

Acts 17:22-34

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 October 2020

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Acts chapter 17. And there's a well-known story of a young minister who's beginning to preach and he goes to an older minister! and he asks for advice.

And about 20 minutes.

And you might be thinking, oh, if only. If only it was the last part. But that's good advice, isn't it? I think. Paul, the Apostle Paul, he preached God.

I very much doubt that he preached for 20 minutes, mind you. But Paul's preaching was all to do with God. I look at verse 23.

Him I proclaim to you. The God who made the world. That's the biblical approach. How does the Bible begin?

[1 : 07] What's the first verse of the Bible? In the beginning, man. Is that right? No, it wasn't that. What does it say?

In the beginning, man began to wonder whether there was any purpose to the universe. In the beginning, man began to search for meaning. That's not how the Bible begins. It begins, not with human beings, but the Bible begins with God.

In the beginning, God. That is the message of the Bible. The Bible never apologizes for God. The Bible doesn't defend God.

The Bible assumes God and proclaims God, just as the Apostle Paul did. And so you see, this book that you've got in front of you is not about man's search for God.

It is really about God's search for man. And when the Apostle Paul began to stand up and preach the gospel in Athens, he began with God. God is actually the subject of every sentence that we read.

[2 : 13] Him, I proclaim to you, I want to talk to you about God. I want to tell you God's story. And there are three things, great statements about God that we're going to look at.

Somebody said that Martin Luther, at the time of the Reformation, that what happened and what he did was he took the church off its hinges and he rehung it. It's a really marvelous summary of what happened in the Reformation.

And that's exactly what the Apostle Paul does in Athens with the Athenians with their thinking about God. He says to them, your thinking about God is all wrong and it's the essence of idolatry.

Of course, you and I, we looked at this last week. We don't make little statues of gold and silver.

We're far too sophisticated for that, aren't we? But you can be guilty of bowing down and worshiping a mental image of God.

I like to think of God like this. My God, the God that I believe and the God that I follow, isn't like that. And so we make our own little images and we make God after our own image.

[3 : 19] And so what I want to try and do this morning is to take our thinking about God and to re-examine it in the light of what the Apostle says. And the problem with these people in Athens was that their thinking about God was entirely wrong.

And so Paul takes it and totally rehungs it. And there are three great statements. I haven't really got points, but they're verse 24, verse 25, and then 26 and 27.

And so here's this first statement. It's in verse 24. Where Paul says this, I think I told you last week that there were 3,000 shrines in Athens.

I was very wrong. I checked my figures. There were about 30,000. 30,000 different shrines, different temples, different gods in Athens. And so you paid your money and you got your choice.

And as he wandered around the city of Athens, there was a God on every street corner. And there was a God of every sort and every description. And you see what he's saying to the city of Athens, to these people?

[4 : 29] What's he saying? He's saying, you've got it all wrong, verse 24. Or verse 24, you think that you've got to build a temple for God to live in. But let me tell you, says Paul, God has built the whole world for you to live in.

Verse 26, he expands it. He says, he made from one man, that's Adam, every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth. This world, this amazing world in which we live, God has given it to you and I as our living quarters.

And what a wonderful world it is. It is so perfectly suited for our needs. So perfectly suited for life. And God has placed us here and it raises for you and I the question, who is dependent on whom? Who is dependent on who? So, your children, okay, children, you hear? I come from an edge. You children, do you provide a home for your parents to live in?

No, you don't, do you? You don't do that. Of course you don't. Your parents provide a home for you to live in. Because your children are dependent upon you.

[5 : 45] When your parents get old, well, then you might well have to provide a home for them. And they become dependent upon you. So it makes life in old days so difficult. But the whole point is, as parents, we provide a home for our children.

You children are dependent on your parents. And what we need to understand is that to build a house for God to dwell in is to have it completely the wrong way around.

That actually is a pagan idea for God. If you think that you have to provide somewhere for God to live in, you're saying that God is somehow dependent upon you.

And nothing could be more ridiculous. And so this church building, as lovely as it is and as thankful as we are for it, it is not the house of God.

It is not the sanctuary. It's a meeting place. That's what it is. And God does not dwell in houses made with human hands.

[6 : 50] Because where does God dwell? Where does God dwell? He dwells with those who have a broken and contrite heart. He dwells with those who are poor in spirit.

He dwells with those who are poor in spirit. he doesn't dwell in anything that you and I can make. Second thing that Paul says here is in verse 25.

Nor is he served by human hands as though we needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And so firstly we see that God is not dependent on us, we are dependent on God. But secondly, here's the other idea, that God needs us.

As Paul wandered around the city of Athens, he would have seen people coming and going with their little offerings, with their flowers, with their bits of food, and all sorts of things for their particular God. They tended to the various shrines, the particular needs of the deities.

[7 : 54] And the pagan idea of God was that God needs to get something out of his followers, out of his devotees. And so it's up to you and I, we've got to win favor in one way or another with our God.

And so we bring to him little offerings, little treats. And that's why Psalm 50, we read it, because it is withering sarcasm.

Did you pick it up? God speaks to the people of Israel. Don't misunderstand him in Psalm 50, he's not dismantling the sacrificial system, God had set that up.

But the problem in the Old Testament was that they'd misunderstood what the sacrificial system was all about. And God speaks to them, let me read it to you. He says this, God says, Can't you see the sarcasm?

To think this morning that God needs in some way or other to be fed or provided for. Or God needs to be paid his weekly rent.

[9 : 34] That's a pagan idea of God. And there are so many people out there this morning that have gone to a religious building. In fact, there probably aren't. But those who have gone often go to pay God his due.

That's what nominal Christianity is. So people think, well, as long as you kind of go to church and you pay God his due, we'll all be well.

That's why there was an altar to the unknown God, wasn't there, in Athens. They were hedging their bets. It was just in case.

In case there's a God out there that we don't know about and we've got to somehow make him, we've got to placate him. There's loads of people, well, there's people that go to church this morning

like that.

The churches are empty, aren't they? But the people who go, they've got no real knowledge of God, lots of them. They don't know if God is really there or not.

[10:36] Just in case, they just go to church. Just in case there's something in it. Just in case. And they worship at the shrine of an unknown God. Of course, the moment you become a real Christian, the moment that you encounter the God of the Bible, the moment that you come to know God and your mind is enlightened, you realize just how ridiculous it is to think of God in that way.

Because as if God Almighty needed anything from you. As though Almighty God, who holds all things together, should be satisfied by the likes of you and I going into a religious building and nodding in his direction.

It's ludicrous. It is ridiculous. I get it sometimes from people. They say to me this. They say, I'm not a churchgoer, but say a prayer for me, would you?

I believe there's someone up there, but say a prayer for me, vicar. That the idea that God would be somehow satisfied with our religion, with what we have to offer Him, that we're doing Him some kind of favor by being here this morning.

The gospel doesn't teach us that God needs us. The gospel doesn't teach us that God needs us.

[12:00] It tells us that we need God. The gospel doesn't proclaim that God needs us. It tells us that God wants us. And that's the great news this morning.

That God wants us. Not that He needs us. He doesn't need us, but He wants us. And if you want to know how much He wants you this morning, you look at the cross.

If you want to know how much someone wants something at an auction, you ask how much are they prepared to pay for it. And if you want to know how much God wants you, you only have to look at Calvary.

You only have to understand what is happening there. So the Apostle Paul says in another place, we are redeemed. We have been brought back. We've been brought to God.

And we've been brought not by silver or gold, but by the precious blood of God's Son. And that is how much God wants human beings, men and women, and boys and girls like you in fellowship with Himself.

[13:09] He doesn't need you. He doesn't need our company. He doesn't need our worship. The idea that He needs us, sometimes the gospel is proclaimed like that.

That as if God is lonely without you. But God doesn't need us. The idea that God needs us is pagan. It is to un-God God.

God doesn't need us, but He wants us. Let's think about that for a minute. God has made us for Himself. A.W. Tozer, I think, puts it really helpfully.

He says this, The reason God made man in His image was that man might appreciate God and admire and worship Him. So that God might not be a picture, so to speak, hanging in a gallery with no one looking at Him.

It's a really good way of putting it. Think of some great work of art, some masterpiece, and there's lots of those kind of paintings, aren't there, that are lying around in art galleries.

[14:20] Some of them are hanging on the walls for the public to admire. But there are many great works of art that the public never get to see. They never get to see the light of day that they're lying in an attic somewhere, or in a secret vault.

And they're so precious, and they're so priceless, that they're actually kept away from the public. And the point is, what Tozer is trying to say, is that a great work of art like that doesn't cease, doesn't stop being a great work of art just because it's stashed away, just because it's in a secret vault, or just because it's in someone's attic.

Whether people see it or not, or recognize it or not, it's still a masterpiece of art. But such a great work of art ought to be admired, shouldn't it?

And it ought to be enjoyed. I've told you before, but in our family, we have this china set, Aunt Lila's china. And it comes out one day a year, on Christmas Day.

It's precious china, Claire's aunt, and it comes out on Christmas Day, but apart from that, it's hidden away. There's a little bit of an argument that happens in our family. I happen to think we ought to have it out most days, and every Sunday.

[15:38] At least once a week, for us to enjoy it, and admire it. What's the point in having good china, if you never see it? And the argument goes, isn't it, well with kids like ours, they'd break it, or

they'd, and it would be gone.

And in our families, we probably all have that kind of discussion. But do you see the point? That china is no less beautiful, because it's stashed away all year. It's still beautiful, even though it's stashed away in a box, most of the year.

And here's my point. God would be no less God, if He'd never made us. If God had never made this universe, and He'd never made you and I, He would be no less God.

He would have been just as much God, as He is now. But the point is this, such a God is so glorious.

And God is such a wonderful God, that He ought to be admired. And He ought to be worshipped, and He ought to be enjoyed. And that is why God has made you. He's not made you, because He's got some kind of psychological quirk, in His nature, that He needs a fan club for Himself.

[16:57] That isn't why God made you to worship Him. We know people like that, don't we? A kind of psychological issue. They're always fishing for compliments. But that isn't why God made human beings. As though He was insecure, as though there's something wrong with Him.

God is perfect. God has absolutely no need of us. No need of our worship. But such a God is so glorious. Such a self-sufficient God.

Such a perfect God. Ought to be admired, and enjoyed, and reveled in. And for that reason, we ought to thank Him, that He did. There are times in life, even in London, isn't it, where you get that, it's good to be alive feeling.

You say sometimes, I don't know, you see some view, you've been on a run, and you come back from it, or something like that. You've played sport, and you feel great, and you say, well, it's good to be alive. And if the creation can do that for you, how much more can the Creator do for that, do that for you, if only you knew Him?

Amen. Oh, how we ought to thank this great Creator, this God for giving us existence, when He didn't need to do it.

[18:14] That He brought us to see the light of day. That He brought many of us by grace, to see the light of His face. And to know Him is to live, and to be truly alive.

And you're not alive, until you truly know God. Because you see, that is what you're here for. You need to know what you're here for.

You need to know why you exist. And you exist to enjoy Him, and to know Him, and to glorify Him. You see what Paul is doing?

He's rehanging there, thinking about God. And he's saying to them, you think that you've got to build a temple, for God to live in. But I tell you, He's built the world, for you to live in.

You've got it the wrong way around. And he says to them, you think that God needs your worship, but let me tell you, it's the other way around. God doesn't need you, you need Him. And he says in verse 25, your very life depends upon Him.

[19:20] He gives you life, and breath, and everything. So do you realize this morning, that you exist by His sovereign good pleasure, and your life is in His hand. And that if God permitted it, your life could end at any moment.

And don't think that you're doing God some kind of favor this morning. That is a ridiculous idea, that you can serve God. You need God. You can't even take another breath, unless God allows you to. And the third thing is really, really interesting. It's in verses 26 to 28. And what he's saying there, I suppose, if I can kind of summarize it, is that God is knowable.

But look at the way he puts it. He tells us there, that 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 may find their way towards Him, and find Him.

And He's actually not far from any one of us, because in Him we live and move and have our being, as some of your own prophets have said, for we are indeed His offspring. And we've been made for Him, and that is what we are for.

[20:34] And we need to know what we are for. I told you last week tonight, about the ugly duckling. Let me tell you again, it's a good enough illustration to keep telling.

And the ugly duckling, he didn't know what he was for. He thought he was a duckling, he'd been told he was a duckling. And the other ducks thought he was a duckling, but he was a swan, and he was so unhappy, wasn't he? Because he'd adopted the lifestyle of a duckling.

But he was a swan. And you have been made for God. You're not made for this world, and just this world. You've been made to know and glorify and enjoy God.

The Bible tells us that God has written eternity in our hearts. It's stamped across our nature. It's like a stick of rock, with Blackpool written in the middle of it.

And every bite you take of that stick of rock, there's Blackpool in every bite. That writing is in every bite. And every bite of life that you take, everything that you do with your life, eternity is written across your nature.

[21 : 46] You were made for something more. And that is the way God has made us. And so we cannot be happy scratching our way around in the dust.

We can't be happy confined in time and space, because we're immortal souls. And so the dissatisfied feeling that our culture constantly feels, God has written that into our hearts.

Because we're immortal souls. Because we were made for eternity. And God has made us, Paul says, for himself that we might seek after him, until we find him.

And we know what we're made for. But not only has God made us for himself, but can you see that God actually has arranged the layout of the world, in order that we might seek after him.

Look what he says there. He says, doesn't he, in verse 26, And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

[23 : 00] He's actually not far from any one of us. Why are there so many different nations in the world? Why are there so many languages? About 6,500. Well, according to Acts 17, God has ordained it like that.

And he's ordained it like that so that we might seek after him and find him. So any teacher will understand that. What do you do as a teacher when you've got troublemakers in your class?

A couple of troublemakers, or maybe three or four. And they gang up on you. What does the teacher do then? When two children, what do they do, Ellie? Split them up.

That's exactly right, isn't it? They separate them. You put one at the front, and you put one at the back. My teacher just put one facing the wall with his nose against the wall like that.

And if that doesn't work, splitting them up in the class, you put them in different classes, don't you?

You stick one in the corridor, you put another one in another class. You separate them. Why do you do that?

[23 : 59] You separate them to stop them from ganging up on you. Doesn't that happen all the time in eating, Arthur? I'm sure. But that's just what God has done. In his judgment and in his mercy.

What has God done? Well, Genesis chapter 11. That's the whole story, isn't it? The story of the whole earth. They had one language and one speech at the time. And it came to pass that they said, come, let's build a tower to the top of the heavens and let's make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered over the face of the earth.

And the Lord comes down. That picture of the Lord, they think it's going to be massive and the Lord kind of has to come down to see it. And the Lord says, behold, they are one people. They have one language and this is only the beginning of what they'll do.

And nothing that they propose will be impossible for them. So come, let's go down. Let's confuse their language so they won't understand each other's speech. And the Lord dispersed them. The Lord scatters them over the face of the earth.

And they left the building of the city. And its name was called Babel. Because the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the earth.

[25 : 13] And that is God's mercy as well as God's judgment. It's God's prescription for a fallen race to contain and restrain men and women.

To constrain their rebellion. So instead of ganging up on God, they are scattered. Just think of the evil that the human race would be capable of if everyone spoke the same language and the whole human race was united.

It's better for human beings to be divided than united to stand against God. Do you see the goodness of God in that, can't you?

Do you see what Paul is saying? He's saying he's not only our Lord and our maker, he's not only the creator of the universe, he is the sovereign Lord of history. And he's appointed the boundaries and he says, you will go this far and no further.

And he scatters the human race into different languages. And he says, I do that so that you might seek after me and that you might find me because I'm not far from any one of you.

[26 : 21] And so that means this morning that you and I are without excuse. And if you don't know God this morning, you are without excuse. Because God is not somewhere else.

And if God seems to be far away from you this morning it's not that God is somewhere else in terms of space. He is not light years away from you through some black hole. No, Paul says, in him you live and move and have your being.

He's not far from any one of us. Augustine says he's nearer than hands. He's nearer than breath. You can't get nearer than that.

He's not feet and inches away from you this morning. He's not somewhere else. The problem is what we've already talked about this morning. The problem is our sin. That our sin has come between you and your God and that's the problem.

But he's not far from any one of you. Because in him you live and move and have our being. So how do you find him? How do you know him? Look at verse 18. How can you know this God?

[27 : 28] How can you find him? Jesus, Paul tells us that when he arrived in Athens he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And that's his explanation.

He's come to Athens and he says, they say he's got some new teaching. It's really interesting what you've got to say, Paul. And Paul explains to them why his message is about Jesus and the resurrection.

And he says to them, I've not come to introduce to you some alternative philosophy, some life coaching or philosophy. I've come to tell you what happened in time and in space, in history, about a man called Jesus who God raised from the dead.

And they would have laughed at that and they would have thought it was ridiculous. And Paul tells them why he's preaching it to them. He says, you've got your thinking about God all wrong and you cannot find God by philosophy or by religion and you're just groping in the dark.

And the only way that you can know God is if God reveals himself to you and God has done that in the person of his son, Jesus. The invisible God whom no one has ever seen has now been declared to you and God has made him known.

[28 : 52] And he has come into this world in order to deal with the very problem that keeps you from knowing God, the problem of your sin. And he's come to die upon a cross to take that sin away to remove the barrier between you and a holy God.

And so he is not far from any one of you this morning. And so call upon him.

Bow your knee before him. Ask him to forgive you. Ask him to take your sin and guilt away and be reconciled to God.

Because the reason that you are here this morning and not somewhere else is that you should seek God. And you should perhaps feel your way towards him and find him.

Because he's not actually far from any one of us. He's closer than hands. Closer than breathing. Let's pray.