

The Day of Judgement

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let's turn to our reading in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17. And you'll find this on page 926 in our big hardback Bibles, if that's the one that you have, page 926.

I want to read the second half of the chapter from verse 16 to verse 32. And this describes Paul's visit to Athens.

We don't know whether Paul visited Athens on other occasions. But we certainly know about this one. Luke, his good friend, wrote the book of Acts. And no doubt, Paul told the story of his visit to his friend.

So chapter 17 and verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them, that is 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.

[1 : 08] 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? For you bring some strange things to our ears.

We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now, 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.

[2 : 10] 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.

[3 : 22] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, And may it be a blessing to us today. Let's have a further moment of prayer. We thank you, dear gracious Father, For your servant, Paul the Apostle.

And we thank you for using him, Not only in the first century, But in every century since then. And we thank you that through his words, You continue to speak to us and teach us today.

Be our teacher then, And please encourage us, And give us greater understanding. And we ask it, In Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, you'll see from our order of service, Our sheet, That my title is the Day of Judgment.

[4 : 32] And you'll see from this passage, That Paul mentions, Speaks of the Day of Judgment, At the very end of this short speech, That he gives in Athens. Verse 31, He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world.

So that's where we're going, That's where we're ending up in a few minutes' time. But I want just to introduce the scene to you first a little bit. Paul finds himself here in Athens. And he is distressed as he looks around at the city, And he sees that it's full of idolatrous images, Shrines and temples and so on.

And so he gets into conversation with various people in the marketplace, Or in some open air place. And this results in him being taken hold of. Do you see that phrase in verse 19?

They took hold of him. You almost get the feeling that they frog marched him along to the Areopagus. And the Areopagus were the city fathers of Athens in those days.

Not quite like our house of lords, But they would have been the intellectuals and philosophers and leading citizens of the day. So we can picture Paul being taken into their midst.

[5 : 38] It says in verse 22 that he was standing in the midst. Almost a bit like somebody speaking at the dispatch box in the House of Commons. And they would have been sitting all around him. And they're asking him, if you like, to give an account of himself.

And to explain what this new teaching is that he is bringing. Teaching that they haven't heard before. So here is Paul, this Jewish man, this stranger from Tarsus. And he is rash enough to call these men ignoramuses.

Now that's really 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 had spotted on his travels around the city an altar dedicated to the unknown God.

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

[6 : 47] You say that you're ignorant of him. So let me tell you the truth about him. And he proceeds to tell them that they profoundly misunderstand the nature of the deity. So he says to them, first in verse 24, you cannot house the creator of everything in a temple.

How can you possibly think that you can box him in or domesticate him or control him? It's ignorance of the nature of God that makes you behave like this, that makes you build temples.

Then in verse 25, Paul explains that God, the true God, doesn't need to be supported by human hands. He doesn't need us to give him food and drink.

The truth is always the other way around. He is the one who supports us. Then from verse 29, Paul says, it's quite wrong to think of him as being like an image or a statue made of gold or silver or stone.

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

[7 : 54] So Paul is saying to these Athenians that their view of God is not slightly wrong. It's wildly and woefully wrong.

They're misrepresenting the deity hand over fist. There's nothing approximately close to the truth in their view of him. So here you see Paul as the theological battering ram.

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

Now it's in verse 30 that Paul's speech suddenly takes on a new tone. It's rather like that moment when, think of yourself in the dentist's chair. And the dentist is drilling your tooth because there's a bit of rotten stuff that needs to come out.

And suddenly the drill hits the nerve. Picture that. Have you got it? Suddenly it's a white knuckle moment, isn't it, as you grasp the arms of the dentist's chair. Well, verse 30 is a bit like that.

[9 : 00] It's the moment when suddenly something begins to bite home. And the Athenians are made to realize that a philosophical discussion has suddenly turned into a command from heaven. The verse begins gently and almost soothingly. The times of ignorance, God overlooked. But then the drill touches the nerve. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. So this ignorance expressed in idolatrous misrepresentations of God is culpable ignorance. God in his patience and forbearance has allowed it to run its course for many centuries. He has overlooked it. But that period of patient forbearance is now ended. In sending Christ into the world, God is now calling the whole world to account. Before Christ came, it was an era of forbearance. But since Christ's arrival, it is an era of repentance. Now, this surely is just the same thing that Jesus said when he first arrived. [10 : 07] He said, the time has now come. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Therefore, repent and believe the gospel. So the time has come. Ever since Jesus came the first time, the time is now here for repentance and faith in Christ.

So let me ask every individual here directly, have you yet repented? Have you yet put your faith in Christ? Ignorance of God, Paul is saying, is no longer excusable.

The time of forbearance is now over. The time for repentance and faith in Christ has now come. Indeed, it has been here for 2,000 years. And it's only by God's continuing grace that it's extended as far as 2014 AD.

So we need to repent and believe in Christ. God commands it. But 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 everywhere.

And here is the reason. Because, verse 31, he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

[11 : 20] And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. So what is Paul saying here? He is saying that the curtain is very soon going to drop on the world.

God is commanding universal repentance because the day of judgment is coming. And those who have not repented when the day of judgment comes will be unprepared to meet their judge. So, friends, isn't God merciful that he lets us know that this day of judgment is coming? It's because he wants us to be saved on that day that he tells the world that the judgment is coming. 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, those who trust in Christ, will be saved on that great day.

But those who ignore Christ or refuse to repent will be lost forever. That's why it's so kind and merciful of God to tell us so clearly that there is a coming day of judgment.

[12 : 26] So let's notice the details of verse 31. Paul tells us four things about the day of judgment in verse 31. First, it will be universal.

Look at the words there. God has fixed a day on which he will judge, what? The world. And that can only mean every human being who has lived on the earth since Adam and Eve.

Everybody is included. 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.

Everybody will be judged. Now, we know that this judgment of the world includes people from all periods of history because of other things that we read in the New Testament.

So, for example, Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 4. You see, the dead as much as the living will be judged.

[13 : 35] In the book of Revelation chapter 20, it says this, The sea, the ocean, 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. So nobody in all the generations from Adam and Eve onwards will be able to escape this judgment. Now, friends, I want to suggest that this is a wonderful and thrilling doctrine and one that we ought to treasure and hold on to with joy.

Many people, as we know, don't like it, especially when it's linked, as Paul links it here, with the command to repent. Many folk are very uncomfortable with the command to repent and very uncomfortable with the idea of a universal judgment because these doctrines appear to show God up in a harsh light.

But look at it like this. Wouldn't things be awful if God's judgment were not universal? If he judged some people but overlooked others or if he judged some nations but turned a blind eye to other nations, there would be global chaos.

And what kind of confidence could we have in a God who didn't call everybody and everything to account in the end? A God like that would be capricious and partial and untrustworthy and, frankly, not worth believing in.

[14:58] Of course God's judgment will be universal, involving all people who have ever lived. So there's the first thing, universal. Secondly, God's judgment will be righteous.

There it is again so plainly in verse 31. God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness. One of the features of our modern world is the fact that justice, think of the justice in our law courts, it often appears so fragile and often so unsatisfactory.

In this country alone, we have lots of cases, some of them quite high-profile cases, every year where people have been imprisoned for whatever it is and then they launch a legal appeal and the case gets retried and their conviction is then said to be unsafe and they're released.

There have been farmers who have shot burglars who've come in the middle of the night or mothers who've perhaps allegedly killed their babies and so on. It leaves us with the feeling that justice is very frail and unsure of itself in this world.

Lawyers, forgive me any lawyers who are here, lawyers become more and more numerous but justice appears to become less and less certain. And it's the same with international justice.

[16:16] It's equally frail. The International Law Court at The Hague does its best. The United Nations issues resolutions but often they're not accepted and not followed because there isn't the power to do so.

There isn't the political will to enforce them. Justice is a very frail creature in this world. So isn't it wonderful and reassuring to read that God will judge the world with righteousness, with justice at the day of judgment.

There will be no miscarriages of justice at the hands of him who sees everything 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.

And isn't this encouraging as well when we think of how much disorder and bad behavior and violence there is in the world? I guess all of us think almost every day, what is the world coming to? And God answers that question here. He tells us that the world is coming to a just judgment. Now there's something in our hearts that longs for justice, at least most of the time.

[17:30] I guess there are occasional times when we don't long for justice. For example, you don't long for justice when you're driving at 90 miles per hour up the motorway. You don't want to see that flashing blue light in your rear mirror, do you, at that point?

But apart from moments like that, there is in the Christian heart a deep longing that justice should be done. And God assures us that his judgment will be righteous on the day of judgment.

And isn't this a relief also when we think of our loved ones who have died and we don't quite know where they stand with God? I think, for example, of my own father, whom I loved very much, who died more than 20 years ago.

I think he died as a Christian, but I'm not absolutely sure about that. Now the Bible teaches, as you know, 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 to the gospel and the church was a little bit ambiguous.

He and I used to read the Bible together and I know he discussed the gospel not just with me, but with other friends who were Christians. But I'm not certain that he ever developed really firm convictions about being saved through Christ.

[18:42] 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 in Christ for forgiveness will be saved.

So first of all, God's judgment will be universal. Secondly, it will be just. Thirdly, God's judgment will be definite. Verse 31 says that the day has been fixed and the judge has been appointed.

And of course, we know who that judge is to be. He is Jesus, the one raised from the dead. And this is exactly what the apostle Peter says in Acts chapter 10, where he's speaking to Cornelius and a Gentile audience.

Jesus, says Peter, is the one whom God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead. Now, it's very helpful to us to know in this way that God's judgment is definite.

Definite as to the day chosen by God and definite as to the judge appointed by God. And if we grasp this, it will save us from various errors that different groups have fallen into over time.

[19 : 51] For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses over the centuries have believed in a definite day for the end of the world. But they've made the mistake of thinking at times that that date can be known by people.

And there have been two or three occasions in the course of the 20th century when Jehovah's Witnesses have named the great day when the world is going to come to an end and they've got ready for it. And then they've woken up the following day and they've 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 no one but the Father knows the hour and the day of the judgment. There was a different error made some years ago by a cult group in California. This group committed mass suicide. Some of you may remember this. Several hundred people took their own lives on the same day by drinking some kind of poisonous drug.

And apparently they believed in a life beyond this life. So they were right in that sense. But they thought it could be attained by joining an alien spacecraft that was trailing a particular comet, a comet called the comet Hale-Bob.

[21 : 00] Now both these examples that I've mentioned show the folly of holding a position which is not taught in the Bible itself. 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 cult in California decided that they knew better than the Bible and could control their own entry into eternity by taking a drug. They were not prepared to submit to God's just judgment. They thought they could manipulate 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. It is definite. The day is fixed and the judge has been appointed. And then fourthly and last, the appointment of Jesus as the judge is demonstrated by the fact that God raised him from the dead. Look at verse 31 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.

[22 : 12] It's the raising from the dead of Jesus by God the Father that proves to the world, demonstrates to the world that God has appointed him to be the judge on the day of judgment.

So why is this? Why is it that the resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that his appointment by God as the judge is the real thing? Well, think of it like this. When God raised Jesus from the grave and showed him to his followers in his resurrection body, he was saying to the disciples of Jesus, here he is, my beloved son, bearing now all the marks of the new order in his resurrected body.

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

He taught, for example, that he must suffer and be rejected and killed and then afterwards raised. That teaching is vindicated. It's happened. He taught that the laying down of his life was a ransom price for many.

He taught that he'd come to seek and to save those who are lost. He taught that at the end of everything, he would separate all the world's people like two groups, into two groups, like the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, dividing the saved from the lost, the repentant from the unrepentant.

[23 : 38] All this teaching is true. I'm vindicating it by raising him from the dead and showing him to you in the perfection of his resurrection body. This Jesus, raised from the dead, 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 Christians, and I'm sure that's the great majority here, it's wonderful for us to know that our judge is the same person as our Savior.

He laid down his life for us in love and mercy so that we should not, in the end, be condemned by him. And any friends here who are not yet Christian believers, there is still time to repent and still time to turn to him.

And you too can know the comfort and the joy of being saved. This day of judgment is coming. It is universal. It is righteous. It is definite.

The timetabling of it is something we cannot know. That's known only to God. But the judge is appointed. Each of us needs to be ready to meet him. And we can't afford to put this off.

[24 : 53] Who knows what tomorrow may bring. The day to turn to Christ is today. Verse 30. 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's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Lord Jesus, we pray to you because we know that we can and you invite our prayers and we acknowledge with joy and gladness that you have been truly raised and everything that you have said about God the Father and about yourself is vindicated by your resurrection.

And we look forward, Lord Jesus, to the coming of the great day of judgment because we know it will be the day of truth and the new heavens and the new earth will be ushered in the place where righteousness at last will be at home.

So dear Lord Jesus, have mercy upon each of us. For those who are Christians, please confirm and strengthen us in our trust in you and for any here who are not yet brothers and sisters in that sense. We pray that you will graciously and mercifully draw them to yourself and enable them to put their trust in you. And we ask it all for your dear name's sake.

[26 : 29] Amen. Amen.