

The Name That We Know

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[0 : 00] So we are in, we're in Acts 17, and I want to focus in on Paul and Athens here. So Athens was, as a city, was a little bit past its prime at that point in history, but still a really amazing place, like the art and the literature and the philosophy and the architecture, like it would have been incredibly impressive.

But as impressive as it was, as Paul is walking around, it says in verse 16, he was provoked in his spirit as he saw the city was full of idols.

It's just, he's walking around, and it's just temple after temple after temple after temple. See, Paul believes in the one true God, and he sees, it's like he sees the honor that God deserves as being wasted on things made out of stone and marble.

So he's walking around, and he's seeing all this idolatry, and he's just really grieved about it. You know, whenever Jesus is denied his rightful place in someone's life, that should sadden us.

That should sadden us. It's a great temptation in a city like Vancouver, which is a very impressive place, like Athens would have been, a very impressive place, but also a very spiritually confused place.

[1 : 22] It's a great temptation for us to go, well, you know, my neighbors and my friends, they don't follow Jesus, but it's not so bad. As long as they're happy, or as long as they're sincere, I mean, that's the main thing.

No, no. Idols rob people of life, and they steal honor from God. And we should pray, like Paul, we should be grieved by this.

And that should give us the courage to speak. Okay, back to our story. So, Paul, he's in Athens, and he's supposed to be just kind of, you know, waiting for his friends to turn up.

But he's so moved by what he sees, temple after temple after temple, that he starts preaching, and he starts telling people about Jesus who was resurrected. And some local philosophers start listening to him.

They were called the Epicureans, it's one school of thought, and the Stoics, another school of thought. And they were like, Paul, what are you babbling on about? And for them, the whole thing is just, you know, it's quite amusing for them, this whole business.

[2 : 26] So these guys were the elite, the academic elite anyway, and they loved debating new ideas. And so they thought, well, let's bring Paul in to the Ariokobus, which was sort of this, it was like this court, the court of intellectuals.

Let's give him a chance to say his piece and explain his new religious ideas. And this brings us to verse 22, when we hear Paul's sermon.

So what does Paul do? I mean, how do you start telling people about Christianity who have zero knowledge of the one true God?

Well, he begins by trying to connect with them in a very gracious way, actually. Verse 22, he says, I perceive that you are in every way very religious. I found also an altar with the inscription to the unknown God, what therefore you worship as unknown.

This I proclaim to you. It's very clever, isn't it? So the unknown gods were like the safety net gods for the Athenians. So they were kind of like the just-in-case gods. So, you know, if there was a God that you didn't know about that could maybe help you in some area of your life, you'll worship it and you're kind of just covered, right?

[3 : 39] It's kind of a safety net God. That was their thinking. So Paul cleverly says, listen, I noticed a temple to this unknown God and this God that you don't know about this God. Let me tell you about him.

And then Paul describes God and he's very clever in the way he describes God. This is verse 24 onwards. Let me tell you what it's done. It's really interesting. He says, here's what you guys think God is like.

You know, this unknown God. Here's what you think this unknown God is like. And then he flips it on its head and he says, actually, it's the opposite. And he does that three times.

So we're going to look at that, those three reversals, those three flips. So the first one, verse 24.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

And so God made everything, Paul says. God made everything, he says. So does it make sense to you that the God who made everything could be contained in a building that you made?

[4 : 54] Does that make sense? And then here's the reversal. So he opens the door a little bit and then he totally flips it. He says, look, you don't need to build a house for God.

He built the whole world for you. This is what verse 26 is. And he made for every man, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

We don't make a home for God. He's made one for us. So you see, Paul takes their idea and he flips it on its head. It's the second reversal, the second flip.

Verse 25. Nor is God served by human hands, although he needs anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

So this is brilliant. This is brilliant. Listen to this. So the word served, nor is God served by human hands. The word served in the original language, which was Greek, that word served.

[5 : 55] Therapy is the word. Therapy. So the pagan gods, you kind of had to massage them a little bit. You just sort of emotionally massage them with round-the-clock kind of rituals and offerings in order to get them to do what you wanted them to do for you.

So the pagan gods, they were basically just a means to means. They were used to get something, money, sex, power, victory in some area of your life.

For example, if you're an athlete, you'd pray to the sort of the god of athletes. But to get what you wanted, you had to do a bit of therapy with the gods. You had to massage them, manipulate them a little bit, grease the wheels.

Now, see how Paul flips it in verse 27. In verse 27, Paul explains the whole point of God making the world.

So it's a big idea here. God made people in the world, verse 27, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

[7 : 03] It is actually not that far from each of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. So the Athenian gods were just a means to get something else. But Paul says the point of creation is to be with God.

In other words, we don't just seek God to get something else. The true God is his own reward. We seek him because he's glorious.

It's like when we pray, right? When we pray, what's the reward? What's the payoff? It's not just that we get the thing we prayed for if that happens.

The payoff of prayer, the payoff of worship, it's God. It's that we can talk to God. It's being with God. That's the big payoff. So this is like an alien concept to the Athenians.

I'll summarize it like this. The ancient pagan gods were always a means to something else, to something else that they hoped would make them happy. And Paul says, no, our greatest pursuit in life is to find God.

[8 : 12] The best thing you can do with your life is not leverage God for something else. The best thing is to seek God because of who he is.

And then Paul pulls these first two points together, these first two removals. He kind of pulls them together with this killer line in verse 29. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

If God is the creator of all and not some tribal deity with a kind of a limited sphere of influence like sports or sex or something like that, politics, right?

If God is the creator of all, our greatest end is to be with him. And if that's true, you're foolish to think you can reduce God into something you can hold into your hands, like some little gold statue.

Okay, so how does Paul finish up here? How does he land the plane, so to speak? With one final reversal. He says, If God is creator, we are accountable to him.

[9 : 34] Look at verses 30 to 31 there. The times of ignorance God overlooked. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Because he's fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

So that's Jesus. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Now, this might be slightly disappointing to you because you're thinking, why bring up judgment here? Like, why not talk about lacrosse? Why go all judgy at this point in the sermon? Because these folks, the Epicureans, the Stoics, they worshipped their intellect.

And Paul was this amusing, weird, religious, fanatic guy. And they only brought him into the Areopagus to judge him. They brought him in to judge him and all his wacky ideas.

They were there to judge this new God. And Paul says, no. It is God who will judge you. And I know this to be true because Christ has risen from the dead.

[10 : 44] This is Paul flipping the narrative again. He's turning it on its head. You brought me here to judge me and God. But you need to know that God's going to judge you.

Okay, let me finish up here. There is a lot in this passage we didn't get into. So I just want to leave you with one thing. If you're the kind of person that likes kind of one takeaway to go away and pray about, here it is, I think.

And I think it's the first point. Paul grieved over the city and it motivated him to tell him about Jesus. Like Jesus grieved over Jerusalem.

Do you remember that in Luke 19? Jesus looked out over Jerusalem and wept and wept and wept. They both, both Paul and Jesus, they saw what people were giving their lives to and how broken they were.

Folks, we are not going to have the courage to be public about our faith unless we feel what Jesus and Paul felt about the cities they were in.

[11 : 52] Because evangelism starts with this mix of love and grief. Do you feel that grief about your non-believing friends?

Do you feel that grief about your non-believing friends? Did you have it once? Did you have a sadness? Did you have this keenness for them to think about Jesus, to explore Jesus with them? Did you have that once but now that's faded? Well, look, there's the one thing. There's the one thing to take away and have a think about. Bring your heart to God and ask him to give you great love and great sadness for people, for the people in our city, your friends, your family, so that you would have the courage to tell them about Jesus.

Amen.