World Wide Witness: Mission In A Secular World

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Preacher: Jonny Grant

[0:00] Acts 17. Nick is going to come and read that for us. We did Acts 16 last week. We've jumped the visit to Thessalonica and we're going to jump to Athens. Partly because during the summer you remember we went through the book of Thessalonians, so we've kind of covered that a little bit. So, yeah, Nick is going to read for us now. You can just give the page numbers and the letters. Thanks.

So I'm reading from Acts chapter 17 and starting at verse 13 to the end of the chapter and that's on page 1113 in the Red Church Bible. Burgundy colour, I suppose. Thank you.
When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowd and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.
While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace, day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. This was because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we want to know more, to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.
Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown? I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from them. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.
[4:12] For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered and others said, we want to hear more on this subject. At that, Paul left the council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysus, a member of the Areopagus, and also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Thank you. Thanks very much, Nick.
Kirstie's just handing around some pens and sheets there if anybody would like to take notes. And again, if there's any questions that arise from this morning, please feel free to talk with me afterwards. Or at least you can raise them on our Wednesday evening studies where we follow up on the section. There's further questions about it and application and how it applies to us. So you can have a look at that. Or you can meet with us on Wednesday as we do that.

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Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for this book of Acts. Thank you for everything that is there for us to read and to learn. We pray that it would not just be history, just mere information, but that these words would be life-changing.
We pray that we would be life-changing. We pray that we will be different people from what we hear today, that your spirit would change us. And we pray for your help in this this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.
[7:09] well, I think you all have heard of Albert Einstein, responsible for E equals MC2 or MC squared, is it? See, when they introduce letters into maths, it gets a bit confusing.

but Albert Einstein was one of the greatest scientists, one of the most brilliant minds that the world has ever known. He's also famous for writing what has become known as the God Letter.
You might have seen it on some of the news channels. It went on sale this week on eBay and the bidding started at $3 million if you're interested in buying his letter.
Well, in the letter he wrote this. The word God is for me nothing more than an expression and product of human weaknesses.
The Bible, a collection of honourable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can for me change this.
[8:31] A great mind expressing his views on God. Now, I think that reflects the general mind of people living in Ireland today.

We've come of age, we've graduated from childish thinking. We've moved on from God. We've no reason for God. We've learned to live without God.
But that's actually nothing new. Because this was the culture that Paul found himself in when he went to Athens. Athens was the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire.
It was the place where all the big universities were. It was home to great philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It was the gathering place for the great minds and thinkers to hang out.
Verse 21. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.
[9:42] I think that has to be one of the best descriptions of university and college life, doesn't it? Spending their time doing nothing but drinking coffee and talking.

Spending their time doing nothing but thinking about the way, if you're in university, you can get me back afterwards. But for all of their thinking and for all of their talking, it seems that they just had no place for God.
They were living their life without any reference to God. He was simply pushed out of the box. so while Paul was in Athens waiting for his team to come there'd been persecution in Thessalonica so he had to leave there and go down to Athens and as he's waiting for his team to join him he begins to engage with these great thinkers to talk with them debate with them discuss with them and there's three things that we're going to look at this morning just to kind of keep it all together the first is this how we replace God the reason for God and our response to God so three things how we replace God the reason we need God and then our response to this God so first of all how we replace God look at verse 16 while Paul was waiting for them in Athens he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols literally everywhere you looked every corner that you turned there was an idol representing a certain God they had sex gods they had war gods they had money gods they had work gods they had every kind of God and with every God there was an idol and we're told there that Paul was greatly distressed it means he was he was really angry he was bubbling up inside he wasn't temper like he didn't go around smashing them but he was deeply upset inside himself that the people of this great city had replaced God with their own gods and isn't that exactly what we have in Ireland today we don't just remove God we replace him with something else or someone else there's a book it's a collection of essays called no gods but God and one of the authors
Richard keys he writes this and I think it just sums it up so clearly he says when we cease to worship God we do not worship nothing we worship anything we do not just eliminate God in other words we don't just push God out of out of the way we don't just close them outside the door he says we erect God's substitutes in his place and these God's substitutes are what we call idols and it seems the whole city had not only removed God but they had replaced God with something else we see this in verse 18 there were a group of epicurean and stoic philosophers who began to dispute with Paul now epicureans were people who believed that there were gods who kind of maybe started the world but they were kind of a way out there they were just remote and and took

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no interest in the world or interest in people's affairs a little bit like people today then there were the stoics they were people who believed that the world was controlled by the gods but they were impersonal and you couldn't relate to them and so they entered into this debate this discussion with Paul and some of them asked what is this babbler trying to say they thought Paul was a little bit uneducated what kind of degree does he have to be talking to us others remarked he seems to be advocating foreign gods he's got another one it's not just we've got a few here he's bringing another god along they said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection you see these great thinkers with these brilliant minds being able to grasp great big issues had not only removed Jesus Christ from their thinking but they had replaced Christ with a whole lot of ideologies we might call it intellectual idols it was simply their human attempt to try and explain life the world the universe without any kind of reference to God whatsoever somebody like Richard Dawkins or any of his atheist followers would fit into that category and I don't think that the people of our land today are any different and we're no different and you might say well Johnny I haven't got any idol if you go and look in my garden you might kind of find a little gnome or something like that but that's about it I don't have a carved or or sculpted image in my garden or in my house but we've all got idols again the author Richard Keyes he explains it like this he says an idol can be a physical object it could be your car it could be a property your home a person your spouse or one of your children it could be an activity sport or some other hobby it could be a role an institution it could be an institution it could be the church a hope an image an idea a pleasure or a hero anything can substitute for God now none of these things that I've mentioned are wrong but when they become more important to you than God then they become an idol because you're making it as important as God so instead of looking to God for meaning and purpose well we look to our own little idols the things that are important to us we look to things like friends and family hoping that in them they'll satisfy us
maybe if I could get a wife or a husband or a boyfriend or a girlfriend if I could have that then I'll be satisfied or maybe we work to we look to work and leisure and if I can get that degree if I can get that qualification if I can have that job if I can have that salary if I can have those things then my life will be fulfilled and it seems like we stuff our lives with idols with God's substitutes longing for peace longing for happiness longing for joy if only we could get that then I will be okay you see for all of our clever thinking and talking we've not just removed God we've just replaced God with something else or someone else but you know what when we replace God with with something else it's it's something counterfeit it's it's not the real thing it's always going to fail you it's never going to deliver what it promises you because it can't because it's not God it's a replacement it's instead of look at verse 22
[17:57] Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and he said men of Athens I see that in every way you are very religious now I'm sure some of these great philosophers and thinkers were a bit put out by that you wouldn't want to describe yourself as being religious religious is a dirty word nobody wants to be thought of religious nobody wants to be called a holy Joe anymore because we've moved on we've grown up we've we've moved away from childish thinking we've we've managed to live life without God we don't need him anymore but you know what we actually are all religious and the reason is is because we all worship something look at what Paul says in verse 23 he says for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship

I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God now what you worship is something unknown I'm going to proclaim to you now people might be moving on in their thinking in our land and people might stop worshipping God as we would say they might stop going to church they might read their Bible they might think the value of praying anymore they kind of have left all of that behind but actually people continue to be very religious they still worship other things to worship something simply means to give your life to something in the hope that our emptiness will be fulfilled and our longings will be satisfied we're all worshippers we are all religious people it's just we worship different things but being fulfilled and being satisfied these are only things that God can provide when we worship him so first of all Paul kind of sets out his stall and he shows us how we have all replaced God with something else or someone else and now he shows us the reason for God he shows us who God is and why we actually need God we can't afford to replace him three things first God is the creator of all life verse 24 the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands now to say that in a university setting to talk that way to your friends to say that God created the world whoa people just

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can't handle that anymore
God don't be so silly don't talk like that and they simply want to remove God out of the equation well let's go down that route for a minute let's remove God from the equation of how the world came to be and what are we left with?
I'll tell you what we're left with chance we're a random collection of atoms that came from nowhere and somehow all came together and then exploded into this life giving force all by itself and the end product which is all these multiple forms of life all over the place in all their wonderful design and everything else are just here but they're under nobody's control it all just happens it's all an accident it's all random that means you and I are all accidents we've come from nowhere and we're going nowhere but just open our eyes and our ears look at the delicate beauty that there is from the smallest flower to the intricate design and order of our huge universe and the galaxy it all points to a creator to somebody who's in control even scientists are beginning to step over and they're beginning to say yes there is an intelligent designer they mightn't say it's God but there is intelligent design and look what it says at the end of verse 24 and God does not live in temples built by hands God the creator can't be man managed or downsized so that we can put him into a little box or fit him into into some little cupboard and shut the door when we don't need him when it comes to thinking about how the world came to be let's shove God away to one side we can't do that he is our creator and he controls the world in which we live we can't remove God we need God otherwise life is just chance it's random it's an accident the second thing he says is that God is the centre of all life or we might say the source of all life verse 25 and he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else God is at the very centre he sustains and he maintains all of life he is the source of life and again if you're to talk to people they just can't handle that people don't like to think that somehow
[24:28] God is the giver of life and at the centre of life and they want to replace God and kind of move him out of the picture well again let's do that for a minute let's replace God and well who are we going to put instead into the centre well let's put ourselves into the centre and what do we get when we're at the centre of life we get disorder and chaos let me give an example the way the planets are set out the sun in our solar system is at the centre of our universe and the planets all the planets they all orbit the sun the sun is here and all the planets orbit the sun that's what gives us the seasons that's what keeps everything the way it is and keeps everything in order now let's just change that order around a little bit let's take the sun out and let's put the earth into the middle and let everything else revolve around well what would happen you don't have to be a scientist to know that everything would just fall apart well that's what happens when we put ourselves at the centre when we move the sun s-o-n out of the centre and put ourselves into the middle we get chaos and disorder but look at who this God is the end of verse 25 it says that he gives all people life and breath and everything else

God sustains us in every way not just physically but also morally God is at the centre of our life without him we do not exist and without him we descend into chaos and disorder we can't replace God we need God the third thing then verse 26 is that God is the purpose of all of life he gives us meaning verse 26 from one man this is Adam he made every nation of people that they should inhabit the whole earth and here for me something so exciting he determined the time set for them he determined when each person was going to be born and if that doesn't blow your minds away look at the rest of it and he determined the exact places where they should live when you were born and which nation you would be born into and which country you were going to live you see what happens when people remove God out of this they say no we don't want the God who kind of controls thing and God who determines my life and tells me what happened and what's going to happen let us be the master of our destiny let us be the ones who decide what happens well I'll tell you what happens when we do that emptiness remember what we said without God we've come from nowhere we're going nowhere and such a view just leaves all of life empty of purpose and meaning we've just arrived here and we're going nowhere but verse 26 he has determined the time set for us and the exact places where we should live that means our whole life has meaning and purpose that means our whole life is in control and that purpose look at verse 27
God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out and find him though he is not far from each one of us God has designed and ordered our life and our world in such a way that we would reach out to the God who gives us purpose verse 28 for in him we live and move and have our being we were made to be in relationship with this creator life giving God this is where we find

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our meaning and our purpose and the good news is at the end of verse 28 he's not far from each one of us he came in the person of his son Jesus Christ he's there you see we can't reject God we can't push him out of the equation we need
God we can't replace him because if we are to remove God if we are to replace him if we are to reject him then we lose everything verse 29 therefore since we are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by man's design and skill now isn't it absolutely crazy it's daft of us to think that our idols will give us what only God can give us it's ridiculous to think that we would look to something that we would set up as being God over and above our creator God we're living a lie if we think our God replacements are going to satisfy us and fill us the gods that we make they can't give us life they don't control life they will only destroy our life so Paul he sets out he says look we've all replaced
God with something else or someone else but let me show you now who God is the creator of life the centre of life the purpose of all life we can't do without him we need him so third what is our response to this God what are we to do well verse 30 in the past God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent repentance is not just saying sorry we can all say sorry and just carry on but it's much more than that repentance is also about replacement when you think repentance think replacement it means turning away from our idols and turning to the living Jesus something we do every day it's not just something we do just to become a [31:52] Christian we have to repent every day it means removing our God substitutes it means removing our idols the things that we trust the things that we build our lives on the things that we look to for meaning and purpose we turn away from them and we replace them with the living Jesus who alone can fill us and satisfy us we make him the centre of our lives and please note this is not an optional extra verse 30 see what it says he commands all people everywhere to repent it's a command it's not if you would like to an absolute and radical call to change our lives to reorientate our lives to make Jesus central that means that Jesus becomes more valuable to you than any relationship that you are in or could wish for it means that Jesus is more precious to you than any desire or any other dream that you might have rather than worship something else or someone else we are to worship the risen

Jesus Christ and the reason we are to repent look at verse 31 is because God promises to judge the world verse 31 for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed who's that man well he has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead it's Jesus Christ and this is not fantasy this is reality God has set a day just as the children's referendum is going to take place on Saturday the 11th of November 2012 the day has been set the referendum is going to happen so God has set a day in his diary and this is not just for a few people it's for everyone look at what it says verse 31
God will judge the world no race or religion will be excluded all people will face the judgment no one is going to be excused go back to the beginning of verse 30 it says in the past God overlooked such ignorance God in his mercy did not give us what we deserve but now that he's told us that his judgment is coming now that Jesus has risen from the dead now that he's given us proof there's no more excuses the world needs to repent you see removing God replacing God is not just a way of life it's not just another option that we can take it's an act of serious rebellion it is rejecting God's good and loving rule over our lives it's resisting his kind and generous care over our world and God looks down on him and he says I'm not going to allow you to remove me and to replace me forever I'm not going to allow the disorder and the chaos to continue I will not be treated as second best I will not be pushed out it's my world and you are my people and I will come and judge and so we all need to repent and replace our idols our God substitutes with the risen Jesus he is the only one who can fulfill our deepest longings he is the only one who can forgive us when we fail so he sets it out very clearly these are the gods that we replace we remove God out and we set up our own gods but look at who God is the creator of life the sustainer the giver of all life he gives us purpose we can't afford to leave him out and what's our response to this we need to repent to remove the things that we hold so dearly and put
Jesus the risen Jesus at the very centre of our lives well let's do that now in the quietness as we pray let's just make this a personal time of confession of repentance turning away from what we see is important and making Jesus the very centre of our lives let's just do that now in the quietness so there if you can say only to just do and like a better so to can and it so and it especially you and you and you a the every very day

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