

Solving the Religious Maze

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[0 : 00] Several years ago on one of my birthdays, my eldest daughter Leanne, who has a propensity for sending me comedy cards for my birthday, telling you something about the way we function as a family, she sent me a card that had a picture of a businessman and an Eastern guru in conversation.

The businessman was sitting there cross-legged with his briefcase, and there was the guru sitting there in his long white robes and with all the wisdom pouring out of him. And the businessman is asking the question, what is the meaning of life?

And the guru replies, sorry, I can't tell you the computers are down. Now friends, that's the world we live in, where East is now connecting with the West.

We're in a globalised world where the modern technology of the Western societies has now invaded the Eastern world. But on the other hand, we in the Western world have been consuming Eastern spirituality.

It's evident all around us, body, mind and spirit seminars. Where you can be exposed to all sorts of flavours of Eastern faith. Many of you may find that when you have spare time or when you're off work sick or home from school or uni or whatever it might be, that you might watch that television show which is so popular and famous among so many people called Oprah Winfrey.

[1 : 19] I'm sure nothing better to do with your time if you were home, you'd watch it. But not that I'd expect you actually to really watch it, but if you had and if you did, you would actually discover that Oprah is a person who's very interested in spirituality.

And it's a reflection of something of our Western society. The sorts of views and ideas that are put forward on that show. And somebody did some research. And these are some of the things they discovered by watching the show and how wide ranging with the spirituality and religious values that are being pushed on this television show.

One point that's made is that secular people remain spiritually hungry. They want a practical spirituality. Brenda Salter comments, people today are really looking for a message of salvation that literally has the power to change their lives.

People yearn for a hopeful spirituality. They want something that's hopeful and encouraging in a world that's filled with so much disappointment. Many people dabble in a variety of belief systems.

Oprah actually says though that one of the biggest mistakes that humans make is to believe there's only one way. We heard someone else talk about that this morning. Only one way, but they like to go other ways.

[2 : 38] She actually goes on to say, actually there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God. This smorgasbord of religions and ideas that make up Oprah's belief system do suggest that maybe she herself has not found what she's looking for.

And one can imagine someone landing in Melbourne, maybe from an isolated village somewhere in Ireland where they had little exposure to globalisation and to a modern western city like our own.

And finding themselves extraordinarily confused about the religious marketplace in our city. For if you drive around our city you'll see mosques. You'll see Hindu temples and Sikh temples and Buddhist temples.

You'll see Christianity in its varied forms. It must be very confusing for some of them to see orthodox type churches and their style of how they gather and worship.

They will go past some buildings that are more traditional, maybe like Holy Trinity. They will also go past large factories that have now got big signs up advertising Christian services.

[3 : 48] And of course as they travel around on a weekend they will also see religious fervour of a great intensity. If they went past the MCG, that mecca of AFL, where there's great religious fervour and excitement.

People wear their religious garb coming and going from these amphitheatres of spirituality that is known in Melbourne as AFL. The amazing reality is when you look at our city it is not dissimilar to the circumstances that Paul found himself in in the first century in Athens.

For there he arrived and saw idols and gods everywhere. Look again at sentence 22 that's on the pink sheet at the beginning of the second paragraph. Paul stood up in this meeting of the Areopagus, a sort of religious watchdog society.

Anyone who started coming and speaking about a new faith, they would be, as it were, reviewed by this sort of watchdog society to see whether this was a faith they ought to embrace.

And Paul starts off, Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, To an unknown God.

[5 : 04] Here is a group that's so religious that they cover their bases. They're so open to faith that if a new God was to turn up they'd be ready for him.

Because they would say, Well, sorry we didn't have a sort of an eye, an image for you, but we did have a pedestal to the unknown God. And they'd better quickly fashion a pedestal and put the new God on.

But I suggest the nature of Athenian faith would mean that in a short while there'd still be another pedestal to the unknown God. So you've got to have insurance policy in case you haven't covered your bases.

In that sort of world view. Well, Paul's going to address that culture and our culture's not dissimilar. Paul's going to address that culture and our culture and our culture and our culture and our culture and our culture.

it. First of all then, what has God done? Well God is great and he is the creator of all things. And this is the unknown God that Paul is about to explain to them. What you worship as something unknown he says I am going to proclaim to you. They have an unknown he believes he's got the God. He'll solve their religious maze for them. He'll solve the confusion. He'll clarify the issues. And so he begins and his description you'll discover in the end dismisses all the others. Notice sentence 24 he begins by saying 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 human hands. God is declared here to have proprietors rights over everything there is. Everything you might touch. Everything you might smell. Whatever you might see. Whatever you might hear. Everything there is he has made. What we experience in the universe. From the vastness of our sun to the minute details of a baby's hand or the intimate invisible details of your DNA that can only be seen through very clever microscopes.

[7 : 28] Everything finds its genesis. Its source. Its beginning in the Lord God. God is the creator owner. But this God who has made everything there is is not remote. He is not disinterested and disengaged with his world. He didn't create it and go on holidays or long service leave. He has continued to be involved, guiding and looking after it. He sustains the world and he supervises not only the creation but nations and your life and my life. He is intimately engaged and interested in us. Notice sentences 25 and 26. He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Because he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of man that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determines the time set for them and the exact places where they live. This last image is an incredible picture. Extraordinary.

You and I are used to the idea that local councils and government can establish parking areas wherever they like. And they can put up signs and charge you. And you have to park in the lines and you can park here for a certain amount of time, pay a certain amount of dollars and you are allowed to do that. Well what Paul is saying here, what the Word of God is telling us about the character of the Creator, what he is telling us about himself is that he does that with nations. He sets the boundaries of their times and their seasons. It is no surprise to God when the USSR collapsed and when their nations were divided up. It will be no surprise when Israel and Palestine finally sort things out and their boundaries are finally set up and everyone has their bit of land that they want. It will be no surprise where that is worked out to God. He is the one who establishes nations. He is the one that pulls them down.

But he also does that with your life and my life. But that is not how we like things to be. We don't like having to, as it were, acknowledge there is a God who has that much interest in our life and who has that much control ultimately over our life. We are the sort of people that like to be the captain of our souls and the masters of our fate. There is a very interesting quote that I have from Nijella Lawson's husband. You might remember Nijella Bites, which is those ladies who are into cooking might remember Nijella. She, her husband sadly died of cancer. Before he died he wrote this to her, How proud I am of you and what you have become. The great thing about us is that we made us who we are.

Now there is the cry. That is the cry of every human heart, our natural human heart. We make ourselves. I have fashioned my own life. How wonderful it is to hear Jung's story this morning, Hong's story this morning, about how he recognised in his life that his life was made by God. And he bowed to that, as did I as a young teenager.

[10 : 47] We want to be self-determining. It is us that have tended to disengage from God and show disinterest. Or at least make God on our own terms.

But here are the facts of the situation. Listen to them again from sentence 25. He himself gives all people life and breath and everything else.

And in sentence 28 a similar theme is struck. For in him we live and move and have our being.

Several years ago when I was working in New South Wales in ministry, a friend of mine who attended the church that I was working as an associate minister in, was riding his push bike home from work. He wasn't allowed to drive because he was a severe epileptic.

He had an epileptic turn on the bike and crashed into a wrought iron fence and ended up in hospital on a life support system. Over three or four days I would go into the hospital and sit by his bedside for an hour or so and pray for him and read the scriptures to him.

[11 : 56] Although he was unconscious and the life support system kept breathing air and putting air into his lungs. From time to time the nurses would come and turn the machine off just for a little while to see if his own body could start to take over breathing for him.

Sadly he was unable to do so and he ultimately died which was very sad but he was a Christian which was at least hopeful for him, confidence about his future.

That life support system that kept Paul alive is what the Bible is saying God does for us. He is the world's life support system.

And if he ceased to bother, if God disengaged from the world, if he became disinterested and pulled back from it, it isn't simply that you and I would stop breathing and fall in our seats forward.

It is that we would cease to be. We would cease to exist. This is God in which you live and move and have your very being.

[13 : 04] He has ownership rights over your life and my life. We are the wonderful, purposeful creation of an awesome, all-powerful God who cannot be contained by the limits or within the limits of even all the accumulated intelligences of time.

But if God is so vast, the question arises, is he knowable? How can infinite beings know such an infinitely large and massive God? Well here is the wonder of the nature of God and just how engaged with the world he has been.

Notice sentence 27. God did all of this creating, all of this sustaining, so that human beings would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

That is telling us God created us for relationship, for engagement. This vast God wants you and I to be in relationship with himself. So God is awesome.

We have pondered something of his greatness. This is what God does. He makes the world. He creates it. He reveals himself within it and he relates.

[14 : 22] Interesting thing about so far what we have learnt from this text, that even people who are Muslims and Jews as well as Christians would largely agree on these things.

But there is more information to come where we will part company with some of these other faiths. Now we need to look at what we have done. What have we done with what God has done?

What have we done with what God has revealed about himself? Well this is where the theme of mazes comes up. Mazes, they are great things aren't they? Like the mazes that says help Peter Costello find his Prime Minister's hat.

He might yet have a long time to wait, who knows. Or the mazes that says help the Victorian AFL get a winning team for a change instead of it being out of state.

Well the nature of mazes are that if you start in the wrong place you end up in the wrong place don't you? If you don't start at the right spot then you will never get the right path.

[15 : 23] Just as our friend discovered Scrubs. The dog never found the right way until he started the right way he followed the signs. And this is where human beings have made their biggest and fatal flaw in relating to the great vast creator God.

It's the point at which we begin our journey. And you find it in sentence 29. We should not think that the divine being is like gold, silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill.

The word for design there can also be translated imagination. That's where designs come from isn't it? Our imagination. That is what he's saying here. We move out from human design. That's where we start.

We imagine what God might be like. We start with ourselves instead of with God. Now in our society, in Western culture anyway, we personally don't make usually idols.

We know some faiths that now exist in Australia have idols. But most of us don't make images and idols. But we do make and fashion mental pictures of God, do we not? Images of our liking so we then have to live with the comprehensive claims of reality.

[16 : 43] The great and awesome God who is close makes us uncomfortable so we fashion a God that's more manageable. Indeed that's one of the mental images people might have. A God who is manageable. A God who knows his place.

Or the God of Star Wars. This divine force. This sort of divine energy that we somehow or other have a little bit of in us and one day we'll be reconnected with it all. Or the God who is understanding and loving and tolerant.

These are some of the mental images of God we make. Let's unpack them a bit more. Maybe it's the grandfather God which is the last one I've spoken of. I don't know what happened to my dad. He's now no longer with us.

He died a few years ago. But when my dad became a grandfather he wasn't the same person he was when I was his son. He would buy chocolate and coke and give it to my children just before we picked them up.

It's evil isn't it really? But that's what he does. I mean because he's a generous grandfather God now. He wants his grandkids to like him. So you know you do the things and stuff. And my kids got away with murder with my dad.

[17 : 52] Stuff I would never have got away with. And someone's want a God like that. A God that's all loving and all kind. You can do what you like with your life. And in the end he'll just embrace you anyway.

And give you everything your heart desires. And that's the sort of language we hear people talk about. Someone who's completely lived their life irrespective of God. And at their funeral everyone says how wonderful a person they are.

And God will certainly have embraced them into his loving arms. And yet they've ignored God to the very point of their dying breath. And some people have the sort of photocopy repairman God.

See when do you call the photocopy repairman? Well when the photocopy is down. And you imagine what it's like if the photocopy came to Holy Trinity because the machine was broken. And this person, they're here pretty often.

So they get to know the businesses they come to because they break regularly. And they come and they watch how the church operates. And they see how Paul relates to his staff and Rod and the other people around here.

[18 : 50] And they see how the congregation gets on. Because they're here and they see what the secretary does. And can you imagine how breathtakingly helpful Paul would feel if after one of his visits he knocked on Paul's door and said, Look, by the way, I've been coming here often and I'd just like to explain to you.

You want to know how to do church better? Let me just show you. I mean I've been watching you guys. You haven't got a clue. Let me show you how to do it properly. And Paul would welcome that surely. You get a lot.

Why wouldn't he do it? Because that's not his job. He's come to fix the repair. The photocopier. My friends, but who of us has not done that with God? When we've got a crisis we call out for God to come and help us out.

But when we've got the crisis over we're back into the cupboard. Don't ask God to come and talk about other areas of my life that I might not like to deal with. You see we do fashion a God after our own likeness.

And we can't make God we want him to be. God is who he is. Yet we persist in blindly imagining him as we desire. Now you're going to think I'm really stupid now. But who's ever done this?

[19 : 57] You see your great football team. Mine's the Swans. And they lose an AFL game by one point. It was like a semi-final or something. And you taped it.

And you replay the video tape. And this time you hope they'll win. Yeah, you've done it haven't you? You're just as stupid as me. Or you watch the Titanic and you hope this time Leonardo will come back out of the water.

And they'll be able to get married and all end happily. But it doesn't happen. You see you've got to live with the real world not the one you want to dream of. And that's what God is telling you today.

And telling me. He comes to you and says please believe in me for who I am. Not for who you imagine me to be. Because that will not work.

Because I am who I am. And I am who I am. And I am who I am. Well we've seen God as the powerful and all creating and compassionate Father. But if we can either meet him now as a creator God.

[20 : 58] Or we can continue to be blind and foolish. And then we'll meet him as the just judge. The one who will come and assess our lives. This is something we should not put off.

So we come to the third thing that I need to talk about. What Jesus will do. And at this point what I am saying we are part serious company.

With both what Jews believe and what Muslims believe. Indeed all other faiths believe. You see we may not have found God. But he has appointed a day when he will find us.

The finishing day of history has been set. Our God is coming. He is the approaching God. But don't wait for the last judgement. It takes place every day. 95% of the people who will die today won't have expected to.

And you and I have reminders all over our city. And all over our country's roads. That life is temporary. And at any moment it can end. Those little white crosses on telegraph poles.

[22 : 01] And on front yard fences. And pasted on trees along the sides of roads. Are a reminder to us that at any moment one's life can be snuffed out. We need to prepare to meet our God.

And how do we do that? Look at sentence 30. In the past God overlooked such ignorance. But now, now he commands. This is not a pleasant request.

This is a command of the Creator. All knowing, all powerful God. He commands all people everywhere to repent. Now there is a technical word, repent.

To repent is to give up our wrong ideas about God. It's to put away our idols, our mental imaginations about who God is and what he's like. It's stopping being self-rule.

Stop saying I'm a self-made person and realise my life is owned and it's a precious gift from a created God. It's to change the way I think about life.

[23 : 02] When you come to a dead end in a maze puzzle, you turn around and start again. Because you know that's a dead end road. Unfortunately it took scrubs four times to get it right. How many times will it take you?

I never get maze puzzles wrong. Never have, never will. You see I'm no fool. I start in the middle.

You start with what has been revealed. If scrubs had done that he wouldn't have made any mistakes. There was a revelation. It was there. Go this way. And he would have got to the shop and got his bone and got all that stuff early.

My friends stop going the wrong way. Stop imagining God for who you want him to be and believe in him as he is. He has shown himself in creation. And he has shown himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

We, you and I need to admit, we've lived on a stolen throne. Our being comes from him, not from ourselves. And to surrender our throne may be difficult.

[24 : 06] But the consequences of failing to do so are incredibly terrifying. For you see, sentence 31. He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice.

Or the word can be translated righteousness by the man he has appointed. There's a wonderful story of a young boy who turned up at a multiple choice mathematics exam and sat right down the back.

And when the exam commenced, the teacher noticed this boy was tossing a coin up and down. She went over to him and said, what are you doing? He said, I'm doing the exam. Up goes the coin. Tick a box.

Teacher shrugged her shoulders and thought, well, there you go. At the end of the exam, when pens was supposed to be down and students were just waiting to have the papers collected, she noticed he was still tossing the coin. She said, excuse me, son.

The exam's over. She said, it's okay, miss. I'm just checking my answers. The next day, the student was walking through the school. He put his head into the math staff room and saw the teacher tossing a coin.

[25 : 07] He said, oh, what are you doing, miss? He said, I'm marking your paper. Now that's a joke.

But if God were to judge you and I by the toss of a coin, 50-50 chance. But my friends, that's not what he's going to do.

He's going to assess your life and my life on the basis of God's justice, his righteousness, his rightness.

And if your life and my life was assessed by that, we know we're in trouble. How many of us, if we had a stack of videos down the back that had a videotape of 24 hours of your life, just 24 hours, no more, no less.

24 hours. Every thought, every word, every deed, 24 hours. And we started flashing it up one at a time on the screen. How many minutes would go by before you'd want to shrink under the table?

[26 : 13] See, you and I know that we are guilty. We don't want judgement by righteousness. We want it to be forgiving.

We want it to be gentle. We want it to be furry on the edges. Because we know in our life there's so much toxic waste, so much compromise, so much stuff that's not right.

But God will judge us according to righteousness, according to his standards, not our own. And that means you and I are in serious trouble.

It's like the AFL when they play those video replays and the guy's got to see himself punching out somebody. Every time he sees it, it's guilty, guilty, guilty.

And God's seen everything you've done in your life, not just 24 hours. So repent. It is the great Creator's command.

[27 : 14] The prospect is fearful but the preparations can be made. And you know what? Comfort can be found. We can turn to God for the great news is this, that the one who judges is the one who died and rose again for us.

It is Jesus Christ. Notice in sentence 18 that what Paul had been teaching in Athens was Jesus and the resurrection. They thought they were two new gods.

But he was speaking about Jesus. His name means the one who saves from sin. The one who would die and the one who would rise to life. The resurrected person. And this is the one who will come back to judge us.

And God's justice was burned out at the cross. Like in the movie Deep Impact, the spacecraft Messiah sacrifices itself to destroy an asteroid that would have destroyed the world.

And God sends his son, this great Creator God, sent a rescuer. And he died on a cross. And they're substituted for us. He died in our place so that our world and our lives might not be destroyed.

[28 : 22] And you may be sitting there saying, how do I know this is so? Well this preacher is a witness. He has seen Jesus risen. And he is preaching that this one who comes back is the one who can save us and rescue us from the judgment that is coming.

And the whole of Christian faith is based on this truth, this reality. So will you prepare? I am constantly staggered how human beings prepare for all sorts of things.

But for what's really important. Because we'll prepare for things when there's accountability. And there's accountability with God. It's this time of year when students are finishing off at university and heading back to their farms.

Those who are country students. We have a lot live at Ridley College. And I once heard the story of a young man who is first year at university. First semester. And found it really exciting coming from the bush.

And did all his exams. But hadn't done much study. First semester had been filled with fun, frivolity, lots of friends, new friends. And so when he turned up to look at the exam results posted before he headed home, he noticed there was a fail, a fail, a fail, a fail.

[29 : 36] And he thought, I'm in deep trouble. My dad's forked out a fortune and I'm going home having failed all four subjects. So he figured he needed to prepare the way. So he penned a telegram to his mum. Dear mum, failed everything.

Prepare dad. The next day before he got on the train to head home, a telegram came for him. Dear son, dad prepared.

Prepare yourself. Yeah, it's funny. It's funny and it's a joke. But my friends, it won't be funny when you stand before the living God and you haven't prepared for it.

It will not be funny. It will be an absolute tragedy. And not one person in this room this morning on that day will be able to say you didn't have the opportunity to prepare.

Because today you can prepare. Because God comes and his telegram in this text, this is the telegram he sent to us in this passage. I know your hearts.

[30 : 47] I know where you stand. I know where you are out of relationship with me. I know the false images of me you have in your hearts and minds. Turn.

Prepare. Before the judge comes. My son. Can I urge you to check in with God before checking out for good.

And you can do it by praying. You simply ask God. You repent. This prayer that's going to come up on the screen. There is one on the sheet. But the one that I wanted to use is the one that's on the sheet there.

Let me just read it through for you. There are three parts to it. The first one admits where we confess to God, yeah I haven't honoured God as I should have. I've blindly imagined you to be a God of my own making.

I've ignored your loving ownership of my life. I'm very sorry. Please forgive me. And then there's the thank you bit. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to take my guilt and punishment for me on the cross.

[31 : 45] And finally there's the help me part of the prayer. Help me from today to live under his leadership as my risen king and rescuer. I'm going to pray this prayer in a moment.

If this is what you need to say to God, that I'm sorry, I need forgiveness, I'm thankful there's a way back and I want some help to live life with him from now on.

Then God will hear that prayer. I'll say the words but you can say them in your own heart and quietly make them your own as I pray this aloud. Can I urge you to do so? Let us pray.

Lord God, I have blindly imagined you to be a God of my own making. I have ignored your loving ownership of my life.

I'm very sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to take my guilt and punishment for me on the cross. Help me from today to live under his leadership as my risen king and rescuer.

[32 : 50] Amen.