

Making Known the Unknown God

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- [0 : 0 0] Schools and universities are no longer there to teach us or to shape us, they are there to affirm us and pity help anyone who challenges anyone else's truth.
- We live in a society that has cut itself adrift from its creator, from its sustainer and from its saviour. As a society we are drifting aimlessly in a boat cut adrift from our moral moorings, drifting towards a massive iceberg that we deny is even there.
- And as we walk around the equivalents of Athens in our own society, the Londons, the Edinburghs, the Paris, these cities that we walk around in our western societies, what do we see?
- We see cities that are aesthetically pleasing, that are culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent, philosophically confused and spiritually deceived.
- And I guess the challenge for us as Christians is, are we, like Paul, deeply distressed? Are we, are our spirits provoked within us, as we see there in verse 16?
- [1 : 3 0] How do we respond to this society that we're living in? How do we live? How do we reach out to our neighbours and our workmates?
- How do we raise our kids in a pagan culture? How do we make God known in a society where he is not only unknown, but he is despised and rejected?
- Well, Paul faced a very similar situation in Acts 17. Athens was a renowned city in Greece. It was famous for learning.
- It was famous for philosophy. And it was a gathering place for intellectuals. It was a place where great issues were debated.
- And the place where these issues were debated was the Areopagus. It was where the governing council of Athens, it sat, and where it regulated visiting lecturers and new ideas to try and protect the city's academic reputation.
- [2 : 3 9] And what we see in this address by Paul is we see a master preacher. Paul was able to weave beautifully in his address both an ability to build bridges with people but also to demolish their arguments.
- Paul points to creation. He points to providence. He points to life. He points to the afterlife. And he compares all their learning to ignorance.
- All the learning of Athens was ignorance because they didn't have the knowledge of God. And of course, what we have here is we have an example of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23.
- He becomes all things to all men that by all means he might save some without ever compromising the truth of God.
- So here we have Paul in this pagan city. So here we have Paul in this pagan city, this city full of idols. This city that is famous for intellectualism, for philosophy, for ideas.
- [3 : 5 1] And we have this picture of paganism and progress side by side, not unlike our own society. As we look back over the last hundred years, we have made so much technological progress, haven't we?

We've all got phones in our pockets. We've all got phones in our pockets that have the same access to information that huge libraries used to contain.

But we have this society where paganism and progress live side by side. And how does Paul address a society full of idolatry and paganism?

Well, he does it in three ways. First of all, he points to the God who is great. He points to the God who is great in verses 22 to 25.

Paul starts by pointing to the altar to the unknown God. He grabs their attention. You see, the Athenians were famous for their gods.

[4 : 59] They are a God for everything. They are a God for love and war. They are a God for science and art. They are a God for land and sea. They are a God for work and rest.

They are a God for health and finance. They are a God for everything under the sun. Just on the chance that they'd missed anybody or any subject, they had an altar to the unknown God.

And Paul seized on this altar. He seized on this admission of ignorance and declared unto them the character of this unknown God.

Now, before we look at what Paul said, what was Paul's audience? Who was Paul's audience? Well, we're told in the verses beforehand that he was speaking to Epicureans and to Stoics.

Now, what did Epicureans believe? Well, Epicureans believed in what you could see. They believed that if God existed, he was some distant force.

[6 : 05] He didn't care what you did with your life. He didn't interfere. He didn't mind who you slept with or what you did with your time. But God wasn't somebody to be feared or to be worshipped.

If he existed at all, he was some force out there. Life was about the elimination of fear and anxiety. It was about the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain.

The Epicureans were like Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society. Seize the day. There is no yesterday.

There is no tomorrow. Today is all that matters. Truth is like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold, as one of the students said in Dead, Dead Poets Society.

Carpe Deum. Seize the day. This moment is all that matters. This experience with this person is all that matters. History doesn't matter. The future doesn't matter.

[7 : 09] All that matters is this experience today. And who were the Stoics? Well, if the Epicureans were all about enjoyment, the Stoics were all about endurance.

They didn't believe that God was far away. They believed that God was near, that God was in everything and everywhere. They believed that God was very close.

They believed that God was inside you. They believed that God gave you the divine spark, the spark of life and rationality. How does Paul deal with his audience?

How does he speak to the Epicureans and the Stoics? Well, he takes them back to God as creator, the infinite creator.

Paul starts by emphasizing the power of God in creation. God is not in creation. He was before creation. He was the first cause in the universe.

[8 : 17] God is not small. He's not an idol that's in some altar. God is huge. He's big. He's great. God is the maker of the heavens and the earth and everything in it.

God is glorious. God is transcendent. God is great. Think of the complexity of our bodies. A piece of brain tissue the size of a grain of sand contains 100,000 neurons and 1 billion synapses, all communicating with each other.

God created the complexity of the human body. Imagine the complexity of all living creatures. 7.77 million different species in the world.

And God created every one of them. Think of the vastness of the universe. Scientists and astrologers estimate that we can only see about 5% of the universe.

They estimate there are 1 billion trillion stars in the observable universe. That's the God that Paul took these people back to.

[9 : 34] God is not tiny and inconsequential. God is big. God is great. God is the creator of the universe.

The universe did not happen by accident. There was a creator behind it. So he takes them back to the infinite creator. But he also takes them back to the independent creator.

Who else has created everything from nothing? Only God. He didn't need any help. He didn't need the help of man. He says in Psalm 50, If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and everything in it is mine.

A.W. Tozer said this, The picture of a nervous, ingratiating God fawning over men to win their favour is not a pleasant one. Yet if we look at the popular conception of God, that is precisely what we see.

20th century Christianity has put God on charity. The God of the Bible has no needs. He is self-existent.

[10 : 48] He is self-sufficient. And he is self-dependent. He is independent. And he is free. So that is the first thing that Paul does.

He takes the Epicureans and the Stoics, he takes them back to a great God, a creator, and he reminds them of his independence. What are the implications of believing that God is your creator this morning?

Well, the implications are huge, aren't they? If we believe that God is our creator, then we are accountable to him. Even before we come to redemption and salvation, even if we believe that God is our creator, we are accountable to him.

And you see, when society no longer believes in God as creator, what does man become?

Well, man becomes an animal. He becomes an unaccountable animal, free to do anything he wants, to gratify any lust, and to believe that there will be no consequences.

[12 : 02] That's why the doctrine of creation is so despised and hated and attacked so viciously. Men do not want to be held accountable for their actions and for their sins.

They don't want to be held accountable to a creator who can tell them how to live and who to love. Because the creator gets to define the parameters of life, as Paul says.

That's why people don't want a creator. That's why authority has broken down in our society and in our schools.

Because if we have no authority from God, then there is no absolute authority. And the only thing that fills the vacuum is the state and the government.

So the first thing that Paul does is he takes them to a great God. But the second thing that Paul does is he takes them to a God who is near, in verses 26 to 28.

[13 : 06] He reminds them, in verses 26 and 28, that God is not only our creator, but he is also our sustainer.

Having established God's independence, Paul now brings them to God's engagement with creation. God is the God, not just of creation, but the God of providence.

God is intimately involved in his world. God sustains every living being. That's why Paul says, in verse 28, for in him we live and move and have our being.

God is not like the Epicureans believed some distant, nebulous force. He is a loving creator. He is involved in his creation. He sustains his creatures.

He gives us the breath in our body. Perhaps Paul was thinking of Isaiah 42, verse 5. This is what God the Lord says, who created the heavens and who stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk on it.

[14 : 20] I am the Lord and I have called you for a righteous purpose. The air you breathe, the food you eat, your minds, your emotions, your family, your work, they are all from a loving creator.

God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth. God is not the blind watchmaker. He didn't wind up the universe and let it go and stand back.

He is involved. He is intimately involved in his creation. God determines the allotted periods and sets the boundaries of our dwelling places.

What does that mean? It's very difficult to know exactly what it means. Perhaps it means that God is sovereign over all natural phenomenon and over all natural, over all the seasons.

It may also refer to God's control over history. Nations rise and fall and boundaries are reset. It perhaps means that.

[15 : 28] But whatever it means, it means that God is involved in all the events and the circumstances of life. we have this word determined, allotted periods.

This word determined is used back in Acts chapter 2 verse 23. This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

He crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. And it's used again in this chapter in verse 31 because he fixed the day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

This is all about God's foreknowledge. God is not surprised by the events of history. He is not surprised by the events of your life and my life.

God foreknows and God determines all that happens. The Epicureans believe that history was a random cycle of chaos and order.

[16 : 39] But Paul says, no, it's God's history. God has determined what will happen. God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

God knows, God foreordains and God predestines. Why do we apply that to our lives? Well, surely God's sovereignty over history and God's sovereignty over our lives should bring us great comfort.

We are not living a life of random accidents. God has appointed whatsoever comes to pass.

God is not just our creator but he is the sustainer of all things. Nothing takes God off guard. Nothing surprises him. And whatever you are going through this morning, God has a divine purpose in it.

That's the great comfort. It should bring us great comfort and consolation to know that God is in the details and the events of our life.

[18 : 01] We are in the hands of our loving creator. But God is not only, God is not just near as our sustainer.

God, of course, is also near as our saviour. God is not just near. Why did God create man and sustain man as the crown of his creation?

Well, verse 27 tells us 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.

God's great purpose was to draw human beings into a quest to know their creator. God didn't make us for fun.

He didn't make us for some joke. He made us so that we would enter into a quest to know our creator. Here we have in this picture a picture of mankind groping about in the darkness trying to find their way to God.

[19 : 19] It's a picture of Athens, all these idols, people groping their way to find these puny gods to try and find the real and true God.

And you see, God is not just near to us in his creation. He is near to us because of his salvation. God came down in human flesh to redeem man to God.

And you see, God has always been near to man but you see now the gospel light has been switched on. We're no longer groping around in the darkness because we have the word of God.

We have the person and work of Christ. And we're able now to find God through the darkness. God is not only creator and sustainer, he is saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is not far from each one of us. And you see, through this address, Paul is calling us in the gospel today. What is the great antidote for our fractured and alienated society?

[20 : 30] a saviour who can bring reconciliation and redemption. Only in Christ can we be redeemed and be renewed as to who we were meant to be when we were created.

Only God can renew us to be the child of God that we were meant to be. only through Christ can we have a love for righteousness and a hatred for all that is evil.

So we've seen that God, that Paul is pointing us to God as creator, as sustainer. He's pointing us to a God who is near in creation but also in salvation.

And then, thirdly and lastly, Paul points us to the God who is holy. We've seen that God is great, we've seen that God is near but Paul ends with a warning, God is also holy.

If there was ever an attribute of God that has been forgotten in the modern church is the holiness and transcendency of God. J.I.

[21 : 48] Packer calls the holiness of God the attribute of attributes. God's holiness demands justice because God cannot overlook sin.

We're told in this passage that God overlooked the times of ignorance. In the authorised version it's got God winked at it. In other words, God had a time of restraint and mercy.

But what Paul is saying at the end of this passage is that there is a time coming when God will no longer overlook sin. God will no longer wink at sin because the full revelation of the gospel has come.

And one day there is a judgment coming. One day the living and the dead will be judged. And you see what Paul the master preacher is doing.

He's turning the corner. He's been using general revelation up until this point. He's been talking about creation and providence and life.

[22 : 53] And you see now he's turning the corner. He's turning the hinge towards Jesus and the resurrection. He's pointing his hearers towards the saviour.

Paul has masterfully, like an architect or a builder, he's laid the foundations. He said you need to believe in God your creator, God your sustainer, God the giver of life. But you see now at the end of this address he is bringing in the judgment and the resurrection and repentance.

God now calls every man, every man, everywhere to repent. Why? Because he has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

You see what Paul is doing? He's moving from philosophical discussion to personal responsibility. He's driving the nail home.

This God is calling you and me today to repentance, to turn from our sin, because a judgment day is coming. A day of reckoning is coming with regard to our sins and the sins of this world.

[24 : 17] You may think that you can sin against a holy God. You may think you can get away with your sin. But the word of God tells us that one day God will judge you.

For God to be just, for God to be holy, for God to be righteous, he must punish sin. Thankfully, if you're in Christ, that punishment and that wrath and that judgment fell on Christ at the cross.

But if you are not in Christ, the full wrath and punishment will fall on you on that day. Thomas Watson said, the Lord has a golden scepter and an iron rod.

Those who will not bow to the one shall be broken by the other. One day there will be a great gulf of fixtures, it says in Luke 16 of the rich man and Lazarus.

It's difficult to know in that story how much is the reality of hell, but it seems from that story that one of the features of hell will be the remembrance of all the privileges and opportunities that we spurned while we were in this life.

[25 : 37] God is holy. He has appointed his son to judge the world. And one day every one of us in this church will face him either in Christ or outside of Christ.

So what has Paul done? He's pointed us to a great God. He's pointed us to a God who is near. And he's warned us about a God who is holy.

What use is all this to our daily lives? What use will all this be when we wake up tomorrow morning and we face our workmates who don't know this God, who don't care about this God and who despise this book?

Well, let me just give you three or four things by way of application to take into this week. First of all, we need to stand firm as Christians. The best response to expressive individualism in our society is not angry admonition or accommodation but loving proclamation of the gospel.

Too many Christians today are like Statler and Waldorf from the Muppets. They sit in the balcony and they shout down at people. They don't get engaged in the real society.

[27 : 15] They post angry things on social media. They admonish everyone about the state of society. What did Paul do? Paul went into the marketplace every day.

He engaged with the Jews. He engaged with the Gentiles. He went into the marketplace every day and he reasoned with them. He got himself dirty with society.

Angry admonition doesn't achieve anything. But neither does accommodation. Neither does compromise. Neither does throwing the Bible out the window and accommodating to everything that is going on.

What we need to do as Christians is to stand firm on the word of God, to lovingly affirm the eternal truth of God's word and call a lost world to repentance and faith.

We need to stand firm. Secondly, we need to lovingly engage with people. As I said, Paul reasoned daily in the marketplace. He wasn't angry.

[28 : 28] He engaged in reason debate and he persuasively communicated the gospel. We need more Christians in the marketplace. We need more Christians on the school council, the community council, the local school chaplaincy team, and the local football team.

That's where we need to be as Christians. Reasoning with people, lovingly proclaiming Christ to people. We need to be in the community cafe, the local drop-in.

We need to be down at home bargains in the cafe talking to people. We need to talk to people. We need to love people. We need to reason people about this great God, this near God, and this holy God.

Thirdly, we need to rediscover the doctrine of God. In a society full of idols, we need to proclaim the uniqueness of God as creator, as sustainer, and as saviour.

We need to rediscover the doctrine of God. What do we see as we walk through modern day Scotland? What idols do we see? Well, we see the God of materialism.

[29 : 49] We see the God of individualism. We see the God of equality and diversity, don't we? Everything is sacrificed on that altar.

And of course, we see the God of immorality. People must be allowed to do whatever they want, whenever they want, with whoever they want. These are the idols of modern day Scotland.

And we think, or our society thinks, that all our problems will be solved by new legislation, by politics. Every election cycle comes round and we think that this group of people were better than the last group of people, and that all our problems will be solved.

God. We need to rediscover as a nation the big God of the Bible, the big God of the Reformation, the God that can once again restore and revive our nation and reconcile us to our God.

The modern church trivialises God. We need to rediscover the God of the Bible, the big God, the great God, the transcendent God.

[31 : 05] And then lastly, this morning we need to remember the shortness of life and the certainty of judgment.

We need to remember the shortness of life and the certainty of judgment. Paul was not engaging in some mental exercise, some philosophical debate.

The whole point of his address was to bring people to Christ. He was trying to lay the foundation to bring the gospel in. Paul reminded his hearers that there is always a cost to sin.

There's always a cost to sin. Let's remember that. We think that we can live without God, we can live in sin and there's no cost. There is a cost and the ultimate cost will be the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul didn't shy away from difficult subjects just like Christ didn't. Think of Luke 16. Jesus addresses the issue of love of money, of wealth, of hypocrisy, of divorce and of hell all in one sermon.

[32 : 21] Paul was the same. He didn't shy away from difficult subjects. He didn't shy away, he wasn't embarrassed about creation. He wasn't embarrassed about the judgment of God, he preached it and he preached it clearly.

And it reminds us of the shortness of life and the certainty of judgment. And let me finish this morning by inviting anyone here or online that if you're not a Christian, the invitation this morning is to come to faith in Christ.

Christ. The world of expressive individualism has nothing to offer you. It offers you alienation, isolation and devastation.

That's what we see in our society. One day your truth will not matter but God's truth will endure for eternity. Christ on the other hand offers you life and life in all its fullness.

He invites you to enter into life, to become a child of God, to enter into a community of faith. This world will offer you nothing but alienation and devastation.

[33 : 43] Thank God this morning that God is not unknown. He is knowable. He is near. And you can be reconciled to him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is stopping you today from coming to Christ? Anything that comes between you and God is an idol. Whether it's sport, whether it's your work, whether it's a boyfriend or a girl, whatever it is, it's an idol.

And you need to get rid of it. You need to come to Christ. You need to cast aside your idols. You need to stop groping in the dark. And you need to come to the one who can set you free and give you eternal life.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that you are a God who is known. We confess this morning and again, Lord, that you are a God who is great.

We thank you that you are a God who is near. And Lord, we fear and tremble that you are a God who is holy. And we pray that, Lord, every single person in this building and who's listening online would find themselves in Christ on that judgment day.

[34 : 58] Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for its relevance. We live in a pagan culture. We live in a culture of idols. We thank you, Lord, that you are the God who can be known.

We thank you, O God, that you are the God who is not far away, but near. And again, we confess, Lord, in you we live and move and have our being. Lord, we pray that you would speak to us today.

Bless your word. We pray that the seed that has been sown will reap a harvest, Lord. Perhaps a harvest that we will never see, but Lord, a harvest in eternity.

Thank you, Lord, for sustaining us as a congregation through these difficult last few months. And we ask, Lord, that you would bless us with the salvation of souls, with the building up of souls, with the gospel piercing our communities.

Lord, help us to reason daily in the marketplace. Help us to speak Christ to our neighbours. Help us to point to you as a great God and to Christ as a beautiful saviour.

[36 : 06] Lord, hear our prayers and forgive our sins. For Jesus' sake. Amen. So let's conclude this morning with Psalm 16 from Sing Psalms.

We're going to sing verses 7. To the end, I'll praise the Lord my God, whose counsel guides my choice, and even in the night my heart recalls instruction's voice.

Let's sing this psalm to God's praise. I'll praise the Lord my God, whose counsel guides my choice, and even in the night my heart recalls instruction's voice.

before me constantly. Before me constantly, I set the Lord alone.

Because He is that my right hand, I'll not be overthrown.

[37 : 43] Therefore, my heart is glad. My song, which joy will sing, my body too, my body too, will rest secure in hope unwavering.

For you will not have my soul in death to stay.

Nor will you be your holy one To see the truth's decay You have made known to me The path of life divine Which shall I know That your right hand Joy from your face will shine Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy

To the only wise God our Saviour With glory and majesty Dominion and power Both now and ever Amen