The Life-Giving God

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[0:00] Welcome, everyone. So if you don't know me, my name is Aaron Roberts. I'm the minister for this service. I'd love to meet you if you're new. We are week six in a series tracking with the Life Explored course that some folks are doing in their home groups. And each week we're looking at an aspect of God. And this week it's the life-giving God. So we're in Acts 17. But it's probably helpful to give you a little bit of context. So let me do that. So Paul and his mates were on this missionary venture. They've been traveling around. And at some point he leaves his mates, Paul does, and goes by himself to Athens, Greece. And Athens, very important city at this time in the world. The cultural or at least intellectual capital of the world. Think sort of Oxford in the 19th century. So Paul is there. And it says in verse 16, which was before our reading, it says, while he was waiting, he was provoked in his spirit as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Because the city was just temple after temple after temple after temple after temple. And this word provoked in the Greek, it means like he's having these seizures. He's walking around, he's going like, oh my goodness, look at that. Oh, look at this. Would you look? I cannot believe they built that. Come on. So he's fired up and he starts preaching Jesus. Let me pause here for a moment. I think one of the challenging things for me reading this this week was I heard somebody say, we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel what Paul felt. We do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel what Paul felt. It's a good thing to pray about, I think. Because we live in a city of idols. And we don't want to sort of numb ourselves to that. We don't want to sort of spend our life just walking around our city going, ah, it's not so bad. Everyone's actually pretty happy and that's the main thing, right? Everyone's happy and that's the main thing. Everyone's okay. Our city is actually rife with idols. And these idols rob people of their life. Let me read to you a quote from the late David Foster Wallace. He just died a few years ago. He was a novelist. He was a really great thinker, not a Christian as far as I know, but he got the idolatry thing down, I think. I read a short quote from him. He said this, if you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you'll never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you'll always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect being seen as smart and you'll end up feeling stupid or fraud, always on the verge of being found out and so on. So folks, we want to pray that we, like Paul, are outraged by the idols of our city, the things that people put at the center of their hearts. So we have the courage to speak. Now, back to the story. So Paul is preaching and he comes into contact with some philosophers, some Epicureans and some Stoics and they're like, what are you talking about, Paul? What are you talking about, this kind of new fancy, these new fancy ideas you got? See, for him, it's just all quite amusing, right? These guys were the academic elite and they loved debating ideas. So they think, okay, let's take Paul and we'll bring him before this court of intellectuals, which is called the
Ariokobus. And so they bring him in to hear him speak about his crazy, wacky ideas. So that's your context. That brings us to verse 22. So Paul's got this great chance to speak to the cultural elite of perhaps the most famous city in the world at this point. And I think quite helpfully for us, it was a city that had a lot in common with Vancouver. Let me read a summary I read this week of Athens at the time. Tolerance was highly valued. It was multicultural. It was spiritually fuzzy.
They love sports. Of course, this is the home of the Olympics. They love fashion. They love material wealth. They're really into nature, rights, self-sufficiency, and God-ish. Perhaps there's a God. Maybe there's a God we don't know. Paul gets to speak to them. So what does he say?

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What does he say? Well, he begins by trying to just connect with them. And he's quite civil, actually. Verse 22, men of Athens, Paul says, I perceive that in every way you're very religious. It's quite, you know, like he's greasing the wheels a little bit.
[5:03] For as I passed along, I observed the objects of your worship. I found also an altar with this inscription, to an unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I'll proclaim to you.

It's very clever of Paul here. Now, what's the story with this unknown God? The unknown God, the unknown gods, were like the safety net gods for the Athenians. You could call them the just-in-case gods. So just in case there's the God I don't know about, that I've never heard of, a God that could possibly be helpful to me, well, we've got a temple for that God, and we can go in there, and we can worship him, and I'm kind of, I'm just kind of covering my bases, basically. So Paul, very cleverly, he says, look, I noticed this temple to this God. This God, you don't know the name of this God.
You know nothing about this God. Well, let me tell you about this God. So he makes this clever connection. And then he moves to the meat, the meat of what he wants to say, and that's verse 24 onwards. And let me give you first an overview of his strategy, and it's very simple and very interesting, actually. What he does, he says, here's what you guys think the gods are like.
And then he flips it on its head. He says, here's what you guys think the gods are like. And he flips this on his heads. He says, it's the opposite of what you think. He does that three times. That's the structure of the sermon, three times. So here's what we're going to look at.
They think God is X, and the truth is actually it's Y. So the first one, verse 24. Therefore, the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. God made everything, Paul says. And yet you make these temples as if God needs a roof over his head. Does that make sense to you? He's saying to these philosophers. Does it make sense to you that the God who created everything can be contained in a temple? Does that make sense to you? He says. Does it make sense that you can capture the gods in a beautiful building? If you think that's true, you've got the wrong idea.
[7:24] And here's where he does the flip. He says, you don't need to build a house for God. He has built a world for you. And that's the flip. Verse 26.

He has made from one man every nation of mankind to live in all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. We don't need to make a home for God. He makes one for us. So Paul takes the idea of this very small God and he flips it. He flips it to the truth. The second flip. Verse 25. Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. So there are a couple of aspects to this one.
So in Athens, there would have been like round-the-clock worship of these Athenian gods, people sort of feeling like they need to sustain the gods with food and rituals. These gods can never be satisfied. And Paul says, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.
No, no, no. No, this is not how it works. We don't sustain God. He sustains us moment by moment. I'll read the verse again. You'll hear it.
[8:42] Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. Now it goes a bit deeper than this. Why do people bother going to the temple back in the days? Why bother? What was the motivation?

Well, the entire religious apparatus of Rome, which was overlooking this area at this point, the entire religious apparatus of Rome was based on the idea that you do things for the deities to get them to do something for you. Like leaving them food, for example. You do things for your gods and they will do something for you. And so they had all these specialty gods. I'll rattle a few off for you. Athena is the goddess. Well, actually, does anyone know Athena, the goddess of who? Anyone? Wisdom. Great. Thank you. Wisdom. So in the temple, there was a picture of Zeus with his head being split open and Athena being taken out of his brain. So if you want to be smart, you want to be wise, you go worship Athena. Artemis. Artemis. Artemis. The goddess of what? Anyone? Prosperity and money. So you want some of that? You want some of that action? You go to the temple and worship her. You go and make offerings to her. Nike is an easy one.
Victory. The goddess of victory. Worshiped by athletes and warriors. Aphrodite. Anyone? Love. What's that? Love. Sexuality, beauty, fertility. You want some of that? You go worship with Aphrodite.
[10:25] Here's a good one. This is the last one. Cloacena. Anyone? Cloacena for extra points. This is a very important one. The goddess of the sewer system.

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So you laugh, but when your toilet's broken, right? So they had this elaborate wastewater system way, way, way, way, way back in the days. And Cloacena was the goddess who looked after the sewer system. You wanted that thing to keep going? You worshiped Cloacena. I don't quite know how you worshiped her. Sometimes we light a candle in our bathroom.
I don't know if that's like... Is that idolatry? I don't know. Is that idolatry? I don't know. So you see, right? So you've got all these gods. But here's the thing. You used the gods.
They were used to get something. Money, sex, power, you know, a functional toilet, right? You used the gods. Now look at verse 27. It explains the whole point of God making the world. Paul explains the whole point of God making the world. God made people and the world, verse 27, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. That they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him. For He's actually not that far from one of us, each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being. So the Athenian gods were just... And I really hear this. The Athenian gods were just a means to get something else. But Paul says, no. Flips it. He says, no. The true God is His own reward. The true God's His own reward. So when you pray, what's the reward?
What's the payoff? It's God. God is the payoff. That's the reward. It's just being with God.
[12:29] That's the big payoff. You get to talk to God. I'll summarize it like this. The Greek and Roman gods were always a means for something else. And Paul is saying, no. The greatest pursuit of your life is to find God and to seek God. The best thing you can do with your life is not try and leverage God to achieve something else. The best thing is to seek God always, ongoingly.

And then Paul... So that's two flips. Paul then summarizes his speech with this quite killer line. He says, Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. If God is the creator of all, not some tribal deity linked to a... that has sort of a limited sphere of influence, you know, whether it's sort of like the sewer system or, you know, sex or sports or whatever.
If God is the creator of all, not some tribal deity, if he's the creator of all and he sustains our life moment by moment and our greatest end in life is to be with him, if that's all true, you're foolish to think you can just reduce them to something that you can hold in your hands. So this is Paul's argument so far. He's trying to demolish their presuppositions and it sounds a bit harsh, but what he's doing in the words of Francis Schaeffer is he's blowing the roof off their current house so hopefully they'll seek shelter somewhere else.
Now how does Paul finish up? How does he land the plane, so to speak? Verse 30, 31. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.
So why bring up judgment at this point? Like, oh, come on, man. Why not talk about the cross and forgiveness? Why bring up judgment here? The people he was speaking to, the Stoics and the Epicureans who had brought Paul before them for their amusement. These folks worshipped their intellect. And they only brought Paul forward to them so that they could assess and judge his wacky ideas.
[15:03] They were there to judge this new God they were hearing about. And Paul says, no, no, it's God who will judge you. And I know this to be true because Christ rose from the dead.

Again, Paul is flipping, flipping the story. He's flipping the narrative. That's the third one. He's turning it on his head. What a foolish thing it is to judge God.
What a foolish thing it is to come to his word and read his word and think we know better. Well, folks, that's the passage.
Let's spend some time reflecting on what the Bible has taught us this evening. I think Leo is going to come up and play for us. And let's take this space to think, to pray.
You can pray alone if you like. If it's helpful, you can pray with somebody beside you or near you. Or you can just sit and think. Now, what to consider and pray.
[16:10] Perhaps you could pray to be provoked by the idols of the city like Paul was. Provoked to courage. As you consider what Christ has done for us. He wept over the city.

He wept over our idolatry. He came to us. He pointed us to God through his death and resurrection. You could pray to be provoked, perhaps. Or you could ask the Spirit to awaken your sense of God's greatness.

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That God, that he is the reward. Not that what he can do for us and what he does for us is incredible and wonderful.
But being with God is the great aim of life. This is an important prayer. Because the less time we actually spend with God, he shrinks in our minds. So, Leo, thank you for a couple of minutes.
Pray for us while we think and pray.

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