

Paul Preaches the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we have now our reading from Scripture, and I'm going to read exactly the same passage that we had last week, Acts chapter 17, verses 16 to 34.

Paul has just arrived in Athens, and he looks around, and then he speaks to the Areopagus, once he has been brought before them. So, Acts chapter 17, verse 16.

Now, while Paul was waiting for them, Silas and Timothy, 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 babbling wish to say?

Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 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?

[1 : 1 0] 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.

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.

[2 : 3 4] 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.

Well may God bless to us this passage of scripture. Now we're heading this afternoon for verse 31 here in Acts chapter 17, where Paul the Apostle teaches us some memorable things about the day of judgment.

[3 : 4 6] Indeed, this verse is one of the great New Testament verses on the day of judgment. But I'd like to take a few moments first, just to remind you of the ground that Paul has covered so far, and which we looked at a bit more fully last week.

Paul, of course, is in Athens, and it seems to have been his very first visit to the capital. Because in verse 16, when he arrives there, it seems that he's looking at things through new eyes.

And he makes this short speech or address to a group of men who are called the Areopagus. The address may not have been nearly as short as it appears here to us.

Luke, the evangelist, has probably given us a shortened version of it. I guess that the Areopagus themselves may have well allowed Paul to speak for a lot, longer. And we may just have the bare bones of it.

But we can picture Paul here surrounded by these men. Because you see in verse 22, it says that Paul was standing in the midst of the Areopagus. I'm not quite sure how they arranged their debating chamber, but it might have been a little bit like a person speaking at the dispatch box in the House of Commons, with people on benches and rows all around.

[4 : 52] So there he is in the midst of the Areopagus. And the Areopagus were the city fathers, the philosophers of Athens, the intellectuals and greybeards and wise men.

And Paul, this Jew, and remember how different the Jews were from the Gentiles. They still are, of course, but that sense of difference was so heightened then. Here was this Jew, this stranger from Tarsus, of course, a Greek speaking stranger, but he was still a stranger and a Jew.

And he is rash enough to come to the Areopagus and call them ignoramuses. That's what this speech is all about. He is telling these cultured, philosophically experienced city elders that they are ignorant of God.

Now, we must decide for ourselves whether he was wise or foolish to speak to them like that. But you see, he starts off by telling them in verse 23 that he has spotted an altar in the city, dedicated to an unknown or the unknown God.

And he gently suggests to the Athenians that that is a confession of their ignorance of God. So he says to them, this God whom you confess is unknown to you, is the one that I am now going to introduce to you.

[6 : 05] You're ignorant of him, so let me tell you the truth about him. And then Paul proceeds to tell them that they profoundly misunderstand the nature of the deity. So he says to them, first in verse 24, you can't house the creator of everything in a temple.

You can't possibly box him in or domesticate him or control him. It's your ignorance that makes you think like that. Secondly, in verse 25, he doesn't need to be supported or propped up by human hands.

He doesn't need us to give him food and drink. The truth is the other way around entirely. He is the one who supports us. And thirdly, from verse 29, it's quite wrong to think of him, says Paul, as being like an image formed from gold or silver or stone.

You can't possibly reduce the glorious being of God to the proportions of a statue. He is irreducible. But you think that a craftsman working in metal or stone can produce something which represents the true God.

So Paul is saying to these Athenians that their views of God are not slightly wrong. They are wildly and woefully wrong.

[7 : 16] They are misrepresenting the deity hand over fist. There's nothing remotely approximating to the truth in their view of him. So here is Paul, the theological battering ram.

He takes them head on. He's courteous with them and polite, but he's very direct. And in verse 30, he describes the centuries, the long period in which these idolatrous views of God have prevailed as the times of ignorance.

Ignorance. And it's in verse 30 that Paul's speech suddenly takes on a new tone. It's a bit like that moment when the dentist's drill suddenly touches a nerve.

Do you know that moment? And you suddenly wince and you grip the arms of the chair, don't you? Well, it's like that here. Verse 30 is the moment when the Athenians realize that a philosophical discussion has suddenly turned into a moral imperative.

The verse begins gently, almost soothingly. The times of ignorance God overlooked. But then the drill touches the nerve. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

[8 : 23] So this ignorance expressed in idolatrous misrepresentations of God is culpable ignorance. God, in his patient forbearance, has allowed it to run on for many centuries.

He has overlooked it. But that period of patient forbearance is now ended, says Paul. In sending Christ into the world, God is now calling the world to account.

But before Christ came, there was an era of forbearance. But since Christ's arrival, it is an era of repentance. And this is exactly what Jesus himself said when he first arrived and began to preach

the gospel in Galilee.

Mark chapter 1. He said, The time has come. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent, therefore, and believe the gospel. So the time has now come for repentance and faith in Christ.

So let me ask everyone here, just as if it was just the two of us sitting together having a cup of tea, rather than a large crowd. Have you yet repented and put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

[9 : 30] It is the most important question that any person can be asked. Paul is saying that ignorance of God is no longer excusable. The time of forbearance is over.

The time for repentance and faith in Christ is now here. Indeed, it has long been here. And it's only by God's grace that this time has been extended as far as March the 29th, 2006 AD.

We must repent and believe in Christ because it is God who commands all people everywhere to repent. Now, Paul doesn't finish his message in verse 30.

He goes on to explain in verse 31 the reason why God is now commanding the repentance of all people. And here is the reason. Verse 31. 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, what is Paul saying here? He is saying that the curtain is very soon going to drop on the world.

[10 : 39] God commands universal repentance because the day of judgment is coming. And those who have not repented when the day of judgment arrives will be unprepared to meet their judge.

Isn't God merciful to let us know that this day of judgment is on its way? It is because he wants people to be saved on that day that he tells the world about the coming judgment.

It's because he wants to welcome as many as possible into his kingdom and because he wants to exclude as few as possible from his kingdom. Those who repent and trust in Christ will be saved. But those who ignore Christ and refuse to repent will be lost in hell. That is why it is so kind of God to tell us so clearly that this day of judgment is coming.

Now, let's notice some of the detail in verse 31. Verse 31 tells us four things about the day of judgment. First, it will be universal.

[11 : 43] The day of judgment will be universal. Look at the words here. God has fixed a day on which he will judge what? The world. The world. And that can only mean every human being who has ever lived on the earth since Adam and Eve.

All are included, therefore. High and low, rich and poor, adherents of all religions, atheists, agnostics, the clever and the not so clever, the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the upright and the crooked.

All will be judged. We know that this judgment of the world includes all people from all periods of history because of other things that we read in the New Testament as well.

So, for example, Paul writes to Timothy. 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 1. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead.

So the dead as much as the living will be judged. Or Revelation chapter 20. The sea gave up the dead that were in it. And death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them.

[12 : 48] And each person was judged according to what he had done. Everybody, you see, is brought before the judgment throne. Nobody in all the generations from Adam and Eve onwards will be exempted from the day of judgment.

Now, friends, I want to suggest that this is a thrilling and wonderful doctrine. And one that we should hold on to with joy. Many people don't like it. Especially when it's linked, as Paul links it here, with the command in verse 30 to repent.

A lot of people are very uncomfortable with the command to repent and the doctrine of universal judgment. Because these doctrines may appear to show God in a harsh light.

But let me put it like this. Wouldn't things be awful if God's judgment were not universal? If he judged some people but overlooked other people.

Or if he judged some nations and turned a blind eye to other nations. There would be cosmic chaos. And what kind of confidence could we have in a God who didn't call everybody and everything to account in the end?

[13 : 53] Such a God would be capricious, partial, untrustworthy, inconsistent, and frankly not worth believing in. Of course God's judgment will be universal.

Involving all people who have ever lived. Then second, God's judgment will be righteous. There it is again so plainly in this verse 31.

God has set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness. One of the features of our modern world is the fact that justice appears to be so fragile and often so unsatisfactory.

Think of it in this country, in the UK alone. Every year we have a number of cases, often very high profile cases, where people have been imprisoned but then launched through their solicitors a legal appeal.

And then their case is retried. And then their conviction is said to be unsafe. And they're set free.

There was that farmer who shot a burglar, wasn't there, down in Norfolk. There have been a number of mothers who allegedly killed their babies.

[14:54] There have been a number of cases. And it leaves us with the feeling that justice is very frail and unsure of itself. Lawyers seem to multiply. We have more and more of them.

And yet justice appears to become less and less. Isn't it the same with international justice? It seems very frail. We have this international law court at The Hague doing its best to bring people to book.

We have the United Nations in New York, which issues resolutions. That's international law, isn't it? But those resolutions are often not accepted and followed because there isn't the political will, at least in some countries, to enforce them.

So justice appears to be a very frail creature in this world. Interesting that 2 Peter in his third chapter, 2 Peter chapter 3, speaks of the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness is at home.

It clearly isn't at home in this world. So isn't it wonderful and reassuring to read that God will judge the world with righteousness at the day of judgment?

[15:56] There will be no miscarriages of justice then at the hands of him who sees all and knows everything. If this world's justice is very partial and very shaky, God assures us that his final judgment will be completely just and fair.

Now isn't that encouraging when we think of how much disorder and bad behavior there is? Do you sometimes think, what is the world coming to? We often say that to each other, don't we?

And God answers that question. He tells us that the world is coming to a just judgment. There's something in our hearts that longs for justice, at least most of the time.

The times, I guess, when we don't long for justice are when we're in the wrong and we know it. I mean, for example, you don't long for justice when you're driving down the motorway at 90 miles an hour, do you? But apart from moments like that, there is something in the Christian, that there is in the Christian heart, this deep longing for justice to be done.

And God assures us that his judgment will be righteous on the day of judgment. And it's a great relief as well when we think about our loved ones who have died, and we don't always know where they've stood with God.

[17:10] Of course, we do know clearly with some folk. But I think of someone like my father, whom I loved very much, who died about 13 years ago. I think he died as a Christian, but I'm not absolutely sure about that.

Now, the Bible teaches clearly that all people either go to heaven or to hell. And I can't say that I have an unshakable certainty that my father is in heaven, because his relationship with the gospel and with the church was a bit tenuous, a bit ambiguous.

He and I used to read the Bible together, and I know he discussed the gospel not only with me, but with a number of other people who were Christians. But I'm not certain that he had strong convictions about being saved through Christ.

But what I do know, what all of us know, as I think of many others, my father and many others who have died, is that they will be judged justly, and that all who have trusted Christ for forgiveness will be saved forever.

So first, God's judgment will be universal. He judges the world. Secondly, his judgment will be just. Thirdly, God's judgment will be definite.

[18:14] Verse 31 says that the day is fixed, and the judge is already appointed. Now, of course, we know who that judge is to be.

He is the one raised from the dead. This is what the apostle Peter says in Acts 10, where he's speaking to Cornelius. Jesus says Peter is the one whom God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

Now, it's so helpful to us to know like this that God's judgment is definite. Definite as to the day chosen by God and definite as to the judge appointed by him.

Because if we grasp this, it will save us from the kind of errors that some people can fall into. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses believe in a definite day for the end of the world, but they make the mistake of thinking that that date can be known or even predicted by men.

There have been two or three occasions in the last century or so when Jehovah's Witnesses have named the great day, the day of judgment, and they've got ready for it, prepared. That day has come and gone, and on the next morning, they've woken up and have looked rather foolish because it never happened.

[19 : 24] Well, they were right about the definite day, but they were wrong in predicting a particular date. Jesus says so clearly in the Gospels that no one but the Father knows the hour of the day of judgment.

A different error was made about ten years or so ago, I think, by a cult group. I forget their name, but there was a cult group in California who several hundred of them committed mass suicide. You may remember this one day by taking some poisonous drug. And the reason they did this was that they believed in a life beyond this life, but they thought, now listen carefully, they thought that eternal life could be attained by joining an alien spacecraft that was tailing the comet Hale-Bopp. Remember the comet Hale-Bopp? It passed over the earth, didn't it, a few, however long ago it was. But they thought that they could be released and somehow they were going to get onto this thing, and that was their entrance to eternal life.

Now both these examples that I've mentioned show the absurd folly of holding a position which is not taught in Scripture. The Jehovah's Witnesses decided that they knew better than Jesus and could name a date, only to look silly when the day passed.

[20 : 35] And that Californian cult, they decided that they knew better than the Bible and could control their own entry into eternity. They were not prepared to submit to God's just judgment.

They thought they could mastermind events by their own intelligence, and the result was not merely absurd, it was tragic. It's foolish not to accept God's clear teaching about the future judgment. It is definite, the day is fixed, and the judge is appointed. And then fourth, the appointment of Jesus as the judge, Paul tells us here in verse 31, his appointment as judge is demonstrated by the fact that God raised him from the dead.

Look at that verse again. God 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.

So it's the raising of Jesus from the dead by God the Father that proves to the world that God has appointed him as the judge for the day of judgment. Now, why is this?

[21 : 43] Why does Jesus' resurrection demonstrate his appointment by God as the judge? Well, think of it like this. When God raised up Jesus from the grave, remember, the New Testament doesn't normally speak of Jesus rising, but of God raising him.

When God raised him from the grave and then showed him to his followers in his resurrection body, his new body, he was saying to Jesus' disciples, here he is, look at him, my beloved son, bearing now all the marks of the new order.

Death and pain can no longer touch him. And by my raising him from the grave, I am demonstrating to the world that he is vindicated. All that he taught is vindicated.

He taught that he must suffer and be rejected and be killed and then afterwards raised. And look, it has happened. And he taught that the laying down of his life was a ransom price for many.

He taught that he had come to seek and to save the lost. He taught that at the end, he would separate all the people of the world into two great groups. As a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, dividing the saved from the lost, the repentant from the unrepentant.

[22 : 56] All this teaching is true. And I'm vindicating it all by raising him from the dead and showing him to you in the perfection of his resurrection body. He is the prototype of the new creation.

This is the judge appointed for the day of judgment. Now, friends, for those of us who are already Christians, it is wonderful to know that our judge is the same person as our savior.

He laid down his life for us out of such love for us so that we should not in the end be condemned by him, but rather saved. And friends, if there are some here who are not believers yet, there is still time to repent and turn to him.

And you, too, can know the great comfort and joy of being saved. The day of judgment will be universal, righteous, and definite.

It's timetabling, though unknown to us, is known to God. The judge is appointed. We must be ready to meet him.