

Paul Preaches the Gospel: The Unknown God

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[0 : 00] Well, now we have our reading from Scripture, and you might like to turn with me to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17. If you have one of our big Bibles, you'll find it on page 926.

Page 926, Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, and I'm reading from verses 16 to 34. And this gives the account of Paul the Apostle in Athens, and what he said to the leaders of the city at the Areopagus.

So, chapter 17, verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

And some said, what does this babblers wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

[1 : 06] And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean.

Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

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, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

[2 : 27] Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 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.

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.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We will hear you again about this.

So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

[3 : 36] Well, may the Lord bless this reading from scripture to us. Now for the last three weeks, some of you will know this because you'll have been here, but we've been sitting for those three weeks at the feet of the apostle Peter, listening to him preach the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

But today and next week, God willing, we're going to listen to the gospel as preached by Paul some 20 years later in Athens. And we have the record of his sermon or speech in Acts chapter 17 that I've just read for us now.

Now next week, my plan is for us to study verse 31, the final verse of the sermon, in which Paul speaks about the day of judgment. So that's our subject for next week. But this week, we'll look at the main meat of the sermon under the title, The Unknown God.

Now these two great apostles, Peter and Paul, preach, of course, the same gospel. And it's striking that Peter's sermon in Acts chapter 2 and Paul's sermon here in Acts 17 both end with a powerful summons to repentance.

The gospel preacher will always, in the end, be calling on his hearers to repent. But the big difference between these two sermons, lies in their respective audiences. Because Peter in Jerusalem was speaking only to Jews, both the Jews who lived in Jerusalem and Jews from many other countries who'd come there.

[4 : 59] And that's why, in the course of his sermon, he's able to quote quite extensively from the Old Testament, from the prophet Joel and from two of the Psalms. So Peter knows that his audience, his Jewish audience, know the Old Testament and understand a good deal about the Old Testament's teaching about the true God.

But Paul here in Athens has no such advantage. His Greek Gentile audience would not have known the Old Testament at all. So if he'd quoted it to them, it wouldn't have helped either him or them. Now he does, you'll see, bring in two literary quotations in verse 28 to help him. But he's quoting there from non-Christian Greek poetry because he wants to establish a certain common ground with his listeners.

And that's why he quotes from two poems which he knows they will have read and which actually help him to make the point that he's making at this stage in the sermon. But Paul, if I can put it this way, has to start much further back with these Athenian people.

Because they don't know the Old Testament, they don't know even the most elementary things about the true God. They're very religious people, but they're ignorant of God.

[6 : 11] Now that's a striking juxtaposition, isn't it, when you think about it. Very religious, but ignorant of God. We have to ask if the same may be true in our modern world.

Great doses of religion to be found all over the place, but going hand in hand with ignorance of the true God. Well now to pick the story up from its beginnings in verse 15.

Paul arrives here in Athens and he sends back a message northwards for his friends Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. And verse 16 you'll see finds Paul newly arrived in Athens with his leather holdall in one hand and time available to look around the city.

Now I've never been to Athens. I imagine some of you have. But if I ever found myself in Athens with time on my hands, I don't suppose I would hold myself up in my hotel bedroom watching Greek television.

I think I would wander around the city and take a good look at the sights. And that's exactly what Paul did. Athens is still an interesting and very beautiful city and it certainly was in Paul's day.

[7 : 17] Those great buildings which are still the major attraction of Athens today were already several centuries old when Paul was there. Athens is a city which has always enthralled lovers of art and beautiful architecture.

And in Paul's day Athens had not only its great temples but a great number of smaller shrines and many statues of the old Greek gods and goddesses.

You can see in verse 22 that when Paul later speaks to the men of the Areopagus the Areopagus was a little bit like our house of lords. It was the city fathers or the greybeards if you like.

And he says to them later men of Athens I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Now that was a polite understatement. First century Athens was the religion capital of the world.

In fact the ancient Greek historian Xenophon referred to Athens as one great altar one great sacrifice. And there were beautiful statues of these gods and goddesses everywhere.

[8 : 22] In the Parthenon which was and still is the biggest of the temples there stood an enormous statue of Athene who was the goddess of wisdom and I think she was the patron goddess of Athens thus the name Athene in Athens.

And this great statue made of golden ivory was set up with Athene holding an enormous spear in her hand. And so big was this statue that apparently on a sunny day you could see glinting in the sunshine the spear point that she was holding from a distance of 40 miles away.

That was the size of it and the dominance. So what did Paul the Apostle make of this beautiful ancient wonder of the world? This grand city so full of religion.

Well verse 16 tells us his spirit was provoked within him. He was distressed. He was stirred up. The word incandescent might be a little bit too strong a word but it's almost there I think.

Now isn't that striking? This famous city aesthetically so beautiful culturally so developed politically so enlightened for Athens was the birthplace of democracy this great city upset and distressed Paul as he looked around it and examined it.

[9 : 41] But it wasn't its beauty or its culture or its politics that Paul found so distressing. Verse 16 tells us that he was distressed by its idols.

these gods and goddesses and their statues and temples so deeply misrepresented the truth about God and Paul couldn't bear it. God was being dishonored and the Athenians were being misled by this false religion.

And in verse 17 far from rushing back to his hotel bedroom and burying his head in his hands and weeping Paul went to the synagogue and also the marketplace and he began to argue his case for the gospel with anybody who happened to be there anybody who would speak to him.

What a brave man he was. Don't you take your hat off to him. He had a passion for the truth about the true God. He couldn't bear to have all these theological lies being told to the Athenians day after day.

And these open air discussions led Paul to being taken before the Areopagus. In fact it says in verse 19 they took hold of him.

[10 : 51] You almost get the impression that they're frog marching him along to the Areopagus. But he goes there to present his case which he then does courteously and carefully. So let me try and draw out the main points that he makes to these senior Athenian leaders whose lives have been for so long wedded to idolatrous religion.

First from verses 22 and 23 Paul makes the point that God is knowable and must be known. As I said before Paul is very courteous and we too should always be very courteous in confronting non-Christian religion.

But he's also very direct. He doesn't beat about the bush. He goes straight to his main point by referring in verse 23 to this altar that he'd seen dedicated to the unknown God.

Now just think for a moment of the stonemason or the sculptor who had constructed that altar and put that particular inscription on it. What did he mean that stonemason by writing the words to the unknown God?

Well we can't be certain but probably he meant this city of Athens has hundreds of altars to known gods named gods Athene and Apollo and Zeus and Epaphrodite and all these other ones and all these altars ought to be sufficient to please and placate all the gods in Greece but just in case there's some other deity lurking out there that we don't know about and have never named and have never never honored will hedge our bets by building him or her an altar lest he or she should be displeased and send our city a dose of cholera or something like that.

[12 : 33] In other words a kind of insurance policy just in case there's somebody else out there. Now Paul picks up this inscription and with gentle irony he turns it on its head and treats it as if it were a confession of ignorance as if the maker of the altar were saying who is God?

Is there a God? Can anything be known about the supernatural? Now those are very modern questions aren't they? Is there a God? Can anything be known about him? So what Paul says at the end of verse 23 is really addressed not just to the ancient Athenians but also to our modern contemporaries.

He says what you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you. It is breathtakingly bold but this is authentic Christianity.

To those who say that God is unknown and unknowable the Bible replies God is both knowable and must be made known. Many people today many of our contemporaries say that God cannot be known but in saying that they're willfully disregarding the Bible because the Bible is God's self-disclosure.

The Bible is God's self-portrait a self-portrait in which he displays his features clearly and in great detail. Through the Bible's preachers and prophets and apostles God is clearly laying out for us the great and distinctive features of his own person and of his plan of salvation.

[14 : 01] anyone who has a Bible and an inquisitive heart has access to the knowledge of God and Paul is saying to the world that God is knowable and because he is God he must be known.

Now second from verse 24 God is the creator and cannot be domesticated. Here's verse 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.

This 24th verse is specifically angled at the Athenian phenomenon of filling their city with temples and shrines. So when Paul sees all these beautiful buildings each one dedicated to a God or a goddess he realizes that the Athenians have developed this idea that their gods and goddesses in some way live in their temples in the way that you and I live in our houses or flats.

And if you come to think of your deity as inhabiting the shrine that you have built for him you're bound to think that you've begun to domesticate him to have power and leverage over him.

You're going to think of him as Aladdin thought of the genie of the lamp somebody who pops out and says your wish is my command somebody who will be your servant somebody who will do what you ask him to do as long as you go through the right rituals and say the right words.

[15:24] But Paul says in verse 24 that the real God doesn't live in man-made temples how could he? He is says Paul the creator of the world and the Lord of heaven and earth.

You Athenians Paul is saying you haven't begun to realize how great the true God is he transcends everything and you imagine that you can box him up in a few hundred square feet of bricks and mortar.

Paul is teaching us that the real God is immeasurably great modern astronomy is teaching us something of the size of the universe.

Doesn't it take is it three years or ten years to get to Mars? I think it's three years or so isn't it? And Mars is just a it's just a it's a stone's throw away it's our near neighbor isn't it? And apparently the astronomers will tell us the universe contains something like eleven trillion trillion stars.

The God who made these unspeakably immense tracts of reality is not one whom we can domesticate or house or manipulate. The only appropriate response we can make to him is to bow before his majesty to worship him and to ask him to be gracious to us.

[16:37] He is the creator says Paul and he cannot be domesticated. Thirdly from verse 25 God is self-sufficient and doesn't need to be propped up.

Verse 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. Now again this is angled at the Athenians because they rather liked the idea that if their God was hungry they could satisfy his hunger by offering a sacrificial animal.

Here you are my Lord prime steak and gravy today you'll feel much better and stronger for it. And Paul's point is that to look at God that way is simply absurd. It turns the truth on its head.

The truth is not that we sustain the deity. The real God sustains us. In fact he sustains everything. How demeaning and dishonoring therefore to think that in some way God should depend upon us. There's a wonderful little theological word which I'd like to introduce at this point. A word that some of you will know and others may not but I think it's a great word. It's the six letter word aseity.

[17:50] A-S-E-I-T-Y aseity comes from two little Latin words a and say A-S-E and a say in Latin simply means of and from himself.

Theologians will talk of the aseity of God to convey the idea that all that he is is self originating. He is of and from himself.

He's the first cause he's the prime mover. Nobody made him. He's the origin of everything. So how can it be thought that he in some fashion depends upon puny human beings for his daily needs? How ignorant of God to think that he depends upon men. So friends take away that little word aseity and I hope it will be a blessing to you. Think about it for example as you drink your bedtime cup of hot chocolate tonight.

You need your Cadburys don't you? Some of you get a bit too much of it but you need your Cadburys and you need your Tesco and Sainsbury's and you need your gas and electricity as well and you need the National Health Service.

[18:55] God doesn't need anything. He's the God of aseity. He is self-sufficient. He doesn't need to be propped up by men. Fourth from verses 26 to 28 God is the ruler of all mankind and his purpose is to cause men to seek him.

Now this is an interesting little section here 26, 7 and 8 because for one thing it addresses a very modern question about the origins of mankind. When I say modern I mean a question raised sharply since about 1850 since the days of Darwin and hotly debated ever since.

In verse 26 you'll see Paul says from one man by which he means Adam God made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth.

So if we were to ask Paul is it right Paul to speak of the human race or is it more correct to speak of there being several separate races of humanity Caucasians Eskimos Negroes and so on Paul's reply would be there is only one race from one man God made every nation of men.

So Paul is teaching that we have a common ancestor the historical Adam all nations then Africans, Chinese British, Germans everybody else are descended from Adam.

[20 : 17] Now why does Paul introduce this thought at this point? After all he's not giving us a lecture on anthropology. The purpose of this little section is the same as the purpose of his whole speech namely to expose the Athenians ignorance of God.

That's what the sermon is all about ignorance of God and Paul wants to correct it. So what he's saying is my Athenian friends we are all of us in the same boat so I may be a Jew from Tarsus and you may be Gentiles from Greece but don't let that fact bamboozle you into thinking that Judaism is alright for the Jews and the Greek gods and their shrines are alright for the Athenians.

No. There's only one God who made all of us from a single ancestor and this one God verse 26 has placed all the nations in their various habitats and governs their histories and why is that?

So that verse 27 men of all nations should seek him and reach out for him and find him. So do you see how in each section of his speech Paul is courteously correcting the Athenians showing them their ignorance of God and their profound misunderstanding of him and then showing them the truth about him.

So in verse 23 he exposes the error of thinking that God is unknowable. In verse 24 the error of thinking that God can be housed in temples. In verse 25 the error of thinking that God needs help from human beings and in verses 26 to 8 the error of thinking that God will deal with different nations in different ways.

[21 : 55] No he's saying God is the ruler of all mankind and his purpose is to cause people of all nations to seek him and to find him. He deals with all people in the same manner.

There is only one gospel for the human race. Now fifth and last our natural ignorance of God says Paul is culpable not excusable.

In verse 29 Paul's speech changes changes gear. In verse 29 you'll see he suddenly sounds a new note. He says we ought not to think.

You see there's suddenly there a sense of moral imperative a sense of right and wrong. We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone. It's wrong he is saying morally wrong to misrepresent God by trying to make statues of him.

And then look at verse 30. You'd perhaps expect Paul to contrast ignorance with knowledge. Ignorance and knowledge are usually opposites aren't they? So you'd expect Paul to say God has been very forbearing with this ignorance but now wants to give you true knowledge.

[23 : 09] But that's not what Paul says. This ignorance says Paul is not to be replaced with knowledge first and foremost but rather with repentance. In other words this ignorance of God is culpable.

It is sinful. Now somebody might say but how can ignorance be blamed? If you really don't know something how can you be held morally responsible? Well I think the answer must be that there may indeed be some kinds of ignorance which are not blameworthy but there are others which are. Let me give you an example. You take your driving test and when your driving test is all over you get to that moment when you pull in at the side of the road and there's the examiner sitting beside you and you look across to him in hopeful anticipation and he says Mr. Lobb I'm sorry to say that you failed so you say why?

And he says well you were driving on the right hand side of the road and not the left you drove through the traffic lights on red and you stopped when they showed green you went round around about anti-clockwise you drove up a one way street the wrong way and knocked over three people on the zebra crossing which is why there's a blue light flashing in your rear view mirror now and you say to him but I didn't know about all these things and he replies to you well you should have known ignorance of God Paul is saying is that kind of ignorance we should have known because the data was available Paul is saying in verse 30 that to plead ignorance will not stand up what is needed is repentance verse 30 the times of ignorance God overlooked but now since the coming of Christ now he commands all people everywhere to repent of idolatry and every kind of false religion everything that misrepresents God that is the command of apostolic

Christianity that is God's command to the world and the reason for that command given in verse 31 is what we'll be looking at next week to end