

4. Can we know the unknown God? : He will judge the world: so we need to be ready to meet him

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[0 : 00] Now we have the Bible there, if you'd like to turn please to page 926. I should have mentioned at the beginning there will be lunch again after the service at a cost of £3 downstairs, so if you would like to stay for a little while, please do so.

Over these last weeks, and this is the last session, we have been looking at this address that Paul gives to the people in Athens. He's been evangelising parts of Greece, and now he comes to the city of Athens, and he waits for his friends to join him, his friends Silas and Timothy, who are his associates.

Now we're going to be looking at the last few verses, but I want to read the whole passage again today to put it in context. So page 926 and verse 16. 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 others 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 are presenting, for you bring some strange things to our ears.

[1 : 38] 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 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. Or as even some of your own poets have said, for we indeed are his offspring.

[3 : 03] 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 the 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 erasing 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, the woman named Damaris, and others with them.

That is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to our hearts and to our minds. We have been looking over these four lunchtimes at the question, can we know the unknown God?

Which is exactly the question that Paul is addressing as he speaks to the Athenians. And our subject today is, this God will judge the world, so we need to be ready to meet him.

[4 : 22] In this particular, the last few verses we are going to be looking at, verses 30 to 34. Now, if we believe surveys, and there are so many surveys nowadays that they become almost meaningless, but if we believe surveys, the most popular type of viewing is still soap operas.

Longstanding faithfuls like Coronation Street and Neighbours, and all the various ones which have appeared on the screen and disappeared after a short time. Now, one thing that marks these soap operas, and I'm not a regular viewer of soap operas, in case you think I spend my days and nights doing that.

If you do, you'd better get a life, because that's not a useful way to spend life at all. These soap operas have one thing in common. They never have an obvious ending.

If the soap opera proves to be popular, the authors, the editors, the directors, simply keep adding on other episodes, other stories.

There is no beginning and middle and end. Now, Paul is saying, the story of the universe, the story of the God, whom you are worshipping ignorantly, is not like that at all.

[5 : 42] This story has a beginning and a middle and an end. And the end is that this unknown God, as the Athenians called him, will meet and judge everyone he has made.

As we saw, this unknown God has a name. He was preaching, we are told in verse 18, he was preaching Jesus. And he says this unknown God has a name.

He has appeared in history, and his name is Jesus. So what does this all mean for us? Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say to the Athenians, would you like to meet Jesus?

And he'll transform your life. He'll solve your problems, and everything will be wonderful. That's not what he says at all. So often, I think, when we share the gospel, we tend to say that kind of thing, and people very often say, thank you very much, I'm getting on perfectly well without Jesus.

I don't see why I need him. Paul is saying something very different. Paul is saying to the Athenians, and he's saying to us, you are going to meet Jesus, whether you want to or not.

[6 : 49] It's not a question, do you want to meet him? God has appointed a day when every one of us will meet him, because he's going to be our judge. He is going to judge the world in righteousness.

He's going to judge all of us, and everybody else who has ever lived. And the good news is, before that happened, he died and rose again from the dead, so that if we believe in him, if our lives are committed to him, when that day comes, when we meet him, and he is our judge, we will be ready.

That's the essence of the message. Now, Paul has been sketching the big story, if you like, the story that begins with creation itself, and two weeks ago, we looked at the fact that God is the creator.

But now, he's talking about, he's talking about the judgment. And he's saying two things. First of all, he is saying, this story has an end. Verse 31, God has fixed the day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

Now, most of his listeners, like nearly all the Greeks, believed that history went in cycles. That it's simply, things kept on repeating themselves. Sometimes you had a good cycle, when things went well.

[8 : 08] Sometimes you had a bad cycle, when everything seemed to go wrong. Now, if that's what we believe, it's easy to see how, on the one hand, if we're like the Stoic philosophers he mentioned, that leads to fatalism.

Well, don't get too involved, since there actually is no end, and no judgment, don't get too involved. Or, on the other hand, these people, the Epicureans mentioned in verse 18, basically said, eat, drink, and be merry, if there's no judgment.

There's no point in living and preparing for that judgment. So, Paul says, the story has an end. But this story didn't just have a beginning and an end. This story has, if you like, a middle, a central event that happened in history, when the unknown God, Jesus Christ, came down into history and he died and rose again.

Look again at the end of verse 31. Of this, that's of the judgment day, God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. And we are told in verse 30, the times of ignorance God overlooked.

Now, before Jesus came, before the full proclamation of the gospel, Paul is saying, God overlooked people's ignorance because people didn't have the full revelation.

[9 : 30] What he's saying now, what he's saying to the Athenians, since you have now heard the gospel, there is no excuse for ignorance because each of us have to give an account of ourselves to the judge who will pronounce the verdict.

And Paul says, this is proved by the fact that the judge has been raised from the dead. He has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now, back in verse 18, the philosophers were saying, Paul seems to be preaching strange gods, foreign divinities, because he preached Jesus and the resurrection.

They probably heard this as two gods. He is preaching one god called Jesus and one god called resurrection. That's not what Paul is saying at all. Paul is saying, the one god has revealed himself in Jesus.

Jesus has been appointed judge and God has underwritten that by raising him from the dead. Now, it's important we understand what Paul is saying. After all, other people were raised from the dead.

[10 : 35] Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead by Jesus. Jesus also raised an unknown young man, the son of a widow.

They're not going to judge the world, although they were raised from the dead. You see, this is different. Paul is saying, because the resurrection has happened, the judgment has already begun.

In other words, it's not just a case of waiting until the last day. The judge is already appointed. He is already the judge. And Paul is echoing the Psalms here, which talk like Psalms like 96 and 98, which look forward to God coming to judge the world.

And one of the things it says, that when God comes to judge the world, creation itself will be restored. Wonderful language about the trees of the field clapping their hands, about the rivers rejoicing.

Because when God comes to judge, all the evil, all the sin, all the chaos of this world will be removed. So that's the first thing Paul says. The story has an end.

[11 : 40] And we know it has an end because of what's already happened. The judge has been raised from the dead. The judgment has already begun. That's why it's addressed to us today.

Jesus is judge and saviour. And we need to be ready to meet him. But the second thing Paul says is this story needs a response. Now there are many historical things which in a sense need some kind of response.

After all, I suppose recently, recently certainly in historical terms, the fact that Hitler failed in the Battle of Britain has had enormous significance for all of us.

The kind of life we live and the kind of way our history has developed since those years. Further back, the fact that Julius Caesar invaded Britain has been very significant in all kinds of ways for how our society has developed.

But there are many, many historical events and figures whom we don't need to make a response to. Including, including people like Julius Caesar and Winston Churchill.

[12 : 43] We admire them, but we don't have to make a response to them. Paul is, but Paul is saying here, you have to make a response to Jesus and we have to make a response to Jesus.

Notice verse 32, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. Now, people are always happy to discuss religion.

The Athenians spend most of their time discussing religion, but people become uncomfortable when they're asked about their personal relationship with God.

Not, are you religious? It's a question the Bible isn't interested in, but are you a believer? Do you have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? So, the first reaction is mockery.

They mock. They don't believe it. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. Well, it's crazy. He's obviously, he's obviously gone over the top. He doesn't understand what he's talking about.

[13 : 44] There is no resurrection. That's what one of the Greek dramatists said. When a person dies under the ground, that's it. There is no resurrection. And throughout history, this has been mocked.

People imagine that the world is a self-contained unit, and that when we die, that's it. That's why some mocked. A reaction which is still the case.

And you often get it. Sometimes the mockery is very polite, the kind of sneering of journalists when they talk about the gospel and so on. Second reaction is a very common one.

Others said, still verse 32, we'll hear you again about this. In other words, procrastination, putting it off. Paul never returned to Athens.

There was no church founded there. Did these people have another chance? We don't know. But procrastination is a way that people often come to terms with the gospel.

[14 : 47] They come to terms, they say, oh well, this is interesting, maybe I should do something about it. then we'll wait until the children are grown up. We'll wait until the mortgage is paid off.

Or perhaps if you're younger, wait until I've finished my university course. I'll wait until the job settles down. All kinds of reasons for procrastinating the most important decision anyone ever has to make, which is, what will we do about the claims of Jesus on our lives?

But there is a third reaction. Verse 34, some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Now these two names are not names probably we've ever heard of, unless we've read this passage before. But they are given their names because something very important happened to them that day.

Their names were written in heaven. That's one of the ways the Bible describes those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as those whose names are written in heaven.

[15 : 57] Jesus told his disciples to rejoice, not because they were doing wonderful things, but because their names were written in heaven. Most of us, well none of us obviously, have our names written in the Bible, but all of us can have our names written in heaven, and that's so important.

In other words, they believed, they gave the message a welcome. That's what believing means. It means actually, from that day on, they were changed people.

From that day on, they were no longer groping, trying to find the unknown God. They were no longer bowing at the shrine of Athena, or touching their forelock when they passed the statues of other gods, and the images of other gods.

They were changed people. They belonged to the Lord. They belonged to Jesus, and that God was no longer unknown. And these three responses are still with us, are they not?

These, one or other of these responses we'll make. Mockery doesn't, as I say, necessarily mean we laugh uproariously, and mock cynically, at what's said.

[17 : 06] It simply means we regard it as trivial, something we can brush aside, something we can make nothing off. Procrastination is the real deadly one, because when we start procrastinating with this, as with other things, we almost never get round to it.

So which of these responses is it to be? Many people here are Christian. We need to renew that response daily, not just something we once made a long time ago.

It's something that daily needs a recommitment. If we're not a Christian, if we're exploring it, there never is a better time than now, accumbent Christ.

And so indeed, Lamb of God, we offer ourselves to you, knowing that you welcome us, knowing that you can cleanse us, knowing that you forgive us. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always.

Amen.