Our Father in Heaven

Text: Acts 17:22-33

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**Scriptures:** Daniel 7:9-14; Acts 17:22-33

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 160, 515, 193, 63, 513

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD46)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul speaks to the men of Athens about the True Living God

**Proposition:** When we pray “Our Father in Heaven” we confess our closeness to our Him, our differences from Him, and our faith in Christ.

**Introduction**

A few people have asked me if I would say that the current COVID-19 pandemic is a plague. A plague is defined as “a general name for any malignant disease with which men and beasts are stricken – especially an epidemic attended with great mortality”. Specifically, “plague” refers to a disease which affects humans and other mammals which is caused by the bacterium Yersinia pestis. This disease is transmitted between animals via their fleas. *{The ‘Black Death’ was the most fatal pandemic in recorded human history, resulting in the deaths of 75-200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa, peaking in 1347-1351. The Black Death was the second plague pandemic recorded, after the Plague of Justinian (542–546). The plague created religious, social, and economic upheavals, with profound effects on the course of European history}.*

In the Greek city of Athens in the first century AD there was a legend that there was once a terrible plague in the city and attempts to appease the gods and stop the plague had no effect. Someone allegedly brought flock of sheep to the top of Mars Hill (the Areopagus) and released them. Wherever these sheep stopped, an altar was set up to an ‘anonymous god’ and the animal sacrificed. This course of action was effective, and the city returned to health. Service was offered to this unknown god so that the city might be spared from any coming catastrophes. Like a superstitious insurance policy. Prayers would be offered up to the ‘unknown god’ – just in case he, she or it might be able to help.

It was against this background that the Apostle Paul begins his speech at the Areopagus by referring to an altar he had seen in the city with the inscription ‘To an unknown God’. He then proceeds to teach truth about the Living true God which we’ll look at under three headings this afternoon:

1. God the Father
2. God in Heaven
3. Christ the Saviour
4. **God the Father**

The Greeks, especially the Athenians, had a tendency to racial pride. The Athenians were the only Greeks on the European mainland who had no tradition of their ancestors coming into Greece. They viewed themselves as the purest of the pure: true Greeks – ‘sprung from the soil of their native Attica’ they would say. They thought of themselves as a superior race. Paul says ‘no’ you are of the same origin as everyone else!’ You, as a race, are inherently no better, nor no worse! Why? Because ‘*From one man he made every nation of men’.*

Paul asserts the original unity of mankind, created by God. He doesn’t support this statement from Scripture, of which his Greek audience would have been largely or completely unaware. Instead he references one of their own poets, likely a man called Aratus, who wrote: “*For we are indeed his offspring*” (v28). Based upon his knowledge of the Hebrew Old Testament, Paul knew that just as God had created the universe from no pre-existing material (Gen 1:1), so God had created living, animate creatures.

This was in contrast to the Greeks who taught that man was generated spontaneously from the earth (a form of autochthonism). This same idea is prevalent again today in the theory of evolution. That the origin of life (plant, animal and human) was a chance, spontaneous moment, or a series of events, perhaps in some ‘primordial soup’. This, the theory goes, was followed by a natural development of life becoming more complex in form through mechanisms of mutation, natural selection and survival of the fittest lifeforms most suited to their environment. This process then eventually culminating in the most highly evolved creature: man.

In contrast to the Greek idea of spontaneous generation Paul makes that clear statement in verse 26 “*From one man he made every nation of men*”. Brothers and sisters, friends, Adam, a historical figure who lived for 930 years after he was first created, is our common ancestor. He was the first man, uniquely created by God. However, when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven”, we are confessing more than just the truth that God created us, we are declaring that He is a relational God with whom we are in a personal relationship as part of His family. The possibility of a personal relationship with God is what Paul conveyed to the Athenians at Mars Hill.

Paul explains that God created the human race ‘*that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us*” (Acts 17:27). Not seeking God is inexcusable because God has made Himself known through what He has made (Rom 1:20). People don’t find God, but that’s not because He is far away. It is possible to find God because He is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the ‘*image of the invisible God*’ (Col 1:15). Jesus said, ‘*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*’ (John 14:9).

When we pray “Our Father” we acknowledge, not only that the Living God is relational, but that we are in a relationship with Him! We confess that we are children of God (and so we are called by God our Heavenly Father, brothers and sisters! (1 John 3:1)). We are reminded when we pray “Our Father” that, in the words of Heidelberg Catechism LD46 Q&A120, “*God through Christ has become our Father*”. Just as ‘*our fathers do not refuse us the things of this life; God our Father will even less refuse to give us what we ask in faith*’.

We confess that God is ‘*actually not far from each one of us*’ because He has drawn near to us in Christ as our Heavenly Father. We are **not** praying to a ‘unknown god’ as the ancient Athenians did and as many unbelieving people do today when they are driven to prayer by dire circumstances like this COVID-19 pandemic, cyclone Amphan which struck Kolkata last week, or the diagnosis of a severe illness. We are praying to the known, Living True God who has revealed Himself to us through His Word! We know that whilst we are close to Him in Christ, His ways are far above our ways because He is not a human father, but our Heavenly Father, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **God in Heaven**

Paul explains to the Athenians in verse 24: "*The God who made the world and everything in it* is *the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands*”. God is not material. He is not physical. He is not, in His essence, part of the Creation which He has made. Jesus described this key characteristic of the person of God to a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:24). “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth*".

Being non-material, God cannot be physically contained. We see this reality expressed in the imagery of Isaiah 6: **“***In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple*”. God is infinite, being free from all limitations. He is greater than His creation. He is fundamentally ‘other’. There are no other ‘gods’ but Him. He alone is infinite; all else which exists is finite. He is independent, self –existent. He is Eternal. He precedes us and was never not. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He has no cause, no ancestor, no predecessor. His name is ‘I AM’. God is unchangeable. He is not subject to any modification. He is fixed in character. Whilst we develop and change, God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

God alone is the Creator who gives everything that we have and who determines all aspects of our lives …as Paul says v25-26 “*And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*”.

Paul had been speaking with some of the Greek philosophers in Athens. The Epicureans and Stoics are mentioned in Acts 17:18. These followers of the philosophies of Epicurus and Zeno of Citium were looking for explanations as to why bad things happen and how they should live their lives in light of these difficult realities. People today ask the same questions. The Epicureans taught that one should pursue personal fulfilment and avoid discomfort as much as possible. Their aim was a life of tranquillity, free from pain and superstitious fears. They did not deny the existence of gods, but believe that such spiritual beings took no interest in the lives of people. Many of them would be what we would call ‘Deists’ today. Deism is the belief in a supreme being, who remains unknowable and untouchable. God is viewed as merely the “first cause”. An impersonal force or underlying principle of rationality in the universe. Deists believe in a god of nature -- a noninterventionist creator -- who permits the universe to run itself according to natural laws. A “clockmaker god” initiating the cosmic process, the universe moves forward, without needing God’s supervision.

In contrast to the Epicureans, for the Stoics, fulfilment was attained by accepting the course of events in life, including pain and suffering which was to be endured quietly, even gratefully since, in their view, all events are controlled by impersonal divine necessity or ‘fate’.

God is not a material being, nor a mere philosophical idea, nor an impersonal force, as Paul says in Acts 17:29 “*Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man*”. God is somewhat like us, not because He is formed by our imagination, but because we are made in His image. As we’ve already noted, the Athenians did not know the Old Testament, so Paul quotes from a Greek poet (probably Epimenides of Crete) saying: ‘*in him we live and move and have our being’.*

Some of God’s characteristics, are reflected in part, us: such as love, goodness, kindness, wisdom, and justice. These are heavenly ‘moral attributes’. As the Heidelberg Catechism LD46, A121 reminds us, the words “in heaven” after “our Father” “*teach us not to think of God’s heavenly majesty as something earthly*”. They also teach us to “*expect everything body and soul from his almighty power*”. Which brings us to Christ and our third point:

1. **Christ the Saviour**

We were designed to bear the image of God. To model the moral character of our Heavenly Father; to be wise. To exercise the power we have been given to be good stewards over this creation. To be holy by living lives of moral perfection. To be just by doing what is right and treating everyone else fairly. To be good by doing good works. To be true by speaking God’s truth and never lying, not distorting the truth, not telling half-truths nor making promises that we do not intend to keep.

Knowing that Greek Gentile Athenians likely had not had the True God made known to them before in the way that the Jews had had with ready access to the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul says in verse 30 “*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent*”.But now, because Christ has come, the revelation of God’s character and will is no longer largely confined to the single nation of ethnic Israel. Now Paul issues a general call to every person to turn away from their ignorance and idolatry and to turn towards the God whose true nature has now been revealed to them through the truth Paul had spoken.

Paul speaks of Christ in verse 31 “*He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead*." How are these Greeks to know that God has appointed a man as judge? Because it was a proven fact that God had raised Jesus from the dead. There were eyewitnesses living then who had seen a living man die, then be buried, then be raised bodily from the dead.

The idea of a resurrection of the body was absurd to many of those who heard Paul. The Epicureans would have not objected if he had spoken of the immortality of the soul, but not of the body. The reason that Jesus was raised by God the Father from the dead was because He had the perfect wisdom to always obey God’s will; all the way to the cross. He had the almighty power to prevent his death, yet He willingly laid his life down for people who are powerless to save themselves – people like you and me

He is the Holy One of God. He knew no sin. He died so that we could be declared to be the Holy people of God. He is the righteous/just One. He never broke God’s law. He now gifts his perfection to people like you and me who trust in Him so that we can be declared ‘not guilty’ on judgement day. He is absolutely good. All He did on earth was good. All He does now at the right hand of God is good. He is full of grace and truth. His Word is true truth. It is pure and reliable. Dependable, trustworthy. The Bible is the only rule for faith and life. The Bible reveals the God who is knowable.

Have you heard the universal call of God to repent? Have you turned yourself over to Him? Do you believe that the appointed God-man Jesus has died for your sins? Do you trust in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life?

Brothers and sisters the God to whom we pray is no idol, He is not unknown, He is a relational Being. He is your God, your Heavenly Father and by grace we are His people. Will you pray together with me as Christ our Saviour teaches us: "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*” (Matthew 6:9-13).

AMEN.