

# Who Do You Worship?

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[ 0 : 00 ] We can turn back to our reading in Acts chapter 17. We're looking at this section from verse 16 down to the end of the chapter where we find Paul in Athens.

And we can read again at 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 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. I believe in God is a statement that many people can make.

And if you're a Christian, it's the obvious statement that comes to you. I believe in God. It's a no-brainer because that's the God that we read of in the scripture.

But perhaps if you're talking to other people, you might say to someone around you, Well, I believe in God. And you maybe assume that they know the God that you are talking about as well.

[ 1 : 12 ] But do they? Well, if you go back to this book of Acts, chapter 17, and you find Paul here as he has come into the city of Athens.

And this is part of one of his missionary journeys as he's going around with Timothy and Silas as well. He's here waiting for them to join him. And as he's in Athens, you maybe would think that I believe in God was a common phrase that he would hear there as well.

And it was. I believe in God. And in the discussions that he would have with many people he met, that would be something that they would talk about. I believe in God. But it would be followed maybe by another question or another statement.

Which one? Or which ones? Paul here has come to the city of Athens. And as he's there, as he's waiting to be joined by others, he's looking around this city.

And he's fascinated by this city. And he's taking time to see what's going on in this place and among the people of this place. And it leaves him in many ways troubled and concerned about what he's seeing.

[ 2 : 27 ] If you ever go traveling to different places, if you go to maybe cities or towns, how do you go about finding out about that place? Do you maybe do research before you go?

You can look in your guidebooks. You can look online and try and find out what kind of place you are going to. You could maybe ask others. Maybe you know people who have been there before you.

So you ask them maybe questions. What kind of place is it? And you get very varied answers depending on these people's experience. But one of the best ways to find out about a place is if you go there to ask the people who live there.

To speak to them. To see what kind of place they would say it is. And that's what you see what Paul was doing here as he arrived in Athens.

You see it in verse 16 to 18. Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

[ 3 : 30 ] And then it goes on. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. So he was in among the people.

He was meeting them in all of these different places. The important places in this city. And as Paul did this, he saw for himself, he heard for himself that Athens was a place of worship.

But what kind of worship? As he spoke to the people, he realized that they were a people who were a people of worship. But it wasn't just I believe in God that they would say.

But what kind of God did they believe in? He met them in the synagogues. He met them in the marketplace. Now the marketplace was not just a place to go and buy things.

It was a place where people gathered to share ideas. And that's what he was doing with them. And so what kind of place, what kind of people did Paul find?

[ 4 : 36 ] Well he found in Athens it wasn't a place of atheism. A place that didn't believe in God at all. It was quite the opposite.

There was probably more gods in Athens at this time than there was people. They had a God for everything. And everywhere that Paul looked, he found on every street corner, on every place that he looked, a God of some form or other.

An idol or an altar or something that the people worshipped. And you see that he even saw, as it says in verse 23, an altar with the inscription, To the unknown God.

So it's like everything was being covered. Nothing was going to be left to chance. They would have a God to believe in for every circumstance. And even for the unknown, they had a God who they would believe in just in case.

That's what Paul found in Athens. It was a place of many gods. You wonder today if Paul was to visit Stornoway.

[ 5 : 48 ] What would he find here? How would he look around this town? What would he see? What would he perceive from the people here?

What kind of place is it? Well, in some ways he would probably say the very same thing. I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Because there are so many indications that this is a place of religion.

A place of belief in some form. But what kind of people does he find? What kind of worship does he find? Well, we are thankful today that he would find places where people come to worship the living God.

The God of the scriptures. The God that Paul himself believed in and brought to the people of Athens. He would find that. But he would find a whole variety as well.

If you look around today, you will find people in this town, in our islands, who will say that they are atheists. They would say they believe in many different things and believe in nothing.

[ 6 : 54 ] Not everybody here believes in the God of the Bible. And so you would find too that just like Athens, the town of Stornoway, the islands that we live in, are a place of variety, a place of mixture, of various kinds of understandings and beliefs.

We maybe know more so people who are on the same page as us in terms of believing in God. And we think that when we speak to people and we say, I believe in God, that we are speaking about the same thing.

But what Paul found that there was those who had their idols, their altars, their various gods. Do you find that when you speak to people around you?

When you tell them, I go to church, I believe in God. What kind of response do you get back? There probably was a time when we would say, I go to church too.

I believe in God too. But there's a whole variety now around us of people and understandings and beliefs. But what Paul does here is that as he comes alongside them, he draws them to see where the true worship is found.

[ 8 : 10 ] That is found in God who made heaven and earth and who gave his son, Jesus Christ, who came to die for our sins but who rose again.

And you see that in verse 18, what he was preaching at the end of verse 18, he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

And this provoked a mixed response. G.K. Chesterton once said, and this is what we find in our own day and age as well. When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing.

They then become capable of believing in anything. So it's not just a case of, I don't believe in God, therefore I believe nothing. But people become open to believe anything.

And that's the kind of city Athens was when Paul came in. A place where people had pushed God away and would believe in anything. And we're interested to hear something new all the time, as it says at the end of verse 21.

[ 9 : 18 ] That's the kind of world we live in today as well. People like to hear new things, like to hear new teachings. And that means that it's a day of opportunity as well, just as it was for Paul to present the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

And for ourselves today, it's the chance to ask, well, who do I worship? Who do I worship today? If I say I believe in God, what kind of God do I believe in?

Who is he? And what has he done for us? Well, Paul was confident in the God who had saved him. Who he had come to believe in.

And that's the God that he presents to them. And the first thing we see here is Paul speaks to them of the unknown and the known. You see that in how he presents to them that he found that they were a people who were very religious.

And in verse 23, The unknown he is showing can be known.

[10:37] Unknown in the person of Jesus. Athens was a growing town in Paul's day. It's probably about 20,000 people or thereabouts in the days of Paul.

And it was a place that was very cultural. It was a place that had a lot of culture, a place of thinking. You see that just in the few verses that we've read here.

The marketplace, the synagogue, the thinking, the teaching that was going on. There was a lot of it. And as with many of us who would go and visit a new place, we want to find a place to go and worship.

If we're there on a Lord's day, we want to go and worship. So it was with Paul. He wanted to go and see what kind of worship, what kind of place Athens was.

And he found there a synagogue. And he found, too, the marketplace. In verse 17, He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

[11:45] There was Jews he was meeting with. There was philosophers he was meeting with. He was meeting with all kinds of people. And whoever he was meeting with, he was talking to them, reasoning with them, teaching them about the God that he believed in.

And look at how he does it. He doesn't start by telling them where they are wrong. He starts by presenting it in a very positive way. In verse 22, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

He starts in a very positive way. So as he's preaching to them, he's revealing to them almost the kind of things that they have in common.

The same way as he does, as he's writing in the book of Romans chapter 1, he presents things in a positive way, that we are surrounded by evidence for God.

That we are surrounded by a people who are worshipping, a people who are religious. It's just what kind of religion we have. And you notice he doesn't try and prove to them the existence of God.

[12:59] Because he can tell already that there are people who know God in some form or other, because there are people of worship. But what he does is he talks to them about God that he knows.

For this God that you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you. And this is the God that they are to look to.

This is the God that we are to look to as well. And what Paul is getting at here is that in the heart of every one of us is this desire to worship something.

To worship something. That's why there are so many idols and altars in Athens. As it were, in all the places that Paul would travel to on these missionary journeys, there is a desire in every one of us to worship something.

It's just the question is, who or what are we worshipping? You know, in Edinburgh, there's a group that meets on the first Sunday of every month.

[14:10] They meet at 11.30am. They meet for about an hour. They sing songs together. They hear inspiring talks. They reflect on life.

They share with others who have come along. They eat together. They say, it's free for all to come. We are family friendly and we welcome all. What does that sound to you like?

It sounds like a church service, doesn't it? An hour of singing, hearing a talk, reflecting on life, meeting others. It sounds like church.

And it is church to the people who go to it. It's just a very different church to what we are. You see, it's a part of what they call Sunday Assembly. And this is a group that formed back in London in 2013 as an atheist church.

And the thinking behind it was that they were looking at churches as they met and seeing there's so many good things about church. But we want to leave God out.

[15:17] We want to leave Jesus out of it. And it's fascinating to think about how there's this desire to meet, to hear, to sing, to be together, to contemplate life.

A desire to worship, but without God. Now there's eight different countries that have these kinds of meetings.

They're established. But think about it. Would you be happy with that today? Coming here to just sing any kind of song. To hear any kind of message.

And to meet together. And to have an interest in one another. But without God. Without the scripture. Without any word of Jesus Christ. It would make us go away without anything changing. No difference. It might be good just to meet together. But we're missing the very point of life and worship. And that's what Paul is getting at here as he says to them.

[16:22] You have this inscription, this altar, to an unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you because this is what you need. And this is what we need.

Do you come here today just to meet with others? Do you come here today because you love singing? Do you come here today because there's an interest to see who's here or what's going on? Or do you come here to hear about the living God and Jesus Christ and what he has done? Who are you worshipping today?

That's what Paul was getting at here. Who is it that you are worshipping? An unknown God or one who can be known? And that's the second thing we see.

He goes on to show, well, what's the difference? What a difference there is between the unknown and the known God that Paul has to tell them of. The Sunday assemblies were probably a bit like the church in Athens in Paul's day.

[17:28] It was all about their own ideas and thinkings and inspiration. And yet missing the one who was able to give life to the full, Jesus Christ. They were looking for life, looking for meaning, but missing where it was found in Paul's day, as are many in our day as well.

You know, you think if only the Sunday assemblies in Edinburgh or wherever would read the Gospel of John. And there find the meaning of life. That Jesus says in John 5 verse 39, You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.

And it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me, that you may have life. You are looking for meaning. You are looking for life.

And maybe at times they read, quite possibly like the book of Ecclesiastes, that speaks about vanity, vanity, all is vanity. You hear it at funerals so often.

Maybe they do read that. But they do miss the very point, the Scriptures that bear witness about me, as Jesus says. And you refuse to come to me, that you may have life.

[18:45] There is the difference between the known and the unknown. The unknown gives no life, no hope. But Jesus gives that hope.

Jesus gives that life. And that is the Jesus that Paul is making known to the people here. Let's go back to verse 18. Because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

This was the difference. He was preaching the one who gives life. Again, you go to John 10 verse 10. And the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life and you may have it abundantly.

They don't have it because they're not listening to the Scriptures that bear witness about him. Is that you today? You are searching the Scriptures.

You are looking. You are hearing the Scriptures. They bear witness about Jesus. But you refuse to come to him that you may have life. There is a difference between worshipping the known and the unknown.

[19:53] Verse 25 here. It talks about the idol served by humans' hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

This is what the Lord gives to us. Life and breath and everything. What a difference there is between gods that are made by the hands of man and the God who made man and gives breath to man and to all creation.

There are many things that can make us look for a God. Many things that appeal to people in this world that speak to us. Nature. A beautiful sunrise or sunset.

The starry sky at night. Oceans and lands. And just survey the creation around you. And for many people it makes them think, Ah God. That's what Paul is sharing to them here.

The God in verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth. He is sharing this with them. And you think of time, days and weeks and months and years. [ 21 : 07 ] They make us think of Ah God. And again, that's the God that Paul makes clear to them here. That he, in verse 26, he made man, he made man from one, 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. So their land, their place, their times was all appointed by God. And even ourselves can make us think, well, there's got to be a God.

Our bodies, our minds, our experiences, all of these things make us look for our God. It's the same in Paul's day in Athens as it is in ours. What Paul talks about to the church in Athens here is these things that they are experiencing day by day.

But he points them to what fulfills all of these things. The missing link. And that is Jesus and the resurrection.

Because that is what makes all the difference. You see it in verse 30 and 31. The difference is an attitude, a day, an appointed man, and a time all connected.

[ 22 : 28 ] The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands that all people everywhere repent. Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

And this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. He is telling them of Jesus and the resurrection. Just like in verse 18.

Jesus and the resurrection from the dead is what makes all the difference. Is this who you are worshipping today? Is this your Christ?

Is this your Savior? The one who is judge? Who will judge in righteousness? The one who we are called by people everywhere to repent and believe in.

Before that judgment comes. Because he has raised him from the dead. Is this who you worship? The known or the unknown?

[ 23 : 32 ] Is it your own ideas? Is it your own way of thinking? The ideas of others around you? Or is it the word of God that you are putting your trust in that tells us of this wonderful Savior?

There's a great difference between the unknown and the known. It is only through Jesus that we can be saved. And the final thing we hear then is that this calls for a response.

This calls for a response. We see this in verse 32 to verse 34. If I was to ask you today. Why do you believe in God?

What's your answer? Why do I believe in God? Or if someone who you meet in the street or at work says to you. Why do you believe in God?

What is your answer? Well you could say because there's evidence that demands a response.

[ 24 : 37 ] The word of God. History. Creation. Providence. All of these things speak to us of a God. Why do you believe in God?

You could talk about creative. The creation. You could talk about time. You could talk about yourself. All of these things. And these are things that certainly spoke to me.

Creation often spoke to me. Time spoke to me of an urgency. I need because time was passing. People were passing. From time to eternity.

My own body speaks to me. That there is something. We are created. There must be a reason.

Why can I think? Why am I living? What is the purpose? There's all of these things that speak to us. Why do I believe in God? Because of all of these things. But there's more. Because of a Savior. A God who has remembered us.

[ 25 : 39 ] Through his steadfast love. And given his son Jesus Christ. Who died for our sin. And because of the Holy Spirit.

Who draws us to himself. Because apart from him. I could do nothing. I was lost. But by his grace. He draws me to himself.

Why do I believe in God? Because apart from him. I am lost. But you see the response of others. And there's three responses. Some mocked. It says in verse 32. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead. Some mocked.

They ridiculed. Because they thought they had all the answers. They thought they knew it all. They were the philosophers. They were the educated ones. They had all the answers.

[ 26 : 38 ] The resurrection was rubbish. So they mocked. And we see it all the time. All you need to do is open your eyes and your ears around you. Even here.

There are those who will mock. Everything that the word of God says. Do not be found among those who mock. There were those who said.

They would hear again. We will hear about this again. You see that in verse 32. We will hear you again about this. They put them off.

Put them away. They had questions. They had things to ponder. But the response was not today. Maybe another time. And again that is not the response to have.

But maybe it is your heart today to say. I will leave it for now. We say it again and again. Do not leave it. Do not leave it.

[ 27 : 38 ] Because the gospel is urgent. The gospel needs to be heard. And believed today. Because we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

But that is the wonder of the third response. So Paul went from their midst. But in verse 34. But some men joined him and believed.

There were those who heard and received this word. Because they knew that their gods were nothing.

Compared to the God and the Savior Jesus. Who Paul presented to them. The God who Paul proclaimed to them. Is the God who gives life.

And life eternal. Through Jesus Christ. And that is the God you hear of today. But is it the God you worship? Micah in the Old Testament.

[ 28 : 37 ] Micah 7 verse 18. Says this. Who is a God like you? Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression. For the remnant of his inheritance.

He does not retain his anger forever. Because he delights in steadfast love. Who is a God like unto you? There is none who compares to this God.

Who doesn't retain his anger forever. Because he delights in steadfast love. Is this the God you worship? Is this the God you believe in?

There are many things you probably believe in life. Do you believe in a place called New York. In a country called America. I'm sure you do.

Do you believe that the Titanic sank over a hundred years ago. I'm sure you do. Do you believe in the battle of Culloden. That took place. Again I'm sure you do.

[ 29 : 37 ] Do you believe in the Vikings. And the Roman Empire. I'm sure you do. Why? Because you were taught about these things. You've maybe experienced a place called New York.

Or a country called America. You believe in it because there is evidence. And you've been taught by authority. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in this God.

That the Bible presents to you today. And the Son of God who is Jesus Christ. Because there is no greater authority. than the word of God before you today.

Do you believe in this God. This God who Paul presents. I proclaim to you today. Jesus.

And the resurrection is what he was preaching. This is what we hear today. But do you believe. Do you believe. Can you say. With a children's hymn.

[ 30 : 36 ] Jesus loves me. This I know. For the Bible. Tells me so. It's the word of God. Not enough. Creation.

Speaks. Time. Speaks. Our body. Speaks. All of these things. Were things that Paul. Spoke to the people of Athens about. That they saw. They understood.

That they had their own ideas about. But the word of God. Proclaims more. A savior. Who is Christ. The Lord.

Do you worship. The unknown. Of your own making. Or the making of others. Or the known. The God of the scriptures. And his son.

Who he has given. That you might have life. In him. Let us pray. Lord our gracious God. We thank you.

[ 31 : 31 ] For your word. And we pray. That it's authority. It's truth. Would be. What we believe. Even today. Not just the words. Of man. Or the wisdom. Of man.

But your authority. Your wisdom. Your word. And your power. To make it real. To us. Hear us Lord. And guide us by it. And forgive us our sins. In Jesus name.

Amen. We're going to conclude. By singing to God's praise. In Psalm 36. Sing from verse 7.

To verse 10. Page 44. Of the psalm books. And the tune is. Glencairn. Psalm 36. At verse 7. How precious is.

Your steadfast love. What confidence it brings. Both high and low. Find shelter in the shadow. Of your wings. We'll sing from verse 7 to 10. To God's praise.

[ 32 : 27 ] How precious is. Your steadfast love.

Of confidence it brings. Of high and low. Of high and low.

The shadow of your wings.

The feast within your house and drink from streams of pure delight.

For with you is the source of light, and your life please delight.

[ 33 : 33 ] To those who know you are the Lord, you stand fast, love and heart.

Make it in your righteousness to those of pure and a bright heart.

After the benediction, I'll go to the door to my right. We'll close with the benediction. Now may grace, mercy and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon and abide with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

Amen.