

# Seek (or, Christmas in Athens)

Acts 17:16-34

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*Video and audio versions available online:*

<https://relentless-love.org/sermons/seek-or-christmas-in-athens/>

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*This document was prepared by Heather Eades using Peter's notes and the video version of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Heather know. Thank you!*

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## Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for this season...this season of expectation and waiting. Jesus, I thank you that you are the one who inspires us to wait, to seek. And now, Lord God, I pray that you would help us to believe, to hear your Word, and maybe even become the incarnation of your Word. In Jesus's name, we pray these things. Amen.

## Message

About thirty years ago, I was the youth pastor at Community Presbyterian Church in Danville California. My job was to evangelize the youth of the church and the youth of the Danville community. Burt Decker, a friend and father to one of the kids in my group, nationally known for his public speaking seminars, and he paid for me to attend one of his national public speaking seminars in downtown San Francisco—It was geared toward the business community, but of course I was coming in as a youth pastor...to San Francisco, which was roughly equivalent to Babylon, Athens, or Rome.

Well, the first day our instructor taught us about persuasive speech and he asked us to prepare a persuasive speech for the next day. He asked that we choose a theme inherent to our profession. I thought, *No problem.*

So, the next day I arrived with my speech prepared. He then began to teach us about the importance of eye contact in persuasive speech. He told us that it was really important to try to make eye contact with everybody in the room while you're speaking. He also told us that each of our speeches must end by asking the listener to make a concrete commitment to something we ask them to commit to.

And then right before we began, he said, "And oh yeah, I'm going to add a fun little twist to your assignment: If the person giving the speech maintains three seconds of continuous eye contact with you at some point during his/her presentation...you have to publically agree to whatever they've asked of you at the end of the speech." I swallowed hard and began to sweat.

Everyone except me was selling some "thing." For instance, one lady got up and gave a speech on her credit union and then asked, "Who would commit to join Patelco Credit Union?" And we went around the room one by one, all of us, having to say (if she had made three seconds of eye contact

with us), *"Yes, I will join Patelco Credit Union."* One gal worked for a vineyard, and we had to say, *"Yes, I will sample the chardonnay."* One guy worked for a phone company, *"Yes I will sign up for Advantage Calling."* And so it went until it was my turn.

I had prepared my message on the need to commit to Jesus the Christ as your Savior and Lord!<sup>i</sup>

It was too late to change it. So, I gave it. I gave a great speech on why we each need to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord. I got to the end and realized the only logical thing to ask them to commit to was Jesus. And so, I said, *"Ah...ok...umm... so will you commit to Jesus as your Savior and Lord?"*

If you look up the word "awkward" in the dictionary, you'll find a description of what happened next. To my wonder, horror, amusement, and embarrassment I discovered that I had maintained three seconds of eye contact with every person in the room. And so I had to watch as everyone in the room (all 15 or so, one after another)—I had to watch them fidget, squirm, roll their eyes, as they said things like:

*"Yeah...umm... I guess I commit my life to Jesus the Lord."*

*"OK. I joined the credit union, got the phone deal... so Jesus is Savior and Lord."*

Every one of them...all of them...said they gave their life to Jesus. 100% conversion rate – I'm quite the evangelist.

And yet, it seemed as if something was missing...like *Faith, Hope, and Love*. They packed up their notebooks and left. Not even one of them said, *"Hey man, thanks for the Eternal Life."*

Have you ever wondered why God doesn't make this whole thing more obvious, so people had no choice but to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord? I mean, why isn't there some simple watertight proof for the existence of God so that faith is the absolutely obvious and only solution to a problem that could be written on a chalkboard? I mean, why couldn't I go into downtown San Francisco, Athens, or Rome and say, *"Jesus rose from the dead—Do your thing, Jesus!"* Jesus would materialize, blow crap up, and everyone would drop to their knees, screaming, *"I believe! I believe! And yes, I'll join the new members class!"*

A friend emailed last week saying, "Peter, why won't Jesus talk to me?" I mean he was at the point of desperation. I think I spent the first 30 years of my life asking that question. It's weird, but during that time, I thought I knew what God was doing, but wondered if he actually existed.

Now I know he exists, but I'm always wondering what he's doing. Why is he like that?

About 30 years ago, I had some experiences that I just couldn't explain away... And now I get really frustrated that God doesn't do them all the time...I mean I know God is there, and I know God can make himself obvious... And so I wonder:

- "Why are you asking me to preach? To struggle and seek and feel after you, hoping that I might feel after you, find you, and then preach about you?"
- "Why don't you rend the heavens and come down like Isaiah asked in Isaiah 64—(the text that Chris preached about last week)?"
- "Why don't you make it obvious... so, people *have* to repent?"
- "What are we *doing* here? Why am I here?"
- "Why are *any* of us here in this world of ambiguity, confusion, and doubt?"

You know God makes his presence absolutely obvious in several places in the Old Testament, like at the parting of the Red Sea—and everybody repents... but not really in the way God wants them to

repent, and then they all die in the desert. He made it obvious through the miracles of Jesus, and yet they crucified him. They all shouted, “*Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!*” and then, when there were no signs, “*Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!*” In the Revelation, he basically blows the Hell out of everything, and nobody repents... until, at the seventh seal, seventh trumpet, and seventh bowl, we meet the Word.

Well, I preached in San Francisco, and 100% said the words...but I don't think anyone actually repented. In Acts 17, Paul preached in Athens, but it was a rather different kind of sermon... in fact, many commentators actually argue that Paul failed in Athens, for he never even quoted the Bible... and yet what he said is now Bible... and people repented.

**Acts 17:16 • Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked** [*peroxyno*—it's where we get our word “peroxism”; he experienced a fit of anger] **within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.**

So, he cried out, “*Repent! Or suffer the Judgment of God!*” No, it doesn't say that...

**<sup>17</sup> So he reasoned** [*dialogomai*—dialogued] **in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.** **<sup>18</sup> Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** [*philosophos*—literally, “friend of wisdom”] **also conversed with him.**

It was Paul's practice to go to the synagogue and speak from the Scriptures with the Jews, but in Athens he also went to the marketplace and began *dialoging* with pagan philosophers. Why is he *dialoging*... and not monologuing... like me in San Francisco?

For a Jew, Athens was like the heart of the Evil Empire. The reason the New Testament is written in Greek, and not Hebrew, is due to the fact that in 332 BC, Jerusalem was conquered by Alexander the Great. In 175 BC, the Greek King Antiochus Epiphanies IV outlawed the worship of Yahweh, massacred countless thousands of Jews, and sacrificed pigs on the altar of incense in the temple before a statue of Zeus, which he had erected in the Holy of Holies—the Jews referred to it as the “abomination of desolation.”



This is the Areopagus in the heart of Athens, also called Mars Hill. Ares is the Greek name for the god of war; Mars is the Latin.

In Paul's day, it was tradition to take the commanders of foreign armies and ritually strangle them before a statue of Mars. The Areopagus also came to refer to the Athenian council that met in the very same place. The Areopagus was the heart of Athens, and Athens was the heart of the Evil Empire... and yet Athens is also the birthplace of Western Civilization.

Athens had been home to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Plato and Socrates were the fathers of *a priori* reasoning—that is simple logic itself, like mathematics. Aristotle is the father of *a posteriori* reasoning—that is empiricism, or the scientific method.

They all postulated an “unknown, uncreated Creator—not a god, but the God. They referred to this God, not as Zeus, but “Theos.” Socrates was tried and executed in Athens for refusing to acknowledge the gods of Athens and corrupting the youth with talk of Theos.

About 150 year later, Epicurus and Zeno taught what's now known as Epicureanism and Stoicism, respectively. Epicureans believe that “the good” is about maximizing pleasure—not just for yourself but for everyone. Epicureans would even describe the greatest pleasure as maximizing pleasure for all, which sounds pretty American, huh? Stoics believed that “the good” is virtue—they had a lot of faith in reason (that is the Logos), or as it is translated in English Bibles: the Word. Many believed that in every person there is a seed of reason, and this reason is fire. They argued that we all came from that fire and would return to that fire and God is that fire.

“We are indeed his offspring,” wrote one of their poets named Aratus.

The philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics were very refined, and yet at the core, for Epicureans, *the Good* was pleasure; and for the Stoics, it was virtue.



Figure 1 "Mystery of the Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena (1420)

Epicureans then are like those who look to the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and see that it's "*good for food and a delight to the eyes, and so you should take it!*"<sup>iii</sup> Stoics are those who look to the fruit of the tree and see that it's desired to "*make one wise, and so you should take it and use it to become wise!*"<sup>iii</sup>

Like all of us, the Epicureans and Stoics desired the Good, but neither knew exactly what, or who, *the Good* is. And I imagine that both might sacrifice to idols—that is anything that might help them to get what they wanted—*the Good*.

Well, Paul dialogued with all of them, as if he knew something about them, as if something was hidden in them, that they were not aware of themselves.

**V. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babblers [*spermologos*: "seed pecker"<sup>iv</sup>] wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities [*daimonion*]"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.**

They referred to Jesus and the resurrection as "foreign divinities." In other words, they thought that these things have little to do with them or Athens. I suspect that's what the businessmen and women at the communication seminar in San Francisco thought of my message—*it has nothing to do with us...* just some "Foreign Divinities."

**Verse 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus...**

That makes sense, for what do you do with foreign divinities? You go to war with foreign divinities using your own divinities. Jesus vs. Mars, the God of War. This should be interesting...

**...they took him and brought him to the [Mars Hill], saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.**

**22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious [*deisidaimonesteros*]<sup>v</sup>. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: "To the unknown god [*agnostos theos*]<sup>vi</sup>." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...**

(And why would he do that?)

**V. 27... that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him [*heurisko*. It's where we get our word "Eureka!"]. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for**

**“ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’;**

**as even some of your own poets have said,**

**“ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’**

**<sup>29</sup> Being then God’s offspring** [*genos*—it’s where we get our words “Genesis” and “genetics”], **we ought not to think that the divine being** [*theion*: divinity, brimstone] **is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.**

**<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,** **<sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man** [literally, “*he has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness in a man*”] **whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance** [*pistis*: faith] **to all by raising him from the dead.”**

**<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”** **<sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst.**

**<sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius<sup>vii</sup> the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**

There is so much meat in these verses... so we’ll come back to them next week. But for now, maybe we could just chew on this thought: *God made from one man*, (“Adam” in Hebrew), *all of the nations of mankind* (which, in Hebrew, is also “the Adam”) And why did he do this? “That they should seek [him].”

So, do you ever wonder, “*Why do I exist?*”

Here’s the answer: So that you would seek the one who made you.

And do you ever wonder, “*Why doesn’t God just make himself obvious?*”

Well here also is the answer: You don’t seek what you’ve already found.

If I’m holding my car keys, I usually don’t look for my car keys. I also, probably, don’t stop to say, “*Oh God, thanks so much for my car keys!*” Now sometimes I do say that, but only after they were lost and then found...and they were never found unless sought.

Proverbs 25:2 · “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search things out.”

It should be no surprise that science has flourished most extravagantly in theistic countries, for we believe that the *theos* has spoken a *logos*, and so there is a reason for everything and even nothing. And it’s also rather silly that for some Science has become an idol.

I’ll hear people say things like, “*Well, I believe in Science...*” Well, everyone believes in science to some degree... it’s simply the study of cause and effect. But no one can believe in it to the final degree—our hearts know this, and philosophers have always wrestled with this.

Thomas Aquinas put it this way: He said something like, “Imagine the sum total of everything that’s been caused—(that would include biology, evolution, genetics, the Big Bang, us...)—imagine the sum total of everything that’s been caused. Now, what *caused* everything that’s been caused? *It has to be “an Uncaused Cause”...* (that caused science and all things.)”



Well, Paul says that God made us all to seek, and so it makes sense that all of creation is meant to help us seek... *The Uncaused Cause*.

I find it absolutely delightful that modern physics has traced several strings of cause and effect back to a point where there is no cause and effect, for there is no time... There is only something like an "*I Am*."

Folks will ask, "What came before the Big Bang?" But physicists argue that time itself began at the Big Bang, so there is no "before the Big Bang," just some sort of Uncaused Cause, ...like an *I Am*.

And then it really gets weird, for not only is there an Uncaused Cause behind all things; there's something like an Uncaused Cause in every physicist... actually, in every person, even in every baby. We call it "*consciousness*" or "*spirit*"—it's like the "*I*" that *I am*; it's the "*I*" that observes "*me*"—this body of dust in space and time. And this "*I*" that I am appears to be more foundational than anything in all creation; for in some sense, consciousness shapes reality, according to quantum physicists.

Well, it's the "*I*" that *I am* that is doing all this seeking...And now it's too difficult for human words, for "*I*" am seeking "*I am that I am*." I am, like the breath of *I am that I am*, seeking my source—the lungs that bore me.

Well anyway, it was Socrates who pointed out that all learning is seeking. And if you think about it, all learning ends in finding something we call "*the Truth*"—which in itself, must also be the *Uncaused Cause*, for there is no truth about the truth. The Truth just is the Truth, the Reason, the Logos.

So, Paul says that God made us to seek. And all over the world, it's obviously working.

And as we said, we only seek what we don't have, like the car keys. And yet, we only seek what we once had, or, at least know existed. For instance, no one looks for car keys if they never had car keys, and they don't even know that there is such a thing as a car or a key.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard put it this way, "*A person cannot possibly seek what he knows, and just as impossibly, he cannot seek what he does not know, for what he knows he cannot seek, since he knows it, and what he does not know, he cannot seek, because after all, he does not even know what he is supposed to seek. Socrates thinks through the difficulty by means [of the principle] that all learning and seeking are but recollecting.*"<sup>viii</sup> That is, remembering.

Jesus, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Light, and the Word, said, "*Do this in remembrance of me...*" What if we're remembering more than one supper in one room two thousand years ago? What if every breath we take is a remembrance of Him and our own creation?

Well, it was Socrates who pointed out that we wouldn't look for something that didn't exist. So:

- Why do people everywhere look for God... if there is no God?<sup>ix</sup>
- Why do people everywhere look for Truth... if there is no such thing as Truth, no Word of God?

(You can't give a silly answer like "evolution," for then you have to ask "What caused evolution?"... and how would you know if your answer is true?)

Well, now I'll stop talking philosophy and say the same thing a different way.

I think I'm saying that we're each like the little bird in the children's book, Are You My Mother?

[Image on screen of the cover of the children's book by P.D. Eastman, *Are you my mother?*]

Remember this book? It was my favorite as a child... the little bird hatches while the mother is away.

[Image on screen showing illustration from the book of the little bird sitting on the edge of the nest, freshly hatched from the egg.]

So, he goes on an adventure asking a kitten, a hen, a dog, a cow, a boat, and a steam shovel, "*Are you my mother?*"

[Image on screen of book illustration of the mother bird with her wing wrapped around her baby bird.]

In the end, he finds his mother because his mother finds him.

Last week, I drove by my old house and thought of Susan, my kids, my mom, and dad who's been gone now for sixteen years. And I felt such an indescribable ache as I realized that I'm always looking for *something*... and the closest thing that I can find to a description of what that something is, is my father's lap—I can still smell his aftershave, feel the cool fabric of his suit coat on my cheek, and his arms tightly wrapped entirely around me. When I was on his lap, I belonged. Every worry vanished; I was home.

And yet, I've discovered that that experience of home was still just a shadow of my true home and maybe a deeper memory.<sup>x</sup> Your father's lap may have been a horror, or non-existent, and yet you still know the longing that I'm speaking of.

Paul writes that God made us "to seek." Jesus even commands us to seek... and yet neither of them really tell us *how* to seek... In the Old Testament, God says to seek with your whole heart. But that doesn't tell us *how*, so much as to do it with everything we've got.

And I think this fact indicates that there is a purpose in just the seeking. That is, we don't seek just to find, but we seek to find in a new way, "*... to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time*"<sup>xi</sup> (in the words of T.S. Eliot). And that is why every good parent plays Hide-n-Seek with their children.

The Psalmist cries out, "Oh Lord...Why do you hide your face from me?"<sup>xii</sup> Yet every good parent hides their face from their baby—it's called Peek-a-Boo. Last year, I discovered that there were whole websites devoted just to Peek-a-Boo, where you can watch parents hiding their faces and revealing their faces to their babies. And each time it happens, the baby's sorrow at the absence turns into a deeper joy at the presence, until the baby squeals with delight and starts playing Peek-a-Boo too.

Psychologists argue that Peek-a-Boo is integral to a baby's development. It teaches the child *object permanence*—that the other person is a separate individual that doesn't go away when one is no longer looking. And it teaches *Grace*—that the other isn't simply an object, but a subject who chooses to reveal themselves to you; it teaches that *their presence* is *Grace*.



When my kids were little, their favorite game was Hide and Seek, but especially a particular version of Hide and Seek that we affectionately called “Monster.” They’d send me down into the dark basement to hide; then they would come down the stairs looking for me in the dark—behind the water heater or some old boxes. (*You see?* They were looking for me in the place of their deepest fear...)

When they’d spot me, I’d jump out, scream, yell, and blow bubbles on their tummies as they squealed with delight, and they’d say, “Do it again! Do it again!” It was as if their deepest pleasure was finding me in the place of their greatest fear.

Maybe there are places in your soul that are like the basement of my house.

There is a legend that God once sought the advice of a wiseman. He said to the wiseman, *“I would like to play a game of Hide-n-Seek with mankind. I’ve asked the angels where to hide. Some say the depths of the ocean. Others—the highest mountain, the dark side of the moon, or a distant star. What would you suggest?”*

*“Hide in the human heart,”* said the wiseman. *“That’s the last place they’ll think to look.”*

Sometimes when we would play Monster, the kids would get too scared or tired and begin to give up... so I’d bump a box or snuffle just to give myself away. The great medieval German mystic, Meister Eckhardt, said, *“God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away.”*

Why is it that you seek the Truth? Why is it that you long for Love? Or even ask the question: *“Where’s God? What’s the point? What’s the Reason? What’s the Logos?”*

What if *that* was the Logos, giving himself away, in *the basement of your soul*?

“I would not seek you,” wrote Augustine, “if I had not found you already in the depth of my heart.”

Every couple, at some point in their relationship (hopefully all points in their relationship), plays a little Hide-n-Seek; I think we call that “romance.” And every good father romances his children at least a bit.

I think my favorite memory with my son Coleman is of one particular day when he must have been in ninth or tenth grade, relishing his newfound independence from me. We went for a bike ride and found the entrance to some new sewer lines that construction workers had just installed under the Home Depot on Quincy. I said, *“Coleman, let’s go in!”*—And so of course, we did.

I led and Coleman followed. We crawled for a long, long time, several hundred yards, until it was absolutely *pitch black*. You would think that you were lost and utterly alone, except for the comforting sound of your partner’s voice there in the darkness.

At one point, I was able to crawl ahead of Coleman a bit. I stopped speaking, tried to hold my breath, and just waited. Then, I heard my independent, self-sufficient, teenage son say, *“...Dad?”* But I didn’t answer.

He said, “Dad...?! Dad, where are you? Why aren’t you answering me?!” Then he started screaming, “Dad! Dad, this isn’t funny! Where are you?!” I could feel his breath; I saw the numbers glowing on his watch; I was inches from his face—he was screaming “Dad! Dad!” at the top of his lungs...

Then he stopped... And I whispered, “Hey Coleman.” It was epic! Eureka!

It’s one of our best memories; we enjoy each other more now than we did before because I *hid*, and Coleman *sought* me in the dark, feeling his way toward me, in the hope that he might find me... and I found his heart. My grown son was once again seeking my lap... and isn’t that pretty much what every father wants: He seeks children who would seek himself. Not just his gifts but his presence.

Rabi Barukh’s grandson, Yehiel, was playing Hide and Seek with a neighbor boy. He hid and waited, and waited, and waited. When he finally came out, the other boy wasn’t anywhere to be found. Yeheil then realized that his playmate had never even looked. He ran to his grandfather, told him his sorrow, then sat on his lap, weeping. And then, the old Rabbi began to weep as he realized: God says the same thing: “*I hide and no one wants to seek me.*”

That’s not just an old story; that’s Psalm 14:2, 53:2, and Romans 3:11—“*no one seeks for God.*” It’s also Genesis 2:18—It’s the first thing that God declares to be “*not good.*” Adam, mankind, is alone, for he doesn’t seek anyone other than himself.

This is the shocking reality that emerges from studying the text.

- Adam is alone and can’t find his Helper—because he’s not seeking.
- It’s revealed that God is Adam’s Helper—his *Ezer*.<sup>xiii</sup> [Eleazar means “God is my help.”]
- Eve is not Adam’s Helper and Adam is not Eve’s Helper, but they each are signs pointing to humanity’s true Helper, our Husband, who is God.

In Genesis 2, Adam isn’t seeking. But how could he? He doesn’t know what to seek: he doesn’t know *the Good* ...and his Helper is *the Good*. So now, his Helper will help Adam know his need for the Helper. And in doing so, his Helper will make himself “*fit for the Adam*”<sup>xiv</sup>; he’ll make himself good for humanity.

So God puts the Adam to sleep and begins to write the Gospel. He makes Adam, male and female, and appears to leave them alone with an evil talking snake and a tree in the middle of a garden—two trees that look like one, or one tree that acts like two, depending on how you take it.

[Image: painting on screen, as shown before (above) of “Mystery of the Fall and Redemption of Man” by Giovanni da Modena (1420)]

On the tree is fruit—it’s wisdom; that’s knowledge of Good and evil. And it’s life—Jesus is the Life and the Helper made fit for us. He is our Bridegroom, given to us, betrothed to us, on a tree in a garden. (John 19)

Well, the Adam doesn’t seek. Humanity doesn’t seek. And yet, God makes us to seek... How does he do that?

[Image: showing on the screen is the image previously shown of Aereopagus]

Well in Athens, they sought—actually, they had been seeking for hundreds of years, and Paul found evidence of that fact, for he found an altar with this inscription: “*TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.*”

From the works of Diogenes Laertius (a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Greek historian), some comments by Plato, Aristotle, and a few others, we actually know a little more about that altar “to the unknown God,” than what’s recorded in Acts—we know what Paul must have learned as he dialogued.<sup>xv</sup>

Around 600 years earlier, a plague had fallen on Athens. Sacrifices were made before every idol, and nothing would stop the devastation. Horrified, the Council sent a man named Nicias on a desperate journey to the Pythian oracle, where a pagan priestess informed Nicias that Athens was being punished for the sins of their former king. The Oracle directed Nicias to find a man named Epimenides who lived on the island of Crete, saying that he would know how to make *atonement*.

You’ll remember that Paul quotes the Stoic poet, *Aratus*, in Acts 17—“*We are indeed his offspring*”—but he also quotes Epimenides.<sup>xvi</sup> *Epimenides* is the Greek poet from Crete who wrote a poem declaring that although some Cretans thought they had buried Zeus, Zeus couldn’t die; and then Epimenides writes, “*For in you, we live and move and have our being.*”

Well, Nicias brought Epimenides to Athens where he met the council on Mars Hill and proposed the idea that there was a God that the Athenians did not know, and that perhaps this God was *great enough* and *good enough* to forgive their sins and stop the plague, *if* they would only seek his favor. He instructed them to release a flock of lambs on Mars Hill, and he prayed that this God would choose his atonement. Then, wherever a lamb would lie down, they would build an altar and sacrifice that lamb to that God. As they did, the plague began to lift.

Over the centuries, the altars fell into disrepair, but at one point, one of these altars was maintained and preserved, apparently with the hope that one day “*THE UNKNOWN GOD*” would choose to make himself known... somehow; and that if he did, the Athenians would remember that he was no stranger to their city, but that with lamb’s blood, once before, he had redeemed them from a curse.

Just think of it: for at least 600 years, before Paul arrived in Athens, God had been at work in Athens, building an altar on Mars Hill of all places. He used *his Word*, spoken through pagan poets like Epimenides and Aratus, even philosophers like Socrates and Plato, even pagan idols that broke the hearts of their worshipers, and even a plague that ravaged a city... all to build an altar, all to make them seek, for all along he had been seeking them--that they would seek him, find him, and know his joy... Eureka!

Do you suppose that there was, or is, an altar like that in San Francisco? If there is, I might need to dialogue a bit to find it. Do you suppose there’s an altar like that in every city, in every nation? There was in Persia—that’s why the Wisemen came, seeking the baby.<sup>xvii</sup> God prepared an altar with *the stars*, and I imagine he prepared an altar with Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia; Zoroaster prophesied a messiah. It’s remarkable.

Maybe there’s an altar in every country, every city, and every heart. Maybe God even uses idolatry to build them... I mean it’s when your old idols no longer satisfy that you begin to look for the unknown God. It’s when the idolatry of sex leaves people battered and broken that they begin to look for Love. It’s when alcohol has ravaged the soul that the soul seeks a deeper form of communion.

Maybe God is building an altar right now.

- This plague, we call COVID, makes us think about death... and seek the Life.
- This plague of lying politicians makes us seek the Truth.
- This plague of confusion makes us long for the Way.

- Maybe *bad government* makes us long for a *different government*—like a Prince of Peace, a Wonderful Counselor, and a government that would rest upon his shoulders?

Maybe the manger is like an altar, and in every heart, there is a manger....And in every manger, appears a baby... And that baby is the Lamb.

Well... that's the introduction to my sermon, and we have no more time, so I have to leave you with just a thought and this is it:

God not only builds the altar; He provides the lamb.

I mean by that:

1. God arranges situations in which we need to seek—Do you realize that this entire fallen world in which we find ourselves is like an altar to the unknown God? ... And still we don't seek; we don't repent. But...
2. God also provides the lamb; by that, I mean he even gives us the desire to seek—that desire is called *Faith*, and *Hope*, and definitely *Love*.

When Adam left the Garden, which was leaving the manifest presence of Love, it was leaving the lap of the Father. When Adam left the Garden, he was *enslaved* to himself and his own desires, and so he was doomed to be forever alone. And yet, when Adam (which is Adam and Eve), when Humanity left the garden, when Adam left the garden, something left with him, actually *in* him.

[Image: painting shows on the screen as previously shown: "Mystery of the Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena (1420)]

It was the fruit that had been hanging on the tree; it was a seed. Humanity took the Good from the tree, ate it, and everything died. But it was an eternal seed; it comes to life and turns into a kingdom.

Do you understand that Faith, Hope, and Love in you *is* the Breath of God in you; it's the Spirit of Jesus in you; it's the Eternal Seed rising within you.

Paul said to the Athenians, "God does not dwell in temples made by man." The Gospel revelation is that *Man is the temple in which God dwells*.

"So where is he?" you ask. Well...He must be hiding in the Holy of Holies, behind a curtain in the temple of your soul.

[Image: cartoon shows on the screen of Jesus hiding behind a curtain as two evangelists stand at the door asking the person answering the door, "Have you found Jesus?"]

Remember this cartoon? What's he doing behind the curtain? I think he's coughing, sniffing, bumping old boxes, and giving himself away.

He's whispering:

- "Hey Peter,... you're losing it; why don't you talk to me...?"
- You're lonely... why don't you try to find me?
- You're sad... I know it's frightening, but why don't you look in your manger?
- You're feeling shame; tell me about it, confess to me, and you'll see the curtain rip from top to bottom and discover that I am Grace.

- *You're dying... Don't worry, for in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, you'll hear me calling, "Olly, Olly, Oxen Free."*

Most scholars think that comes from the phrase "*all ye, all ye, the outs in free*"<sup>xviii</sup>—that phrase proclaimed by children at the end of the game... "all ye, the outs, in free." Eureka!

Well, some of you are seeking God and thinking he'll never be found, but just the fact that your seeking means he's hiding behind the curtain...in your basement. And some of you are asking the question, "*Why doesn't God talk to me?*" I'm convinced that you can only ask that question because he already is.

He's whispering even now, "*Keep seeking... 'Seek and you will find,' for I have already found you, and I am always seeking your heart.*"

## Communion

And that's why, on the night that he was betrayed, on a hill far scarier than Mars Hill, the Truth took the bread and broke it saying, "This is my body given to you. Take and eat, and do this in remembrance of me."

And in the same way, he took the cup saying, "This is the covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it all of you and do it in remembrance of me."

And so we invite you to take communion. Take the seed and ingest (Peter places bread in his mouth) into your basement, your manger.

[Peter swallows bread and wine.]

When did this happen? Now... and at the foundation of the world. You see, I think that he is telling us the story of who we are. So believe the Gospel. In Jesus's name. Amen.

## BENEDICTION

So, Father, I need to thank you for the number one thing that I complain to you about. Thank you, Father, for playing Hide and Seek with me. And I pray that you would forgive me, Jesus, for wanting to quit. Thank you for giving yourself away...for revealing that you're good. That no matter how deep I go into the basement, you're in front of me, and behind me, and all around me...and you love me. Thank you, Father, in Jesus's name. Amen.

Next week we'll keep talking about this because today I just today talked about how God is everywhere building an altar, and then he provides the Lamb—The desire to Love. Now, some people say, "Peter, you don't think the cross matters," ...and I just freak out. It's the *only* thing that matters! Not only is this how God saves you, this is how the baby gets in the manger in the first place. (Points to cross) This is the Judgement of God. This is the boundary of space, time, and eternity. This is the heart of your Father. So believe.

And then people say, “Well, what difference does that make?” Well, you’re going to have to play Hide and Seek whether you want to or not; that’s just the reality. We’re here. But you see, if you know who’s hiding, well then you can enjoy the game. And so in the name of Jesus, may you look for him. And enjoy the game, because he’s always found you. And he’s always seeking your heart. In his name, Amen.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> If I remember correctly it was even based on Acts 17 and how each of us was made for God and that like Augustine said, “*Our hearts are wrestles until they rest in thee.*”

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 3:6a

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 3:6b

<sup>iv</sup> This is such a fascinating word. It referred to birds picking at seeds and implies that words are like seeds and of course we know that Jesus is the Sperma (the seed) and the Logos (the Word).

<sup>v</sup> This is another utterly fascinating word. It’s comprised of two other Greek words, one translated “fearful” and the other “demon” or “god.” They would have heard this as a compliment, yet it’s unclear as to whether or not it is a compliment, maybe it is and it isn’t. He’s saying, “I see that your desperate to worship something. I also see that you haven’t found that something and so I’ve found you worshipping a bunch of demons.”

<sup>vi</sup> Maybe every agnostic is an altar to the unknown God.

<sup>vii</sup> The name means “devoted to Dionysius (Bacchus to the Romans).” Bacchus was the god of wine and parties and often pictured as a bull. This man was an “Areopagite.” He was part of the Council. “Damaris” means “heifer,” that is young cow. Bacchus was depicted as a bull and so his consorts were, naturally, cows (maenads: mad cows).

<sup>viii</sup> *The Essential Kierkegaard*, edited by Howard and Edna Hong, p. 117 (from Philosophical Fragments)

<sup>ix</sup> This is a profoundly fascinating question that is best known as St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument:

“The first, and best-known, ontological argument was proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century C.E. In his *Proslogion*, St. Anselm claims to derive the existence of God from the concept of a *being than which no greater can be conceived*. St. Anselm reasoned that, if such a being fails to exist, then a greater being—namely, a *being than which no greater can be conceived, and which exists*—can be conceived. But this would be absurd: nothing can be greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. So a being than which no greater can be conceived—i.e., God—exists.

In the seventeenth century, René Descartes defended a family of similar arguments. For instance, in the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes claims to provide a proof demonstrating the existence of God from the idea of a supremely perfect being. Descartes argues that there is no less contradiction in conceiving a supremely perfect being who lacks existence than there is in conceiving a triangle whose interior angles do not sum to 180 degrees. Hence, he supposes, since we do conceive a supremely perfect being—we do have the idea of a supremely perfect being—we must conclude that a supremely perfect being exists.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>)

<sup>x</sup> Soon after her brother was born, little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that like most four-year-olds, she might feel jealous and want to hit or shake him, so they said no. But she showed no signs of jealousy. She treated the baby with kindness and her pleas to be left alone with him became more urgent. They decided to allow it.

Elated, she went into the baby’s room and shut the door, but it opened a crack-enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly, “Baby, tell me what God feels like. I’m starting to forget.” -Dan Millman

- “Sachi”, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, pg. 290

<sup>xi</sup> "We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one." - TS Eliot

<sup>xii</sup> Psalm 88:14

<sup>xiii</sup> Deuteronomy 33:26, Psalm 33:20, 70:5, 115:9-11, 121:1-2, Hosea 13:9. Nowhere in Scripture is woman said to be man's "helper," or man said to be woman's "helper." Neither is the helper fit for "ha Adam," humanity. How could either be, for each is simply part of "ha Adam" who needs to find his "helper," his "ezer." Eliezer, which is translated into Greek as Lazarus, means "God is helper."

<sup>xiv</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>xv</sup> See: Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Regal Books, Ventura CA, 1981) pp.16-18

<sup>xvi</sup> *A grave has been fashioned for thee, O holy and high One,  
The lying Cretans, who are all the time liars, evil beasts, idle bellies;  
But thou diest not, for to eternity thou livest and standest,  
For in thee we live and move and have our being.*  
--<https://isthatinthebible.wordpress.com/2014/09/16/lying-cretans-and-unknown-gods-allusions-to-epimenides-in-the-new-testament/>  
[Notice that Paul quotes the second line in Titus 1:12, leaving little doubt that Paul was quite familiar with Epimenides.]

<sup>xvii</sup> Because of God's revelation we know we're not to be directed by stars, but the wisemen were directed by a star and it appears that the gospel was even written in the constellations—as you can investigate at [www.BethlehemStar.com](http://www.BethlehemStar.com).  
Jupiter the king, was crowned by regulus—the king star.  
And Virgo, the virgin, rose clothed in the son with the moon, the faithful witness, birthed at her feet.

<sup>xviii</sup> The *Dictionary of American Regional English* says the phrase may be derived from *all ye, all ye outs in free, all the outs in free*, or possibly *calling all the "outs" in free*; in other words, all who are out may come in without penalty.<sup>[1]</sup> Various calls used for such purposes have gone by the collective name of "ollyoxalls" in some places.<sup>[2]</sup> Others speculate the phrase may be a corruption of a hypothetical and ungrammatical German phrase *alle, alle, auch sind frei* (all, all, also are free).<sup>[3]</sup> Another German variant is "alle alle Ochsen sind frei", meaning "all, all the oxen are free", which is a good reason for the oxen and their chasers to run. – Wikipedia  
[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olly\\_olly\\_oxen\\_free](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olly_olly_oxen_free)]