

2. Can we know the unknown God? : He created the universe, so we can't put him in a box.

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] To expand our musical horizon somewhat, it's a hymn about the wonder and glory and extravagant generosity of God in creation. So let's pray to that God as we come around his word.

God our Father, we praise you for the miracle and marvel of beauty in which you have placed our lives. We look up at the night sky, look at the light coming to us from stars which left them so many years ago and travelling across such vast deserts of space.

We can hardly begin to imagine. We look at the beauty of the autumn landscape. We remember your ancient promise that as long as the earth remains, sea time and harvest, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

We look at the wonder and variety of the creatures that you have made and we realise that you are a great God. You are our creator. You are the Lord of heaven and earth.

Come, let us bow down and worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker. And as we turn to your word, speak to us, Lord, in the busyness of our lives.

[1 : 19] Speak to us as the creator who made us, as the one in whose hand our breath is, the one who indeed gives us life and breath and everything.

As you speak to us, open our hearts to listen. Open our minds to understand something more of who you are and what you have done. And send us back into the normal business of our lives, with hearts that have been challenged and inspired by what you have to say to us.

With wills that are ready to obey. And anxious to share the good news with others. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now we are continuing the series we began last week under the title, Can We Know the Unknown God?

And we are turning again to Acts 17 on page 926. Our particular subject today is that God created the universe and so we can't put him in a box.

And we are going to read from verse 16 down to verse 25. Paul is waiting at Athens for his friends Silas and Timothy to join him.

[2 : 35] 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 babbler 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 are 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.

[3 : 43] 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.

Amen. That's the word of God and may he speak to us through it as we look at it together.

However, the God who made the world does not live in temples made by man.

A number of years ago, in fact it was in the 1960s, there was a fashion among liberal theologians to use the phrase that God is dead. No one seems to have told the publishing industry that, because a huge number of books have appeared in recent years with the name God in their titles.

We have Christopher Hitchens, God is not great. We have Richard Dawkins and the God delusion. And we have A.A. Grayling, against all gods.

[5 : 08] The one thing that all these authors have in common is that they think they are saying something new. Rather like the Stoics and Epicureans here, of whom we read, verse 18, verse 21, sorry, they would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

And one of the things Dawkins and the others says to us is that to believe in the gospel, to believe in God is old-fashioned. That we have a new doctrine, a new theory, which helps us to explain the contemporary world.

God may have been all very well for the Victorian period, may have been fine for the Middle Ages, may have been fine for the ancient world, but we know better. In fact, what Dawkins and Hitchens and Grayling and others are doing is simply recycling old and exploded ideas.

In fact, the kind of ideas that were established about a hundred years ago by people like Bertrand Russell and the Huxleys and so on, the people who established the way in which people would think during most of the 20th century.

And they argued essentially this. The universe is a closed system. The universe is a box, in fact. There is nothing beyond it. There is nothing outside it.

[6 : 29] There is nothing greater than it. Now, if that's true, the only way to understand the world is by studying the world. The only way we can understand why we're here is to study astronomy, is to study history, is to study zoology, is to study botany.

All these sciences that will tell us about the world. Now, these are useful. So these are useful studies. They're interesting studies. But what they will not do is explain the world.

Because they try to explain the world from the world. And this is exactly the kind of thing Paul was confronting in Athens. He was confronting the Epicureans. Remember last week, those of you who were here, we saw how the Athenians were searching for God.

But they were searching in the wrong way. They were searching through idolatry, through search for novelty, and through philosophy. And the Epicurean view essentially was the universe came into being by chance.

A chance collection of atoms came together and produced the world as we know it, the universe as we know it. They believed there may be gods, but they were remote, they were distant, they had nothing to do with the world, and nothing to do with our everyday living.

[7 : 48] The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that the universe itself was a kind of God, a kind of what nowadays would be called pantheism. And you get that view in many quarters today, the worship of Gaia, the earth goddess, that the earth itself is divine.

In other words, they are worshipping the unknown God. And Paul, as we saw last week, says this unknown God actually wants to be known.

He has proclaimed himself. He sent us a gospel. And this God has a name. He's not the unknown God. He has a name, and that is the name given to him when he came into the world.

And so Paul preaches Jesus and the resurrection. Now, it's easy to see why Dawkins and others actually have so much influence today. In the world of Google and Wikipedia and all the rest of it, everybody knows everything about everything, or thinks they know everything about everything. We press a few buttons, and a mass of information comes up onto our screens, and we think we are better informed than we are. Paul says, the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by hands.

[9 : 06] So first of all then, God is the explanation of everything. Since he made everything, he understands everything. See, the view of those thinkers like Dawkins, and earlier on people like Bertrand Russell, is that the world itself explains the world.

Now, you see what happens? We can't look back. There is no creation. There is no point at which it began. There is no beginning in which the Lord made heaven and earth.

So we can't look back. We can't look up, because there is no God out there to whom we can speak, and who can speak to us. And we can't look forward, because there is no end, there is no day in which God will judge the world by the man he has appointed.

So if we can't look back, and we can't look up, and we can't look forward, there is only one way we can look, and that is inward. And you see what happens then? I become my own God.

Everything is related to me. Everything is explained by me. Everything is judged on how it affects me. And that is the great problem of the contemporary world, isn't it?

[10:18] The kind of phrase we use, that's not where I'm coming from, that's not where I'm at, rather than looking beyond, to the God who made us. And that's why our world is full of idols, isn't it, as well?

Where power is an idol for many people. Power to control, power to manipulate. Sex is an idol for many people, rather than being a God-given gift to be received with gratitude.

It's created into something that dominates the whole of life. Wealth is an idol for many people. In other words, like the Athenians, we are worshipping something lesser than ourselves.

That is the point of idolatry. When I worship an idol, I worship something that's less than me.

Something that can't guide me, something that can't rebuke me, something that cannot help me.

So God is the explanation of everything. Look at verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth.

[11:28] In other words, he is Lord of heaven, first of all. These vast distances of space, these unthinkable distances revealed by our modern telescopes.

He understands them because he created them. We are not alone in a hostile, threatening universe. We have been made by the Lord of that universe.

The Lord who made heaven and he also made earth, since he is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is the God of everything we are and everything we do.

There is no part of the universe where his root does not run. Now you see, that's not just a theoretical idea, is it? It's a very practical idea. Every one of us here woke up today.

Perhaps some of us have jumped out of bed the minute we woke up. Perhaps some of us switched on the snooze button and had another five or ten minutes. One way or another, we all woke up today.

[12:29] One way or another, we all came here. One way or another, we've all done various things today. Perhaps we've gone into shops. Perhaps we've done some work this morning. We've spoken to people.

We've gone about our business. Why have we been able to do any of these things? It's because the Lord made us. He gave us these things. He gave us life and breath and everything.

Verse 25. Since he himself gives to all mankind, life and breath and everything. This is a very liberating thing, isn't it? Everything matters because everything has been made by God.

You may think your life is unimportant. You may think you don't matter to anyone. You may think your life has run into a cul-de-sac. Paul is saying here, God made you.

He gave you life and breath and everything. He has a plan for you. Everything you do is a gift from him. So that's the first thing Paul is saying. If God is creator, not the vast areas of space, the huge mysteries of the universe, they're all in his control.

[13:35] He understands them. But also the little things, the getting up in the morning, the going to the bus or the train, the driving into work, all these belong to him as well. Secondly, he is saying he can't be confined in a box.

He does not live in temples, verse 24. We are not meeting here in the house of God in the sense that this is a magical building.

Nor is St. George's Tron down in Buchanan Street which is being renovated at the moment. That is not the house of God because God cannot be confined in a building.

We use these buildings for the glory of God. We use them to spread the gospel. But they are not the place that confines God. Now Athens was full of temples and those temples were the houses of their gods.

Athena, the goddess of the city, had her magnificent temple which could be seen from miles away as its gold and silver decorations shone in the sun. And long ago when King Solomon built the temple, he recognized this.

[14:40] He says, Heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built. Do we put God in a box? Do we put him in a box?

You see, when we call a church building the house of God, we put God in a box and we call that religion. That's what we do on Sundays. On Sundays we go to the house of God.

Implication of that is we are not in the house of God during the rest of the week. Implication of that is God is for Sundays. God is for special times. Paul is saying to these Athenians and he's saying to us God cannot be confined in places.

He cannot be confined in times. And he's not served by human hands. Now Athens had a whole industry. Masses of people in Athens were employed to service the God slot, so to speak.

They were employed to sweep out the temples. They were employed to in the functions of those temples. But it was a particular slot that wasn't related to the rest of their lives.

[15:45] The point, says Paul, we can't build a house for him. He has built a house for us. He has built this world for us. And more than that, he's built a home beyond this world for us.

We come to him in faith and in belief. And he's not dependent on humans. He is not, sir, verse 25, by human hands.

We didn't make him. We didn't create him. He created us. Many years ago, in the middle of the 20th century, the distinguished Bible translator, J.B. Phillips, wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small*, in which he attacked the idea that God is just my private possession.

God is something that I create in my own image, someone I talk to in my own time. And he argued that the God of the Bible is a big God.

He argued our gospel is too true. One of the reasons why many people won't accept the gospel is not because so much they think it's wrong, it's because they think it's trivial. They think it's not worthy of serious consideration.

[16:56] When you read the Bible, you discover that God is far greater than all that. Read Genesis 1, the God who made the world simply by speaking, without apparent effort.

He's not confined to the world, and yet that God, and he does this in Genesis 2, comes down into the world, speaks to humanity, reveals himself to them. That's what he still does through the gospel. So, this little passage about creation, I think, leaves us with two questions I want us to consider.

The first question is this, what kind of God do you believe in?

Do you believe in a God who is simply either out there, a remote figure, whom you can never contact, and never know, kind of thing that many people say, well, I believe there is a God?

Now, that's, when people say that, what they mean is, not that they have a relationship with God, not that they know God, but that there is a God somewhere out there. And the other mistake is to say, oh yes, I believe in God, he is, but his only concern is with me, and my personal matters.

[18:06] What kind of a God do you believe in? Do you believe in a God who is both out there, greater than anything we can imagine, and yet comes down to us? That's what Paul's going to go on to say to the Athenians, as we'll see in the last, in the last talk in this series, that he has come down.

He's become human himself. And he has become the one who will judge the world. That's the first question. The second question is this, do we believe that this God is relevant to our, to the big questions of today?

You see, part of the problem about many of the books that are written today, the Dawkins and the Hitchens and the Graylings and so on, is that they are fundamentally dishonest. They tell us that it is religion, as they call it, which causes all the problems.

It's religion that demolished the Twin Towers. It's religion that causes the wars and the turmoil. They never, ever tell us about the changed lives.

They never, ever tell us about those who are being brought from darkness to light and from death to life. So what kind of a God is it that we are presenting to the world?

[19:24] First of all, what kind of God do we believe in? And secondly, if we are Christian, what kind of God are we presenting to the world? I don't know everybody here. I don't know what your answer is to each of these questions.

It may be that you're exploring Christianity at the moment. It may be you're not sure what to believe. And part of the problem with so much of these publishing ventures today is while they call it a debate in ideas, there is no debate.

They're not interested in the arguments. They simply want to destroy belief in God. Paul tells us there is a God who made everything and who is the explanation for everything.

And Paul tells us that that God wants to know you and that God wants you to know him. Let's pray. In God our Father, we confess that we do not want to know you as much as you want to know us.

Very often we try to run from you and hide from you. But we pray that we may open our hearts to you. That we may see the truth that shines through your word.

[20 : 47] That we may walk in the light that that word gives us. That when the day comes when we stand before the man whom you have appointed to judge the living and the dead, that we may indeed know him as Saviour and as Lord.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.