

# Paul and the Athenians

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] we're going to look at acts chapter 17 we'll take up the reading again at verse 22 although i want to think about the whole of this passage between verse 22 and the end of the chapter acts chapter 17 and verse 22 so paul standing in the midst of the areopagus said men of athens i perceive that in every way you are very religious for as i passed along and observe 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 it's very doubtful if anyone in here tonight is either an epicurean or a stoic these were the two groups of men with whom paul argued in this chapter the epicureans and the stoics they lived a long time ago and they held to two very different beliefs and they are as follows the epicureans believed that the gods were not absolutely sure if they were gods but if they were that they were remote they were detached from the world and the gods whoever they may be are not interested in the world so say the epicureans they don't interfere with this life they keep their nose out of the affairs of men and women in this world they have no influence in this world they're not interested in punishing people either here in this life or the afterlife and the world and the motion of the world the day-to-day living whether it be animal human vegetable or whatever is all down to random a random course of atoms and it's due to chance there is no survival after death and there is definitely no need to worry about judgment because it's not going to happen because the gods if they are there they're not interested in what we do that was the epicureans that's what they believed the stoics were rather different their founder was a man called zeno i should probably have told you that the epicureans founder was a man called epicureus who died 270 bc and the stoics they were founded by zeno they were another group of philosophers they had a rather different idea of the relationship between the world and god they didn't believe in the same kind of gods as the epicureans epicureans weren't too sure but the stoics believed that god and the world were one and the same thing it's what we call pantheism in other words that god is not separate or detached from creation or from the world or from you and i but you know god and us and god and the world it's all one and the same thing and it's more god's more kind of a force rather than a determining force that determines the course of this world the movement and the motion of this world from one day to the next the actions and the activity of this world and rather than god being separate and determining or deciding how the

world is going to be the world is not it's not as simple as that according to them they say that they've said that it was determined by fate in other words if you've ever heard people saying whatever will be will be that was the stoic philosophy whatever will be will be and everything is going to happen by fate so if i was a stoic my objective my aim in life would be to find happiness by just submitting to whatever happens in the world just submitting to it if it's painful so be it if it's joyful so be it if it's easy so be it that's whatever will be i just need to accept and the more i can accept the happier i will be now as far as the epicureus were concerned they were their aim in life was slightly different they wanted to get the most out of life because there was no judgment the gods were not interested in them it didn't matter how they lived but that didn't mean that they just chose to live lustfully but it meant that they chose to try and find they were a wee bit wiser than that or so they thought they thought well let's try and look beyond just what i want let's try and find happiness when peace and so that's the way that's what their aim in life was they wanted to enjoy life and they wanted to enjoy they wanted to avoid everything that gives them trouble in life and to try and make the most out of their lives now whilst there may be no epicureans or stoics in stornoway tonight yet i wonder what your belief actually is that was the world of paul's day and that was the way people thought in athens and that was the world that paul faced in his day and there are some elements in what these two groups believe that are very relevant and very true in our day to day and i hope i'll be able to to prove that to you in a few moments time but just first i want us to notice that paul as a christian and

as a preacher of the gospel he lived for his day and he preached the gospel for and he met with the challenges of his day he spoke in the language of his day and he answered the questions of every generation and every culture has their own questions and every place you find the human being you'll find that he asks those basic questions which i hope at the very least that you will be asking tonight i hope that that's perhaps what brings you into this building tonight to ask not the questions that you that can be answered elsewhere but the deeper more profound basic questions which i suppose can be boiled down to three things if there is a god then who is this god and secondly who am i where did i come from what is it that gives me my individuality and my own person in this world and then thirdly is there any hope is there anyone out there can give me an answer to life after death now i don't believe that there's anybody in this world any thinking person who hasn't asked those three questions and i'm sure many more and these three questions lie at the heart of who we are as human beings and i believe as paul believes that the gospel and the bible has the answer and a very definite and a very clear answer to those and that's what paul in in his sermon here in in acts chapter 17 declared to all of those people who were asking these questions he declared those three things first of all who god was secondly he declared that who they were and thirdly he made clear to them where their hope lay for life after death these are the three the three questions then um that uh lie at the heart what then are the challenges of the day and the age to which you and i belong today in the 21st century we're not epicureans and we're not stoics and yet am i not right in saying that if i was to ask people their belief in god that it would pretty much boil down to either someone who believed well god and the world are both one and the same thing and and i don't know where we got this idea of the infinite personal god from surely god is the world and all the forces of nature that is what i believe god to be or someone could equally say well we're not too sure but i believe in something out there the truth is out there somewhere but i'll never discover it i know it's there but i can't be certain of anything that's exactly what you find people saying today either one of these two things either that god and the universe are both one and the same thing and that fate determines whatever whatever is going to happen in this world or in this universe and i might as well just accept my fate for what it is or the person who says to me well i do believe in god but i don't believe i know what god is like and i certainly don't believe that that he would be have any interest in me you see that's a bit of an excuse isn't it it's a nice excuse if you believe in a god who's far away then he's not threatening is he or she or it if you believe if you take away the personality and the power and the interest of god then you end up with someone who's so far away he's not interested in the world that makes it nice and comfortable for us to live as we like and that's the way we want it because the moment we begin to think of a personal infinite god that actually takes an interest in you as a person it makes you feel uncomfortable makes me feel uncomfortable and that's why we don't like to be told that's exactly i believe why those people took such exception to what paul was saying because he began to probe and he began to to prod and enter into areas in their lives where they didn't really want them to enter so it's far more comfortable to believe well the truth is out there somewhere but we will never find out what that was long as you continue believing that then you can live any way you like because you'll never come to certainty and you'll never find the truth and that's fine because that's the way it is you are an epicurean or you're a stoic whether you like it or not you may never thought of yourself as an epicurean or a stoic before but there's nothing new under the sun you see these people were thinkers they were children of their own generation they were readers they listened to all the latest ideas they took seriously the questions that i've just talked about where did i come from what's the explanation for that's what you call philosophy and you can go through a whole history dating back hundreds of years and you can read about the ideas of of of aristotle and plato and all of these men who who dominated the philosophical industry at that time and who came out with idea after idea and so it became a bit of a game that's why we read there that all that what does it say it says that all the athenians athens was renowned as being a place where the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new so you would go to athens for this very purpose you would go to listen to some new idea that would come about how the world came to be or what humanity was all about or what god is if there is a god and what does he like and all this kind of thing and then you would give then you would share the idea and you would debate and you would argue and you would give one argument and then another person would give and then you'd go home having had a very fruitful day you would have nothing at the end of it but you would have a nice argument and a nice discussion that was the way in which people passed their times today you

pass your time by playing a game boy or playing a or going and watching eastenders on the tv but that's the way they passed their time that's the entertainment that they got and these are the places that influenced their thinking today what influences our thinking is what's happening on er and what's happening on eastenders or what's happening on on big brother that's the way we pass and that's where the world gets its values from and that's where they get their guidelines from what other people are doing so if you see somebody who whose role model you like on tv then you take your values and your interest from that person or that storyline or whatever now you have to take it seriously because because it has a massive influence on the way people think and if i'm going to preach the gospel and if we're going to live as christians in today's world we have to confront the philosophy of today's world just like paul confronted the philosophy of today's world you see the problem is that having said everything that there was to say and having thought everything that they thought there was to think they were left with still this sense of emptiness inside and in order to try and fill or provide for that sense that's gap inside that trying to trying to provide for every eventuality with a god for every single thing they could think of they still were left at the end of the day with with something missing and that's why there was this altar to the unknown god that was the contingency and you have to have a contingency in today's world as well whether you believe whatever you believe you're always going to be left with some lack some gap some a sense of emptiness inside something that you're not getting to the unknown god and so tonight this passage is is is extremely relevant for every age whether you're an epicurean or a stoic or a modern day atheist or an agnostic or someone who's who does it for whom the truth is out there somewhere a post-modernist or whatever you are unless you have the truth there'll always be that unknown god that contingency there'll always be that gap and something missing that you'll try your hardest to fill and you'll never be able to fill it until you come to confront the truth in jesus christ now what does paul say well he he says he answers those very same three questions that i i started with a few moments ago he starts with the truth about god and i want us to look at these three things first of all i want us to see how he describes the truth of the living and the true god which was paul's apart from their perception and conception of what god was whether you were an epicurean or stoic or whatever you were that god is that there is is that that that god is ultimate and god is eternal and god who is real what does he say then about then the first of all in verse 24 he tells us this the god who made the world and everything in it being lord of heaven heaven and earth does not live in temples made by man now you see when you think about this when you think about what god we're not talking about something that's examinable or we're not talking about something that we see or hear or experience in this world something tangible we're talking about god you see very often when people have debates about god they talk about god as if something that you find in the kitchen but when we whenever we talk about we have to change our our mindset altogether don't we we have to say we have to think well what do i mean by god what what what am i actually meaning when i talk about god first and foremost what makes god god is the fact that he has made everything in this universe this whole universe has come to be by the will and the purpose of this supreme eternal unchangeable inscrutable being that's what i mean by god and when you think about it you know if god hasn't created the universe as paul says as god if he hasn't made heaven and the earth then he's not god because it means that the heavens and the earth the stars and the universe must have come into being other than god which means that well it's a bit of a waste of time talking about him if he hasn't made the universe so what qualifies him if we like to be god is the fact that he is the ultimate creator the ultimate creator and of course right there and then you're confronted with with uh what some sections of science believes which is that there is no creation but that there was rather a process of development of natural development starting from who knows what and that development has resulted in the universe as we know it over the process of time and millions and millions of years and a process of chance happenings process what they that they call evolution which has left us the way we are in this world and uh and everything uh everything uh uh the the forces of nature have determined if you like a bit a bit a bit like the stoics but if you go down that road you really have some problems your first problem is well how do i know that it is true how do i know why should i put my faith in science any more than in the bible oh well people say well um because science has proved hasn't it that that we have come about by a process of evolution well they haven't it simply is not true that we have come about by a process of evolution and it cannot be proved either it is a theory something that some people have trusted in and grasped that to explain the existence of you and i and the universe but it is not true science because it hasn't proved because we're going back millions of years so they say to time

and chance and to that process that would that would they call an evolutionary process but by so doing they have taken god out of the picture removed the need from god that's why you have men like richard dawkins who is absolutely vociferously demanding that we take god out of the picture in our thinking and in our education and in our thought processes because science according to him has disproved the need for god and has pushed him out of the picture altogether because he says that we are now i'm asking you this question tonight here you have jesus christ on the one hand who is a real person and who has come

[ 20 : 20 ] into the world and who has who proved his identity unmistakably and you have someone like richard dawkins on the other hand who says who claims to have to have disproved the need for god i challenge you tonight that if you are going to believe him rather than jesus christ and if you're going to go down the road of believing that there is no god then you have put your trust in science or what he calls science which isn't actually real science at all but it's it's in his precise belief you have put your trust and your faith in him and you're saying because he's got a phd and because he's a lecturer in cambridge and because after all he must know more than anyone else about this that's what the world really see the problem is that we don't know what we're talking about so when we listen to someone who tells us that a b c and d and he uses fancy words to describe the way that the world came into being and human beings came into being because he's a scientist we say that's who i believe because he happens to use big words and because he happens to have a plausible argument you're putting your faith in him you're putting your faith and that to you is your religion because religion is whatever you give yourself to whatever influences your thinking and whatever shapes your life and your your movements and your lifestyle whatever triggers your decisions that's your religion that's what means more to you than than anything else and if that's what you ground your life on and that's what formed your life view then that's your religion that's what you put your faith in and that's who you your faith so i'm asking you tonight you take those two individuals and you ask who is really and truly more qualified in the big picture to shape my thinking who is it that really truly has proved himself beyond any doubt someone who theorizes and someone who because of because of slick use of language and slick use of scientific terms has told us because after all isn't it it's far more comfortable to go down that road than to go than to believe and accept that there is a supreme being who is interested in you and i and who's concerned about us who's made us to be individuals but if you go down the atheistic road then it leaves us as i've said often before it leaves us as having no significance in this universe there's no difference between us and a apple tree there's a difference in terms of molecules and atoms but really no value difference why should i think i am more why should i think i'm more valuable than my dog or have any more significance or value than a monkey in a zoo or something why if we've both evolved by a process of so-called random science and molecules i have it's a height of arrogance for me to say i'm worth more than some other life form it's also confusing as far as any conception of right and wrong a scientist i shouldn't say a scientist because there are many many good scientists who there are many believing scientists and who are just as vociferous about their faith and and science as well but the the evolutionist or the atheist who says who says that that there is no god and that the

modern world has pushed out the need for god has to has to ask ask ask the question well what do i mean by right and wrong does that mean that there is no such thing as right and wrong now someone like richard dawkins has come up with this elaborate theory called memes and a meme apparently is a some kind of some kind of something that is within the human race that that is picked up from your culture that in which your your behavior is shaped to do what you do and to observe what you observe and to take things from your culture and from what you see in other people and then you pass it on to some and that shapes what you believe to be right and wrong and it's all part of the evolutionary process and in order to keep the human race surviving we have to develop some kind of natural form of form of form of behavior pattern in which we don't kill each other and in which we form a value system but the problem is it doesn't exist it just doesn't exist it's all very well to use fancy words like that but then when i ask well what is a meme it actually doesn't exist there's no such thing but if i'm thinking tonight and if i was an atheist you know this i shock myself when i think sometimes i sometimes think if i said to sat down what would i be if i wasn't a christian maybe i would be a decent caring individual maybe but if i didn't think that there was a god and i was if i wasn't accountable to anyone and if there wasn't no such thing as right and wrong i i'm shocked to think of what i could be and i'm just waiting for the real consequences of today's new

atheism to really begin to show itself the real consequences you see you can't just be a today's atheists are kind of theoretical aren't they you go to somebody say well i don't really believe in god and they seem to have read the books and the god delusion and all the rest of it and they say well i don't but yet when you really put your mind to it it's the most frightening prospect to live in a world where there are no values where you can do what you want and don't give me this about oh as long as you don't harm anybody why shouldn't why shouldn't i am anybody if i don't believe that there's a god why why should i have that as a value system oh because that's the way that the human race is preserved but what if i want to preserve my humanity and what if i take a dislike to some group of people in the world that i think are a pest in the world either a race or a religion that i think are a menace to society or another group of society that waste taxpayers money in the world and decent people like me who've worked hard all our lives and and we should have more right to live than they and what if i want to build a world what if i want to say well if i believe in evolution then why can't it go my way because if i think feel so strongly about preserving my kind of humanity i want to get rid of the rest and don't think this is a joke because this has happened how do you think that's exactly what hitler did he believed that there was a part of the society which was a menace subhuman and so he decided to get rid of them six million jews he sent to the gas chamber that's why i'm asking it's fearful to think of what today's new atheism might produce it's fearful it's not theoretic it's not just a philosophy it grows into a reality when you start

putting it into practice it's not doesn't just exist today exists in the universities of cambridge or whatever tomorrow it will exist in real life now i know i've taken a bit of a detour but it really is something that i believe we should think about i believe that we don't give enough time to thinking about these issues and when we go in amongst people who think that way we don't have the answers you see paul was ready for for to meet the challenges of his world we must be ready to meet the challenges of our world today and it's not just down to ministers it's down to ordinary christian people to move in these circles and to think and to read and to be prepared for these answers because there are real reasons for the being and the existence of god there is a there is an equally plausible i believe a much more plausible answer as to why we are here and paul's answer is that that we are here because god has created us out of one single human being here he says he made from one man verse 26 one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth on all the face of the earth in other words what paul is saying is this that you epicureans and you and you stoics you may have all the fancy words and arguments but you still haven't shown me where we came from and what gives us our sanctity of human life and our dignity as human beings who has made us individual you see we're not just a flock of sheep because a flock of sheep are made up of individuals as well but we are all individual beings every one of us radically different from the other person yet all sharing the same humanity together why is it that we are so radically different from one another why is it that each one of us has our own personality each one with a capacity to wonder and marvel and ask and reason because says paul we were all taken from one individual who god created supernaturally in this world to be the first man and to bear his image and that's what makes us different and that's the only way of explaining the uniqueness of the human race that the difference between us and every other life form and what why we have that unique capacity of thought and reason and consciousness the consciousness that asks us that asks the questions that we're asking tonight if you're an atheist tonight then you're in the wrong place and it's a defect in your genetic makeup or your mimetic makeup that brings you here tonight but you know deep down that these are real questions and that you long to discover the real answers to those real questions and if you long to discover them then you have to go beyond human reason you have to go beyond that to what god has done and you have to ask what we're asking tonight as real real and tangible questions that form the basis of our existence but i want you to notice in verse 26 something very very interesting in verse 26 he says this he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having determined look at this having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place that they should seek god now what does that mean paul's argument is that god out of one man adam he has produced the human race through the centuries by ordinary generation by by parents having children and so on generation but then he says this having determined as part of the human the world that we live in that god has determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place now what in the world does he mean and what how does that affect the argument well i'm tell you what i think it means it means that we have been confined in many many ways it means that we live in a carefully ordered universe in which there are restrictions to what we can do and what we

can't do we can only be in one place at one time we can't fly you take away the airplane i'm not talking about the airplane that's ways in which a human by his genius has has defied these laws but that basic human being can't fly nothing nothing can do about it he simply hasn't been given the capacity to fly he can't run at 60 miles an hour none of us can run as fast as a cheetah we don't have the strength of an elephant we can't make ourselves invisible there are some elements that are invisible like gases that are invisible we are visible and we're tangible the same is true for time that's a restriction as well none of us can live in the past none of us can turn back the hands of time and go back into the past we're restricted to the here and the now none of us can be here and all of a sudden be in america we've got to be in one place and one time and one time we can't go back in the past and we can't go into the future many of us would love to go back in the past to undo the things that we've done it's not going to be in the past but we can't go back into the future one place and one time and one time we can't go back in the past and we can't go into the future many of us would love to go back in the past to undo the things that we've done in the past and perhaps some of us would like to see into the future but it's completely impossible we're restricted that's what that's what the apostle is saying now why is this so important it's important because when we discover there's two things first of all we want to investigate our restrictions and our boundaries and the world in which we live and now is that the correct use of science the correct use of science is to say well well what is it that keeps us here what is it that keeps my feet on the ground and of course isaac newton and gravity and the apple falling to the ground and how he determined the formulae for for the gravitational pull of there and so on speed and motion and flight and all of these things have been arrived at an understanding of all these things has been arrived at through the process of investigation and science it's part of our human makeup to investigate and makeup to investigate and to discover all of these things but you see what we should have done is we should have discovered these things and the more we discover the more glory we give to god because the more we should recognize that the world is so ordered and so structured and so carefully put together because if it wasn't we wouldn't be able to investigate them and to discover them if it wasn't there weren't laws that governs laws that govern every single aspect of life laws that govern heat and light and power and energy and all of the things that we that we've that we've commanded and that we've we've encapsulated and we've we've made use of in this world as human beings because if we had thought about it correctly as paul says we would have sought to know god more and more as the god who has created this carefully ordered universe but instead we discover something and we say look how great we are and then the next thing is how can i use this for myself instead of giving glory to god we give glory to god we give glory to ourselves so that we arrived in the 21st century we're saying god we don't need you anymore we've arrived where we are by by evolutionary process we've cracked it we don't need you anymore how dishonoring is that to god how utterly utterly dishonoring when you think about it you know there's one of the things that i learned in physics when i was a student way back i can can i forget forgotten more than i know one of the things was we remember doing energy levels in physics and about molecules and this is this is our makeup we're all we're all made up of these tiny little particles molecules and atoms and that they're there's all very carefully constructed energy units and nobody's quite sure of what keeps that energy going because if the energy is taken away that's it we're finished disappear that's a fact you ask any scientist and he'll tell you that i'm thinking i'm thinking how is it what's the explanation for the fact that i am actually held together by a power and an energy that i can't explain and the more i understand these things and i don't understand it fully the more i understand it the more i'm thinking whoa we are fearfully and wonderfully made and we have been made to discover god that's why human humanity has been made to communicate and to commune with god and god has not cast us off after we rebelled against him through adam he hasn't cast us off as he could have done but he's persisted with us even despite the outrageous ways in which we attempt to blot him out of the picture god has persisted with us to the point where he sent his own son into the world where god himself became a man and we're on to the third question i know the time has gone we're on to the third question and the third question is is there anyone out there that can give me any hope or any promise about life after death the atheist says forget it don't even think about it when you're dead you're dead you go into the dust of the ground or you're cremated or whatever there is no hope for life after death that's his answer but god is saying no i'm i have another answer i have created you for myself and you're accountable to me you can't just pretend that you're nothing because you're not nothing you have been created as you for a reason i have created you for a reason for a purpose and nothing you can do you might persuade

yourself but nothing is going to change that fact that there is life after death and the way that god proved it to us was in sending his son jesus christ and tonight i would love to think that you if you fall into the category i've described earlier that you'll go home tonight and that you will check this out for yourself check out jesus christ if you've never done it before and read through his life and ask yourself what kind of man is this that's what the disciples asked the more they saw the more the more amazement that produced in him as they saw a man who did things that they were unable to do and that they and us knew were completely impossible let me ask you this question tonight the bible says that jesus is god in the flesh god and man okay so you look at jesus christ those who looked at him those who whether you were a disciple or whatever you looked at him and you saw god

[ 40 : 48 ] in the flesh this jesus of nazareth is god now let me ask you this question if that is the truth what kind of person do you think would you expect him to be that's a fair question isn't it that's a fair question you know if they if a guy comes to your door and says i've come to read the meter the first thing you ask him is can you identify yourself please you're not going to let anybody into your house and entrust your property to someone who's who hasn't identified himself jesus is the same the bible does not expect us to accept the being and the existence of god without him identifying himself to us so here we are here's this question i know i'm running out of time here's this question what kind of person would you expect him to be why you say i would expect him to live a perfect life for a start i wouldn't expect to be able to see him doing anything bad or anything that i knew to be sinful this man would be what you see is what you get now you go through the life of christ and you show me anything any flaw any defect in his character any deception any prop pride any conceit anything at all show me jesus was able to say which one of you can accuse me of anything the next question is this what would you expect him to be like well i would expect him to do extraordinary things i would expect him to intervene in the natural processes of nature in the natural world what else did he do five thousand people saw him creating enough loaves and fish to feed them all in front of everyone he didn't do it in a tent where nobody could see him it wasn't some kind of trick it was impossible anyway he was he took five loaves and two fishes and he he multiplied them so that they fed five thousand people he didn't walk on the water without anybody seeing him all his disciples they looked they were amazed they were horrified they were fearful they got the fright of their lives when they saw him walking on the water why did they get the fright of their lives because nobody can walk on the water and you go through i could go i could go on and on and on and you see we read these things and we say ach well and you don't take it into your head or into your heart these were proofs that is jesus identity badge but the greatest of them all is what paul says here and he proved he's given assurance to all verse 31 by raising him from the dead and that's what got to them that's the point at which the discussion stopped there and then and which the most of them went home but the raising of jesus from the dead was the final and ultimate proof of who he was and why he came into this world and it's the proof that draws me with full confidence tonight and say i believe i don't have an answer to every question but i truly entrust my life to this man jesus of nazareth who is both man and god and who came into the world to save me from my sin and as long as i stay away from him there will always be an unknown god in my heart and that gap will never be filled ever ever as long as i live but the moment i come to jesus and see him for who he is and trust in him with all my heart and turn away from all the darkness and the sin in my life and accept what he has done for me in his love for me then the unknown god is not unknown any longer let's pray our father in heaven we pray tonight that you will speak to us clearly and powerfully oh lord we do not have the answers to every question

and our minds are filled with issues that we don't understand and yet you have made yourself known to us clearly and simply in the bible we pray that by your own unique power that you will change us and open up our hearts and give us that faith that rests in jesus and what he has done for us in his name amen some Thank you.