

The God We Need Pt. 2

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[0 : 0 0] So, last week we began to look at the difference between the God that we think we want and the God we truly need. This week we're going to pick up where we left off, and we're focusing specifically on Acts chapter 17, verse 26 through 31.

If you remember, the Apostle Paul is in Athens, and Athens is a highly intellectual place. It's a highly pluralistic place. It's a place where the latest ideas and religious schools of thought and philosophies are debated.

And so, Paul has been invited into that conversation. He's been invited to share about his faith, about his God in the Areopagus, which is the center of religious and philosophical discourse.

And it's here that Paul makes a very audacious claim, audacious for any culture, every bit as audacious in this culture as it would have been in Athens.

He makes this claim. He says that God, and he's talking about his God, is the God of all people. So, he's saying that in the middle of a pluralistic society. He's saying his God is actually everybody's God.

[1 : 1 9] And then he goes on to say that there's a day in the future, that God has fixed a day when he will come to judge and to restore all that is broken in this world.

And then Paul goes one step further. He says, now is the time, therefore. Now everybody has an opportunity to repent and to come to this God and to be reconciled to him while there is time.

Now, again, this is audacious in any culture. And it raises, I think, one of the most common objections that you hear to the Christian faith. When people hear that Christians believe that their faith is for all people, one of the most common objections is for people to say, well, wait a second.

Religion is cultural, right? So much of it is determined by where you're born, by your family, by your upbringing. And so, because of that, people just tend to adopt the religion that they're born into.

Isn't that the way it works? So they would say, well, you're only a Christian because you were born into a Christian family. But they were to say that if, for instance, you have somebody who's born in Saudi Arabia or Burma, they would probably be Muslim or Hindu.

[2 : 4 1] And then the real objection is voiced like this. If religion is cultural and if we're simply born into a religion, then how dare you? How could you possibly say that your religion is the only religion, that Jesus is the only way to salvation?

And so, Paul's sermon here, the part that we're going to look at, actually begins to give us a way of answering that objection. Because what we see here is this, that the God we truly need, the God that we truly need, is the kind of God who is able to reach people and to save people regardless of their culture, regardless of their family, regardless of the nation, regardless of the religion that they're born into.

The God we need is not hindered by those things. And we're going to see four reasons in Paul's sermon why this is the case. So let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word together. Lord, we do ask that you would be with us, that as we open your Word, we would not do it alone, unaided, but rather we pray that your Holy Spirit would illuminate your Word, that it would cease to simply be ink and paper, that your Word would come alive.

It is a living Word. And that it would reveal to us the Word, Jesus Christ, Lord. He's the one we have come to see this morning. And we pray this in your Son's holy name.

Amen. So four reasons why God is not hindered by culture, language, religion in His desire to reach all people.

[4 : 13] Reason number one, God is the kind of God who is able to determine the boundaries of our lives. It says here in verse 26, 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.

So in other words, even though human beings have rebelled against God, even though they do all kinds of things that are destructive and harmful to themselves and to the world that God has made, even though all of that is true, God is still sovereign over all human affairs.

And so God is the one who determines when and where each of us will be born. God is the one who determines who our family will be. God is the one who determines our culture and our language.

And what this means for our question this morning is that all of that is not left up to chance. Right? Proverbs 16.33 says, the lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

So what may actually seem like a random dice roll to us is actually part of God's sovereign plan. And what this means is that God is not sitting there biting His nails when someone is born in the Amazon rainforest.

[5 : 34] He's not looking at that person and thinking, man, I really wish I could reach that person, but they live in the middle of nowhere. They're not near any major cities. They're not near any churches.

And so I guess there's no hope for that person. That's not how God responds because God is sovereign. So God is not limited by those factors. And so what we see is that God has a purpose in mind when He puts people where He puts them.

And this says that God determines when and where people will live, and then there's a purpose for that. God doesn't just sort of say, well, I think I want this person here, and that person looks good there.

There's a reason why God puts us in the context where He puts us, and it says that in verse 27. That they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him.

And this brings us to the second reason why God is the kind of God who's not hindered by all of these factors. The reason is this. God imbues us with an inconsolable longing.

[6 : 36] God imbues us with an inconsolable longing. The philosopher Charles Taylor writes about Western culture, and here's what he says. He says that we live our lives suspended between two poles.

A purely materialistic atheism on the one hand, where there are no God, no miracles, nothing like that. And then he says the other pole is this sort of deep inconsolable longing for the transcendent.

And he says that we live between these two forces, a materialism on the one hand, and then this kind of longing for the transcendent on the other. And so what this means is a couple of things.

It means, first of all, all believers, including me, all believers are haunted by doubt. Right? Doubt is just a part of belief.

Right? So if anyone tells you they're a religious person, they're a believer, and they say, oh, I've never felt doubt. I think that's simply not true. All believers are haunted by doubt. They're haunted by the possibility that there really is nothing out there.

[7 : 41] And that's because partly we live in a culture where belief is constantly undermined. It's constantly undermined. But on the other hand, we also live in a culture where unbelief is constantly undermined, where you have many atheists and agnostics who are also haunted, but they're haunted in the opposite way.

They're haunted by belief. They're haunted by the possibility that it might all actually be true. Thomas Nagel is an atheist philosopher, and he writes this.

He says, I want atheism to be true, and I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

So he's haunted by belief. His doubt is that it might actually be true. Georgi Kurtag is one of the most revered contemporary European composers there is.

And people often talk about the transcendent quality of his music. And in 2015, an interviewer actually asked Kurtag about his religious beliefs. And here's what he says.

[8 : 48] He says something pretty remarkable. He says, consciously, I'm certainly an atheist, but I do not say it aloud. Because if I look at Bach, I cannot be an atheist.

And then he goes on to say about Bach's music, he says, his music never stops praying. All right, so here's a man who doesn't believe in God, and yet he hears this music that makes it impossible for him to claim atheism.

He says he's praying. He's interacting. He's in relationship with a being. And though I don't want to believe in this being, I'm haunted by the possibility that there is such a being.

All right, so Bob Dylan, as one of our own poets once said, art can lead you to God. And then he goes on to say, I think that's the purpose of everything. And I would say, you know what?

On this point, Dylan is 100% correct. Right? This is what Scripture is telling us. The purpose of everything is to lead us to God. The purpose of everything is that we would feel our way toward God and find Him.

[9 : 51] Right? So when you listen to an exquisite piece of music, or when you read a really satisfying book, right, I've gotten to the point where I won't start a series, a series of fiction unless I know there's at least 10 books in the series, because I hate the feeling of being done with a series that I love.

But when you're reading a really satisfying book, when you take a beautiful hike like I did with my family this past Saturday, when you enjoy a celebratory meal with close friends and family that you really love, when you make love, all of these experiences can bring immense pleasure.

But always, and I want you to sort of think about these experiences in your own life. In my experience, always when we do these pleasurable things, there's this immense pleasure, but at the very center of these experiences, there's still an ache.

There's an ache. There's an emptiness. There's a kind of incompleteness just at the very center of the experience. And it's almost as though we almost attained, we almost attained some higher form of pleasure or beauty, but we just missed it.

Right? And the mistake I think that we often make as human beings is we think, well, I almost got there. If I just indulge a little more, if I just do this thing a little more, then I'll get there. But the opposite happens. What we find is, you know, we almost get there.

[11 : 17] We have this great experience, but it's not quite perfect. There's something kind of missing. And we say, well, maybe it just takes a little more. Maybe I just need to eat a little more. Right? And then the pleasure starts to go down.

And we realize that the more we indulge, the less pleasure we take in the indulgence. And so we have to ask, why the ache? Why even in the midst of the greatest pleasures of our lives, is there an ache as though we didn't quite make it?

And the reason, as C.S. Lewis would say, is that the thing we thought was in the book or the music or the poetry or the intimacy, that thing was never actually there.

Right? So Lewis says, the book or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust in them. It was not in them.

It only came through them. And what came through them was longing. And this particular longing can never really be satisfied.

[12 : 21] It can never really be satisfied by anything in this world. And here's what Lewis goes on to say. This longing is actually the scent of a flower we've not found, the echo of a tune we've not heard, news from a country we've never visited.

All right? So Paul's saying in verse 27 that every human being has this inconsolable longing because God put it there. He put it in you because God wants you to feel your way toward Him and find Him.

All right? So the reason that you feel thirst is because you were made to need water. The reason that you feel hunger is because you were made to need food. The reason that you feel loneliness is because you were made for relationships with other people.

And the reason that you feel an inconsolable longing is because you were made for God. And apart from Him, you will never, ever, ever find the answer to that ache.

And so people have a kind of innate God-given longing for God that God has placed in them. But then that begs the question, how then should we go about trying to find this God?

[13 : 27] And that brings us to the third reason why God is not hindered by culture, language, or religion in His desire to reach people, and that is that God is the kind of God who's able to surround us with His truth.

Paul goes on to say this about God in verse 28. He says, 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.

And as it points out here, Paul is actually quoting pagan, Stoic writers here. And this is, by the way, not the only time that Paul does this. This isn't a kind of glitch, right?

You see this in other places in Scripture, Titus 1, for example, or in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Paul is quoting the pagan writers in his teaching.

And this is hugely significant for us as Christians because it tells us something about the nature of God's truth, and that is that we can find glimmers of God's truth everywhere around us in the culture.

[14 : 25] So imagine panning for gold where you have to sort of sift out all the rocks and the silt and the gravel, and every so often you spot something shining amid the silt.

And the Bible says that God's truth is kind of like that, right? You could be in a culture that has never had any contact with the Christian truth. No missionaries have ever come there. There's never been the preaching of the gospel there.

They've never heard of these concepts. And yet, if you look in that culture, you can see glimmers of God's truth shining out from the common stone. And so the point of this is not to say that all truth can be found in all cultures.

It's, in fact, the opposite. What Paul's doing here is actually separating the bits of God's truth out from the common stone. He's quoting their authoritative sources in order to expose the inconsistencies in their thinking.

He's saying this is truth, but this needs to be separated out, right? So he's saying essentially, your own poets have said that we are God's offspring, right?

[15 : 36] And then he goes on to say, so how can you then believe that God is something that you can make out of stone or wood or metal? He's saying there's an inconsistency there.

You have a bit of the truth, but your thinking is inconsistent, right? So we might do the same thing in a number of ways these days. We might say, you know, it's interesting.

Scientists have determined that the universe, the entire universe, everything that exists, sprang into existence in the fraction of a second around 13.7 billion years ago.

It went from nothing to all of a sudden everything, flinging out from an infinitesimally small point, right? So scientists have determined this.

And so then we say, so how then can you reject even the possibility of a creator or a creation event? Wouldn't that make sense? Right? Or we might say, hey, you obviously care a lot about justice, and you care about justice for people everywhere, not just for yourself or your own family or your tribe, but you really care about justice everywhere in the world, and you've given your life to that.

[16 : 44] And you have a really strong sense of what that means, a strong sense of right and wrong. So how then can you go ahead and say that all morality is relative, that there is no objective standard of right and wrong for anyone?

So as Paul's doing, you might say, isn't there an inconsistency here? And what we're really doing when we do that is we're saying, you know, there's a glimmer of truth here. There's a glimmer of truth, and it's embedded in the culture.

It's embedded in the way you think. It just needs to be illuminated and separated out from the things that are inconsistent with it. And then you say, well, how can we tell the difference?

You know, I mean, who's to say that this is truth and not this over here? And who are you to say that you know what glimmers and we don't? And the answer is, well, you're right, and we actually need a standard against which to measure all truth claims, right?

And the answer is that there are glimmerings of God's truth in the culture, but they all point to the one who embodies God's truth in its fullness.

[17 : 50] And this really shows us the difference between the Christian faith and all other religions, right? Because all other religions were founded by a religious leader who said, I have discovered truth.

I have stumbled upon truth. I figured truth out. Truth has been revealed to me, and now I'm going to point you all to the truth, right? But there's only one religious founder who ever said, I am the truth, and that's Jesus Christ.

Truth in the flesh. And what he's saying there is that I'm the one, I'm the standard against whom all truth claims are measured, right?

And so, truth glimmering in the culture is known as truth to the extent to which it resonates with the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ, right?

He's the standard. So, you say, okay, well, if Jesus is the standard of truth, then how are people everywhere supposed to learn about Jesus? How are they supposed to come to know Jesus?

[18 : 54] And this brings us to the fourth and final point. Reason number four why God is uniquely able to reach people everywhere is because God is the kind of God who accomplishes salvation on our behalf.

Verse 30 says, the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. So, up to this point, this is saying that God has overlooked people who were ignorant of Him.

He's overlooked the fact that they were ignorant. And Paul says something similar earlier in Acts chapter 14, verse 16. He's preaching to the unbelievers at Lystra, and he says, in past generations, God allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.

In other words, God allowed them to remain ignorant of Him, right? He didn't intervene and bring judgment, nor did He intervene and immediately announce the gospel to everybody. He allowed things to progress as they were.

And then you ask, well, what's changed? You know, Paul's saying that used to be the way it was, but now something has changed. What's different? Well, the big event that changes everything is the fact that Jesus Christ has come into the world, and that He has come to give life by giving life, right?

[20 : 05] He's come to give His life to pay the price for human sin, and that He has risen from death as the rightful King of the world. And you say, well, what does this have to do with anything? And here's the point, right?

The real obstacle to belief is not ignorance. The real obstacle to belief is not simply that people just don't know what to believe. That's an issue that God can solve a hundred different ways.

The real obstacle to belief is sin. It's the fact that people do hear the truth, do know the truth, and they reject it anyway. Right?

And this is what Paul says in Romans chapter 1. He says, you know, the world is filled with evidence that points to God. But the reason that people reject Him is because of spiritual blindness.

It's because their hearts are dark and futile. Right? Their thinking never leads them to the truth of God. That would have been a major blow to the Athenians, by the way, for whom philosophy was a way of seeking truth.

[21 : 08] Paul would say, you're never going to get there on your own because sin makes it impossible. And so the good news of the gospel is not just that there's information, and if we say the formula, then we get saved.

The actual good news of the gospel is that Jesus has broken through. Jesus has dealt with sin so that He can begin to spiritually wake people up. He can eradicate blindness.

This is the reason Jesus goes around healing the blind. Not just because they're blind and He wants to alleviate suffering. That's part of it. But He's also giving us a metaphor of the reason that He came to begin with, which is to enable us to see the truth, to overcome that blindness.

So all other religions tell us what we have to do in order to be saved, the path we have to walk, the disciplines we have to adopt, the doctrines that we have to check off on the list.

Only Christianity is based on the good news of what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Right? The announcement that, you know, the bad news of the fact that there's no way you could ever measure up to God's standard for human life.

[22 : 14] And yet there's this announcement that goes out. Jesus lived that life for you. He lived the life that you should have lived. Right? He went on to die the death that you deserve to die.

And in this, He's done everything for us. And what's left to us is to accept this truth in faith. To simply receive it and respond with all of our lives to it.

All right, so this brings us back to our original question. If people are born into their religion, if they're born into their culture, if they're born into their family and their language, and many of those cultures and families and languages are not in places where Christianity is strongly represented, how can we then claim that Jesus is the only way?

And the answer is that God is not in any way hindered by culture or language or religion in His desire to reach people. Just to sort of draw together some of these points that we've made, He's the one who determines the boundaries of our lives.

He's the one who imbues us with an inconsolable longing because He wants us to find Him. Right? He's the one who's able to surround us with His truth like glimmers of gold.

[23 : 29] Right? He's the one who is able to accomplish salvation on our behalf. And you know, for those of us who are Christians who are listening to this, this gives us a very beautiful and nuanced view of evangelism that I think avoids two pitfalls that we can often fall into.

On the one hand, for those of us who grew up being told that it all depends on you. You know, some of you may have grown up in a household where it said, you know, there are all these lost people out there and it all hinges on you.

Right? So if you don't preach the gospel to that person or if you do it but you do it badly, you know, you screw it up, there's no hope for that person. And so you have these youth group kids kind of walking around with just deep terror and anxiety that this soul is dangling over the pit of hell.

And if they don't get this right, that person is lost. Right? So this would tell us, no, no, no, no. God is sovereign. Right?

God is not limited by our limitations. Which is profoundly good news if you're somebody like me. Somebody with a whole lot of limits. Right?

[24 : 40] But on the other hand, this does tell us that God gives us, not other people, us, the responsibility and the dignity of playing a central role in the redemption of His world.

I mean, we are the messengers of the gospel. As it is often said, the church is God's plan A for the world and there is no plan B. There's no one else out there. There's no one on deck. If we abdicate, right, the people whom God has called to be His messengers in the world, that's us.

Right? Every single Christian. And so this is the thing that we have to realize, and it is a deep responsibility. And we do it in the confidence and the hope of God's sovereignty, but nevertheless, we do it realizing that's the very reason that God has put His people on this earth.

As Paul says in Romans chapter 10, how then will they call on Him in whom they've not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. Let's pray.

[25 : 51] Lord, we thank You for Your Word and we thank You for Your truth. And we thank You that it doesn't depend on us. And Lord, I pray that this would be a hope that for those listening who don't know You, that You would open their eyes to see the truth around them, to recognize the object of that longing within them, that ache, and the reason it's there.

I pray that You would open their hearts to the truth of the gospel. And I pray that You would make it possible for them to hear that gospel through a friend or a family member or maybe through someone here in this church community, Lord.

And I pray that You would give them the courage to respond in faith, Lord. For those of us who are hearing this who are believers, Lord, I pray that this would not give us license to abdicate in our responsibility, but rather I pray that it would embolden us.

We recognize that we go in Your power, that when we proclaim the gospel, we're proclaiming it with a spiritual power. And I pray that knowing that, we would do it all the more, Lord, all the more for Your glory.

In Your Son's name, amen.