

3. Can we know the unknown God? : He made human beings, so we can't live without him

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 November 2007

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, if you have the Bibles there, please, if you turn to page 926, we are in the middle, as I say, of a series on this address that Paul made to the Athenians called, Can we know the unknown God? And today our subject is, He made human beings, so we can't live without Him.

We are going to start reading at verse 22 and read on to verse 29. As I say, Paul speaks on the Areopagus, the main meeting place, the main assembly place in ancient Athens.

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.

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 towards Him and find Him.

[1 : 41] Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being. Or, 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.

This is God's word to us, not just to ancient Athens long ago, but to us in Glasgow today. I wonder what you think of your fellow human beings.

I suppose the answer to that question will depend where you are, what you are doing. This morning as I travelled in the very crowded commuter train, pushed up against a rather uncomfortable wall, I didn't form a terribly high opinion of my fellow human beings, as they pushed and jostled and as they talked loudly into their mobile phones.

This has been a common view of humanity. Jonathan Swift, the writer, says, I don't have any problem with humanity, it's people I don't like. And I suspect there are many who feel that.

[3 : 06] On the other hand, Shakespeare's Hamlet said, What a piece of work is a man! How infinite in faculty, how noble in reason, much like a god. There's a very different view of humanity.

And just one more, the philosopher Nietzsche said, The earth has a skin, and that skin has diseases. One of those diseases is called man. Now there's a cluster of views of you and I, and of our fellow human beings.

Now the Bible has a very, very clear view of humanity. Where humanity comes from, where humanity is going, what humanity is.

And we must listen to that view. And this is what Paul is turning to next in his address. He told people that they are searching for an unknown god in the wrong way.

He told people that that god is the creator. And now he turns in these verses we've read to human beings. What are humans? Why are we here? And the Bible makes it very plain that we are here because god put us here.

[4 : 12] God made us. God created us. We didn't make ourselves. And that this god is not an unknown god. He is proclaimed in the gospel.

God made us. God loves us. But yet at the same time, we are lost. We are alienated from God. We have gone away from him.

We have turned astray like sheep, as the prophet Isaiah said. And we have gone our own way. And that's what Paul is saying to these philosophers and others in Athens. The Athenians, on the whole, were a fairly conceited people.

They believed that they had sprung from their native soil. That the Athenians were different from other Greeks. And certainly different from the rest of humanity. The Greeks had a word for the rest of humanity.

The word we translate as barbarians. The reason the rest of humanity was called barbarians was they talked an uncouth language. They sounded like bar, bar, bar, bar, bar.

[5 : 11] Not like the sophisticated Greeks. Paul is saying humanity is one. There aren't different classes of humanity. There aren't different kinds of humanity.

They are one. And in particular, he's saying two things. He's saying, first of all, that God made us so that we might know him. Look at verse 27.

In verse 26, he's made from one man every nation of mankind. And then in verse 27, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. So Paul is saying, God made us. And the reason he made us is that we could know him. That we could find him.

That we could have a relationship with him. And he's going further than that. He says, God is the explanation of human history. Verse 26, he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the faces of the earth.

[6 : 15] But having determined allotted periods. If you're interested in history or if you're interested in politics and look at the world scene. Very often it's difficult to explain why certain nations come to great prominence and then disappear.

Why certain governments do very well for a while and then they're thrown out and so on. Now Paul is saying the reason for this is because this has been appointed by God.

God knows exactly how long a particular regime will be in power. God knows exactly how long a particular nation will be prominent. And God knows when that nation will fall and another nation will rise.

In other words, it's the explanation of history. Now we can't just read this off history. We need God to explain it to us. And that's what he's done in scripture. History is not just an accident.

The nations that rise and fall. The governments that come and go. It's not just an accident. It's because God has ordained it. God has appointed it. And therefore, God has appointed human purpose and human destiny.

[7 : 23] But not only that. Not only is God the explanation for history. God is the explanation for geography as well. Reading on in verse 26. Having determined the allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

The whole explanation of human geography. Why particular nations live in particular lands. Why certain nations expand over a great area and others diminish.

Now of course there's all sorts of other explanations. There are secondary explanations. There are economic explanations. There's explanations of great figures in history. But ultimately, God explains history.

And God explains geography. He's made us. He's not just made us in the abstract. He's made us to live in particular places at particular times. And he guides the destinies of nations.

Now you see one of the things that means. That means this gospel is for the whole world. This God whom Paul proclaims. Is not a Jewish God. A kind of Godlet who belongs only to one nation.

[8 : 28] This is a God of the whole nations. And that's the kind of thing that throughout Christian history. Has sent people all over the world. To preach the gospel. That's why we can sing.

We have a gospel to proclaim. Good news for all throughout the earth. And the great missionary movement of the 19th century. Was marked by hymns.

With lines such as the whole wide world. For Jesus. This shall our anthem be. Jesus shall reign. Where e'er the sun. As his successive journeys run. So that's the first thing that Paul is saying.

God made us to know him. And he didn't just make us in the abstract. He made you and me to live in a particular place. And in a particular time. And it's in that place and that time.

That he'll meet you. Secondly. We. God made us in his image. Verse 29. Being then God's offspring.

[9 : 25] We ought not to think that the divine being. Is like gold or silver or stone. An image formed by art. And the imagination of man. Read the book of Genesis.

Read how in Genesis 1 and 2. God makes people. Male and female. In his own image. That image is. That image is spoiled.

When people turn away from God. But it's still there. You and I are still in the image of God. Rather like a great building. Whose magnificence can be shown.

Like the cathedral in St. Andrews. I don't mean St. Andrews Cathedral down the road. I mean the cathedral in the town of St. Andrews. This vast ruined edifice. Which when you look at it.

You realize how splendid it must have been in the Middle Ages. Vast dimensions. Tremendous architecture and so on. Now that's you and I. We are fallen. But we still have the image of God.

[10 : 22] And that means. That we. That means first of all. That we have a God shaped blank. In our lives. The book of Ecclesiastes says. God has placed eternity.

In our hearts. In other words. God has made us. Not just for time and space. God has made us to live beyond that. To live in his eternity. Now part of the problem is.

Indeed the root of the problem is. That we don't realize it is God we are searching for. We think we are searching for something else. We think we can find fulfillment. In some other way.

Perhaps in wealth. We look for wealth. But wealth is uncertain. I'm sure Alistair Darling. The Chancellor is wishing you'd never heard of Northern Rock.

For example. I'm not making a political point. It's just the point that. These great financial institutions. They are unstable. And over and over again.

[11 : 19] This kind of the Wall Street crash. Back in the 1920s. Riches are uncertain. And Paul warns us not to trust. In uncertain riches.

We'll be looking for it in our job. If you have job satisfaction. Then thank the Lord. That is a very blessed thing. But work. And labor.

And so on. Genesis 3 tells us. Is something accompanied by frustration. However much you might like your job. It's not the whole of your life. It won't fulfill you. As a person.

You may be looking for it in sex. Now sexuality is a good gift of God. And it must be. And we must be treated as a gift of God. When we try to treat it as a God in itself.

Then it simply destroys us. It destroys lives. It demeans people. Treats people simply as commodities. So all these ways. And other ways as well. Maybe our house.

[12 : 16] Maybe a relationship. Anything at all. That we are trying to fill our lives in. These are God shaped blanks. Because it is only God. Who can finally satisfy us.

We are made for him. We are made for eternity. So we can't be satisfied by time. And Paul says. When you.

To the Athenians. Look at verse 28. For in him we live. And move. And have our being. Or as some of your prophets have said. We are indeed his offspring. Paul says to the Athenians.

Even if you read your own literature. Even if you read your own poets. You would realize. That we are made for God. We are made to live for God. And to live with God.

And when Paul quotes these pagan poets. He is doing something very important. When God. When God creates humanity. And places his image in them.

[13 : 13] He places a consciousness of himself. When we look up at the night sky. You realize the greatness of God. When you look at something smaller. Like say a butterfly.

You recognize the beauty of God's workmanship. And so on. And very often. Pagan writers have had glimpses. Of the truth. The truth that is going to come to full light.

In the gospel. But the gospel of John says. The light that lightens everyone. Was coming into the world. Notice when Jesus appears. People realize. That he is the one.

Who fulfills all those longings. All those dreams. So. Paul is saying. Athenians. You have a God shaped blank. And none of those masses of idols.

That fill your city. None of them can satisfy. Not any one of them. Not all of them together. Just as not all of those things. Can satisfy us. God.

[14 : 09] And the other thing. Paul says. Since we are made in God's image. We cannot make God in our image. Verse 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.

Now notice the kind of things. That Paul mentions. First of all. He mentions the most precious commodities. We ought not to think. The divine being. Is like gold. Or silver. Or stone. The great statue of Athena. The patron goddess of Athens. That stood in the city. Forty feet high. Made of the most beautiful materials. And a magnificent sight. As the sun caught it. Probably could be seen. From miles and miles away. In other words. Their goddess. Is so important. You have to lavish. The most wonderful materials. In order to make her image.

[15:06] Paul says. Even if you use the most precious metals. Even if you use all your efforts. To mine them. That will not tell you. What God is like. Similarly.

He says. It's image formed by the art. In other words. The most inspired art. The most inspired craftsmanship. The most beautiful buildings. The most wonderfully ornate ceremonies. That will not lead you to God either. Or the imagination of man. The most vivid flights of imagination. Will not lead us to God.

And why is that? Why is it that these splendid objects. And those magnificent flights of human imagination. Won't lead us to God. Why is it so wrong to try and make images of God? God. And Paul is saying. It's wrong to make images of God. Because God's image is already in the world. You and I are God's image. Humanity is made in the image of God.

[16:04] And when we make idols. However magnificent they may be. However splendid they may be. They are less than ourselves. Just like computers I suppose.

My computer has broken down several times this week. And you begin to realize then that the most wonderful inventions are less than humans.

I didn't sort it myself. I got another human being to sort it. Which once again illustrates it. Not my good friend and brother Edward. Who is not a computer expert. Someone else.

God's image is not to be found in the most wonderful things. It's to be found in humanity itself. And above all it is to be found in the unknown God.

Jesus. Who himself took the form of humanity. Who is in the form of God. And took the form of humanity. Next week we'll be seeing how not only is he the explanation of creation and history.

[17:03] That he is the Lord of the future. The judge who will come. So as we finish today. The question that faces us. Is since God made us. We need God in our lives.

Otherwise we're simply going to be existing. However magnificent our lives. However tremendous our achievements. Unless God is in our lives. We're not going to be living. And secondly.

This will be our subject next week. God will hold us responsible. For how we treat him. For how we treat his revelation. For how we regard him. And that is what Paul is saying.

Paul is saying. God made you. God made me. And therefore. We cannot live without him. Let's pray. God our Father.

How we praise you. That you have revealed yourself to us. You have not remained unknown. You have come to us in Jesus Christ. And you have given to us your word. Which so fully and faithfully points to him.

[18:07] Help us as we leave here. To go away challenged. Encouraged. And strengthened in our faith. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.