

Pauls Sermon About The Unknown God

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[0 : 0 0] Our God, as we, or may we, quieten our hearts before you, may we be ready through the foolishness of preaching to hear the incomparable reality of the Word of God.

And in that Word of God will you speak to the needs and longings and the deepest questions and questings of our own heart.

We ask in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. This is just about the end of the series.

We're not there yet, but we're getting there, of sermons on the sermons from Acts. And I suppose that the sermon we have to look at this morning is probably the most famous sermon in the history of the world, perhaps apart from the Sermon on the Mount.

But that was the Word of God speaking the Word of God to the people of God. This is a man of God speaking and preaching this sermon in a very peculiar situation in which he found himself.

[1 : 3 8] Paul had been stoned and thrown out and driven out and beaten at many of the places where he'd been preaching in recent weeks.

And so he was ready for a break. And so he, so to speak, booked into the Sheraton, Athena, and was going to spend a few quiet weeks healing from all the damage that had been done to him in the outposts of the Roman Empire.

And he got there, and he turned into a very disappointed tourist. One of the great problems of all the tourist literature that pours into Vancouver when the skies get gray and the rain starts to fall, and we are all very susceptible indeed, is the loveliness of the picture the tourist information puts in front of us.

And yet if you're an experienced tourist, you may know that there will still be a problem, a disappointment.

And Paul was a disappointed tourist when he went to Athens. This great center of the world, this capital of all the intellectual life of the ancient world, this repository of all the accumulated wisdom of centuries, this community in which philosophers had debated and politicians had schemed.

[3 : 1 9] And all of this had gone on for some centuries now. This place which was the great intellectual center of the whole of the Roman Empire. And Paul went, and he found he was provoked in spirit because of the mass of, well, of pagan idolatry as he saw it.

It somehow grated on him, and he couldn't understand. And sometimes tourists know best what's happening. I would love to be able to sit in this congregation this morning as a complete stranger, never having been here before, and to see what's going on with the eyes of a complete stranger and know what's taking place.

So we must welcome strangers in our midst because they can generally sense what's happening better than you and me who are conscious that perhaps there's a draft, or perhaps the caretaker hasn't cleaned our pew properly, or perhaps, you know, those things that occupy our little minds.

And we become totally obsessed with them and aren't aware of what's happening at all. Well, Paul was a disappointed tourist.

And he came to this city, and as was his custom, he took his disappointment presumably to the Jewish synagogue, and there he gave vent to his teaching on the Sabbath, and then through the week he went out into the marketplace.

[5 : 03] And the marketplace was a kind of haven of fast foods for intellectuals. That is, we buy fast foods and junk foods and various things.

Well, they did that in ideas. That's what happened in the marketplace there. They traded ideas with one another. And Paul, being something of an entrepreneur himself, got in and traded with the best of them so that he was giving them his ideas, and they were listening, and they concluded that he was talking about some foreign deities or demons that he called Jesus and the resurrection.

And they couldn't make that out at all. And so they arranged that Paul should be brought before the Areopagus. And the Areopagus was, I think, something perhaps like the Senate.

It was the place where certain issues were decided, not the practical issues of everyday life, but some of the other issues. And it suggested that in order for him to speak, he should be heard by the Areopagus to see that he wasn't undermining the life of the city.

And so they took him to this place. And there before the aristocrats, who were the rulers of the city of Athens, he made this presentation.

[6 : 27] And the presentation is found in Acts chapter 17, and beginning at verse 22, on page 130 in the New Testament section, where standing before this very aristocratic company of people, Paul said to them as follows, Men of Athens, verse 22, chapter 17, page 130, are you with me?

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and 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 proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything, and he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined the allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.

Yet he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your prophets have said, for we are indeed his offspring.

Paul continues, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that deity is like gold or silver or stone, a presentation by the art and imagination of man, the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men 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 all this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.

[9 : 01] The end of the sermon. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this.

Some put it off. So Paul went out from among them. Some men joined him and believed. Among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Amaris, and others with them.

You know, one of the great ambitions of my life would be to take that sermon and assign it to the philosophers in our midst this morning that they might come back on the feast of Christ the King a year from now and say what they conclude about philosophy and the man who was risen from the dead.

And I would like the social geographers to take what Paul says about the limits of human habitation and to come back a year from now and tell us what they found out about that.

And I'd like the politicians to take the social and political structure of this city and to examine it and come back and tell us about that. And I'd like the anthropologists to come back with some report on the view of man held in this city.

[10 : 24] And I'd like the artists to come back and talk about the fundamental meaning of art. Because all these things Paul touches on as he goes through the few verses of this sermon.

The lawyers and the psychologists and the philosophers and the geographers and all of us could come together and share some of the richness that I think Paul opens up.

This in a sense was the death knell of that city when Paul preached that sermon. I don't think they knew it and I'm being highly speculative in saying it. But I think people still go to see the Parthenon because of what Paul said about the art and imagination of man.

Not because it's the ancient shrine of a Greek goddess. But the beauty and magnificence of what man is able to do under God's guidance.

And how wrong he can be in understanding his own skills and his own ability and his own technical expertise. So much of the glory of man was wrapped up in this city.

[11 : 41] And what did Paul find there? Paul found there one thing. Ignorance. Now I don't think he's being arrogant when he says this.

Because I don't think this was ordinary ignorance. Some of us are wonderfully and justifiably ignorant. We have good reason to be ignorant.

But the ignorance that Paul ran into in Athens was an ignorance which was a studied ignorance. An ignorance which was not man groping for the light, but man having seen the light, he turned away from it.

And he cultivated this ignorance. And he made of it a place where he could hide from the reality of God. So that when Paul took the inscription that was on that altar to an unknown God, he said in effect, that God is not unknown because he's unknowable.

He's unknown because you have chosen to be ignorant and to live in ignorance of him. You don't know God because you have chosen not to know him.

[12 : 58] And I am here to tell you about him, Paul said. And so he began. And he told them about who this God was of whom they claimed to be ignorant.

This is, in a sense, the intellectual bastion of the ancient world which cultivated an ignorance of God which sophisticated people today still use in order to protect themselves from the knowledge of God.

And Paul proceeded to dismantle this bastion of ignorance. And he told them in so many terms, you're very religious.

Does that not suggest to you that when you are crowded in this city by idols and idolatry and altars to unknown gods and a whole pantheon of places of worship that somehow your philosophy has not given you the answer because the best answers that philosophy can give have produced a city that's full of idolatry?

Does that not suggest that there is built into this city some kind of basic contradiction? Your philosophy has failed? He said that I'm going to proclaim to you who this God is.

[14 : 36] This God whom you acknowledge to be unknown whom you have in fact chosen should be unknown this God is the creator and sustainer of the world.

This God does not and could not live in handmade shrines. That's what he called them.

And they were standing within sight of perhaps the world's most famous handmade shrine the Parthenon to the virgin goddess Athena.

God doesn't live in places like that. God in fact does not need to be served by man because he is the very source of man's existence.

You've got the whole thing the wrong way around. You regard yourself as those who serve the interests and purposes of God. the God who created and sustains the universe is the God who serves you from whom you derive your life and your being by whom you are sustained from day to day.

[15 : 59] God makes it his business to provide that for you. The basis of our relationship to him is not that we serve him but that he serves us and that our life is utterly dependent upon him.

He goes on to say I mean he says that sort of I mean these are landmark statements perhaps not for us because we've been familiar with them for a long time but he says that that let me find it.

He made from one that man the source of man is one he made from that one source which is God himself every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation that should be put in Latin and put up as an inscription over the anthropology department of the university I'm sure because what describes the Eskimo and the Arctic the Haida Indians on the west coast the people of the Nile the people of the Kalahari desert what describes the fantastic attachment people have to their land except that God put them in that relationship with space with the land and then he gave them within that a season in which to live a season of seasons and they live out the cycle of their lives in that setting in which God has placed them and he has placed them in that setting he says for the purpose that they should verse 27 that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him man's purpose is to seek and to know

God the provision of all that he's given to us is in order that we might come to know him and yet you have hidden him behind the bastion of your own chosen ignorance because you have determined not to know him not to accept the evidence not to see what is right before you you've chosen to remain ignorant that's a very sophisticated choice to have made your business is to seek and find God even he says your own poets know that and tell you that much he says that art and imagination he talks about that you see and that intrigues me when it says that and it's in in verse 29 we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone a representation by the art and imagination of man we sometimes think that our art is the highest attainment of our civilization when man creates something magnificent and beautiful with his hands with his imagination working in conjunction with the civilization and the education and the understanding that he has when man creates that that surely is the pinnacle of human achievement we preserve it in great galleries and temples that we can have it there but Paul says the source of that is God it's not you that's God's inspiration in man stirring him to think about things beyond himself stirring him to try and go beyond the wall of his ignorance with which he has surrounded himself that God has given us artists and people of imagination to try and force us to see what we refuse to see what we refuse to look at and that's why he says in verse 29 you don't do that you don't take gold and silver and stone and use the representations that you make out of that and fall down and worship it and say that is our

God that's not how it works God is the one who has opened our eyes to the wonder and reality of the world which we try with hands to give expression to well Paul says the time of this ignorance is ended you can't go on any longer deliberately cultivating this ignorance God has overlooked the times of ignorance but now it's time to repent do you writhe under that as I do it's why does he come back to that why because that's what has to happen we have to look at the flip side of our lives the other side the side which knows the reality of our circumstance the side which knows that we can't deny the existence of our

[22 : 06] God and of our dependence upon him we've got to repent we've got to change and look at that side of our lives we can't go on in our proud self-sufficiency our intellectual self-sufficiency we have to repent because there is coming a judgment and in this judgment God has already appointed the one who is to be the judge and he has marked him as the one who is to be the judge because when he was crucified and buried God raised him up and said this is your judge this man wounded in hands and side and feet he is the one who stands among you as your judge well no wonder they'd heard enough at that point and they turned away may God grant us grace that we don't turn away see what the what the

Greeks had in their philosophy sought to do they sought somehow to live life without getting involved in the hurt without getting involved in the suffering without getting involved in the evil to find some state of serenity some kind of dispassionate submission to the reality of the process of life so that they didn't get caught in it and Paul comes along and says you cannot avoid the fact that there is suffering you cannot blind yourselves you cannot hide behind your ignorance any longer suffering is a part of the human condition and the one who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross the one who made it possible to say that

I reckon that the sufferings of this present world are not to be compared with the joy that shall be revealed that one is the one who comes to us and is our judge we are judged by him we think that it is our place to look at him and to judge him and dismiss him and say what he contends we can know we can't know get rid of him and so we dismiss Jesus with mockery or perhaps say we'll hear another time about this for the present I have other things to do we're meant to hear him and we're meant to take the chosen ignorance by which we hide ourselves from the gracious presence and purpose of a creating loving redeeming

God and allow the barriers of that ignorance to break down we built them we can allow them to be broken down you see the lovely story that Jean read this morning of Christ being present in the frozen man the street cleaner and the young mother and in man turn our eyes the things and from poverty and from the desperate sufferings of human life we choose to be ignorant of and and we live in the castle of our chosen ignorance.

Paul says the time of ignorance is finished. It's over. It's time to repent and to recognize that in the man whose body was broken on the cross, the man who suffered and died and by God's demonstration rose from the dead, God demonstrating his glory, that man stands among us as our Savior and Lord.

[27 : 09] And if he's not our Savior and Lord, he is still our judge. Amen.

Now we sing together our offertory hymn number 127. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[30 : 23] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Eternal God, by your grace you have raised us up and enthroned us with Christ in the heavenly realms. Receive all we offer you this day and lead us in those good works for which you have created us.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. Amen. Amen. Let us pray.

[33 : 14] If you'd first of all take your Bibles and turn to Psalm 130. It's on page 549 in the Old Testament section.

Amen. God detective 23, taking care of us. You are there, the times of hearing mostly in the name of Jesus Christ in the skies and■■■■■. Spanish cross New Children's speech including zwei countries 10 months. Goes for now to Exciterion purity or subject nessa calendar. Exactly.■■ submerged. The