

Acts 17:22-34 "Is Jesus Really the Only Way to God?"

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Today is the last sermon in our summer series on tough questions. These are hard topics and I, for one, will be relieved to get back to preaching through a book of the Bible as usual. Even if that means revelation here shortly. But in all sincerity, this study has been really helpful for my faith.

I pray that the same is true for you. And I pray that in addition to your own faith being strengthened, that you'll be encouraged to listen to, to engage with friends and neighbors because these questions we're talking about really are fundamental to life.

A foundational to eternity. We've talked about suffering and science and the Bible and hell. But today we close with a question that a lot of people ask.

[1:15] Is Jesus really the only way to God? And I want us to turn to Acts chapter 17 together. There are passages that answer this question more simply and directly.

But I really love this passage where Paul is in Athens and he's engaging with the philosophers of the day about such significant and eternal issues.

I'd encourage you, if you're not personally wondering about the question for today, think of someone who is.

Put yourself in their shoes. Think of someone you know, perhaps. Let's read God's word in Acts 17 at verse 22. With Paul standing in the center of the city's social discussion, underneath the shadow of the Parthenon and speaking to the crowds gathered there about Jesus.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

[2:28] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the 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 temples made by man, Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, Since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one 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, That they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

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

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.

[3:44] 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.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, Among them Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

This is God's word, let's ask for his help. Father, what an incredible day when Paul spoke, Would you do that now?

Would that be true again as we speak of this same Jesus with our friends and our neighbors and those we love? That your same spirit would be at work? Give us that hope in the resurrected, living, powerful Savior.

We ask you in his name. Amen. The nuns are on the rise in our culture, surveys tell us.

[5:31] The nuns are not an order of Catholic women, but rather those who describe themselves as having no religion at all.

Some of you in this room think of yourself that way. One of the interesting things is less than 20% of the nuns in America say that they are atheists.

In other words, the large majority of them are open to the idea of God. They're asking some honest questions about what God would be like.

Questions like the ones we've asked this summer. And one of the benefits of asking such questions, if you're one who's prone to doing that, one of the benefits of having an open mind is that many people are there interested in answers.

As G.K. Chesterton once quipped, an open mind is like an open mouth. The purpose of its being open is to close it on something substantial.

[6:53] What I mean is, in different words, we're all actually worshipping something, all of us.

Whether or not we would use that word worship.

Most of us are looking for some centering principle for our lives, something that helps us understand our place, our significance in the world, that gives us meaning and purpose each day.

Even if some wouldn't call it God, we're looking for something bigger than ourselves to be a part of.

If you don't believe me, go to a college football stadium on a Saturday this fall.

It may be freedom that we're looking to, being true to myself, right? It may be success, professional advancement, or money will make me somebody.

Or it may be pleasure. Maybe happiness will satisfy me deep inside. But we're all looking for something that we can live for.

[8:01] And this is where Paul makes his connection with the intellectual elite in Athens. Athens long, the philosophical center of the world.

Paul's going to answer yes to our question, is Jesus really the only way to God? But he wants to connect with his hearers first.

He wants to help them understand Jesus as answer to questions they ask. That they too ask questions to which Jesus is the answer.

That's what happens here in this interaction. Paul sees this altar, right? To an unknown God. God, you've got questions, he says.

Amidst this Greek pantheon of gods and idols, they had plenty of them. There's one for crops, right? There's one for your family.

[9:05] There's one for love. There's one more here. To an unknown God, you know, to cover their bases because they weren't sure that they had life figured out.

That they'd covered everything. There was no one God that could handle all of it. But Paul doesn't leave them just with open minds, right?

Searching for answers, not caring where they find them. No, Paul has more in his heart for them.

He says, you worship.

You worship. What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. For our purposes, Paul says three things.

First, there is a God who made all this world, including us. That's where he starts, right? Paul says, there's a God, not one tribal deity among many, but the one supreme over all.

[10:16] He does not depend on people to serve him like your gods do. But he makes the world and all people. On top of that, this God is involved in the world.

Now, here's where it starts to get a little bit different from what they would have expected. Some of them would have expected there was a God. But this God, he says, is involved in the world.

Where people live and when they move and every other piece of society, this God is involved. And that's new information. But see, they loved new ideas.

That's what they gathered to talk about. It would be new to them because their leading philosophies, Stoicism and Epicureanism, are mentioned in verse 18.

They were both functionally naturalistic, like many in our culture today. In other words, if there was a God outside this world, and maybe they weren't sure, but if there was, he didn't get involved here.

[11:27] So you were stuck dealing with yourself, your desires, your emotions, either way. Paul says this true God is different from that.

He's inside and involved. In fact, there's a reason, Paul says, this true God is so intimately involved in this world.

This God is personal, and he wants a relationship with us. Track there in verse 26, why did he make them and put them in this time, in this place, verse 27, that they might seek God and find him since he's actually close to us.

So he says, listen, listen, don't think that this true God is made of stone by men. Don't think, friend, that life's centering principle is something that we invent, that we could come up with, that we could concoct.

No, he made us and is personal. And that speaks to his reality. This is important to follow.

[12:46] See, if God is just some man-made God of gold, then you can pretend whatever you'd like about who it is and what he does.

You could pretend that he'll hear you if you dance longer or reward you if you say the magic words or that he'll satisfy you if you mix in other pursuits and you learn some calming postures.

Whatever. You get to make it up if you made the God. But if God is personal, then like you or me, you have to know him for who he really is.

That's what it means to be a person. Paul says, truth is a person, someone you know in relationship. So, you should not say, well, you know, I like to think of God as a vengeful warrior or a heavenly Santa Claus or a cosmic cheerleader who supports whatever I want to do.

No, no, no, no. Even if you really like the idea of God being like one of those things, it doesn't make him that. He's a person.

[14:06] You can think of Will Spink as a gifted auto mechanic who hates people and loves cooked spinach. You can, but you'd be wrong on all counts.

In fact, if you really, sincerely believe those things, you are really, sincerely wrong. See, truth, God says, is a person you can know in relationship.

Truth, then, is based not on sincerity but on reality. Because God can actually be known because he wants relationship with us, because he's a personal being, you can be sincere in your thoughts about him and be sincerely wrong.

Right? That's what Paul's saying. And by the way, any other kind of God, a distant one, an impersonal one, you got nothing to do with, right?

And nothing to worry about from anyway, so don't bother with that option. One side note before we move on to Paul's punchline.

[15:24] I hope that you, just if you grabbed this verse and thought, man, this isn't even really what Paul's building to, but I hope you can stop here and remember how much God wants to be in relationship with you.

Can you see that there in verse 27? Why he's doing all of these things in history? When we talk about our faith priority, the importance of owning our relationship with God, we don't mean that it's up to us to figure it out and make our way up the mountain to God to finally get to where he is.

No, he has made us and he has placed us when we are and where we are that we might know him. He made you and placed you in Huntsville, in the 21st century, in your school, in your friendships, in your neighborhood, today at Southwood Church.

Why? Why are you here? That you might know him because he wants to know you and he wants you to know him.

[16:37] I hope that encourages you. I hope that warms your heart to him to making a priority out of that relationship as he makes a priority out of it.

If that doesn't do it, how about the fact that he came after you for that relationship? God became man to fix our broken relationship.

This is where I want us to slow down. It's Paul's climactic point. Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that he uniquely is the key to this relationship.

It's what DJ was just singing about, right? It's a living hope. See verse 30, God commands all people everywhere to repent, to turn back to him as the true God, not just one among many, not just take your pick today or this week, to turn back to him as the true God because, verse 31, God 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. boom. Paul has moved immediately and starkly from philosophical to practical, from theoretical to tangible, from hypothetical to historical, right?

[18:23] Why is Jesus the only way to God, Paul says? Why, if God so wants to have this relationship with us, are there not just a million ways and you can get to him any way you please?

Because God is a person and no other person has ever risen from the dead like this but God has in the person of Jesus.

So to finish Paul's argument, that got interrupted there in Athens, the unknown God is unknown no longer but has made himself known in Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead.

He's how you know God. Yahweh, his personal name, has sent his son and he's the way that you know God. See, the point Paul is making is there's a lot of philosophical things you can talk about but in an objective human history, Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't.

Right? It's not like, well, kind of and maybe he either rose from the dead or he didn't. It is a debated, admittedly, historical fact that makes a significant statement about who God is and this is why saying that all roads lead to God while perhaps well intended by some actually does not respect any religion except the one belief system that embraces that particular theory.

[20:12] That's not the teaching of Buddha. That's not the teaching of Muhammad. That's not the teaching of Confucius. That's not the teaching of Jesus. They all present unique ways to experience the divine.

And by the way, only one of those founders claims to have died and then risen from the dead. You can visit Muhammad's grave site today.

The resurrection of Jesus is where all these roads diverge, isn't it? See, Muslims talk a whole lot about Jesus, but they don't believe that he died.

Jews talk a lot about Jesus, but they don't believe that he rose from the dead. Christians understand that both the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus are essential for our salvation, for our relationship with God to be restored.

the life giver must pay our penalty and then conquer death once and for all. And what does he do? Jesus appears to hundreds, starting with women who wouldn't have been legal witnesses.

[21:33] He appears to hundreds and hundreds on different occasions. In fact, many of his followers who see him then end up giving their lives to defend the truth of the resurrection that they saw with their own eyes.

None of the religious authorities, none of the Roman authorities who desperately wanted to stamp out this movement could produce his body days or even months after his public crucifixion.

If you think of the resurrection as something that Jesus' followers made up to pretend that he was God, and he really didn't think that, now just remember all the things Jesus himself said and did to demonstrate his self understanding that he was the divine son of God.

What does Jesus do? Jesus forgives sins. Jesus accepts worship. Jesus commands creation. Jesus speaks of the unity that he has with his father, and then he says in John 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the father except through me. undeniably an exclusive claim. Right or wrong, an exclusive claim.

[22:52] One echoed by the apostle Peter in Acts 4 as he says of Jesus, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

He said the Bible's answer, answer, Jesus' answer, the apostles' answer to the question of how to live a meaningful life.

How do people separate it from the God who created them in his image to have a purpose for which he made them? How do they get back into relationship to have that image restored completely from cover to cover?

the answer to that question is Jesus. Right? The death of the sacrificial lamb. The life of the resurrected king.

Jesus is the way you find the purpose and significance that you feel deep inside but you can't live up to, that you struggle to explain in the real world.

[24:01] Jesus is the way to God. God. Now that can be good news. That you today can respond to that with joy and embrace and believe in him but I understand that often statements like that Jesus is the only way to God are more of a shock to our system.

Especially with our modern sensibilities. People often ask our question this morning because the exclusive claims of Jesus sound to them narrow minded or intolerant or arrogant. You may have heard those words in that context. It's important to say that sometimes the way we hold these truths is arrogant.

Right? Shame on us. Father forgive us for ever being like that. Actually properly understood the claims of Jesus should make us not arrogant but humble.

Eager to see others as better than ourselves. Empowered to love sacrificially since that's what the Savior at the center of Christianity is and does.

[25 : 29] Those are resources that no other religion has. We ought to live like that. But if the claims of Jesus are true, demonstrated by his rising from the dead so that we can trust everything else he says, then sharing them in love is not arrogant or intolerant.

I've told you before of this evening that I was on some nearby trails and starting to get really confused about where I was.

I was turned around, I walked in circles, it was starting to get dark, I decided to run some but I didn't know if I was running in the right direction, I walked back a little bit, tried different trails.

I was urgently needing to get back to the safety of my car. When I walked past an old sign that said parking lot this way and it pointed to a trail.

Now that trail was not one that looked very bright, it was getting quite dark and looking down the trail I could not see the parking lot. There were actually a couple other trails nearby that looked a little bit brighter but I followed the trail within a few minutes, made it back to the safety and rest of my car.

[26 : 54] Now listen, that sign was not arrogant because it told me the one trail that led to my car, right? And it would not have been loving to label all of the trails with the same sign when some of them were actually loops that I could have walked around all night and never found my car.

The only way that the trail, the way, doesn't matter matter is if the destination doesn't matter, right? But if there is a personal God, if there is a true source of safety and rest, then we follow the sign to Him and we know we can trust Him.

Think about it this way, I hardly hesitated when I saw that sign. I was looking for a sign to follow, right? But to be honest, it was kind of an old sign and I do know some kids who have sometimes in their boredom or mischievousness decided to mess with a sign and point it down a wrong trail.

Maybe they were messing with me. I couldn't be sure that that trail would get me to my car just because the sign was there. But what if there was a person standing there instead of an old sign? What if there was a person saying, I've just come from the parking lot and I've got a headlamp that's really bright. Jump on my back, in fact, I will carry you there to the parking lot.

[28 : 33] Wouldn't that be even better? Jesus is the person who came as the way to safety and security and joy and hope and life with your heavenly Father that you may never have personally met.

Jesus says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

He's the door of the sheep because he is the resurrection and the life. We need no other way.

Jesus saves. That's our hope.

God. One other concern that causes some people to ask this question is their genuine care for those who have never heard the good news of Jesus.

I love the heart of that concern. A couple of things I want to say briefly. First, the Bible says that creation itself testifies to God.

[29 : 44] It's a way, all of creation is, that God generally reveals himself and his character to all people. So there's always a sign pointing to God near everyone who has ever lived and who knows all of the ways that God might use this sign to point them to Jesus.

I don't know. But we do know the most common way that God does that and that's that God sends you and me to them. That's the message of Paul in Romans 10.

How will they believe in him of whom they have not heard and how will they hear without someone preaching? If that's a burden on your heart, how is God sending you to be a part of that mission?

Sharing the good news, translating his word, equipping others to share the good news with people you'll never reach? Who are you going to meet this week that you can share with? So there's creation.

There's God's people as ambassadors of Jesus. And my single greatest hope by far is God himself. God's grace that is bigger than any of us can grasp.

[30:57] Let's contemplate this glorious truth as we come to this table. It's what I call inclusive exclusivity. people complain about the exclusivity of Christianity, claiming to be the only way to God.

But listen, many religions and approaches to life require a lot of proper performance from you to approach God, to get anywhere near him, to have any opportunity to be pleasing to him.

There's often a long list. Some require, in fact, multiple lifetimes of good deeds. Try that. others offer preference based on race, finances, or physical sacrifice, even harming yourself or others. Still others insist on inner peace from long practice of getting there just right. that. Listen, only Jesus says, God so loved the world that he didn't send a long list of things to do to get near to him, but in fact he gave his only son, the exclusive only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

whoever just does what? Believes. Whoever follows the light of the world will never walk in darkness. If you are hearing my voice right now, you are invited in, not excluded from, the family of God, the hope of Jesus, the Savior who's big enough for you.

[32:48] God is so gracious, y'all, that his family is made up of people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, tight laced rule follower types and go with the flow, partiers are all in his family.

I mean, just think it's amazing to consider the different ways people encounter Jesus and the different lengths of time they actually spend following him. The way to God.

Right? Isn't it the same for everybody? Don't we all have the same experience? We do not. Some never remember a day they didn't trust Jesus. Baptized before they can remember but prayed to trust Jesus in the church, nursery or VBS or their home at three years old.

Others met Jesus on a retreat as a teenager. Others spent years sowing their wild oats before a friend told them about a Savior who would forgive all those sins and show them the path of true life. Still others wrestled painfully through intellectual questions and discussed things with friends and others and then Jesus met them as an adult over coffee and they surrendered.

[34:06] Increasingly these days I hear stories of a man in white who appeared in a vision to introduce himself to people before they knew his name. And yet others are like the thief on the cross who doesn't follow Jesus a single day in his life here but spends eternity with Jesus in paradise.

Not because he knew enough, not because he did enough, but because God's grace saves people that you know didn't deserve it and never thought would encounter Jesus personally at all.

That's what God's grace is like so you keep praying, you keep sharing, you keep praying. What greater hope could there be than a God whose gracious character brought him from the comforts of heaven to the pain of a cross and the shame of a tomb for us?

Yes, Jesus is the only way to God but anyone, yes him, yes her, yes you can come to God through Jesus.

Jesus, praise the Lord. This may be your first day in church and you may think you are the worst person in here. You're not. But Jesus is alive for you regardless.

[35:24] You may think you have nothing to do with religion, with lists of rules, it's just anathema to you, with hypocritical people like you're surrounded by right now. Well then listen, come not to us, come to Jesus who brings you straight into a relationship with God because he's the way, the truth, and the life risen from the dead.

You have options. You can mock like some did that day to Paul. You can ask to talk more. We would love that opportunity.

We'll even do it after the service. You also have the option to join the man Dionysius on the philosopher's council or the woman Damaris.

Among others, you can hear the good news of Jesus and believe and find life in him today. I want you to hear the invitation straight from the lips of Jesus.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. I am the way and the truth and the life.

[36:39] No one comes to the Father except through me. And whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. Jesus sat with his disciples the night he was betrayed and he took bread and he broke it and he gave it to them as I am ministering in his name.

Give this bread to you. He said, take and eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Then after supper, he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

My blood shed for many. For the forgiveness of sins, drink from it, all of you. Do this. Eat this.

Drink this as long as you're remembering Jesus as you do. If your hope is not in Jesus, don't come and perform a religious ritual that your heart is not in.

We're warned against acting like that. Instead, would you consider the offer of Jesus to bring you to God, to be the person at the center of your life that gives you hope and peace and purpose that you so long for?

[38:01] Jesus is offering you that today. And for those of you who have found him to be just that, even though you struggle, even though you may have wandered after idols, but you're coming back right now to the one in whom you found life.

You've been baptized in his name. You're part of his family at any church that preaches the good news of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Come and eat then with the one who comes first to set the table and to eat with you. Let's pray and we'll do that together. Father, Jesus, we're so grateful for you, for your salvation, for the hope that we have because you died instead of us and you live so that we will live with you.

Would you use very normal bread and wine to remind our hearts afresh that we have life in you?

We ask it in your name.

Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](https://yetanother sermon.host). Thank you.