

The Unknown God

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[0 : 0 0] with me to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17. And if you have one of our big visitors' Bibles, you'll find that on page 926. I want to read the section that begins at verse 16 and goes through to verse 31.

And this is most of the section concerning the visit that the Apostle Paul made to Athens. We don't know the precise year, but I guess it was somewhere around 50 AD.

And I want particularly to look at his sermon or address that he makes to the Areopagus, beginning in verse 22 and going to verse 31. We'll look at verses 22 to 30 today, and then when I'm with you again in a fortnight's time, I hope we'll look at verse 31, where Paul particularly writes about or preaches about the Day of Judgment.

So that's for a fortnight, but I want us to look at the meat of this sermon today. So let me read from verse 16 so we can get the whole setting of Paul visiting Athens for the first time in his life.

Now while Paul was waiting for them, that's his friends Silas and Timothy mentioned just above, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

[1 : 1 7] 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 babblers 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. That was the senior body in Athens, a bit like the House of Lords, you might say, senior body of greybeards.

They took him to the Areopagus and said, 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 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.

[2 : 3 1] 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.

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.

[3 : 50] 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. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord's blessing rest upon it to us today.

Well, the Acts of the Apostles, as I'm sure you know, is a unique book in the New Testament. There's no other book quite like it, recording the early history of the church from the time of Jesus' ascension into heaven until more or less the end of Paul's life.

A period of some 30 years. But we mustn't think that the whole of the Acts of the Apostles records everything that went on in that first 30 years of the church's life. It's a little bit like a series of holiday snaps.

Snaps. You think of your holiday snaps. You come back after your holiday and you show your friends the pictures of your holiday. You're just recording various key incidents in your holiday. Here was I on the barge or on the ferry or whatever it was.

[4 : 58] Here's the dog. Just a few little bits and pieces. A great deal more happened in those 30 years than Luke has recorded for us here. So we just have a few important moments, if you like, in the first 30 years of the church.

And one of the interesting features of the Acts of the Apostles is that it shows us something of the early preaching. of the Apostles, particularly of Peter and Paul, also of Stephen, but particularly Peter and Paul, of how they preached the Gospel in those early years.

Peter, you think for example of his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, he was speaking there largely to Jews. So he was able to tell the Gospel to them by showing them how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies and promises.

So therefore he quotes freely from the prophet Joel and from the Psalms as he explains to them who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Paul does the same thing when he's preaching to Jews and Jewish synagogue adherents and so on.

But when he comes to a place like Athens which is full of Gentiles and there would hardly have been a Jew in sight, he has to do his Gospel preaching in a rather different way. So he has a Gentile audience, they wouldn't have known the Old Testament and therefore if he'd quoted the Old Testament to them in explaining Jesus, it wouldn't have helped them or him.

[6 : 11] He does bring in one or two literary quotations. You'll see there in verse 28 and he quotes there from non-Christian Greek poetry to help him on his way because he wants to establish a certain amount of common ground between himself and his listeners.

But Paul has to start further back with Gentile folk like these Areopagites, these senior men of Athens. Because they don't know the Old Testament, they don't seem to know even the most elementary things about the true God.

They're very religious, Paul makes that point strongly, but they're ignorant of God. Now don't you think that is a striking juxtaposition of ideas, to be very religious and yet, says Paul, to be ignorant of God.

We have to ask if the same sort of thing might not be true in our own world today. Great doses of religion, a lot of interest in religion, but going hand in hand with ignorance of the true God.

Now to pick up the story from its beginnings in verse 15, Paul arrives in Athens and he sends a message back to his friends Silas and Timothy who are further north and he asks them to join him as soon as they can.

[7 : 26] And so verse 16 finds Paul newly arrived in Athens, I guess with his leather hold-all in one hand and time available to look around the city. Now I've never been to Athens, I'm sure some of you will have been there, perhaps as tourists and holiday makers, but I've never been there.

But if I ever were to find myself in Athens with time on my hands, I don't think I would hold myself up in my hotel bedroom watching Greek television. Would you?

It would be all Greek to me anyway, wouldn't it? So we wouldn't do that. I think what I would want to do is put on my walking shoes and get out and have a look at the city. And that's exactly what Paul did. Now Athens is still a very beautiful and interesting city from the photographs I can say that.

And it certainly was in Paul's day. In fact, those great buildings, the great Parthenon temple and the other big temples which are still there to be seen in Athens today were something like four or five hundred years old when Paul was there.

They predate him by almost half a millennium. And they would have been then a great attraction to the sightseer. That was a city, Athens, which always enthralled lovers of art and beautiful architecture as it does today.

[8 : 39] And in Paul's day, it had not only these great temples and shrines, but at almost every street corner there would have been smaller places of worship. Little temples, shrines, statues of the old Greek gods and goddesses.

Now you can see in verse 22 that when Paul later speaks to the men of the Areopagus, he says, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

Now that was a polite understatement because first century Athens was, you might say, the religion capital of the world. The ancient Greek historian Xenophon referred to Athens as one great altar, one great sacrifice.

And there were beautiful statues of the gods and goddesses everywhere. In the Parthenon, which is that great big temple, the one that typifies Athens more than anything, there was an enormous statue made of gold and ivory of the goddess Athene.

Athene gave her name to the city of Athens. So she was its patron goddess, you might say. And apparently this statue of Athene was so big that she was holding a spear. Apparently the point of that spear on a sunny day would reflect the sun to a point 40 miles away.

[9 : 52] So if you were out at sea, 40 miles distant, you could see Athene's spear glinting in the sunshine. That was how big and dominant she was over the city. So what did Paul make of this beautiful ancient wonder of the world, this city so full of religion?

Well, verse 16 tells us his spirit, says Luke, was filled or provoked within him. He was distressed. He was stirred up. Incandescent is perhaps slightly too strong a word, but it's almost right.

Now isn't that striking? This famous city, aesthetically so beautiful, culturally so developed, politically so enlightened, Athens was the birthplace of democracy, this city upset and distressed Paul as he walked around it and looked carefully at it.

But it wasn't its beauty or its culture or its politics that Paul found so distressing. Verse 16 tells us that he was distressed by its idols. These gods and goddesses and their statues and their temples so deeply misrepresented the truth about God and Paul couldn't bear it.

God was being dishonoured as Paul saw it and the Athenians were being misled by all this false religion. Religious but ignorant of the true God. And in verse 17, far from rushing back to his hotel bedroom and burying his head in his hands and weeping, Paul went to the synagogue where the Jews were and to the marketplace where the Greeks were, the Gentiles and he began to argue his case for the gospel to any person who happened to be there.

[11 : 35] What a brave man he was. Don't you take your hat off to him for being so courageous. He had a passion for the truth about God. He couldn't bear to have all these theological lies being told to the Athenians day after day.

And these open air discussions that he engaged in led to him eventually having hands laid on his shoulder so they took hold of him and they marched him off to the Areopagus, the city fathers, to present his case which he does courteously and carefully.

So let me try and draw out some of the main points that he makes to these senior Athenians whose lives have been wedded to idolatrous religion. First, from verses 22 and 23, Paul makes the point that God is knowable and must be known.

God is knowable and must be known. As I said before, Paul is very courteous as we too always should be if we're talking to people who belong to other faiths.

But he's also very direct. He doesn't beat about the bush here. He goes straight to his main point by referring in verse 23 to this altar he's seen dedicated to the unknown God.

[12 : 47] Now just imagine for a moment the sculptor or the stonemason who made that altar and put that inscription on it. What did he mean when he inscribed that altar with the words to the unknown God?

We can't be certain but perhaps he meant Athens has hundreds of altars to known gods, gods who are named. Athene, Apollo, Zeus, Aphrodite, Hera, all the others.

And all these altars ought to be sufficient to please and to placate all the gods in Greece. But just in case there might be some other deity lurking out there that we didn't know about and have never named and have never honoured, let's hedge our bets by building him or her an altar lest he or she be displeased with us and perhaps should send our city a dose of cholera or something else terrible.

In other words a kind of religious insurance policy in case there's some other god out there that's honour him or her. Now Paul picks up this inscription and with gentle irony he turns it on its head and treats it as if it were a confession of ignorance, as if the maker of the altar was saying, who is God?

Is there a God? Can anything be known about the supernatural? Now those are very modern questions, aren't they? So what Paul says at the end of verse 23 is addressed not just to the ancient Athenians but also to our modern contemporaries.

[14 : 17] What you worship as unknown, says the apostle, this I proclaim to you, I make him known. Now that is breathtakingly bold for Paul to do it, but this is authentic Christianity.

To those who say that God is unknown known and unknowable, many of our contemporaries today, the Bible replies that God is both knowable and must be made known and acknowledged.

Many people today say that God is unknowable, but in saying that they are willfully disregarding the Bible, because the Bible itself is God's self-disclosure.

The Bible is God's self-portrait. It's a self-portrait in which he displays his features clearly and in considerable detail. Through the Bible's preachers and prophets and apostles, God is clearly laying out before us the distinctive features of his own person and of the plan of salvation.

So anybody who has a Bible or has access to a Bible and has an inquisitive heart has access to the knowledge of God. And Paul is saying to the world that God is knowable and because he is God, he must be known.

[15 : 34] Now secondly, from verse 24, God is the creator and cannot be domesticated. Look with me at verse 24.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. Now that verse is specifically angled at this Athenian phenomenon of filling the city with temples and shrines.

So when Paul sees all these beautiful buildings, each one dedicated to its own god or goddess, he realises that the Athenians have developed this idea that their gods and goddesses in some way live in their temples, as you and I live in our houses or our flats.

Now if you come to think that your deity somehow inhabits the shrine that you've built for him, you're bound to think that you've begun somehow to domesticate him, to contain him or tame him.

You're going to think of him rather as Aladdin thinks of the genie that he's able to rub out of the lamp. Somebody who comes up, stands before you and says, your wish is my command.

[16 : 43] In other words, your servant. The god becomes your servant, somebody that you can manipulate and exercise leverage over to get him to do the things that you want to have done as long as you go through the prescribed rituals and motions.

But Paul says here in verse 24 that the real god does not live in man-made temples. How could he? He is, says Paul, the creator of the world and the lord of heaven and earth.

You Athenians, he's saying, you have not begun to realise how great the true god is. He transcends everything. And you imagine that you can box him up in a little building made of bricks and mortar and stone.

So the apostle Paul is teaching the Athenians and us today that the true god is immeasurably great. Modern astronomy over the last few centuries has been teaching us something of the size of the universe.

And our minds boggle, don't they, at the statistics that we hear from the astronomers. Doesn't it take three years to go to Mars? Have you been there yet? No. Three years to get there and I think three years to come back.

[17 : 48] You'd be middle-aged, wouldn't you? Even if you started young. And apparently the universe contains, here's a number to conjure with, contains something like 11 trillion, trillion stars.

We can't begin to get our minds around figures like that, can we? So the god who made these unspeakably great tracts of reality, he's not one that we can domesticate or manipulate or somehow cause to live in a little building.

The only appropriate response we can make to a god like this is to bow down before his majesty, to worship him and to ask him to be gracious to us. He is the creator.

He cannot be domesticated. Then third, from verse 25, God is self-sufficient and doesn't need to be propped up.

Look at verse 25, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. Now again, this is angled at the Athenians because they rather liked the idea that if their god was hungry, they could satisfy his hunger by offering some sort of sacrificial animal.

[19 : 01] Here you are, my lord, prime steak and gravy today and you'll feel much better. You'll have onions tomorrow as well. Now Paul's point is to look at god that way is simply absurd.

It turns the truth on its head. The truth is not that we sustain the deity, but rather that the real god sustains us. In fact, he sustains everything. How demeaning and dishonouring, therefore, to think that in some way he depends upon us.

There's a wonderful little theological word which I'd like to introduce at this point, a word that some of you will know and others perhaps will not, but I find it a thrilling little word and I want to share my sense of excitement over it with you.

It's the six-letter word aseity, A-S-E-I-T-Y. It comes from two very small Latin words, A-A-S-E.

And a-se simply means of and from himself. So theologians will talk of the aseity of God to convey the idea that all that he is is self-originating and self-sustaining.

[20 : 07] He is of and from himself. He's the first cause. He's the prime mover. Nobody made him. He's the origin of everything. So how can it be thought that in some fashion he depends upon human beings, puny human beings, for his daily needs?

How ignorant of God, Paul is saying, to think that he depends upon men. So friends, take away that little word aseity and I hope it will be a blessing to you. Think about it perhaps as you drink your bedtime chocolate this evening.

You need Cadbury's and so do I. You need Tesco's. You need Sainsbury's. You need gas, oil and electricity. You need the National Health Service.

We need a lot of other things too to sustain us. God doesn't need anything. He is the God of aseity, self-sufficient. He does not need to be propped up.

Then fourth, from verses 26 to 28, God is the ruler of all mankind and his purpose is to cause men to seek him and indeed to find him.

[21 : 16] Now this is an interesting little section, verses 26 to 28, because for one thing, it addresses a very modern question about the origins of the human race. When I say modern, I mean a question that has been raised sharply, perhaps 150 years or so ago with Darwin and others and hotly debated ever since.

In verse 26, Paul says, from one man, by which he means Adam, from one man, God made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth.

So if we were to ask Paul, Paul, is it right to speak of the human race or is it better to speak of there being several separate races of humanity like the Caucasians and the Eskimos and the Negroes and so on?

Paul's reply is that there is only one race. From one man, God made every nation of men. That's what he's saying. So Paul is teaching that we have a common ancestor, the historical Adam, so therefore all nations, Africans, Germans, Chinese, everybody else, are descended from Adam.

Now, why does Paul introduce this particular thought at this point? You see, he's not giving us a lecture on anthropology here, is he? The purpose of this little section is the same as the purpose of his whole speech, namely to expose the Athenians' ignorance of God and to correct it.

[22 : 40] So what he's saying is, my dear Athenian friends, we are all in the same boat. I may be a Jew from Tarsus, you may be Gentiles from Greece, but don't let that fact bamboozle you into thinking that Judaism is okay for the Jews and the Greek gods and their shrines are okay for the Athenians.

No, there's only one God who made all of us from a single ancestor. And this one God, verse 26, has placed all the nations in their various habitats and he governs their histories.

Why? So that, verse 27, men of all nations should seek him and reach out for him and find him. So do you see how each section of this speech, in each section, Paul is courteously correcting the Athenians, showing them their ignorance of God and their profound misunderstanding of him and then showing them the truth about him.

So in verse 23, he exposes the error of thinking that God is unknowable. In verse 24, the error of thinking that God lives in temples.

In verse 25, the error in thinking that God needs help and sustenance from human beings. And then in verses 26 to 28, the error of thinking that God will deal with different nations or different ethnic groups in different ways.

[24 : 04] No, Paul is saying, God is the ruler of all mankind and his purpose is to cause all the nations to seek him and to find him. He deals with all peoples in the same manner.

There is only one gospel, only one savior for the whole of the human race. Now fifth, our natural ignorance of God, says Paul, is culpable not to be excused.

In verse 29, I think you'll see that Paul's speech changes gear. In verse 29 here, he suddenly sounds a new note. He says, we ought not to think.

Do you see that? There's suddenly a sense of moral imperative, a sense of right and wrong. We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone.

So he's saying it's morally wrong to misrepresent God by trying to make statues of him. And then look at verse 30. You'd perhaps expect Paul to contrast ignorance with knowledge, because ignorance and knowledge are normally opposites.

[25 : 14] So you'd expect Paul to say, God has been forbearing with this ignorance, but now wants to give you true knowledge. But that's not what he says. This ignorance, says Paul, is not to be replaced with knowledge first and foremost, but rather with repentance.

In other words, this ignorance of God is culpable. It is sinful. Now somebody might say, but can ignorance be blamed?

Can you blame somebody for not knowing something? But if you really don't know something, can you be held morally responsible? I think the answer must be that there may be some types of ignorance which are not blameworthy, but there are others that are.

Let me mention an example which many of us will identify with. You take your driving test. And when the driving test is all over, just think back to that day, friends, if you've done it, when the test is all over, you pull up at the side of the road and you look across at the examiner in hopeful anticipation.

And he says to you, Mr. Lobb, I'm sorry to say that you failed. So you say, why? Why is that? And he says, well, I'll give you the reasons. You were driving on the right-hand side of the road, not the left.

[26 : 31] You drove through the traffic lights when they were on red and you stopped when they were on green. You went round the roundabout anti-clockwise. You drove up a one-way street the wrong way. You knocked over three people on the zebra crossing, which is why there's a blue light flashing in your rear view mirror at the moment.

And you say to the examiner, but I didn't know about all these things. And he replies, well, you should have known. You should have known. Now, ignorance of God is that kind of ignorance.

We should have known because the data has always been available. Paul is saying in verse 30 that to plead ignorance is not enough.

What is needed is repentance. Let me read verse 30 again. These times or the times of ignorance, God overlooked in his grace and generosity and patience.

But now, since the coming of Christ, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. To repent of idolatry and every kind of false religion and everything that misrepresents God.

[27 : 37] Now, that is the command of apostolic Christianity. It's God's command to the world. It is still God's command to the world. God in his grace has overlooked these generations of ignorance.

But now, he commands all people everywhere to repent. Why? Just look at verse 31. Because the day of judgment is coming. That's why.

And that's what I want to talk about in a fortnight's time, the day of judgment. But let me just ask, have we repented? That's the command. It's the gracious summons of the Lord God made to us through his apostles and through Jesus himself.

Because when Jesus first came into Galilee, he said, the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news. The Christian life can only begin with repentance. It's not simply a question of grasping something with our minds intellectually.

We need morally to humble ourselves, to confess that we have been sinful men and women, and to come to him and to beg for his forgiveness. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together now.

[28 : 40] Lord God, our Father, you are the great God, the creator of the heavens and the earth.

And we acknowledge that you command our repentance because we have been and are sinful men and women. have mercy upon us and give us the grace and comfort and delight of receiving Christ as our saviour and submitting to him as our Lord.

And we pray that this grace and comfort of the gospel will fill our hearts and souls day by day. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.