

The Day of Judgement

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let me read now from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17. You might like to turn, if you have one of these big, dark blue Bibles, you might like to turn with me to page 926, 926.

And I'll read the whole passage from chapter 17, verse 22, through to verse 31. You'll see in verses 16 to 21 the account of Paul's visit to Athens, his arrival in Athens, the way in which his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the great and famous city of Athens was full of idols.

And he debated and conversed and evangelized, not only in the synagogue with the Jews, but also in the marketplaces with the Gentiles as well. And then he is taken to the Areopagus by certain people who want to bring him to the city fathers to explain himself to them.

So Acts 17, verse 22. 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.

[1 : 26] 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.

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.

[2 : 42] And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Well, this is the word of the Lord, and may it indeed be a blessing to us from God today.

Well, now you may have noticed I emphasized verse 31, that final verse, as I was reading it a moment ago. But Paul teaches us in that final verse of his address some memorable things about the Day of Judgment.

Indeed, this verse 31 is one of the great New Testament verses on the Day of Judgment. But I want to take a few moments first by way of reminding us of the ground that Paul has covered.

If you were here last week, you'll remember this. Some of you won't have been, so I hope you'll allow me just to say a little bit about the earlier part of Paul's address. Paul is in Athens, and this appears to have been his first visit to the great capital of Greece.

And he makes this short speech or address or sermon to the group of men who are called the Areopagus. Now, I guess the actual address when he gave it wouldn't have been nearly as short as the account of it that we have here recorded by Luke.

[3 : 52] Most scholars would think that Luke's records of the sermons or speeches of Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles are merely shorthand notes. I can't imagine that Paul would have been quite so brief. Even in the Areopagus, I imagine he would have spoken for 20 or 30 minutes.

It only took me about two minutes to read his whole speech. So I guess he said quite a lot more. But this records the bare bones, or the main points of what he said to them. But I think we can picture Paul the Apostle surrounded by these men.

Do you see in verse 22, Luke says, Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus. Perhaps it's a little bit like somebody speaking at the dispatch box in the House of Commons.

We sometimes get on the television, don't we, short clips of the Prime Minister or whoever standing at the dispatch box surrounded by other people. So here were all these men, the Areopagus, sitting around him.

The city greybeards, the philosophers, the intellectuals, the leaders of the city. And here is Paul, this stranger from Tarsus, this Jew. And Paul, as he explains or gives an account of his message, is rash enough to call them ignoramuses.

[4 : 58] Now that really is what this speech is all about. He is telling these cultured, philosophically experienced, city elders, that they are ignorant of God. Ignoramus is in that sense.

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 God or the unknown God.

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

You are ignorant of him, so let me tell you the truth about him. This is bold Christian evangelism. And he proceeds to tell them that they have profoundly misunderstood the true nature of the deity. So he says to them, and here are some of his main points. First, in verse 24, he says to them, you cannot house the creator of everything in a temple. You can't, as it were, box him up or domesticate him or control him.

[6 : 03] It's your ignorance that makes you think of him that way, that somehow God lives in a house. Secondly, from verse 25, Paul says, this true God doesn't need to be supported by human hands.

He doesn't need us to give him food or drink. The truth is entirely the other way around. He is self-sufficient, self-originating, and he gives us everything that we need. And then thirdly, from verse 29, it's quite wrong, says Paul, to think of God as being like an image formed from gold or silver or stone.

Paul is saying, you can't reduce his glorious being to the proportions of a statue. He is irreducible. Do you think that a craftsman working in metal can possibly produce something that represents the true God?

No. So Paul is saying to these Athenians that their views of God are not slightly wrong, they're wildly and woefully wrong.

They're misrepresenting the deity, hand over fist. There's nothing remotely approximating to the truth in their view of him. So here is Paul the Apostle as a theological battering ram.

[7 : 11] He takes them head on. Oof. He's courteous to them and polite, but he's very direct. And in verse 30, he describes the centuries, the many centuries, during which these idolatrous views of God have prevailed.

He describes these many centuries as the times of ignorance. Now it's in verse 30 that Paul's speech suddenly takes on a new tone.

It's a bit like that moment when we've all been there, haven't we, in the dentist's chair and the dentist is drilling away as a tooth. Everything's fine, isn't it? Until suddenly the drill touches a nerve and you wince, don't you?

You grab onto the arms of the chair that you're sitting in. Well it's like that. Suddenly, we have a moral imperative following the relatively calm philosophical type of discussion that Paul has been giving them.

Suddenly, here it is. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now the drill touches the nerve and Paul says, but now God commands all people everywhere to repent.

[8 : 12] So this ignorance expressed in idolatrous misrepresentations of God is, says Paul, culpable ignorance. God, in his patient forbearance, allowed it to run on and on for many centuries.

In a sense, Paul says, he overlooked it. But that period of patient forbearance, says Paul, is now over. In sending Christ into the world, God is now calling the world to account.

Before Christ came, it was an era of many centuries of forbearance, but since Christ's arrival, it is an era of repentance. The era of forbearance ended 2,000 years ago.

We now live in the era of repentance. Now that's exactly what Jesus too said when he first came into Galilee. The time has come, he said. One era has ended. A new era has begun.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent, therefore, and believe the gospel. So the time has come since Jesus came for repentance and faith.

[9 : 15] Now let me ask every individual here, individually, as if we were sitting having a cup of tea together after the service. Have you repented yet? Have you turned to Christ and put your faith in him?

No more important question can be asked of anybody. This is the era of repentance. Ignorance of God is no longer excusable. That's what the apostle, who is our teacher, is saying.

The time of forbearance is over. The time for repentance is here. Indeed, it has long been here, and it's only by God's grace and favour that it has been extended as far as the year 2009.

So it's God who commands the repentance of all people. Now you will see that Paul does not finish his message in verse 30. He goes straight on to explain in verse 31 the reason why God is now commanding the repentance of all people.

And here it is. Look with me at verse 31. Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

[10 : 22] 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 very soon God will drop the curtain onto the world and bring it to an end.

God commands universal repentance because this day of judgment is coming. And those who have not repented when the day of judgment comes will be unprepared to meet their judge.

Now isn't the Lord God merciful to let us know that this day of judgment is coming? It's because he wants people in the greatest possible numbers to be saved on the day of judgment.

It's because he wants our salvation that he lets us know about the coming judgment. He wants to welcome as many as possible into his kingdom and to have to exclude as few as possible from his kingdom.

And those who repent and trust in Christ will be saved. But those who ignore Christ and refuse him will be lost finally in hell. That's why it is so kind of God to tell us so clearly that this day of judgment is coming.

[11 : 28] Now let's notice some of the details here in verse 31. Verse 31 tells us I think four things about the day of judgment. First, it will be universal.

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 last human being who has lived since the time of Adam and Eve. Everybody is 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, the crooked.

All will be judged. Now we know that this judgment of the world must include all people who have ever lived in all periods of history because of other things that we read in the New Testament.

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

[12 : 36] So the dead as much as the living will be judged. Revelation chapter 20 verse 13 says this, The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what he had done.

Even the sea gave up its dead. I suppose more people are buried on the land than at sea, aren't they? But I guess millions of people have lost their lives at sea in naval battles and, well, shipwrecks and so on.

Even the sea, do you see, will give up its dead. So nobody in all generations from Adam and Eve onwards will be able to escape this judgment. Now friends, I want to suggest that this is a thrilling and wonderful doctrine and one that we ought to hold on to with joy.

Many people don't like it. Especially when it's linked as it is here with the command in verse 30 to repent. Many folk are very uncomfortable with the command to repent and with the doctrine of universal judgment because these doctrines appear to show God up in a harsh light as the fierce judge.

But let me put it like this. Wouldn't it be awful if God's judgment were not universal? If he were to judge some people, let's say he judged this part of the church but he overlooked the people sitting on this side, there'd be something wrong about that.

[14 : 01] It would be not fair, would it? Or if he judged some nations and overlooked others, there would be chaos. What kind of confidence could we have in a God who didn't at the end call every last person to account?

Such a God would be capricious and partial, untrustworthy, inconsistent, and frankly not worth believing in? Of course God's judgment will be universal. Of course it will involve every person who has ever lived on the face of the planet.

So there's the first thing. The judgment will be universal. Secondly, from verse 31, God's judgment will be righteous. There it is again so plainly in the verse.

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

In this country alone, almost every year we have cases, quite often high profile cases, where people have been imprisoned but then launch some kind of a legal appeal.

[15 : 09] Their case is retried and their conviction is then said to be unsafe. Some loophole is found and they're let off. They're released. We can think of a number of cases like this and it leaves us with the feeling, especially when it's obvious that this particular person has committed the crime, it leaves us with the feeling that justice is very frail and very unsure.

Lawyers seem to multiply in number every year and yet justice itself appears to become more fragile. International justice seems equally frail.

The international law court that is held at The Hague I suppose is doing its best to try war criminals and those who have committed genocide and that sort of thing but often these things seem to come unstuck.

Or think of international law, the issues, the edicts and so on, resolutions from the United Nations. Often they are not accepted and followed by people in different countries because there's not the political will to enforce them.

We're conscious that justice is a very frail creature in this world. The new heavens and the new earth which will eventually be revealed are the place where righteousness dwells, is at home. But clearly justice is not at home in this world.

[16 : 23] So therefore it's so good for us to know that God's final justice, God's final judgment will be righteous. There will be no miscarriages of justice at the hands of him who sees everything and who knows everything.

So if this world's justice is very partial and very shaky, God assures us that his final judgment will be completely just and fair. And isn't this encouraging when we think of how much disorder and bad behavior there is in our world today?

People sometimes say to us, what is this world coming to? Don't they? We often hear that. What is the world coming to? Well, God answers that question because he tells us that the world is coming to a just judgment.

there is something in our hearts that longs for justice. At least most of the time we long for justice. I guess there are times when we don't long for it. For example, you are not longing for justice when you are doing 90 miles per hour down the motorway, are you? But apart from moments like that, there is something in the Christian heart which deeply longs for justice and God answers us by saying that his judgment will be righteous on the day of judgment.

[17 : 37] And isn't that a relief to us when we think of our loved ones who have died, especially if they have died and we don't quite know where they stood in relation to the Lord God. I think, for example, of my father whom I loved very much who died 16 years or so ago.

I think he died as a Christian. I think so. But I am not absolutely certain. Now the Bible teaches that all people will go either to heaven or to hell. I can't say that I have an unshakable certainty that my father is in heaven because his relationship with the gospel and the church was a little bit tenuous, a bit ambiguous.

He and I in his later years used to read the Bible together and I know he discussed the gospel not just with me but with other Christian friends. But I am not certain that he really repented and had firm convictions about salvation through Christ.

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

So there's the first thing. God's judgment will be universal. Second, it will be just. Thirdly, God's judgment will be definite. Verse 31 says that the day is fixed and the judge is appointed.

[18 : 51] Now we know of course who that judge is. It's Jesus, the one who is raised from the dead. This is exactly what the apostle Peter says in Acts chapter 10 where he's speaking to the Gentile 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 in this way that God's judgment is definite.

The day is fixed. The day has been chosen. It's in the Lord's calendar. And if we can grasp this it will save us from certain errors which some people fall into. So for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses believe that a definite day for the end of the world has been fixed but they also have made the mistake of thinking that that date can be discovered and known by man.

And as you probably know there have been two or three or four times in the last hundred years or so when the Jehovah's Witnesses have named the great day. The end of the world is coming on December the whatever 19 so and so and they've got ready for it and the day has come and the night has passed and they've woken up the next morning and they have looked rather foolish because it hasn't happened.

So they were right about it being a definite day but they were wrong in predicting a particular date. Jesus says in the Gospels that nobody but the Father knows the hour and day of the judgment and of his return.

[20 : 11] Then there was a different error made some 10 or 15 years ago by, I forget their name but there was a cult group over in California and because they had a very powerful and charismatic leader he persuaded them all to commit mass suicide.

Three or four hundred people would put themselves to death in one day by taking some sort of a poisonous drug. They believed apparently in a life beyond this life but they thought now listen to this for something absurd they thought that life beyond this life could be attained by joining an alien spacecraft that was trailing the comet Hale-Bopp.

Remember the comet Hale-Bopp? Not Halley's Comet but there's another comet called Hale-Bopp and they thought that there's a spacecraft that trails that and they could join it by taking this drug. Now these examples show the absurdity and folly of holding a position which scripture itself does not teach.

The Jehovah's Witnesses decided that they knew better than Jesus and could name a date only to look absurd when the day passed and that California cult decided they knew better than the Bible and that they could control their own entry into eternity.

They were not prepared to submit to God's just judgment. They thought that they could master their own events by their own intelligence and the result was not only absurd but tragic. It is foolish not to accept God's clear teaching about the future judgment.

[21 : 32] It is definite says verse 31. The day is fixed and the judge is appointed. Then fourth and last the appointment of Jesus as the judge is demonstrated by the fact that God raised him from the dead.

Do you see? There it is in verse 31. God will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this this definite day this coming day he has given assurance to all by raising this man from the dead.

So it is 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. So why is this?

Why is it that Jesus' resurrection demonstrates the fact that God has appointed him to be the judge? Well think of it like this. When God raised up Jesus from the grave and showed him to his followers in his resurrection body his new and glorified body he was saying to Jesus' disciples here he is 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 up from death death has no more dominion over him I am demonstrating to the world that he is vindicated.

[22 : 56] Everything that he taught is vindicated. So he taught you will remember that he must suffer and die be rejected and killed and then afterwards raised. And look it has happened just as he said.

He taught that the laying down of his life was to be a ransom price for many. He taught that he had come to seek and save the lost. He taught that at the end he would separate all the people of the world as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats dividing the saved from the lost the repentant from the unrepentant.

So all this teaching is true. I am vindicating him 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 here who are Christians it is wonderful to know that our judge is the same person as our saviour.

He laid down his life for us so that in the end we should not have to be condemned by him as the judge. And friends here if there are any here who are not yet believers there is still time there is still time while we take another breath to turn to Christ and to repent.

[24 : 19] And you too if you are not yet a Christian can know the comfort and the joy and the hope of being saved. This day of judgment let's take it from the apostle Paul who was appointed by God to be the authoritative teacher.

This day of judgment is universal righteous and definite. It's timetabling although unknown to us is known to God. The judge is appointed.

We need to be ready to meet him and we cannot afford to put this off. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. The day to turn to Christ is always today.

So let me read these final two verses again. 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.

Let us pray together. Dear God, our Father, we want to thank you with all our hearts that this universe is not chaotic but is moral because you, the author of all justice and truth are its sovereign ruler.

[25 : 48] We look forward to this day awesome though we know it will be. We pray again that you will hasten it and hasten the return of our Lord Jesus and we pray that you will help us joyfully and gladly to share this good news about him with as many people as possible while there is still time.

and we do pray especially for those known to us loved by us who have not yet repented and we ask that you will impress upon their hearts the need to turn to the Saviour the only Saviour while today continues to last.

So please have mercy upon us our dear Father and we ask it all in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen.