

The Search for God

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[0 : 00] Well, if you could keep your Bibles open to Acts chapter 17, that would be great. Well, I'm pretty sure that you have encountered situations in life where you had many questions but no definitive answers.

Perhaps dealing with a bureaucracy might make you feel like this. Centrelink, the Monash or Melbourne Uni administration or one of your university administrative bodies. NDIS or perhaps even the company you work for if it's a large corporate like a bank or Coles. You're always asking questions and then instead of getting the answer, you get more questions following instead.

And it's pretty frustrating, isn't it? Now, sometimes that's unavoidable because large organizations have a lot of processes and procedures and very complex. And there's lots going on. But nevertheless, when there's too many questions and no answers, it leads to frustration and confusion, doesn't it? Well, Paul arrives in Athens, as Enoch was saying today.

[1 : 08] And what he finds is a city with many citizens with many questions, but few with definitive answers. And as Enoch was saying last week, we saw Paul having to leave Berea due to opposition.

Now he's in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive and he observes a city in confusion and rather oddly, reveling in it as well.

So we read in verse 16, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Now, why might there be this many idols?

Well, perhaps some of them were hedging their bets, you know, not knowing which God was true. They decided to worship everyone just in case and yet giving allegiance to no one in particular.

Or it could be that these were competing idols. They were brought to the city by the many foreigners and they were all vying then to see which one was the most popular.

[2 : 13] You get the sense that some maybe were even enjoying the smorgasbord of gods on offer. A bit like going to Box Hill Central after this, perhaps.

Not today, you're staying for chicken and chips, but any other week. And being able to pick and choose which cuisine you're going to savor tonight. But for Paul, who knew the true and living God and his son, the Lord Jesus, this was a distressing sight.

Distressing on two counts, I think. Firstly, because the true God of heaven was being ignored. Creatures made by him, ignoring their own creator.

But second, as he looked out at the Athenians, he could see that they too were truly lost. Groping around in darkness, confused.

Now, Paul may not have intended to preach there, but, you know, probably just waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. But prompted by the idols, he couldn't help himself.

[3 : 21] And so he finds a synagogue, as he normally does, to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. Now, these knew of the one true God. And what they needed then was to hear that Jesus, the promised Messiah, had come.

But to reach those under the thrall of idols, Paul had to venture out into the marketplace. And here, Paul encountered the full range of beliefs.

Amongst them were two groups of philosophers in particular, the Stoics and the Epicureans. And so we read in verse 18, a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.

Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seemed to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Now, if you know a bit about these Greek philosophies, they have quite different perspectives on life, and which resulted in quite opposite lifestyles.

[4 : 31] So the Epicureans, they were into enjoying life. I imagine that many of you, if you lived at that time, would be an Epicurean. So there's a lifestyle magazine, which I've got a picture of, called Epicure.

Which takes its name from this philosophy. Life is all about, you know, not just cupcakes and things like that, but life is all about enjoying the luxury and the decadence of life.

Then there were the Stoics. They were more into the ascetic way of life. That is, they prized discipline and simplicity in order to live in harmony with the universe.

And so if you think about Buddhism and the Buddhist monks today, that's a bit like what they were striving for. So you can see, therefore, that these were very opposite responses to life, isn't it?

As they saw the plight of humanity before them, the human suffering, on the one hand, the Epicureans chose not to fight it. They say, look, let's eat and drink and be merry, because life's short.

[5 : 37] These problems are too hard, so let's just enjoy life. The Stoics, on the other hand, they retreated and withdrew into a monastic way of living, even though they were still among the people.

And if you look at, you know, the responses of people today to life's problems, you, I think, see very similar ways of approaching it, isn't it? So just take climate change, which is, you know, what the world sees as the issue of the day.

So we see a lot of people calling for a simpler lifestyle, don't they? You know, don't travel, don't fly, shop local, eat organic.

And yet, on the other hand, particularly after the pandemic, we've seen a real boom in air travel, isn't it? Qantas service notwithstanding, people are flying, and the airports are crowded.

And I think the best sort of microcosm of this sort of contradiction or sort of conflict is in the person of Elon Musk, actually. Because who is Elon? He's the founder of Tesla, right?

[6 : 46] The guy who single-handedly invented something that will tackle climate change with the EV. And yet, what does he spend billions of dollars of his profits on?

Space travel. The most environmentally unfriendly form of travel, don't you think? Two people to go up in space. How many, I don't know, how many CO₂, how many tons of CO₂ being burned with it? So, these two groups, then, who have been spending time arguing with each other, well, now they have someone else to gang up on. Paul. Now, neither side could agree with Paul, because he was preaching about Jesus, and more importantly, he was preaching about the resurrection from the dead.

And that was something that was not within their realm of understanding. I've never heard or seen it happen before. And so, they were intrigued and said, Look, Paul, come and tell us more.

Because the other thing that these people liked were that they were attracted to new ideas. And so, next slide. 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?

[7 : 58] You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean. Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time talking, doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

What a life. Wouldn't you have liked to live there, where you have to do nothing but talk about the latest ideas? Now, if you've ever been to Athens, I don't know how many of you have, you'll be able to see a little outcrop in the hill, which is what they think is the Areopagus.

And this is a view of it from the Acropolis. So, it's quite near the Acropolis. But in those days, it wasn't, you know, this is just sort of a ruin now. But in those days, they think that there was a sort of a meeting place there where important people would assemble.

So, if you look at the next slide, there's an idolized picture of what that might look like. It's a bit small, but the building right at the top, that's the Acropolis. But there's a little structure down at the bottom in the shade there, on the bottom left hand.

That's what they thought the Areopagus was and where people congregated. And so, this is where the philosophers took Paul because they wanted to hear his strange idea. But that actually gave Paul an opportunity, didn't it, to preach the gospel.

[9 : 16] Fantastic. And so, he does in verse 22. Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

For as I walked around and looked carefully at the objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, To an unknown God. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship.

And this is what I'm going to proclaim to you. Paul cleverly uses a point of connection with them.

He's seen this altar to an unknown God, and he declares to them, Look, your search is finally over. I've got your answer. You see, Paul realized that, despite the distressing worship of idols, that can actually be traced back to what is an admirable search for God.

The fact that this altar to an unknown God existed is a testimony of that. In fact, archaeologists have gone through the ruins around the empire, and they've actually found such altars, not just in Athens, but in other cities.

[10:22] Unfortunately, they haven't yet found the one that is in Athens. But as I said, it could be that the people are hedging their bets. So, they don't unwittingly offend a God they didn't yet know.

But for Paul, I think he took it to mean something else. He took it to mean that they were searching for God. You see, all the other idols that they've got, which they've sort of created, was unable to satisfy them.

They didn't think, Oh, this is the one. No. And so, without that assurance, they built this altar in a sort of a desire then, and hoping that they would find out about this unknown God.

And so, Paul taps into this longing, and he says, You're so desperate that you even worship what you don't know. And that is our human nature, isn't it? If you read that Old Testament reading that we had today in Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verse 11, it says that God has also set eternity in the hearts of humans, us.

Yet no one can feather what God has done from beginning to end. And all of us, if we are honest enough to admit it, have that same desire, don't we?

[11:38] Desire to have questions answered about our existence. Why are we here? Where did we come from? What are we doing, and where are we going? This search for meaning is ultimately a search for God.

But, as Ecclesiastes also says, this search is futile without God's own revelation. No one can fathom him from beginning to end, unless God reveals it to us.

It's impossible to discover him for ourselves, because he lies outside the material world. And so, Paul now invites the Athenians to consider his preaching.

They've searched without success so far, but finally, Paul says, their search is over. And so he says, verse 24, And if you have a look at your outline there, that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. And if you have a look at your outline there, I've divided Paul's revelation of God into two major categories.

[13:06] First, Paul invites them to meet the God of history and creation. As the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of the heaven and earth, it makes sense, doesn't it, that he cannot and should not be living in temples, nor should he be served by human hands.

And Paul is really critiquing the many idols in that city. He's saying, look, surely these can't be true gods, for they depend on you. You have to fashion them, you have to make them, and then you put food in front of them or whatever.

Instead, it should be the other way around, isn't it? If God created us, then he's the one who feeds us and gives us life. Now, incidentally, of the many gods in the ancient world, only the God of Israel makes any explicit prohibition for his people not to make any graven images of him.

That is, in the first commandment, he said, do not make idols or graven images that represent me. And that's true, isn't it?

Because as humans, our natural inclination is to live by sight, isn't it? That's why those of you who are grandparents, not many of you, but some of you, you love to hang photos of your grandchildren, right?

[14:24] And even parents do as well, even though they see them every day. Because these are visual reminders of people they love. We like to see, don't we? But not so for God and us.

For any such image that's made would misrepresent God, would actually demean him. And so I think that such is our human tendency, it's not conceivable for Israel to have come up with this prohibition of their own.

It had to come from God himself. And then, of course, we see that other faiths like Christianity and Islam then follow in the same vein. Well, not only is God the God of creation, he's also the God of history.

And again, Paul draws from the Old Testament here and proclaims there's only one human race. From one man, all the nations have come. We all share the same DNA. Paul wouldn't have used that language.

He doesn't know about DNA. But God also divided them into nations, he says. Now, of course, if you read Genesis, we know that that happened at the Tower of Babel.

[15 : 31] That was actually God's judgment on humanity. And yet, as the nations and languages arose and people were divided into their own territory, Paul says that this was also part of God's plan for history.

It meant that they eventually lost a knowledge of him. Therefore, again, confirming that without God's revelation, humans quickly degenerate into ignorance and darkness.

We cannot find God on our own. You've heard the saying that people say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. Well, in the case of God and us, we quickly lose a knowledge of him instead, isn't it? And yet, even though people, nations, lose a knowledge of him, our hearts still yearn, don't they? Eternity has been set in our hearts.

We still search for God. And so Paul continues in verse 27. God did this so that they would seek him, search for him, and perhaps reach out for him and find him, perhaps because they did not succeed, though he is not far from any of us.

[16 : 41] 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 human design or skill.

So yes, they reached out and they groped in darkness, even though they failed to find him. But this reaching out and this groping and trying to find God is really a desire for relationship, isn't it?

And this desire comes because God himself, who created us, he is also a God of relationship. For despite God's transcendence and power, God also desires to be in communion with us, his creation.

Now the words, he is not far from us, does not speak about physical proximity, but relational intimacy. So it's not to say, like for example, Eric is close to Allison, that they are physically proximate, but it means rather relational intimacy, which they also have, so they're not far from each other.

But what he's saying is that it's not about God being near us physically, but actually God desiring to be in relationship with us and able to be in relationship with us.

[18 : 04] For God is not just deeply involved in the events of global history from a macro level, but he's intimately involved and interested in the lives of individuals as well.

You and I, each of us, every breath we take, every meal we eat, the fact that you're going to get chicken and chips afterwards, the shelter we have over our heads, that is a result of God's care for us.

And that is a care that he gives to all humanity. For the Bible also says, he causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on all, isn't it? Not just Christians or those who believe in him.

And so, whether you know God or not, the amazing fact is that he's still there providing for you every breath that you take, every step in your life.

And Paul says, you Athenians, you actually know this because you have one of your own quotes saying that we are his offspring. The Greeks knew instinctively that they are created like God.

[19 : 13] They see themselves as God's offspring. And Paul is saying, look, if you just stop and think for a moment there, you realize just how inconsistent that is with all the idols you're worshipping.

Think about this, learned Athenians. Look at us humans. Look at our bodies and our minds. how complex and sophisticated we are. And yet, you've cast these gods as dumb objects to be your gods, these idols.

It doesn't make sense, is it? How can we be offsprings of gods that are dumb, made out of silver and gold? And so God isn't far away, meaning that he can be found here and now, Paul says. A relationship with him can be attained, not by you having to travel far or waiting long, but what is needed, Paul says, verse 30, is that you need to repent.

That is the thing that's stopping you from being in relationship with God. And so he says, in the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere, look how comprehensive that is, to repent.

[20 : 27] 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 everyone by raising him from the dead.

Now again, the phrase, overlooking such ignorance, I don't think Paul is suggesting that God excuses all sin. Rather, Paul means that in the past, if people failed to find the God of Israel in their searching, God was willing to overlook such ignorance because they needed God to reveal that to them.

But it didn't mean that if they sinned against their own moral codes, for example, by disobeying it, that God would overlook such ignorance. So that's what Romans chapter 2 says.

No, God would still judge them according to their own standards. But until Christ came, God couldn't fault them for not worshipping him through his son. Now, all this changed, of course, Paul says, when Christ's come.

And in fact, Paul says, the stakes are even higher because God has appointed Jesus to be the judge of the world. He's demonstrated that Jesus is the worthy judge by raising him from the dead.

[21 : 37] And that's why when we preach the gospel, we preach about Jesus and the resurrection, the person and his work. But here Paul says that Jesus did such an excellent work on the cross, dying on our behalf, that he earned the right to be the judge on God's behalf.

And so this repentance is firstly about turning away from the idols that they are worshipping and instead following and worshipping the one true God and his son, the Lord Jesus.

And that's why gospel proclamation is so urgent, isn't it? Because now that Jesus has come, every tribe and nation needs to hear about him in light of the coming judgment.

We all need to hear about him in light of the coming judgment. And everyone who has heard about Jesus will now have to give an account for how they respond to this.

When you hear the news, the good news about Jesus, what do you say? Do you reject him? Do you ignore him? Or do you believe in him?

[22 : 43] Now, of course, Paul doesn't here spell out explicitly that worshipping Jesus is also a belief and trust in him as our savior.

But that's implicit because we know to worship him is to acknowledge that he has died for our sins and he's able to save us from judgment. All of this occurs as you're turning away from whatever life you're leading, whichever gods and idols you're serving, and following Jesus exclusively.

But know this, that once you've heard about Jesus, you cannot unhear it. You cannot pretend you didn't hear it and ignore him. No, one day you'll be called to give an account for how you responded when you heard about Jesus.

Now, as in the previous weeks, we see in Athens the same variety of responses to the gospel as elsewhere, verse 32. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject.

At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

[23 : 57] And so again, as Luke says, those who are appointed to eternal life believed. But others sneered because the idea of a resurrection didn't quite fit with their worldview.

still others were undecided, sitting on the fence and wanting to hear more. But of those whom God saved, there were men and women. There were prominent members of society like Dionysus, and then perhaps others of a more humble status because they are unnamed in this verse.

Well, that's the ancient city of Athens for us, but I want to bring us back now to our own city of Melbourne. And I think if you look at Melbourne today, indeed any other city in the world, it's not too dissimilar to Athens, isn't it?

Aside from the fact that we also have a very large Greek population in Melbourne, that's not the similarity that I'm trying to draw. Our city is filled, isn't it, with people searching for God.

So yes, we have the Epicureans. You can find them in the restaurants at the moment or in the theatres. We have our Stoics who want us to reduce our carbon footprint and live an alternate lifestyle, maybe tree changes up in the hills or something.

[25 : 14] But we also have a lot of people that are not worshipping God and probably serving other idols as well. Many of these unseen to the naked eye.

Things that capture them and draw them to doing whatever they do for whatever purpose. Wealth, fame, money, whatever. And you know, we may be like poor, distressed by this and perhaps rightly

so but actually if you think about it there is actually a positive side to this, isn't it? Because all these signs that we're seeing and you know, if you just check the kind of books that people are reading in the self-help kind of section of the bookshops or the kind of podcast topics that come up and people are listening to, they all reflect a search for God, isn't it? For wanting to find meaning in life. And so the positive thing is that all these are signs, isn't it? That underneath a surface, underneath the surface of what is really supposedly a prosperous city like ours, we have many people searching for God. That's a positive thing, isn't it? They are longing to find God. And so what we need to do then is really to help uncover what's below that surface. Talk to them to the extent that they open up with real questions in their life to which we can then connect them with the good news of Jesus. [26 : 43] To help them get to that deep down yearning for God. Because all of us, we are all wired with eternity in our hearts, isn't it?

And friends, if you've come here today and you're still searching, then let me commend you for doing that. Because what you're doing, that search for God is very important. And we want to help you with it.

You know, so many times in life we can get distracted by the tyranny of the present. You know, we're so busy having to do this or that, get this done or that. But actually, no, we ought to take the time to stop, shouldn't we?

To find out about this truth. Because it's important. We're talking about eternity in our hearts. But more important than that, this search for God is also important because a day is coming, isn't it? When we will all have to stand before the judge and give an account for what we've done. And this judge, Paul says, is the one whom God has raised from the dead. His name is Jesus.

[27 : 46] Jesus is both God's appointed Savior and Judge. Lord and Savior and Judge. And the key question for each of us is when we face Him that day, will we be facing Him first and foremost as our Savior and Lord or will we be facing Him as a judge?

What we decide today, how we respond today, will determine that answer, isn't it? When we've heard about the good news of Jesus, how will we respond?

Well, many of you have already done that, but we need to keep repenting, turning, and following Jesus. First, so that we can have this wonderful relationship with a God that is not far away from us, but also, ultimately, so that when we stand before the Lord Jesus, we will be welcomed in His arms, He as our Savior and Lord, rather than be coming to Him in fear and dread because He is going to be our judge.

Let's pray. Father, thank You that You have not left us alone so that we are unable to know You, but that You have revealed Yourself to us by Your Son, Jesus.

Thank You that He has come to save us and that through faith and repentance we can have eternal life in Him. Father, give us the courage, give us the opportunity to help others to find Him as well and to find Him before He comes to be our judge.

[29 : 23] We pray and ask this in His name.