, and fail to rise to the higher ground of God’s kingdom and righteousness. His critique of secular culture in his own time, embodied in his phrase “the Gentiles who strive for all these things...”, reminds us that *missing* things do have dead ends when they are sought by hearts motivated by worry over creature comforts *alone*. These are not our primary goods if we are to become fully human. Seekers who allow *crises* and the troubles of today or tomorrow to determine their direction consistently meet with disappointment. Not so with the seeker after the Kingdom of God — the Rule of God, His active reign— made possible by the arrival of His Son, Jesus. Jesus spoke to his fellow Israelites, a people besieged by the loss of dignity at the hands of Gentiles (the Romans). Daily life had become the meat-grinder, wage chaser, and power pursuer. In each case the result had been a deeper hole of *missing* things, lost in the quest. By contrast, the Kingdom of God opened up the promise for a different sort of present and a better sort of future, filled with *hope*. Such hope promises righteousness from God who will put the world to rights and provide a place in it for His people who refuse the worry and embrace Him instead.

St. Augustine of Hippo, the 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian philosopher/theologian, wrote about the seeker who settled for things that could not bring true happiness.

But the title happy cannot, in my opinion, belong either to him who has not what he loves, whatever it may be, or to him who has what he loves if it is hurtful, or to him who does not love what he has, although it is good in perfection. For one who seeks what he cannot obtain suffers torture, and one who has got what is not desirable is cheated, and one who does not seek for what is worth seeking for is diseased. Now in all these cases the mind

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<sup>4</sup> Written by Wanda Mallette, Bob Morrison and Patti Ryan, made popular by Johnny Lee and themed by the movie *Urban Cowboy* (1980).

cannot but be unhappy, and happiness and unhappiness cannot reside at the same time in one man; so in none of these cases can the man be happy. I find, then, a fourth case where the happy life exists— when that which is man's chief good is both loved and possessed. ... (*Against the Manichaens* 3).

Now he is a man of just and holy life who forms an unprejudiced estimate of things, and keeps his affections also under strict control, so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves less or more which ought to be loved equally. No sinner is to be loved as a sinner; and every man is to be loved as a man for God's sake; but God is to be loved for His own sake. And if God is to be loved more than any man, each man ought to love God more than himself. (*On Christian Doctrine* I. 27. 28).

“To love God more than himself” is, in the words of Jesus, to “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

### **Seeking Life that Loves and Lasts (John 17:3)**

<sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3).

This text is a single line from the prayer of Jesus, offered just hours before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Read within the wider context of that prayer, its words reveal the heart of God's Son whose purpose and highest Good was to *complete* the work for which he had been “sent,” and to supply the *missing* something. His understanding of his purpose is seen in several more lines throughout the prayer, noted here, each beginning with the affirmative “I ...”:

<sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. (John 17:4).

<sup>6</sup> I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. (John 17:6).

<sup>9</sup> I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. (John 17:9).

<sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17:12).

<sup>13</sup> I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

<sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

<sup>15</sup> I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. (John 17:13-15).

<sup>20</sup> "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. (John 17:20-21).

<sup>24</sup> Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24).

<sup>26</sup> I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:26 - 18:1).

*Something was missing* and Jesus in his prayer to the Father made clear in what ways he had come to remedy the great loss of human life. The prayer is an appropriate development of his instruction in our previous text to “Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness...” This prayer reveals the supreme goal of “knowing the only true God ... and Jesus the Messiah.” “To know” is the partner of “to seek,” for the kind of *seeking* Jesus teaches leads to a *knowing* that transcends common human understanding. In this sense, as the prayer reveals throughout, “to know God” is “to love God” with an intimacy that brokers true relationship. What humans call “religion” only becomes a lively experience when it is immersed in loving God and thereby loving others. In the span of John 17:23-26, “love” appears five times and fully describes what knowing God really looks like. Seen through the lens of John 17:3, the kingdom of God is equivalent to the phrase “eternal life” — the life that “loves and lasts forever.” Yes, something's *missing* and Jesus supplies the remedy when he prays for those who seek God through him.

### **Losses, Gains, and Knowing Jesus (Philippians 3:7-11)**

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all

things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11).

When St. Paul introduces this portion of his letter to the church at Philippi (3:3-6), he offers a brief personal biography of his own experience in seeking that which was *missing* in his own life. For him the quest for high level achievement had once been paramount. Paul was a striver in his previous life under the regimens of Second Temple Judaism. Frustrated over Jewish losses because of the Roman occupation of the holy land, Paul had in the past set his mind on reforming Judaism. He thought what was *missing* consisted in collusion with the prevailing culture which robbed Jews of their distinctive religious faith and practices. As a Pharisee who followed the rigorous disciplines of the rabbi Shammai, Paul pursued a program of strict conformity to original Jewish orthodoxy and desired that all Jews do the same. In his words:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:4-6).

But as our text in this section indicates, Paul met with failure in his efforts, not because he discovered on his own a better way, but because he had met the Messiah: "Christ Jesus my Lord," for whose kingdom Paul was willing to sacrifice everything. Jesus became for Paul the primary "something that was *missing*."

Paul begins Philippians 3:7 with the words, "But whatever was to my profit," literally, "but whatever was to me a gain (Greek: *kerde*, "gain," "advantage," "a win"). Everything that belonged to Paul's "confidence in the flesh" — what gave him such certainty as a righteous Jew — is now swept away. They became, not assets, but liabilities in the accounting book of the kingdom. What once made Paul proud and self-reliant he takes as a catastrophic loss. The language of this passage is from the world of accounting as Rabbis would have seen it. Even the word *hegeisthai*, translated "count" or "consider" is consistent with this meaning. Whatever Paul "accounted" as enhancing his own value to God and to the nation, he even now decisively regards as bringing no value whatever to either. Though the list Paul gives us has many items on it, Paul uses the singular form of the noun, *zemia*, to consign them to the trash bin. In fact, the noun used here comes from the verb, *zemioo*, meaning "to affect with damage, do damage to, suffer loss, sustain damage, or receive injury". Had Paul used our vernacular, he might have written, "Whatever I thought enhanced my life took a real blow one day." No doubt, Paul had in mind his own encounter with the risen Jesus who "called him out" that day (Acts 9) as a persecutor, not merely of his followers, but of himself. *None of what Paul thought he was accomplishing actually amounted to anything*, he now recognizes.

But Paul can't be faulted for trying. His efforts were zealous and in accordance with the most devout tenants of Judaism. Yet, it was *all he had ever known*; he knew nothing *more*; he didn't know anything *better*. Until... Much like the first disciples who heard Jesus' words, "deny yourself," "take up your cross" there's something so much better "to follow"! The "whole world" cannot enhance the soul, Jesus said (Mark8:36). And Paul discovered as much when he writes, "Whatever was to my profit..." Paul's rejection of his former way of life came at the insistence of the Lord Jesus Christ. As he writes in 3:8, by "comparing" the old "gains" with the new ones, namely with "knowing Christ," the decision to let go of the old is, to use our slang, "a no-brainer". The Greek words are powerful: *huperechon tes gnoseos Christos Iesou tou kuriou mou*, literally, "the superiority of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord..." While Paul "knew" Torah through the lens of rabbinic interpretation, and oral tradition, and while he "knew" a kind of righteousness which qualified itself in self-approving ways, all of that pales in the presence of the "superior knowledge" (Greek: *gnosis*) found in having the Messiah Jesus as his Lord. Given the choice, so keenly set out for him that day on the road to Damascus, Paul chose the knowledge of a *person* to the knowledge of a *tradition*. So much so, that Paul will call his previous "benefits" *skubala*, "manure, dung, excrement" or any other slang expression you dare to pencil in here!

On the road to Damascus that day (see Acts 9), Paul died to himself, though at first he knew little of what that actually meant. His eyes were covered with blindness, and his mind was disoriented, so that others had to lead him to shelter and provisions. For once, he was dependent on others for the blessings of God--such as his sight! And in this Philippians passage, Paul reflects on the meaning of all that and then makes clear his newly embraced vocation: "that I may gain Christ" (3:8b). Did he lose his life that day? Absolutely, letting go of the only life he knew, the life in Judaism with all of its assured benefits and grand dreams. This was no small scuttling of baggage, but the accumulated achievement of a lifetime. The whole world looked different to Paul. Even the Scriptures looked different. They ceased to be proof-texts for his dearly-held doctrine and became living words pointing to God's Messiah who had finally arrived. Paul might well have accepted Luther's assessment, made centuries later, "The Old Testament is the manger where the Christ-child is laid". Manger indeed! The Pharisee who once found solace in his chosenness, now finds a new identity in the words "gain Christ," and "be found in him, not having my own righteousness, the one derived from law-in-itself, but the one derived from God, righteousness [standing] on faith" (3:9). The "Something" that was *missing* turned out to be Jesus!

What does it mean to "be found in" Christ? The Greek word, *heurisko*, translated here as "found," has meanings which include: "to find, to find out, *discover*, devise, intent, make, get, gain, procure, bring, fetch". Paul uses the word in its passive sense, "to be found," along with the preposition *en*, "in". Whereas, Paul earlier wrote about letting go of everything "for the sake of Christ" (3:7), to "know Christ" (3:8a), to "gain Christ" (8b), in this instance, he wants to be "found in Christ" (3:9). New Testament scholar, Preisker, in his lexical entry on this word, comments:

...its reference is predominantly to the surprising *discovery* and mysterious understanding of human existence and historical occurrence in their hidden relationships as seen from the standpoint of and with an ultimate view to the kingdom of God [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II, p.769]

In other words, Paul made a *startling discovery* that all attempts to save himself were doomed to fail, but without warning, God showed up one day and turned his world upside-down, and changed the way he thought about things, especially, about himself. In Jesus, God's Messiah, Lord of all things, the kingdom of God had arrived at last, and, wonder of wonders, Paul woke up one day living inside that kingdom! It was all so unexpected and unplanned from Paul's perspective. Everything he had attempted had to be thrown out. *Christ was Paul's great and magnificent discovery!* And having "found Christ," Paul at last had found himself. Not the old self, rooted as it was in *religious piety*, well-intentioned though it was, but in *real righteousness*. This, then, is the rich meaning of *heurisko--the discovery of the unexpected*: the discovery of Christ, not as Paul imagined him, but as God revealed him. Not arriving in power and majesty, but hanging on a cross.

But Paul is not yet finished telling his readers about his upside-down *discovery*, his holy *heuriskon*. Paul's self has changed residence. He is no longer living only in his own neighborhood but in the kingdom of Christ as well. "Righteousness" is no longer something that he trots out to show off his achievements, but rather is God's declaration, in Christ, of his acceptance as one of God's people. Righteousness is not something "I possess," rather it is something with which I am blessed by God in Christ. Two kinds of righteousness are contrasted: "my own" as an achievement, attracting the favor of God; and "on faith" as the gift of the faithful God. When Paul speaks about "faith" (Greek: *pistis*), he is not so much naming yet one more thing that *he does*, but rather, what God is faithful in doing for him. This is a righteousness growing from the new-found relationship Paul has with Christ, a relationship described earlier, as the "knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord".

By all accounts *Paul has died to his old way of being righteous*, that is, of being accepted as one of the people of God. It's not about circumcision or birthright or separation from the pagan world or achievement under Torah. Quite the opposite (or, as we would put it, quite upside-down from all of that!), in place of this, Paul discovers a new kind of identity, the sort given to him by Christ himself. Recall his conversation with the risen, exalted Jesus on the road to Damascus.

[Note: There are four accounts of Paul's conversion: Galatians 1:15-17 (from Paul himself); Acts 9:1-19 (Luke relating Paul's experience); Acts 22:2b-16 (Luke relating Paul's telling of his conversion to the crowd in Jerusalem); Acts 26:9-18 (Luke relating Paul's telling of his conversion to Agrippa). There are also allusions to

Paul's conversion in Galatians 1:11-12; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8. You are encouraged to read each of these and think about the implications for our study here].

During that exchange with Jesus, Paul gets a new commission: to bring the Gospel to the pagan world, that is, to Gentiles, the hated *goyim*. Nothing could have been more off the beaten path for this set-in-his-ways Pharisee, bent on purifying Judaism of its paganism. With his fresh vocation, Paul had to let go of all of that. "You are," Jesus was telling Paul, "my servant and witness to the Gentiles. Everything else amounts to nothing compared to this vocation." An undiscovered life lay before him, and the old life was laid in its grave at the cross of the risen Christ. Life would not be the same for Paul ever again.

But now we move to the finale of our present passage, 3:10-11. Paul ended 4:9 with the words, the "from-God-righteousness-on-the-faith" (my literal rendering of the Greek). He has just contrasted "his own" version of this righteousness with the "from-God-on-the-faith" version. But the sentence does not end there, and, unfortunately, our translators give the impression that Paul picks up a new thought with 4:10. He does not, but, instead, continues this one. The Greek of 3:10 begins with the genitive form of the article "the," followed by the infinitive "to know". This roughly translates as "of (or for) the knowing of," implying purpose, a common grammatical form in the New Testament. In addition, the form of the verb "to know" is in the aorist tense, likely the variety of aorist which "sums up the action" at the point it begins, a sort of "crisis event". What is Paul trying to tell us by this maze of linguistic twists?

We have already heard Paul tell us that Christ has turned out to be the greatest discovery of his life. That in Christ, he has had a major shakeup of his personal values. Nothing looks the same anymore. Nothing matters that once mattered. *Paul has reached a crisis of knowledge with the result that coming to know Christ matters more than anything else.* It's as if Paul has walked through a hidden door (like the one in C.S. Lewis' wardrobe!), and a whole new world suddenly comes into view on the other side. This world is ruled by a different kind of righteousness, a different kind of "order," than the one he left behind. In this new world, Christ Jesus is Lord — he is God ruling over all things, and Paul has met him face-to-face. What follows in Philippians 3:10-11 is a further explanation of what it means for Paul to be "found in Christ".

Paul gathers up everything he says in 3:10-11 in the word for "to know" or, as we have suggested, "to come to know," a crisis of knowing. This "knowledge of Christ is personal and relational," Gerald Hawthorne writes in his commentary on Philippians (*Word Biblical Commentary*, 43, p.143). The focus is on "understanding," coupled with experience and even intimacy. This is not mere intellectual knowledge of the sort Paul would have known in his rabbinic training. Much of that has been left behind as useless to his pursuit of this new righteousness. The current adage that it's not "what you know" but "whom you know" might be re-baptized in this context to mean that *knowledge* is not impersonal and entirely objective, but verges on the subjective and highly inter-personal. Some readers might cringe at this, thinking that Paul is advocating some form of relativistic truth. If by "relativistic" we mean "without proper grounding or confirmation," Paul certainly is not intending that. But if we mean "relative" in the sense that it pertains to a "relationship" with God through Christ most certainly that is Paul's "understanding". Again, Hawthorne: "...he is thinking about a personal encounter with Christ that inaugurates a special intimacy with Christ that is life-changing and on-going" (p.143). The reader is invited to study these texts which shed more light on that idea of "knowing God": John 17:3, 1 Corinthians 2:8, 1 John 2:3-4, 4:8, 5:20.

What is the content of this "knowing"? Paul identifies a few key components:

1. "the power (Greek: *dunamis*) of the resurrection of him"
2. "the fellowship of his sufferings"
3. "conformity to his death"
4. "attaining the resurrection out from the dead"

Notice that Paul wants to know Christ in precisely these ways. And, also, that in knowing him in these ways, Paul comes to know himself in a way he has not known before. This knowing causes something to happen to

Paul. Once again, the sort of knowledge Paul seeks is not something that he *acquires* (like “the whole world”!) and can neatly catalogue into his lists of “gains,” as part of his repertoire of achievements. While Paul certainly believed in the Jesus of history, it was not merely the facts about Jesus that Paul wanted to input into his information store. Nor does he claim such knowledge as an advantage he now holds over other people, giving him a head-start on some newly discovered righteousness that will move him to the head of the line in the kingdom of God. Not at all. Paul wants to know Christ as the living One who is even now delivering him from his self-centeredness, converting him from the old way to the new way of life, gifting him to serve others by the Holy Spirit, and resurrecting him from death to life.

But having put the best foot forward in seeking the “power of Christ's resurrection,” Paul honestly admits that the road to resurrection lies by the way of the cross. So then he speaks of the “fellowship” (from the Greek: *koinonia*, “the shared-ness”; notice the word “coin” embedded in that term--a thing stamped from the same mold) of Christ's sufferings (Greek: *pathematon*, from which comes our English “pathos,” entailing intense feelings, in this case, pain). Such *koinonia* implies “participation” in something. Paul does not seek *his own sufferings* here, but those of Christ. He wants the divinely appointed suffering of Christ himself to become his own, that is, Paul wants to “die with Christ,” a theme he develops elsewhere in his letters (see Colossians 1:24, Romans 8:17-18, 2 Corinthians 4:7-11, Romans 6:4-11; Galatians 2:19-20). This last passage warrants re-printing here:

<sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19-20)

For Paul, the sufferings of Christ are not something he must imitate, but rather are realities he wants to experience. That is, these are not Paul's sufferings, but instead are Christ's sufferings being made real in his own life. The suffering Christ wields power in his sufferings, since through them he defeats sin and conquers the selfishness in human life. Paul wants that experience in his own life. In fact Paul writes elsewhere that he “dies daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31).

Yet not just the sufferings, but their outcome as well — namely, death; “becoming like him in his death,” as the NIV translates this last phrase in 3:10. The Greek reads, *summorphizomenois to thanto autou*. The first word is unique in the New Testament and simply means, “to conform oneself, to make oneself like”. Paul favors words beginning with *sum-* because they emphasize the idea of “together-ness,” “oneness with,” a thought he has already given us in the word *koinonia*. Classical Greek used the stem of this word, *morphizo*, to express, in one of its meanings, the idea of “give shape to,” or “form by means of”. What Paul seems to be saying here is that *he wants the sufferings and death of Christ to be something he shares so that they together might give shape to his life*. Imagine that! Until he met Christ, the thought of further suffering brought chills to his Jewish spine, in the shadow of Rome. He at one time rejected the thought of a suffering Messiah as an indignity against the whole nation, an insult to its national pride. “Lord knows,” he thought, “We've had our share of failed Messiahs. There is no way we want *this one*, this ‘suffering one’.” Paul's view of that was turned upside-down, and now he sees the suffering and dying Jesus as something that ought to shape his own life. Each life experience he encounters should be shaped by the suffering, dying Jesus. Each decision he makes; each thought he has; each response to his fellow human beings--should be shaped by this knowledge of the Jesus who suffered and died.

However, Paul does not end there. He is not a Stoic who simply accepts his painful lot in life. Beyond the suffering and death, Paul reaches further, even as he began 3:10-11: “if, somehow, I might arrive (Greek: *katantao*, “to arrive, come to,” perhaps of a place “opposite to” where one is now; forms of this exist in Classical Greek which mean “downhill,” “right opposite”) at the resurrection, “the one out of the dead”. What is Paul saying? Simply, that prior to discovering Christ, he was in a certain place, but once Christ entered his life, he was in another place. This new place was pregnant with possibilities; namely, the promise of new life, the kind Jewish people only spoke about when they mentioned the resurrection at the end of days. But things have changed. This resurrection is *even now* a real possibility, yet to arrive at it, we must pass through Christ's sufferings and death. In fact, allowing those to shape our lives is the only way we can “arrive” at an entirely

different place. Hence, Paul makes *the grand discovery* of dying with Christ so that he might live with him also. *Unless the dying Christ shapes our lives, the rising Christ cannot.* This is the force of the "if" in 3:11, coupled with "somehow" (Greek: *ei pos*). Is there any way for Paul to experience, to know Christ, the One who one day turned up in Paul's life? Surprisingly, yes, there is, Paul tells his readers, but it must be through allowing the sufferings and death of Christ to perform a work in them. Only then can the resurrection of Christ unleash its power for holy living, freedom from sin, and personal restoration. What's *missing* has been found!

### **The Ultimate Search: The Missing God (Acts 17:16-34)**

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

<sup>19</sup> So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" <sup>20</sup> It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' <sup>29</sup> Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

<sup>32</sup> When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:16-34).

Many scholars call this text the "Paul's Crowning Speech," largely because in it the apostle combines his passion for the gospel with his skill as a rhetorician. Finding himself in Athens, Paul recruits from his unique training in the classics and in the Old Testament just those ideas which were likely to attract the attention of his audience. Paul the Jewish Christian meets the world of Greece's classical past with its philosophers and poets. Clearly he encounters a people, long after their golden age, who knew the great literature of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, Aeschylus, Solon, and Sophocles, just to name a few. Athenian history is a potpourri for the search for wisdom. The perennial quest for *missing things* is epitomized in Plato's famous Socratic dialogue, *The Theaetetus*: "Philosophy begins in wonder" — wonder about the puzzles and paradoxes of human life, and the journey toward truth while surrounded by unguarded opinion.

Into this city steps Paul, the observant Jew and follower of Jesus. What he saw was no doubt known to him in theory: He was thoroughly acquainted with Hellenism and with paganism from his birthplace, Tarsus, which bore the marks of both. Yet, finally standing in this famous notable city, with its rich heritage in Greek thought as far back as Anaxagoras, Paul shudders at the full effect of seeing and witnessing its religious culture encoded in stone and burnished in bronze.

Luke skillfully describes the apostle's emotional state, using the Greek word *paroxunomai* in the imperfect tense. This word is the basis for our English word paroxysm and has the meaning "to be provoked or upset at someone or something involving severe emotional concern." The classical usage grows out of the idea "to be sharp, to prick," which naturally leads "to be irritated." The source of Paul's irritation was seeing the city "full of idols." Of course, Paul affirmed the fundamental commandments of Torah which began with "no other gods"

and "no graven image" (Exodus 20). Obviously Paul saw both in Athens. When the Old Testament forbade such images, it did so for several reasons:

1. Making images of God greatly *limits* the ways people might contemplate His majesty.
2. Images of God might, in fact, *distort* the true nature of His character.
3. Only one authorized image of God exists in His creation: human beings who are made "in the image of God," thus ruling out idols, the lifeless parodies.
4. In the realm of God, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God," and the authentic representation of God's character.
5. We become what we worship, and therefore the worship of images of stone rather than the living God results in lifeless and powerless human lives (see Romans 1:19ff for Paul's written treatment of this theme).

Paul knew all of this, and so seeing the panoply of stone gods pricked him deep within his soul. On the one hand, his Jewish faith screamed "idolatry!" while his sensible reason must have puzzled at the contradictions between the worship of idols and the claim to have philosophical wisdom. Philosophers had for generations criticized popular religion, reminding the Greeks that the gods were no better than the human beings who invented them. In some cases, the gods lived more immoral lives than the average human being, yet were elevated as supreme beings. Xenophanes who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. once remarked: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things which are shameful and a reproach among humans: stealing and committing adultery and deceiving one another."<sup>5</sup>

After a brief introduction to Paul's first impressions of Athens, his teaching in the marketplace, and the mixed response from the Athenians to his message, Luke proceeds to tell of his meeting at the revered site known as the Areopagus where he is invited to address a curious audience. What follows is Paul's formal address to the Athenians in which he will both satisfy their need for an explanation and issue a *bone fide* invitation for his hearers to respond to the Gospel. To do so he "stands up" in the midst (*en mesō*) of the council, and Luke spells this out with dramatic flair. Famous words come from Paul's lips: "Men of Athens!" (*Andres Athēnainoi*). Socrates spoke to his accusers, the council of 500, in much the same way. Luke is consciously casting Paul in the role of a new Socrates who advocates on behalf of Jesus and the Gospel.

Paul begins by referring to their religious practices, with their many idols, and then remarks that they seem to be very thorough in the forms of worship. He describes them with the Greek word *deisidaimonesterous*, allowing for two possible meanings: 1) excessively superstitious; 2) devoutly religious. A famous satirist of Greek religion, Theophrastus (370-285 B.C.E.), once penned a character sketch called "The Superstitious Man" (*deisidaimōn*) to poke fun at popular religious ideas. How might Paul's audience have filtered this reference? The Epicureans would have been delighted to hear Paul's *complaint* about the silliness of belief in the various deities. This school of thought critiqued the generally accepted view of the gods and replaced it with a more materialistic one, isolating the gods from human beings entirely. On the other hand, the Stoics might have heard Paul differently, attracted to his *compliment* of their "devotion," something they held in high esteem, though attributing it to a single god. So whether the word evoked a *complaint* or a *compliment*, it functioned cleverly as a way to *connect* with the Athenians who heard him.

Much has been written about "the altar to the *unknown god*." Presumably, altars to the approved deities of Athens were labeled with the respective names of the deities. Paul seems to suggest that the Athenians' construction of an altar with the inscription, *Agnōstō Theō*, showed that they were quite thorough! Ironically, the inscription could be translated "To the Agnostic's God," implying not merely that the Athenians didn't know who this god might be, but that they freely confessed in their proliferation of so many other gods, they might have left one out! When in doubt, it's better to say, "I don't know!" We hear something of Socrates in this concession. For when the famous Oracle of Delphi declared Socrates to be the "wisest of men," Socrates did

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<sup>5</sup> Fragment 11, translated by D.G. Rice and J.E. Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion*, Missoula, 1979, p. 31.

not accept that statement at face value, but devised a method for questioning it (the *dialectic*) and then proceeded to look for a man wiser than himself. The net result of his quest was a fresh understanding of what the Oracle really meant, namely, that he is wisest who, *like Socrates*, in his knowing, knows that *he knows nothing*. An honest admission of ignorance is a far better stance than a false claim to knowledge, unsupported by argument or facts. Paul may well be picking up the spirit of this principle when he honors the honest ignorance embodied in the inscription.

"In effect," Paul tells his audience, "you are worshipping a being whose identity you do not know. *Something's missing!* Unlike the other gods whose stories you multiply without end, contained in the mythologies of Hesiod and Homer, this god is *utterly and uniquely different*. In your *knowing*, you admit that there exists at least one god who is unknown to you." Presumably such a god would have lacked a statue, something which the pagans in Athens would have noticed about Jewish worship in the synagogues.

"I am going to proclaim to you the one you, being without knowledge (*agnoountes*), worship (from *eusebeō*)." Paul does not doubt that a deep-seated desire to worship the divine exists in the hearts of the Athenians. From the artifact of their altar, Paul honors them with what little devotion they offer to this unknown God. Agnosticism is not always the end of the road, but sometimes prepares a person for an honest embrace of the truth about God. It is better to reject belief in false gods, even if it means belief in no gods — or in this case provisional belief in the existence of a god about whom one knows nothing. How often do we hear someone say, "There has to be *something* out there!" Better *something*, though unknown, than something-that-is-fiction. *Something's missing*.

The earlier charge that Paul proclaimed "new gods," he eagerly accepts. He takes up the challenge by saying, "I am going to *proclaim*..." using the same Greek root (*kataggellō*) the Athenians applied to him. The heart of Paul's preaching was the revelation of the one true God — the God of Israel now revealed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This was, of course, the great undertaking of the Gospel: to make clear and distinct the true nature of God. What early Christian preaching tried to do was not prove that Jesus was God. Such an attempt would need to assume that people *already knew who God was* and that somehow Jesus matched up with that conception of God. The real challenge facing the first century audience in Athens was not, "Is Jesus God?" but instead, "Is God Jesus." And to the challenge, Paul rises to speak.

The story Paul tells the Athenians is the old, old story of Israel's God, and Paul relishes telling it!

1. "The God..." The Greek is concise, committed to monotheism and to *the unity of God*. Unlike the multifarious gods of the Greek/Roman pantheons, this God is utterly unique and entirely One. Such unity does not rule out His Trinity, but it does exclude any thought of competition, confusion or chaos as the Athenians might find in the lives of their popular gods and goddesses. Paul is hereby affirming the great *Shema* of the Hebrew faith (see Deuteronomy 6:4): "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is a Unity (Hebrew: *'ehād*)..." The plain assertion of Genesis 1:1 is written all over Paul's words to his audience: "In the beginning *the God*..." (*b<sup>e</sup>rōshîth bara ha'elohîm*).
2. "Who made the world and everything in it..." God is the Creator God, implying His logical separateness from the world He made. He is Himself not made of atoms, and so the Epicurean view of Him is wrong. He is Himself not the same as the world and so the Stoic view of Him is wrong as well. Allowing God to be the same as His world, either as matter or mind, undermines His supremacy over it. Curiously, the Hebrew thought forms don't talk about "the world" as much as they express the idea of "heaven and earth" or simply "the all" (see Jeremiah 10:16). This is distinctive teaching from the Hebrew Bible and can be found in several key passages (see Exod. 20:11; 31:17; 2 Kgs 19:15; 2 Chr. 2:12; Neh. 9:6; Psa. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; Isa. 37:16; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Rev. 14:7; 18:1).
3. And "is Lord (*kurios*) of heaven and earth..." And this is the supremacy which Paul affirms when he uses the word *kurios* to speak of God's rule over his world. Notice how he unites that rule over heaven *and* earth. God is not aloof, like the Epicurean gods, "immortal and blessed," who are disinterested in worldly affairs. Instead, God is the King of Creation, who takes an active and vital interest in everything He has created.

That is, Paul is describing Creation as belonging to the "kingdom of God," His active reign or rule over all He has made. Stoics would have resonated with the idea that God *rules the world*, because they imagined their world to be ordered and governed by *logos*, "word, law, mind," although they blurred the distinction between God and this world. Perhaps the most eloquent Old Testament expression of this is in Isaiah 66:1 which leads naturally into....

4. "and does not live in temples built by human hands..." This is largely about *containment* and *control*. Again, Isaiah 66:1. If heaven is God's throne and earth is God's footstool, then no humanly constructed sanctuary could ever "contain God." The argument against idols follows logically from the argument about God's vastness and rule. The very fact — underscored by Paul — that the Athenians had an altar to the "unknown god" revealed the high improbability that human objects of worship could ever fully comprehend this God, let alone *contain Him*. **God is always bigger than our idea of Him**. Thus, the fallacy of idol worship. If human hands make *something*, then human hands are the creators of that *something*. But...
5. "...he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything..." Any god worth his name must be beyond requiring human maintenance. We would live in a fragile world indeed if the gods required sustenance from human beings! If humans need to feed the gods, does that not bring into question who is really the one in charge of creation? Are the gods *that* "needy"?
6. "because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else..." Paul now argues the counterpoint. It is God who give life, breath and everything else *to human beings*. Put simply, God is the *Giver*: God is full of *grace*. Paul takes special pains to point out that God Himself (*autos*) *gives* (*didous*, present active participle — "keeps on giving"). The combination of the intensive form of "himself" and the present tense for "give" implies that God the Creator *remains in constant contact with His creatures, continuously supplying them with their very lives*. This is not the aloof ("immortal and blessed") god of the Epicureans, nor is it the impersonal *logos-law* of the Stoics, but the personal God who ever remains in relationship with the human beings he created. Moreover, Paul tells his audience, this "gift which keeps on giving" is for *all human beings*, not just *some* of them. Though Paul is fully aware that God chose Israel to be His proto-type people, he has also come to believe that restored Israel's present mission is to bring this message to the *whole world*. God's choice of Israel was not merely something He did *for Israel* but rather something He was doing *through Israel* for the whole human race.
7. "From one man he made every nation of men..." The Greek here is interesting: *ex henos pan ethnos anthrōpōn*, literally, "from one all ethnicity of human beings..." That is, God created a single human species, though diverse in its ethnicity and comprised of many human beings. Of course, if an Athenian actually believed the writings of Homer and Hesiod, he would know about the frequent conjugal intrusions of the gods and goddesses into the lives of human beings. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great claimed that Zeus had impregnated her, contributing to a series of later claims that famous rulers were, in fact, "sons of the gods." Such events became for some human beings a reason to claim superiority, whether among persons or within ethnic groups. Paul denies this privilege, but declares the procreation of the *human race* as a unity.
8. "he determined the times set for them..." The sort of language Paul uses here implies our idea of Providence, God's work of "overseeing" the world he made, and in particular, the special place each ethnic group has in His larger purpose. The Stoics would have connected with this idea, since they believed in special roles for individuals within the grander scheme of the world. Paul elevates this idea because of his view of God as a unity ("One God"): human beings belong to a single humanity though they possess a majestic diversity of race. "Who" a human being is and "where" they live belong to the overall Providence of God. Human history — including time and space — is not an accident, the result of the collisions of atoms, for example (as in Epicurean thought), but the thoughtful intention of God who made the world. The *unity of the human race* derives from *the unity of God*, as well as from the kindly mercies of God.
9. "God did this so that men would seek Him..." What God intended was that human beings might "seek" Him. Paul is careful with his grammar at this point: So that human beings might seek "**the** God" (*ton theon*). Notice the use of the definite article to "articulate" the singularity of God. That is, human beings, discerning the Providence of God in the careful ordering of human history, would *look for the One True God*, and not chase after *the many gods* of infamous Greek mythology. Paul argues that the flow of history

and the situation of ethnic diversity within that history strongly points to One God, not many gods. The word for "seek" is a present-tense verb, *zēteō*, which has several possible nuances: "seek, search, inquire, investigate, require, or demand." In some instances, the emphasis is on "felt need for" something. God is One "sought after," because human beings are keenly aware of the vacancy in their lives without Him. That is, this seeking is not a mere *intellectual project*, but a *love-driven passion*. In effect, Paul suggests the cry of the human heart sounds like, "Who are you, O God, You who has placed me *here* and made me *now*?" In this way, Paul is already issuing his invitation to the Athenians. He does not wait until the end of his speech, but calls them to trust the One True God by using this important word, "Seek."

10. "Reach out for him, find him..." This is also an invitational statement. What does it mean to "reach out"? The Greek word used here is an unusual verb: *psēlaphaō* which means to "touch, feel, feel around for." Its dominant meaning is highly *tactile* — touching, groping — as a blind person or a person in the dark trying to find their way. A person who "touches" in this way is moving his hands over a surface, hoping for something familiar to come within their grasp. One might argue that human religious devotion and philosophical inquiry are both a great deal like a person groping in the dark, feeling their way, seeking to find something familiar, something filled with warmth and security. Students of Plato probably recalled the Allegory of the Cave, and the world of shadows which at last gave way to the light of the sun.
11. "Find him...not far from each one of us..." What we know about darkness or blindness is that they "hide" objects which are still there nonetheless. God is always present within His world, or, as Paul frames it, "not far from (Greek: *ou makran apo*) each one of us." Once again, we observe Paul's skill in connecting his words with Epicurean and Stoic thought while, at the same time, making sharp distinctions from the message he is proclaiming. Epicureans would not consider the gods to be "near" in any sense of that word! Nor should human beings, following the Epicurean "story-line," ever be encouraged to "feel their way toward God." On the other hand, Stoics were far too confident that human beings were already "part of God," in a literal sense, such that the being of God and their being were somehow common — the fundamental problem with pantheism or even panentheism (see our comments and footnote above). Yes, Paul is telling his audience, it is true that God is not far from everyone of us. But the fact that we must "move toward Him" reveals the plain fact *that God is not the same as His world*, though He is related to His world in loving and merciful ways.

What follows, at the end of Paul's narration, is his citation of Greek poets. These references add a certain credible "flavor" to the speech, revealing to the audience that Paul is "no dummy" when it comes to their own literature. That being said, though Paul's ideas about God do not derive from Greek thought, Greek thought certainly offers Paul wonderful cultural raw material for connecting his view of God with the ages-old longing of the human race for an immediate experience of that God. And so, he makes a number of important Greek-based affirmations (17:28):

1. "For in him we live and move and have our being..." Though Paul does not directly footnote the first literary allusion, we have evidence of several sources he might have followed, including an address to Zeus by his son Minos: "...you are risen and alive forever, for in you we live and move and have our being..."<sup>6</sup> and was part of a poem attributed to Epimenides (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.). Great care is taken by Paul in citing this quotation. He is willing to accept the equation of Zeus=God in order to offer the statement to his audience. But the statement itself does not play into the pantheism (or panentheism) of the Stoics, since he draws a sharp line between "being *in him*" and simply "being *him*." Yes, we are *in God* but we are not *the same as God*. The three-fold action underscores that we are the *creations of God* without *being God Himself*.

Each verb form is present tense. The claim of the Christian Gospel is that God is a "Living God," who belongs to the *present reality* of human life and not to the *dusty past* of an heroic age *long gone*, but now irrelevant to our lives. Our relationship to this God is that of "We" to "Him," thus preserving our individual identity while at the same time maintaining a personal relationship with God the Giver of Life. Therefore,

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<sup>6</sup> This is cited in the Syriac language by Ishodad in his commentary on Acts 17. According to Clement of Alexandria, the statement originated with a work by Epimenides the Cretan, and was part of a poem known to Diogenes Laertius who lived much later. See Bruce, p. 338 for the details and references.

we are not Stoics, lost in the God of pantheism. Our relationship to this God is a near-present existence in which we actually live, move, and exist with the God who is with us. Therefore, we are not Epicureans, whose gods are unconcerned, unaffected or indifferent to the human condition.

Paul seems to suggest that the Greek poet responsible for this statement either knew more about the nature of God than he was letting on, or else, spoken like a prophet, and was unaware of the deeper meaning of his words which came from God Himself.

2. "As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Scholars are fully agreed that Paul cites Aratus, a poet from Paul's home region of Cilicia, in his *Phainomena* 5. But he may also be referring to Cleanthes familiar *Hymns to Zeus* 4. Elsewhere in Paul's own writings, he shows acquaintance with Greek literature and some of the same poets (see Titus 1:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:33). Using these citations works well rhetorically within Paul's speech. However, as we have suggested, nothing in the quotations was required to make the case for God as Creator and Sustainer of His world, the God who comes close to human beings, and who desires that they seek and reach out to Him, as beings living, moving and existing through Him. In the minds of his audience, Paul ceases to be some "seed picker" or religious "hay-seed" and becomes a human being who shows respect for Athenian and Greek ideas, while wisely selecting, critiquing and judiciously applying them to his telling of "the story of God."

Paul argues from the role of human beings as "offspring of God," to a deeper understanding of what God is truly like (see our remarks above on the relationship between God and Jesus). What he cites in the Greek writers is a simple affirmation that human beings are truly related to God *divinely*, but *distinctly*, and thereby he avoids the missteps of both Epicureanism and Stoicism in a single step. To be the offspring of God suggests that human beings bear *the image of God*, a prominent theme in the Hebrew Bible and throughout the teaching of early Christianity. Want to know what God looks like *minimally*? Look at human beings: they live, move and exist. What then can we say, minimally, about God? He must also live, move and exist as well. Now, says Paul, take a good long look at images of gold, silver and stone. Do *they* live, move and exist? Of course not! Therefore, we should not suppose that gods which are formed by human hands could ever be true gods at all. In point of fact, the altar to the "unknown God" is a far more accurate reflection of God's nature because it does not presume to define God in physical terms at all, but allows God simply to *be* — even if mysteriously so.

We are brought back to the "unknown God" theme in 17:30 when Paul speaks about "times of ignorance." Although the English translations might omit it, Paul does use the word "therefore" (*oun*) again to introduce this verse. "Therefore, *then* God overlooked the times of the ignorance..." (Greek: *tous men oun chronous tes agnoias*). Consistent with his understanding of *time*, Paul speaks in terms of a "then" followed by a "now," just as he will sometimes speak about the "already" alongside the "not yet." In this case, Paul lumps all of time *before now* as a period of *hē agnoia*, "the not-knowing." The altar to the "unknown God" belongs to the lengthy times of "not-knowing." The worship of idols made from silver, gold or stone belongs to the times of "not-knowing." Elsewhere, we hear similar words in Acts 14:16 (which we have already studied), in that case, Paul told his audience that God "allowed..." the nations to follow "their *own ways*," whereas in this case, he "overlooks their ignorance..." However, something new has taken place and the old ignorance is being replaced by a fresh understanding of who God is.

Along with the new understanding come new expectations from God Himself: he is calling on the whole world "to repent." Once more we meet our old friend *metanoia*, the Greek work which means a change of mind and heart. That change involves the setting aside of old agendas and ways of thinking and allowing God to fill the heart with His own truth contained in the Gospel. When Paul speaks about God's new expectation, he frames it using the verb *paraggellō*, a military term which means "to give strict orders." A special use of the root word is found in *paraggelma* which means to send a message by transmitting a beacon of light. Combining these ideas, we can understand Paul's point: God is now (*ta nun*, "in the now") sending a message with a beacon of light to the whole world. That light turns out to be Jesus, the light of the world!

Paul at this point pulls back the curtain on his Good News by announcing (17:31) that God has a number of plans in store for the world:

1. "He has appointed a day to judge the world in righteousness..." Literally, God has "set up a day." When applied to time, the verb *histēmi* means to "appoint." Within the clearly military language of this passage, Paul announces a decision-day, an ultimate day marked by a ruling of God the Maker and Judge. Within the Christian understanding of time, this corresponds to "the Day of Yahweh" and "the Day of Jesus Christ." On that day, God will finish the work of the New Creation begun in the first announcement of the Good News by Jesus of Nazareth. For God "to judge in righteousness" does not merely mean that God will do away with all the evil people by sending them to hell. "Judge" and "righteousness" are words which point to God "putting the world to rights," *restoring* what has been taken away and *healing* that which has been wounded. The Greek idea of *dikaiousunē*, "righteousness," is the same as "justice." When God "judges in righteousness," He is *correcting* that which is out of joint and *making straight* that which is crooked. The work of God the Judge, in Hebrew terms, is not done until all parties to the courtroom case have their grievances satisfied, and the Judge leaves the situation — which occasioned the case — better off than how He found it.
2. "By the man he has appointed..." Mysteriously, Paul inserts in his public announcement to Athens that God will one day judge the world "by the man..." Naturally, the audience wants to know, "What man?" It is as if they wait with baited breath for Paul to say "Behold, the Man!" in a way Pilate could not have intended such words. Just as God "appointed a day" (a matter of time), He has also "designated a man" to bring that day onto the stage of human history. Among the Stoics in Paul's audience, there was probably general agreement that things happened according to a pre-determined plan, and that each human being, like actors in a grand drama, had their special part to play. What Paul tells them, however, is that such a plan is embodied in a person and not simply in an abstract idea of human progress or impersonal destiny. *God's plan is bound up with God's man.* Nor does Paul go into egregious detail describing how this man was conceived as a demi-god or super-hero, as one might hear about such tales of the god Apollo or the goddess Athena. Instead....
3. "He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Aeschylus, the 6<sup>th</sup> century Greek playwright, placed on the lips of Apollo these words: "When a man dies, and his blood is shed on the ground, there is no resurrection" (*Eumenides*, 647f). There may have been dying and rising among the gods, but not among human beings. Death, for the Greeks and Romans, meant descent into Hades, the "shades," from which no human being would emerge as a whole person ever again. Yes, a man's spirit might wander the earth as a ghost, failing of rest and repose. But that is not *resurrection!* Socrates and Plato canonized the notion that the soul was imprisoned in the body. Death was, for them, the final release, the liberation of spirit from matter. Human existence did not have, in the world of Plato, a re-embodied form after death.

That view is completely rejected by Paul and the early followers of Jesus. From Jesus' own lips we hear the words of promise, "I am the resurrection and the life..." (John 11). We are not whole persons without our bodies. Creation, Genesis 1&2-style, includes forming human beings from dust and breathing into their nostrils the breath of life so that they *become living souls*. The "soul," the *nephesh*, is the whole person not just the disembodied form of it. Paul devoted one long chapter of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15) to promoting the idea that God raised up Jesus and He will raise us up, not as simply persons who experience "life after death," but instead as persons who will experience "life after life after death." Resurrection of the dead is not about souls going to heaven when they leave their respective bodies, but about human beings — soul and body — being taken up into the resurrection life of Jesus. This is our hope and the fulfillment of God's promise to bring about the New Creation in a New Heaven and New Earth (see Revelation 21-22).

Paul has no time for a further summation. His audience, grasping the issues raised by this startling claim, divide neatly three ways: those who mocked, those who believed and those who offered to hear Paul at least one more time before deciding. Nothing seems strange about these outcomes, nor does Paul offer the precise statistics — the breakdown of these choices. *Something was missing* in the long history of Athens, and yet there were "echoes of the voice" in the altar to the unknown god and in the literature of philosophers and poets. The good

news is that Paul gave his audience reasons to seek and to find what was missing in the person of Jesus, and from his witness some found what they were seeking.

## Conclusion

<sup>17</sup> I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me. (Proverbs 8:17).

<sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

<sup>20</sup> Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. <sup>21</sup> To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Revelation 3:20-21).

*The Search* for what's missing is not left up to the seeker alone, for the seeker needs a frame of reference in order to look in the right direction. When the Sage wrote his proverb cited above, he put the emphasis on God love first. Those who love God do so because His love has preceded theirs. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). His grace has *gone before*, or as we sometimes say, the grace of God is *prevenient*, coming before all other loves. The God-shaped vacuum flows from the love of God already at work in the world. He has been here all along, working, guiding, planting, and loving His human creatures. They have an innate reason to seek him, but they must do so "diligently." This adverb means to seek *early*, at the first opportunity. *Hesitation risks failure in finding the most necessary thing that is missing.* Seize the moment of God's first impressions and pursue them until they are your own.

"Know the Lord" is the essence of Jeremiah's words (31:34). That is, let the *missing* "something" become the discovered "Someone." The prophet here uses the covenant word for God, *Yahweh*, whose name means "the One Who Is." Seeking is not chasing after the wind, but rather finding the wind-maker. His covenant reaches out with divine agency and is something that he "makes." The same human heart that has the capacity for knowing the unknown has now encountered the "law of God" — His Torah, instruction, direction — which *He writes there*. God desires that "they shall *all* know me..." God's good-faith pledge to the human race is to meet every person with the offer to "forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." When grace for forgiveness touches the human heart, it ignites gratitude. In this grateful encounter is found the earliest stirrings of saving faith, like the rustling of leaves by the wind of approaching rain. *Seeking* and *finding* leads to *knowing* because the One who was unknown now appear for salvation. What's *missing* is no longer so!

More directly, the prophet of *Revelation* brings us the word of the risen Jesus, the one who is "standing at the door, knocking." He stands with *intention* and he knocks with *hope*. His *knock* becomes his *voice*, and the *door* becomes *opportunity* for human decision. His knock is the "echo of a voice," longing to "come in" so that he might "be with." For such a one there is a place with Jesus: not only at the *table* but also on the *throne*. Seeking and finding is a matter of utmost importance for *the Kingdom of God*. The kingdom belongs to those who seek and find. Jesus offered the discovery of the kingdom to those who hear and receive his words of salvation:

<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11).

The fruit of the search turns out to be the gift of the Father's kingdom where persons are made whole and the world is transformed. Finding what's *missing* is finding Jesus who is the end and goal of *the Search*.

**To God Be the Glory! Amen!**