

# The Life-Giving God

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[ 0 : 00 ] You might like to turn to Acts 17 on page 926 in the Bible. This is the last, second last in our series Life Explored Sermons.

And I, in preparing this, I can hardly think of a passage that is more helpful for us as Christians living in Vancouver today.

And one of the reasons that we're doing Life Explored in our small groups is we hope in the fall to have an open group for people who have no experience of Christ or the church.

We'll have a meal and a discussion here at the church. And the fundamental question that the course is built around is this, what if the God you do not believe in is not the real God?

Which is a very clever question. And all of us are deeply conscious that the culture in which we live has shifted and changed. Not just that Christianity has been marginalised or regarded with suspicion.

[ 1 : 01 ] But I think that we're very aware that there is a tremendous unawareness of what Christianity actually teaches. When people react to Christianity, they're often reacting to a caricature or a distortion.

And because we're all so fragile, we can't talk about it these days. Do you know, more than 41% of people in Metro Vancouver have no religion.

The last census said that. It's a higher proportion than any other city in North America as well as Canada. So we're at the top of the heap in terms of our opportunity.

One of the reasons this passage is so helpful is because this is one of two sermons that the Apostle Paul preached to people who had zero Bible background.

Didn't have the Old Testament. Had no knowledge of Christ. Were not interested in Jesus Christ. The idea of a bodily resurrection was vaguely disgusting to them.

[ 2 : 02 ] And this is Athens. Athens. This is the centre and cradle of civilisation. The most glorious city in the Greek world. It's the cradle of philosophy and democracy and sculpture and eloquence and the seat of the gods.

Dozens and dozens of temples that are still there that you can see. And as Paul, he's waiting for a couple of his friends to arrive. As he's walking around the city and praying, something very wonderful and strange happens to him in verse 16.

If you look down there. He has a paroxysm. That's what the word is. He has a seizure in his heart. His spirit is provoked.

Not by the beauty and creativity of artistic expression. But by the fact that the glory that ought to go to God alone is going and being squandered on idols.

And it pained him as it ought to pain us. When the true God is not treated with the honour he deserves. Being wasted on rocks and gold and all sorts of other things.

[ 3 : 10 ] So here he is in this cultural civilisation. In this cultural centre. And as the apostle walks around, he's grieved. He sees darkness, spiritual blindness and ignorance of the true God.

And it's helpful to us because what is beautiful is not necessarily true. Because Satan uses beauty as well as God. So what he does is, he goes down to the biggest shopping mall in the world at that time.

It's called a marketplace. It's a market and governance centre. And he reasons with those who will engage him in conversation. And this is how he gets his invite to go up on the Mount, up on the Areopagus and to speak.

Now, along with the cultural sophistication of Athens, and you find this in most sophisticated cities, came a spectacular sense of superiority and arrogance.

A comprehensive sense of entitlement. So, in my big fat Greek wedding, when anything good happens, the Greek grandpa says, Oh yeah, we Greeks invented that.

[ 4 : 17 ] That has continued to this day. And you can hear something, a little bit of that, in verse 18. Where the philosophers in the marketplace give their impression of Paul.

And they say, what does this babbler wish to say? You may think that about the preacher. But they say, he keeps talking about this Jesus and the resurrection.

It's nonsense. And he doesn't have anything of the elegance of Epicurus. So, let's take him up the hill, see if there's something new. What harm could there be? And what do you do if you're Paul and you address the cultural elite?

So, he goes up on the Areopagus. And in verse 22, he begins, he makes a polite but very direct beginning. He says, look, I see you're very religious. But there's an idol, there's a shrine to the unknown God.

That's what I'm going to preach to you. So, he's not flattering them and he's not insulting them. But he finds one thing that he can build on. In the midst of the forest of idols in Athens, there is one particular shrine where they confess they have some inkling that they've overlooked something.

[ 5 : 28 ] Some admission of ignorance. So, what does he do? And I think the best way to explain this, what does he do with a group of people who've got no background whatsoever in Christianity?

I think the clue for what he does is actually back in verse 6 when he's in Thessalonica. And if you look down at verse 6, Paul and his friends are being hounded out of town by a mob.

And what's infuriating to the mob, and they say it in verse 6, is that these guys, by preaching Jesus, have turned the world upside down. In other words, they've got the fact this is not neutral, it's positively dangerous, it's subversive.

What Paul and the others are preaching is a revolt against the way we've set things up. It's a revolt against the system. It's a rebellion. And they react with violence. And although it's not a good reaction, at least they've understood two things.

That with Paul's gospel, you cannot fit Christianity in around all the rest of your priorities. And it's going to require, secondly, deep change. Now, I wonder how that compares to what you hear Christians saying today.

[ 6 : 39 ] I think when we proclaim the gospel, we talk so much about the benefits and blessings of being a Christian. Come to Christ, he can give you peace and hope and life and purpose.

All of which are true. The trouble is, they're not the gospel. And they don't necessarily put God at the centre. It is possible to see the Christian faith as something good just to add on and give you these extra things on top of your other very busy priorities.

But when Jesus preaches the gospel and when the apostle preaches the gospel, it turns things upside down because we have reversed the way that God has made us. Instead of worshipping the God who made us, we have exchanged the glory of God for the glory of idols.

We'll come back to this in a moment. Now, that, I think, is a great description of what Paul does. What he does is he tries to turn things upside down. I want to show you how he does it.

And he does it in three very simple points. And the first is in verse 24 and 25. And the simple point is, God made you. You didn't make God.

[ 7 : 50 ] So he begins with God. In fact, the entire sermon is, which is summarised here, is profoundly God-centred. And that in itself is a bit of a shock to the audience.

Because Greek philosophy and Greek religions and every human religion is human-centred. It was the pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras who said, man is the measure of all things.

And they deeply believed that. But what Paul does in verse 24 is he starts at Genesis 1. And he gives the basic Bible view of God.

The God, he says, verse 24, who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. That's very interesting.

If you go back and look at the other sermon that Paul preaches to people who have no Bible background, he starts in exactly the same place. He says, God made this world.

[ 8 : 48 ] He made everything in it, including you. And that means he's the Lord of heaven and earth. In other words, this is a huge gospel.

The Athenians thought that they were part of a big story. You know, we've been on the top of the cultural heap for a couple of centuries. The gospel comes in and blows the walls off and says, actually, we go back to creation.

And he's going to finish at the end of creation. And puts our lives in a far greater story. And after starting positively, he then applies negatively in verse 25.

He waves his hand and he says, look, if God is the maker and creator of everything, he doesn't live in the buildings that you've built, even though they're very beautiful. You can't control and contain the one who made you.

You can't confine or constrict him. What's really important here is not the shrines that you've built, but the God who made you. You see the question? Who depends on whom?

[ 9 : 48 ] And in verse 25, when he says, he's not served by human hands, the word served is the Greek word therapy.

I think this is wonderful. Human religion and idolatry works by trying to give God therapy. It massages God and tries to manipulate him.

So it's a therapy session for God. You know, you offer him food and flowers because he's hungry and needy. The whole pagan view of religion is that we make God offerings to God so that they will make things good for us.

We manipulate God so that life will go well. And Paul just turns that completely on its head. The God who made us. He says he gives us life, breath, everything.

So just hold your breath. That breath God gave you. The next breath, the next heartbeat, that is a gift from God. And the idea that you could give something to massage him is vaguely ridiculous.

[ 10 : 50 ] It's completely upside down. So this is the first reversal. We don't create God and give him something. He made us. We don't sustain him.

He sustains him. We need him. We depend on him, not the other way around. And that's the first reversal and it's fundamental. God made you. The second reversal in verses 26 and 27 is that God is seeking you.

You think you're seeking God? God is seeking you. Now, you might think it's strange that Paul goes here in verse 26. He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place that they should seek God.

Why did he start there? And I think it's partly because the Greeks are famously arrogant culturally, politically, and particularly racially.

The Greeks were racists and proud of it. They said, We are the ones who rose from the soil of Attica. And everyone else in the world who's not part of our race are barbarians.

[ 12 : 00 ] And Paul's just drawing out the implications of God as creator. And he makes another reversal. And he says, Look, if God is the creator of all things, there is a fundamental unity in humanity. And the basic unity of humanity comes from the fact that God made us and God made us all from one man.

And you may be lucky enough to have been born in Athens or Vancouver, but every single human being living bears exactly the same dignity from God. There are no exceptions. And he's given us this world to enjoy and how enjoyable it is, the mountains and the sea and the sky.

It's beautiful, perfect for us to live in. But he says, Because he's creator, he is utterly sovereign over both history and geography. And you may have the cultural edge right now here in Athens, but that too is a gift from God, because God controls the rise and fall of cultures, civilizations, rulers, and powers.

Do you know, within 90 years of Paul preaching this sermon, the Greeks were utterly defeated by the Romans? And if you spin forward 2,000 years and have a look at Greece today, I checked yesterday, and the Greek debt at 3 p.m. on Saturday afternoon Vancouver time was 355 billion euros.

It's not the same, is it? And you can look at history and see this. You know, first Babylon rises and goes down, and then Egypt rises and goes down, and each time it's God who raises up, and it's God who brings down.

[ 13 : 26 ] Just as God will do with China, and the United States, and the European Union. So those of you who are lucky enough to study history, you're tracing the hand of God.

That's what you're doing. Why has God, why does God do this? Verse 27, that they should seek after God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

In other words, enjoying life and enjoying God's creation is not the final purpose, not my final purpose. A final purpose is to seek him, not to build beautiful boxes or to give him spare cash, but to

seek him with all your heart.

And when he says, in the hope that feeling after him, you might find him, it's much more uncertain in the original. It's the picture of groping around in the dark, and blindly feeling your way.

And it's here that Paul introduces the big reversal. He says, it's God who's seeking you. Verse 27, he is not actually far from each one of us.

[14:29] In fact, in him we live and move and have our being. One of your poets has said, we are his offspring. One of my favourite preachers is an older guy in England called Dick Lucas, and he often refers in his sermons to the fact that in England, around Christmas time, the BBC will usually put on some religious special, and it'll be hosted by an agnostic academic or an atheist or someone.

And it usually is called something like, human humanity's long search for God. And Dick Lucas points out, that's exactly the reverse of what the Bible says.

God is not far from every one of us. In him we live and move and have our being. And since he's made us, and since he sustains us and holds us in being, he could not be closer.

And if you haven't found him, it's not his fault. We are his offspring. He hasn't disengaged from us. He's not watching from a distance, but he daily follows us with care and love.

And, you know, if he's made you in his likeness, building rock and stone is an insult. Bowing down and worshipping that. So the first reversal, God made you.

[15:51] The second, God is seeking you. And the third reversal brings it together. And that is, you will, you're not judging God, but God has set a day in which he is going to judge you.

This is, this is completely turning the tables. There is, you know, Paul on the Areopagus. He says, you think you're judging me and my message.

Nothing could be further from the truth. What I'm announcing to you is the judge of all the earth.

He's still talking about God. God's still at the center, but the same God who made us and the same God who sustains us and who has a purpose for us now has a command for us.

In verse 30. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

Because he has fixed a day in which he'll judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he's appointed. And of this he's given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

[16:57] He's saying the resurrection means that we're in a new moment. God has done something to change everything. He says, there is a day that is affixed.

There is a man who's been appointed. And there's public proof that's been given by his resurrection from the dead. And the judgment's not a local judgment.

It's universal. All who've lived and died. So the command from God is repent. Literally, change mind.

Change outlook. Change direction. Turn life upside down. It's very interesting. You know, Paul does not use the language of sin with the Athenians.

That's what he's talking about. If you look at the verse before, verse 29. He says, being God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by an imagination of man and art.

[17:59] Sin, he's talking about, is idolatry. It's worshipping something from our imagination. It's putting something else in the place of God. It's remaking God in our own image.

And it's the fund, it is the fundamental sin. When the Bible speaks about idolatry, it speaks about two different kinds of idolatry. Physical outward idolatry, where we bow down before images. And mental idolatry.

Idolatry of the heart. Where we, it's something where we think, if, if I have that in my life, I will have meaning. I will have significance.

I'll have value if I have that thing. Tim Keller is a well-known pastor in New York, has written on this. And he says, An idol is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life and identity.

Idolatry is not so much wanting bad things, as it is turning good things into ultimate things. This means anything can become an idol, including good things, such as career or family or achievement or independence, a political cause, material possessions, certain people, power and influence, physical attractiveness, romance, human approval, financial security, your place in a particular social circle.

[ 19 : 19 ] So here's the thing though. Repentance isn't to feel rotten about my sin. It's to recognize that my only happiness is God, and I've replaced him with something else.

And I unconditionally shove that thing off the throne, and hold God in Jesus Christ as my only God. Brunny and I were in Ireland last year, and you drive around the countryside, if you've had this experience, and most of the wooden barns in the north, in the Republic of Ireland, are painted with Bible texts.

And they're very confronting. They're not friendly texts. They're very fierce. So you drive around the corner, and you're confronted with red paint. Be sure your sins will find you out.

Watch my driving very carefully. You drive around another corner, and it's repent, or you will likewise perish. And you think, do people die? There's no context, and there's no mercy.

And Paul's message is full of mercy. To see this. He doesn't say, repent or else. He doesn't say, repent or God will get you.

[ 20 : 30 ] He says, look, God has overlooked times of ignorance. He's calling us back, as creator and sustainer, and savior and judge, to repent. And that simply means, to put things the right way up.

Now, there's a lot in this. And we don't have time, to look closely, at lots of things. But this is particularly helpful, for us who live in post-Christian, pluralist Vancouver.

You know, as a church, we want to faithfully represent, the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to live effectively, and speak relevantly for God. So let me just, meditate with you, on two things.

Commend two things to you, as we finish this morning. Now, the first is, the shape, of the apostolic gospel. Did you notice the shape?

When speaking to people, with no Bible background, the apostle has a very big gospel. It's not just, Jesus loves you, and wants you to be fulfilled, and oh, he'll forgive your sins.

[ 21 : 33 ] The gospel is about God, from beginning to end. And he does go to the beginning, and he does go to the end, from creation to consummation. Overturning all the foolishness, of idolatry.

Notice, he doesn't start with Jesus. That wouldn't just make sense, to any Athenian. He begins with God, as creator and Lord, the one of infinite power, and wisdom, and control.

And he spells out, basically, he's just spelling out, the big implications, of God as creator. The fact that he made us, means that he has a purpose for us. The fact that he made us, means we're accountable to him.

And that is why judgment, is always part of the gospel. And earlier in the book of Acts, when the apostle Peter, is speaking to people, who have a non-Jewish background. He describes what Jesus, told the disciples, they should preach.

Let me read to you, it's 1042. Jesus commanded us, to preach to the people, and to testify. What? What is the gospel? That he is the one, appointed by God, to be the judge, of the living and the dead.

[ 22 : 38 ] There it is. Because without accountability, without judgment, there is no gospel. Because judgment, is the other side of love. You see, if, without judgment, there's no hope, for the slave, or the person, who's been sexually trafficked.

There's no justice, for any victim, of injustice. Which is why, why God, will judge the world, in righteousness, by the man, Christ Jesus, who is tempted, in every way, as we are, yet without sin. So I just offer that to you, as a reflection, on the shape of the apostolic gospel, in our context. And lastly, the second thing to reflect on, is the power, of the apostolic gospel.

And here is a question, and a challenge, for each of us. It is possible, as Christians, to bring idols, back into our hearts. And we have to ask ourselves, am I today, looking to something else, for my happiness, or my identity, or my meaning?

God's question, each day to us, is there something, more important in your life, than me? You see, it's the gospel, that creates repentance, in us. And repentance, is not something, you just do, once a month, or once a year.

[ 23 : 55 ] It's a daily, ongoing, specific thing, that we can, and we don't just, generally confess. I know we say, general confessions, here at church. But we ought to be, turning over, specific sins, and specific idols, to God.

Let me give you, an illustration. This will make sure, you're all awake. If you pick up, your service bulletin, and go back to page four. Top of page four, is the collect for purity.

It would be difficult, to find, a better prayer. Almighty God, to you, all hearts are open, and not just my heart, but my desires, are known, and from whom, from you, no secrets are hidden.

My desires, are hidden from myself, but he sees them. Then, the prayer is, cleanse, the thoughts, of our hearts, heart and thought, are the same, by the inspiration, the breathing, of your Holy Spirit, not just so, that we will be forgiven, but so that we may, perfectly love you, and worthily magnify, your Holy Name, through Christ our Lord.

It's a prayer, that will come clean, with God, and in the communion service, what do we do next? Ten commandments, did it twice today. Just have a look at them, for a moment, will you? The basic command, the basic reality, is, you have no other gods, but me.

[ 25 : 23 ] And every other commandment, comes out of that one. So the next commandment, don't make yourself an image, that's physical idols, and all the rest of the commandments, are about heart idols. Look at the next one down.

You shall not take the name, of the Lord your God, in vain. The word take, means to carry. So as we go out of here, as Christians, we bear the name of God, we carry the name of God. Don't do that in vain.

Don't add other idols, to the pantheon. What about your time, or your family, or how you feel, or hate other people, or sex, or your generosity, or your speech?

What about coveting? Coveting is idolatry, this goes right into the heart. So here is an examination, of our hearts, and as we go through it, we ought to be very specific, in our repentance, toward God. We'll turn over, to page 8 for a moment. Such a relief, to repent. After, after the offertory hymn, prayer, we're going to be called, to confess, all you, at the top of page 8, who truly, and earnestly, confess of your sins.

[ 26 : 35 ] Don't do it lightly. And then when we confess, in the middle line, we say, we sincerely repent. We're turning away. And the absolution, in the second line, God promises, forgiveness of sins, to all those, who heartily repent.

And then, what relief of reliefs, we hear, come to me, all who labour, are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. That's what we're here for. There is a church, in Manitoba.

It's in the town, town of Steinbeck. The town of Steinbeck, has 15,000 people, living in it. The weekly attendance, at this church, is 5,000 people, on Sunday.

There are pastors, travelling from all over the world, to this church, right now. They're having conferences, after conferences, after conference.

You know what their secret is? You know what they're doing? Repentance. That's all they're doing. So, our son Ben, went last weekend, for a conference.

[ 27 : 34 ] 10 hours, of prayer, in a triplet. Working through different categories, of sin, and confessing. And repenting. Very interesting.

Now, I'm not suggesting, that we all do this. We couldn't fit, 5,000 people in here. But the Christian life, is a life, of ongoing repentance. And I can't tell, and you can't tell, if I'm truly repenting.

But there are marks, from this passage. Let me just leave you with this. A life of repentance, will mean, you'll feel, the same sort of paroxysms, that Paul feels, when God is not honoured, as he should be.

Your faith, secondly, will not be safe, it will be subversive. And thirdly, you will see, that the gospel, has the power, to turn the lives, of others upside down, because, it's turned yours upside down.

Let's kneel and pray. Thank you. Thank you very,