

The God Who Made Everything

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on March the 7th 1999 the preacher is Phil Merlman his sermon is entitled The God Who Made Everything and is from Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 32 Please be seated. You may like to turn to page 902 of the Bible as we look at Acts chapter 17 Some years ago I did an overland tour from London to Kathmandu and one of the countries we visited in that trip was India. It was a fascinating country I entered the country as a tourist and I was amazed at the sights that I saw and I also entered into a culture which was foreign to anything I had ever known or felt before and while I was there I learnt to love the people by listening to them and speaking to them about their lives and so on engaging with the people

I remember very clearly one place that we stopped in to do some sightseeing I remember the place but I'm not 100% sure of the name of the place I think it was called Amritsa and in this place called Amritsa which I think it is was a place full of Hindu temples and these Hindu temples had shrines full of idols depicting all sorts of sexual things and there were literally hundreds of these idols on each shrine there were gods of fertility and all sorts of phallic symbols around the place and I couldn't believe what I was seeing as I moved around everywhere I looked there were these idols and the more I looked the more I became troubled the reason was that I could see how lost these people were they would come to these shrines to pray thinking that their gods would hear them

I know I felt very uncomfortable about this because the people were not worshipping the living God they were worshipping idols they were worshipping useless handmade statues made from stone and there's no doubt in my mind that these these people's lives were deeply spiritual yet they were not focused on the living God now there were lots of people there and I spoke to them about all sorts of things but I never spoke out about my Christian faith whilst in Amritsa I don't really know why I didn't except that I remember the place being a very oppressive environment and I just felt very ill-equipped at the time to do so well like my experience in India we read this morning of the Apostle Paul's trip to Athens and Paul is there on his own waiting for his companions as we read a little bit earlier he's waiting for his companions Timothy and Silas to join him from a place called Berea and Paul is essentially there as a tourist and he's probably having a good look around the place just as I did in India and let's think about

Athens for a moment Athens was one of the most remarkable cities in the world it was home to some of the greatest minds who ever lived some of the most influential philosophers poets and statesmen in history Socrates Plato and Aristotle are just a handful of those who lived during Athens golden age well it's in this city of Athens some 450 years after Socrates has been put to death for proclaiming foreign gods that Paul is now wandering around he's wandering around looking at everything and it's in this city of the great philosophical minds that we see Paul preach the Christian gospel the life death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the reason he speaks out is because of what he sees and what he feels about that whole city now if you look at verse 16 of Acts chapter 17 we see that while Paul was waiting for them in Athens he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols now Paul's greatest compassion sorry greatest passion was to see that

God was given due honour and that people from all nations had the opportunity to worship the living God the one who gives life the one who takes life away but as he tours around this city waiting for his friends to turn up it's obvious to him that the Athenians do not have a relationship with this living God he sees there the worship of idols the various philosophical schools of thought and so the worship of their own intellect and their own achievements and because of what he sees happening around him he is compelled to speak he was able to speak in India I don't know why I just couldn't speak but he is compelled to speak first in the synagogue to the Jews and the Godfamilies which was his normal practice and then we read on that he spoke in the marketplace every day to those who happened to be there now our marketplaces today or equivalents today would be something like the university campus they are the sorts of place that he was speaking to these people and in the marketplace we are told that he debates with some

[5 : 53] Epicurean and Stoic philosophers now again looking at the scene carefully before we hear what Paul says to these Athenians let's think a bit about the philosophy of the Epicureans and the Stoics who are identified here in English the word Epicure describes someone who loves sensuality who is committed to refined experiences of pleasure a gourmet a traveller who takes only the most exotic trips to the finest places now the word Stoic in modern language describes someone who can bear up under the most difficult circumstances and so the modern use of these terms mirrors well the ancient use of them as well Epicureans for example in 50 AD when Paul encountered this philosophy were people who essentially believed that all life is random that everything that happens to a person happens completely without reason or purpose it's just a series of circumstances

I guess therefore for them there is absolutely no reason to analyse events and experiences in life as good or bad there's no such thing for them as good or bad there's no predicting or changing of things so for that reason you are better off if you just grab the gusto of life do what you can to pamper yourself extract delicacies from life experience as much pleasure as possible fan self interest take care of number one and choose what's best for you stoics also believed that life had no meaning rather than considering life though to be random and unpredictable they believed in an unchangeable fate set in motion by distant powers what will happen will happen it can't be changed therefore the wise person is strong he's able to be dealt terrible blows and suffer against pain he's able to bear up under good and bad and never raise an eyebrow he's able to still themselves against every contingency and they are never ever fooled by anything and they never allow their hopes to be raised by anything the stoic is the essence of the green and bear toughness a grand pre driver or a

Sydney to Hobart yachtsman stoic people well the trouble with both of these philosophies is that they don't allow for human significance we are either the victims of chance or the victims of fate we will choose to either drop out and serve ourselves or stand up under all that life throws at us but in either cases we are not personally valuable the things that we believe hope dream of and long for the relationships that we have and the choices we make all get washed away by impersonal forces but friends humans weren't created for insignificance were they we are made as the bible tells us in the image of god there is something inside every one of us that says wait a minute this can't be true I know that I matter it must make a difference if I do what is right or wrong my hopes for achievement must count as something

Paul's debate with these epicurean and stoic philosophers as we're told here probably follows along those sorts of lines things and because of this new preaching and this new teaching that he is presenting to the people Paul is then taken to a place called the Areopagus which is here means the council members of the city and he's taken there to explain further this new teaching that he is proclaiming and we're told in verse 18 I think that he is proclaiming Jesus and his resurrection now the Areopagus was an important institution in Athens it had great prestige and had special jurisdiction in matters of morals and religion so because Paul was proclaiming foreign divinities it was only natural that he should be brought before these people and it is to these or this audience that Paul's sermon is addressed now I want to show you a couple of overheads of Athens and the particular place where

Paul was he was preaching in Athens and he's in a place called we think it's called Mars Hill and it's a place which looks down over Athens and that is Mars Hill the photo is taken from Mars Hill and it's looking down over Athens a modern day photo of course but probably when he was looking down he was able to see all these idols and so on and the second thing we have is a slide of Paul preaching but it's not that Paul that is actually Paul standing on Mars Hill in Athens but that's he's only a vicar he's not an apostle turn it off it's okay he's not here you're not recording is are you no okay well anyway Paul preaches in Athens on Mars Hill and that's Paul was on a trip there some years ago and I got that from him the other day well look what I want you to notice here is that the apostle Paul begins his sermon by starting where the people are at now if you look at verses 22 and 23 you'll see what I mean then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and he said

[11 : 50] Athenians I see how extremely religious you are in every way for as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship I found them sorry I found among them an altar with the inscription to an unknown God what therefore you worship is unknown this I proclaim to you the God I'll stop there well look in those verses twice in these verses he uses the term to look intently first of all he says I see how extremely religious you are and secondly we read that he says I went through the city and looked carefully Paul has paid attention to their world he has regarded their religiosity he connected with them in an area that he was going to speak to them about but he didn't judge them he didn't dismiss them or express anger at their foolishness he was saying I know you want the truth

I know that you are hoping for something you're not satisfied I can see that I found a statue that was erected to a god that doesn't have a name so I'm going to tell you his name so Paul goes on to tell his audience about god and there are five things which he says about god and I'm just going to put up an outline if you just sort of expose each point as we go along olive that would be good thanks there's five things which he says about him first of all he says that god is the creator of heaven and earth in verse 24 we read the god who made the world and everything in it he who is lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands now this view that god is creator of heaven and earth is very different from that of his epicurean and stoic friends for him and for all of us creation is not a random colliding of atoms or a march of fate with no purpose god is the lord of history he is both the personal creator of everything that exists and the personal lord of everything he has made so it's ludicrous to think then that god the creator who made and supervises everything lives in shrines which human beings have built secondly we see that god is the sustainer of life the second part of verse 24 he who is lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things god is the sustainer of life he continues to sustain life which he has created and given to his human creatures so it's absurd to suppose that the one who sustains life should himself need to be sustained any attempt to tame or to domesticate god to reduce him to the level of a household pet that is dependent on us for food and shelter is again a ridiculous reversal of roles we depend on god he doesn't depend on us god is the lord of the harvest that's why it's good to celebrate the harvest service to bring all these things in to remind us that god is the lord of the harvest and we do well to celebrate that together as christians and to help out those who are needy thirdly we read or we see in verses 26 to 28 that god is the ruler of all the nations if god is the creator of heaven and earth the sustainer of life then it goes without saying that history and geography of each nation is ultimately under his control the reason we read he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live was so that they would search for god and perhaps grope for him and find him yet this hope is unfulfilled because of human sin as the rest of scripture makes clear sin alienates people from god even as sensing the unnaturalness of their own of their alienation though people grope for god they look for him it's wrong to blame god for this alienation or to regard him as distant unknowable or uninterested it's wrong to do that indeed we are told here that he is not far from each one of us it is we

who are far from him now if it were not for sin which separates us from god god would be readily accessible for in him we live and move and have our being being and in him we find significance as human beings fourthly in verses 28 and 29 god is the creator of all life now paul quotes a pagan poet to identify with his pagan audience that all life derives from god the living god who has created the world that we can see all around us and so he says since we are his offspring who has been derived from him and depends on him it is absurd to think of him as like gold silver stone an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals which in themselves are lifeless and which owe their being only to human imagination and art all idolatry friends whether ancient or modern is inexcusable whatever the images or concepts are you see for idolatry is the attempt to idolize and confine god within the limits which we impose so in effect to put it in our terms work family spouse they all become idols when we decide to tell god how much or how little he is to be involved in those areas of our lives we can't do that fifthly god is the judge of the world verses 30 and 31 this god who is lord of heaven and earth will be answered to he will judge the human race by the one that he has appointed here paul began to speak of jesus he may have said more that isn't recorded here and i think he did now preaching judgment for some is a direct denial that human individuals are insignificant but the truth is they mattered so much that their life was going to be judged they were going to be examined someday by their creator and they needed to answer for their choices they had made so paul was in effect saying pampering yourself and serving your appetites is a choice the stoic hardness that accepts what happens but doesn't do anything about it is a choice but there is somebody someday who is going to look at all these things so you do matter you are significant judgment you see by talking about judgment paul was talking about significance judgment i think is actually good news as little as we tend to think of it in these terms only people who matter have to answer for their actions and paul claimed that jesus was the lord of life from the dead and so he preached his resurrection he pointed to christ although obliquely here as the answer to life so he says the time for ignorance was over they had an opportunity to change their minds to listen to him and to believe well we read on that there is a very sad pair of responses in verse 32 some were too haughty too impressed with themselves

too much in love with their own past too committed to protecting the shell too unwilling to see their own shellness so they scoffed others wanted to hear him again but even that was an inadequate response because paul had just said that the time for ignorance was over and they needed to repent they were putting it off with the idea that there would always be an opportunity in the future to reflect on these matters putting off what God says should be attended to now is a very grave mistake well do we see and do we care let me offer you some thoughts of application as I conclude I think that we live in an Athenian place in Athenian times if paul were to stride into melbourne today the apostle paul he would be provoked for the same reason that he was provoked in athens lives here are being ruined by idolatry materialism gambling sport sex tv and so on the list goes on and on why are people idolatrous i think it's because they are hopeless they are hopeless because somewhere along the way they don't believe they can make any difference and so therefore there is no personal god to whom they can appeal to melbourne now i think the problem for us as melbourneans is that we ourselves are not visitors to melbourne this is too much our home and we're used to the idolatry that's around us the footy is great many melbourne's love to enter into it and it's a passion it's a passion of mine i love it the gp the grand prix i should say moomba the crown casino are all pretty well accepted institutions here in melbourne but we don't realise how idolatrous they have become because it feels comfortable they're there the question we need to ask is why are we as christians not provoked why are we not stirred why are we not involved why aren't we caring to the same degree that paul was when he was in athens probably because we don't see what he saw in verse 16 when paul was waiting for his friends in athens he didn't intend to minister he was just going to wait there he was going to be a tourist just like i was in india but that's when this whole thing got started for him that's why he was taken before the board because he spoke out perhaps we don't see the idols because we ourselves are too idolatrous we're too inclined to believe the priests of materialism materialism that say money is the answer to everything we don't see idolatry because we're too close to it so there's another reason that perhaps we aren't provoked as paul was we see idolatry but we don't love people enough we may not care enough to even get involved but both of these responses are sub-christian responses they are inappropriate now i i hope and pray that by the grace of god we

can and all be challenged to see and care by observing this this great preacher paul who preached in the areopagus about god's sovereignty over all things and that in doing so as we look at paul that we are challenged through that and that in doing so we can help people find significance in their own lives by pointing them to the lord jesus christ just as paul did we're going to stand and sing a song there is a redeemer and this song is a song which is uh for christians we've seen out of thankfulness for what he has done for us and i hope as well that you can pray it and be challenged to to go and serve god to speak out about your faith to tell people that there is significance in life and that that significance is found through the lord jesus christ let's stand and sing