

Acts 17 - Part 2

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Preacher: Rupert Evans

- [0 : 01] The reading today is Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34, which is on page 1116 of the Church Bibles. 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 had happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.
- And some said, what does this babbler 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 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.
- 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.
- [1 : 10] 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 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 towards 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. For 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.
- [2 : 41] 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 was Dionysus, the Areopagot, and a woman named Damaris and others with them.
- Well, hi again everyone. Philippa, thank you very much indeed. We've already prayed for God's help, so we won't pray again. But I think you'll find it helpful to have that Bible passage open. If you've closed your Bibles, can I encourage you to open them up again on page 1116, because we'll spend the next few minutes looking together at that passage that we read.

And in particular, at verses 22 to 31, which is going to be our focus, that speech of the Apostle Paul. Now does the Christian faith have anything to say to the enlightened 21st century world?

Does it have anything to say to people in sophisticated dullage? Can it bear scrutiny among those who are educated? Or is it simply to be consigned to a primitive era, or perhaps written off as a crutch for those who want to fall back on a comforting fairy tale that makes them feel better?

[3 : 55] Here at Grace Church, we're in the second of a two-week mini-series in Acts chapter 17. The book of Acts was written by Luke, a doctor, and is the sequel to his gospel.

And so far in the book, Luke has recorded the advance of the good news of the Christian message from its small, humble origins in Jerusalem into much of Turkey and Greece. But now, Paul has arrived in sophisticated Athens.

Athens, that great city of the ancient world. The Oxbridge of its day, or perhaps with Tim here, I should say the Durham of its day. In fact, if you look at verse 21 of our passage, the Athenians seem to have had an awful lot of time on their hands, so Durham students would have fitted in very well.

But Athens was a city famous both for its philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and for its religion. Perhaps like me, you remember learning the names of all the Greek gods and goddesses at school.

And it's into that context that the Apostle Paul speaks here in Acts 17. It's actually a remarkable incident. The most famous leader of the early Christian church takes on the most famous philosophy and religion of the ancient world.

[5 : 08] And one thing that struck me as I've been preparing this talk is the many parallels between first century Athens and our 21st century context. And so my aim, as we look together at the passage we read and this sermon Paul preaches, is that like some of those who first heard this sermon, we'll see this morning that the Christian faith is not only credible, but also critical in its importance for each one of us.

If you're not familiar with Acts, it tells the story of the unstoppable spread of the early Christian church in the years after Jesus' death and resurrection. And Luke records sermons like the one we're looking at today to help us grasp what the message was which caused such remarkable and improbable growth against all odds, even in sophisticated, educated Athens.

There's much we won't have time to cover here, but I want us simply to notice three surprises from Paul's sermon, which I think take us to the heart of his message. Here's the first surprise.

We can know God. We can know God. Many people like to sit on the fence when it comes to the question of God. The proportion of people who describe themselves as atheists remains a small minority, but many identify themselves as agnostic, thinking either that it's not possible to know if there's a God, or if there is, it's not possible to know what he's like.

Maybe some of us here can relate to that mindset. We don't rule out the idea that God exists, but we've never been properly introduced to him. So he remains something we're open to or vaguely believe in, but nothing more.

[6 : 46] And we're not even sure we can know anything more about him, or that he wants us to know much about him. Sure, maybe God set the world into motion, but his character and purposes are a mystery.

He's largely unknowable. And so we either resort to agnosticism, of not being sure whether he exists at all or what he's like, or to its first cousin, pluralism, which is the idea so common in the modern world that since no one religion can claim to know what God is like for certain, we should celebrate them all as equally legitimate expressions of faith.

And this idea of pluralism, of there being many gods or many ways to God, was prominent in ancient Athens. Have a look down with me at verse 22 of our passage.

Paul's been invited to the Areopagus, the speaker's corner of the Athenian debating circuit. And he begins his speech with these words. 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. The Athenians believed in God, or the gods, all right.

[8 : 01] In fact, everywhere Paul went, as he did his sightseeing tour of their city, he saw altars dedicated to different gods. But despite their extreme religious commitment, they still weren't certain they'd got it right when it came to God.

So just to make sure, they covered themselves by building an extra altar dedicated to the unknown God. That way they hoped to appease any God they might have missed. You see, despite this appearance of being religious, a deep agnosticism, a deep not-sure-ism existed in the hearts of these people.

And again, perhaps some of us can relate to that. Maybe we're very religious in one sense and come to church regularly. Or perhaps we're not religious at all, but might still tick the Christian box on the census.

And yet, deep down, we're not really sure about God. We've got this sneaking suspicion that we haven't fully got to grips with him yet. As with the Athenians, he's unknown to us.

Maybe we even fear he's unknowable. And therefore, what we need is for God to be revealed. And that's precisely what Paul does here and what the Bible wants to do for us today, to reveal God to us.

[9 : 23] Let's see how Paul continues halfway through verse 23. He goes on, near the end of that verse, What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul is claiming to reveal God to his listeners, removing their uncertainty. And by doing so, he therefore makes agnosticism unnecessary and pluralism untenable.

Before a baby like Clemmie is born, the parents have no idea what the baby will be like. Some parents choose not to find out the sex.

Will the baby be a boy or a girl? Will they be big or small? Have blue eyes or brown eyes? Be born with lots of hair or very little? Will they get lucky and have Sarah's looks? Or be permanently baby-faced like Tim?

We can speculate. We can guess. We might get some clues from a blurry scan, but we can't be sure before the baby is born. And at that point, agnosticism about the baby's appearance kind of makes sense.

[10 : 27] Be rather arrogant to claim to know for certain what the baby is like before it's born. But not once the baby is born. Then we know. Then agnosticism is kind of weird.

Because the guessing game is over. And when it comes to God, the guessing game can be over, Paul asserts. The Christian claim is that we can have certainty about God and what he's like.

Let's read on. End of verse 23. 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 the lost periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is not actually far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being. Do you see the real problem here? The Athenians were looking for God in the wrong place.

[11 : 37] Verse 24. They thought God could be found in temples or holy buildings. Or if you just read on to verse 29. They thought the divine being was like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

They totally misunderstood what God was like, reducing him to products of their own creation. In other words, these Athenians had too small a view of God.

And that brings us on to the second surprise I want us to notice from these verses. God is bigger than we think. God is bigger than we think. You see, the Athenians can be confined to churches or mosques or whatever it might be and then safely ignored the rest of the time.

And that wasn't the only thing the Athenians got wrong. Look on to verse 25. Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. If you think about it, it's absurd to think that the God who is Lord of heaven and earth needs our sacrifices or rituals or offerings to somehow keep up his self-esteem.

You see, these educated, sophisticated Greeks had actually got it the wrong way round. As Paul explains in verse 1, the building for God to live in, God made the whole world for us.

[12 : 55] That's why it doesn't matter very much whether Christians meet together in a beautiful church building or a primary school like this. Because while buildings may have their uses, they're not where God lives.

We can't reduce our worship of God just to what happens in a particular type of building. He made the whole world and is therefore worthy of our worship all the time, everywhere.

Perhaps slightly disturbingly, therefore, God is bigger than we think. Or verse 25 once more. Notice that rather than us needing to give God things, whether it's the animal sacrifices of the ancient world or the set prayers and processions of organized religion today, it's God who gives us things.

And not just some things, but everything. Do you see that in the verse? He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

We owe our entire lives to God, the God who made us, who generously gives us so much, and who therefore is worthy of far more than a few religious rituals in return.

[14 : 03] Religion, whether in the guise of ancient Greek paganism or the lifeless routine of much formal religion today, believes in a God who's rather small, who's only interested in what happens inside religious buildings.

But the true God, the unknown God who Paul makes known, is far greater than that. He made everything. If you go to St. Paul's Cathedral, named, of course, after the Apostle Paul, you'll find a plaque commemorating Sir Christopher Wren, its architect.

Unlike the countless other famous people built there, there's no great memorial to Christopher Wren to be found in the cathedral. Instead, the plaque has a simple inscription containing the Latin phrase, Si Monumentum Requiris Circumspicite, which means, if you seek a monument, look around you.

Christopher Wren didn't need a great monument when the whole building testifies to his brilliance. And in the same way, God doesn't need altars or rituals or temples when the whole world is his.

Si Monumentum Requiris Circumspicite, if we seek a monument to God's existence, we can look around us all the time and see the brilliance of his creation, whether found in the wonder of a newborn child like Clemmie or the vast diversity of the world displayed in the languages.

[15 : 27] Sarah speaks as a language teacher and the maps that Tim spends his time colouring in as a geography teacher. God is much bigger than we think.

And since all the world's his stage, we're to worship God all the time, not just in a building one day a week. But the trouble, of course, is that none of us worship God like that.

In fact, we prefer to worship other things. Have a look down with me at verse 29 once again, where we see what the Athenians worshipped instead. Verse 29, Paul tells them, Being their 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 Athenians worshipped idols made of metal or stone, gods conjured up by their own imagination. And if we're honest, we also so often, in effect, worship things that we make.

It may not be the unsophisticated metal images of Athenian idol worship, but we still slave away after gold or silver, the worship of money. And how many still worship stone in the form of the bricks and mortar of the ideal home they pursue, or the next home improvement they dream of?

[16 : 43] Well, perhaps it's not metal images we substitute for the true God, but mental images, like the Athenians conjuring up gods by our own imagination. We decide for ourselves what God is like and worship our vision of him.

That's why agnosticism is so convenient and pluralism so appealing, because they mean I can imagine God as I want him to be, or choose the God that most suits me, a God who almost invariably will make few demands of me and who approves of all my decisions and lifestyle choices.

And while it's a rather attractive view of God, Paul shows us it's too small of you also. The dress that Clemmie is wearing today at her baptism is one she'll grow out of.

Children grow up. But sometimes as parents, we can kind of wish our children didn't grow up, that they just stayed small and cute. And when it comes to God, we can be tempted to think of him as being small and comforting.

We can find him to suit our wishes like a parent trying to squeeze a young child into its sleep suit long after it's outgrown it. And we end up with a very small but very convenient God.

[17 : 56] And of course, if that was what God was like, it wouldn't matter very much if we rarely thought about him, if our Christianity amounted to little more than ticking a box on a census form. But Paul tells us that God is bigger than we think.

And yet the truly amazing thing that Paul tells us in this sermon is that this big God, this God who made the world and everything in it, this God who is Lord of heaven and earth, is nonetheless interested in you and me.

And that brings us on to our final surprise from this passage. God wants us to know him. God wants us to know him. You see, God didn't simply set the world into motion and then leave it to its own devices.

Look at verse 26. We're just going to flip back a few verses. Verse 26. We're told, And God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined the lost periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

Not only did God create the whole world, but he also made every nation of people and determines where and when people live. It's no coincidence you're here in church today, for example.

[19 : 04] There's a thought. And far from leaving us to our own devices, he continues to sustain us. Look on to verse 28. In God, we live and move and have our being.

God sustains us, giving us every breath we enjoy. And why does he do all this? Why does he give us life and determine the exact times and places people exist? Well, verse 27.

And here's the point. That they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. God wants us to know him.

You see, God's character and purposes are not an unfathomable mystery. He isn't unknowable or unknown. Have a look at the end of verse 27. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

He's not a distant God hiding from us like Tim and Sarah playing peekaboo with Clemmie. No, God wants us to know him. And we know this.

[20 : 05] And here is why, to return to our first surprise, we can know God. We know this because of Jesus Christ. God has revealed himself to us and made it possible for us to know him through his son, Jesus.

You see, so many of the debates about God and people's arguments about atheism and agnosticism revolve around creation and why the world is as it is. Is it here by blind chance or merely because of the Big Bang?

Or is it here because of some kind of intelligent designer? And while there may be a place for such discussions, and while Paul begins with the assertion of God as creator in verse 24, he ends his sermon talking not about philosophy, but about a person.

Let's pick up Paul's speech at verse 30. Paul speaks of a time of ignorance, a time when a certain amount of agnosticism about exactly what God was like was perhaps temporarily excusable, but not anymore, because verse 31, God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed.

And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. This is what Christianity is about. Jesus Christ, the man Paul is of course speaking of here.

[21 : 23] Paul goes into Athens and meets the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers back in verse 18. And what is it we discover he talks to them about in verse 19? Not the argument from design or philosophical theories.

But have a look, we're told he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And that's exactly what he does also at the Areopagus. You see, according to Paul, according to the Bible, God has now introduced himself to us.

In the person of Jesus, he's entered the stage in history so the guessing game can be over. He's no longer the unknown God. And Paul says that Jesus' resurrection, his rising from the dead in history after taking the punishment for our sin as he died, is proof that he really is God and therefore the one who will one day judge the whole world.

Now the idea of the resurrection of Jesus may sound improbable to some of us. And it did when Paul first spoke those words. In verse 32, we're told, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

But surely it's the case that the God who made the world and everything in it, in verse 24, and Jesus. And for Paul, the evidence for the resurrection was so strong that in verse 31, he's able to use the word assurance or as some translations put it, proof.

[22 : 47] Now Paul gets interrupted at this point and doesn't have time to expand on the proof. And I don't have time to do so in detail now. Though do please ask me about it afterwards if you want. I'd argue the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is compelling beyond reasonable doubt.

But I want instead to finish by focusing on what Paul does speak about here. Because what's at stake couldn't be more important. Let me read verse 31 again. Paul tells us that God 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. According to Paul, the resurrection proves that Jesus will one day judge the world.

Just as a pregnant mother knows that a day is coming when she will give birth but doesn't know exactly when. So even though we don't know the date, a day has been fixed when Jesus will judge.

And notice he'll do so in righteousness. There'll be no miscarriage of justice like that that Jesus suffered when he died in order to willingly take the punishment for sin in our place.

[23 : 55] No, Jesus' judgment will be wonderfully fair. And yet if you think about it, that's not very good news for us in a world where we so often live as if God isn't there.

Or make up our own gods to worship instead. Or domesticate God to be far smaller than he is. The fact Jesus will one day judge the world ought to, if I can say it, terrify us in a sense.

But in his kindness, just as parents who are expecting have time to be prepared and get ready for their new arrival, God gives us time, time before judgment day to get right with him so we need not face the judgment we deserve.

Let me read verse 30 once more. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. I don't know what you make of that slightly strange word, repent.

It appeared in the baptism wording, didn't it, when we asked the parents and godparents if they repent of their sins. And it's actually repentance which simply means turning away from sin and self-rule and trusting in Jesus as saviour.

[25 : 04] Not baptism, which makes someone a Christian. We're to repent by giving Jesus his proper place in our life as our good and wise king. And if we do that, if we heed the warning in time, we can be confident of being safe on the day when Jesus judges.

So three surprises from this sermon to the academic elite of the ancient world. We can know God, God is bigger than we think, and God wants us to know him.

He wants us to know him so much that he sent his son into the world to die on a cross for our sins and be raised to new life as the one who will one day judge the world fairly. That was the message Paul proclaimed in pluralistic, educated Athens.

And it's the same message which Christians hold out today. And the question is, how will each of us respond? I wonder if you noticed that there were three different reactions when Paul first preached his sermon.

Some sneered and mocked, as has always happened down the centuries, as the news of Jesus and the resurrection has been proclaimed. After all, it's not very convenient to have to come to terms with a God who's bigger than we think and so has a claim on our lives.

[26 : 18] Much easier just to bat it away. Others wonderfully believed. And some, verse 32 notice, said, we will hear you again about this.

They were intrigued. They knew how much was at stake and they wanted to find out more. And if that's you, please can I encourage you to investigate further. Maybe begin by reading Luke's Gospel, the first of Luke's two volumes, or perhaps ask a Christian friend to read the Bible with you to help you understand it.

Maybe look into the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Or please do come back to Grace Church again. We'd love to have you with us. Maybe come back for that guest service in a few weeks' time that was mentioned earlier where we'll be thinking about the question, is Jesus for real?

And all our sermons and talks can be found afterwards on the website if you'd like to listen to it if you don't live nearby. But for now, let me lead us in prayer.

As we close, let's pray. We thank you, our Heavenly Father, for this wonderful truth that we can know you and that you want us to know you.

[27 : 26] We thank you that in the person of Jesus, the guessing game is over because you have entered into the world in the person of your Son. And we thank you that Jesus came into the world first and foremost to die on a cross in order to save us, people who don't deserve to have a relationship with you.

We pray that you'd help each of us here to understand more of who Jesus is and therefore to know you, the one true God. Amen.