

Do you know God

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the book of Acts chapter 17 and especially to verse 23. Acts chapter 17 verse 23.

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown God.

Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you. Especially these last words. What you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.

The majority of people, when asked if they believe in God, answer yes. But when the follow-up question is asked, do you know God?

Then the results are very different. Very few people claim to actually know God. To actually know God in a personal way.

[1 : 17] I wonder about yourself this morning. Do you know God? Or do you just believe vaguely in the existence of God?

It makes all the difference in the world. And this is what the Apostle Paul was so concerned about here. He came to Athens. A great religious and cultural center of ancient world.

And he was surrounded by evidence of religion. Evidence of people being very religious. Evidence of people's belief in an unseen world.

A belief in God or in God. And yet, his verdict upon the city of Athens was that they did not know God.

And this very thing that they did not know, he came to proclaim to them. I wonder, do you know God? Do you know God in this personal way that the Apostle Paul is talking about?

[2 : 24] Because this is what the Bible speaks of. Not just knowing things about God. Not just knowing or believing that God or some sort of God exists.

But knowing God as a person. Entering into a personal relationship with him. Well, just as today, many people may have some kind of belief in a God, yet not really know God.

But the situation was no different in Athens. We're told here by Luke in the book of Acts about some of these people whom Paul met.

He met the Stoics. They belonged to a certain school of philosophy. Now they believed in the existence of God. But they conceived of God as an impersonal power in the universe.

Very similar to the kind of ideas that many people have today. That there is some kind of force or energy or power that is at work behind everything in the universe.

[3 : 37] But certainly you can't have a personal relationship with this God. That's the kind of idea many people have concerning God today.

And also there were the Epicureans. Again, they did not disbelieve in the existence of the gods. But they believed that they took no interest in human beings.

They belonged to a different realm altogether. So in the same way today, many people say they believe in God. But it makes no practical difference to the way they live.

I wonder about yourself. You say perhaps you believe in God. You're here this morning in a church to worship God. I'm sure in some sense or another you believe in God.

In the existence of God. But do you believe in a God that makes no practical difference to the way you live? He's not someone that's interested in you.

[4 : 37] He's not someone with whom you can have a personal relationship. That is the great question. And also of course there in Athens, the Apostle Paul was consulted with what we may call the general religion and superstition of the Greeks.

One of the first things that struck him there in Athens was the number of idols. The ways by which many of the ordinary people sought to worship God or to worship the gods.

And there were altars upon which sacrifices were made to these various gods. Now we might think our own age, our own time is a very irreligious one.

But you'd be surprised by the amount of religious symbolism that exists in our society. And I'm not just thinking of things like images in churches.

I thought that's part of it. What about all the art that there is? The pictures that portray religious things? And people hold in some kind of awe.

[5 : 52] What about the films that are made on religious subjects? But again, people get a kind of religious feeling from these films. What about all the crosses and crucifixes that are used merely as jewellery?

Perhaps as a kind of good luck symbol. To ward off any kind of evil. All these things, all these symbols, all these outward trappings of religion.

But no real knowledge of God. No real knowledge of this one who died on that cross. For sinners. Well, the Apostle Paul noticed one particular altar in Athens.

And what struck him about it was the inscription on this altar. To God unknown, said the altar. It was as if the Apostle Paul had come to visit the city of London.

And in his slight feeling around London, he came to the cenotaph. That memorial to the tomb of the unknown warrior.

[7 : 08] And as if he said to us, you've got this memorial to an unknown warrior. A man who died for you.

Yet you don't know him. I am going to tell you about this man. That was what the Apostle Paul did as he came here to Athens. There was this inscription that to him encapsulated the ignorance and the agnosticism of Athens.

With all its religion, with all its philosophy, it did not know God. And with all our religious symbolism perhaps today, people do not know God.

You may have the outward trappings of religion. You may attend church. But the great question is, do you really know God? Here this morning, we are going to look at what the Apostle declared to Athens.

And I am going to seek to proclaim that same truth to you today. Concerning this God. The God who to many is unknown. But the God who can become known in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[8 : 28] The Apostle Paul said several things about this God as he declared the true and living God. He first spoke about the greatness of God.

And to really come to know the true God. We have got to understand his greatness. So often our ideas of God are too small.

We think, as the Greeks did in many ways, that God can be manipulated. God can be kind of controlled by us. The Apostle Paul disabuses the people of Athens of any such idea.

He declared to them the true and living God. Verse 24. The God who made the world and everything in it. He declared him as the creator.

The creator of the cosmos. That's the word for world that's used here in the New Testament. But only this past week we've had modern scientists discovering a little bit more, as they understand it, of how the universe was created in the beginning.

[9 : 43] We don't know all the implications of the discoveries made in the past week about an explanation of what they call the Big Bang Theory of the origin of the universe.

But what is brought before us in all these things is the vastness of the universe and the tremendous power that was there right at the beginning in the creation of the universe.

Now many people may look upon that first Big Bang as they call it as something just that impersonally happened. But the Christian knows that whatever was the mechanism that was used, whether it was the Big Bang as commonly understood today or whether it was some other mechanism, it was God who was at work.

It was God's power that was active, not just in developing this universe but in bringing it into being in the first place. Here the Apostle Paul speaks of such a God.

The God who made the world, who made the cosmos and everything in us. He also is the creator, Paul says, of mankind.

[10 : 59] God of all races of men. In verse 26, from one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole land.

It is not some kind of small concept of God either in terms of his relation to the universe or his relation to the human race. He is not a God of one group of people like the gods of the Athenians or the gods of Rome or the gods of Canaan limited to one particular place or one particular area of creation.

No, he is the God, the creator of heaven and earth. The God, the creator of all men. So all men are answerable to him.

Do you know God today? Is this God, the God who is the creator, creator of the whole universe so that when you look up at the stars at night, like day David did, you wonder what is man that God is mindful of him?

The God who created all this. You marvel that God is the God of all mankind. And each individual is responsible to him.

[12 : 11] Of all the billions of people in the world today, God has caused the creation of each one. And each one is answerable to him.

But also the apostle Paul stresses here that God is ruler. He is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

And he's not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Because he created the universe, he owns it. It is his.

And he provides for this universe. You see, we so often have got the whole concept of religion wrong.

Man's religion is the idea of what can we do for God. And all our efforts in religion are to this end what we will do, our action, our activity.

[13 : 17] But we need to realize that God needs nothing from us, Paul says. As he viewed Athens and he saw all the work of men's hands, all the temples and altars and idols.

He saw all the work of man's hands. Man declaring his greatness. Man declaring that he could achieve some kind of relationship with God, however conceived by his own effort.

And Paul says, no, God does not need your effort. He is not served by human hands. He is not limited to human temples built by human hands.

God is not dependent upon man, nor can God be manipulated by man. And so much of human religion is along these lines.

That it is a way by which we believe we can manipulate God. In the old system, according to Greek religion, it was by sacrifices that they could win the gods round to their way of thinking.

[14 : 29] Or to be favourable to them. And of course today, the same kind of thinking has not died out. That we think by doing this or that or the next thing.

By our pretending or trying to be as good as we possibly can. That in this way we'll win God round to our way of thinking or to be favourably disposed to us.

But the Apostle Paul says, no. God is absolutely sovereign over all. He is the infinite God. And we are all answerable to him.

It is he who gives all men life and breath and everything else. You see the whole action is flowing the other way. We are dependent upon him.

Absolutely dependent upon him. And answerable to him. So do you know this, the living God.

[15 : 30] Do you know God as the creator, the ruler and the giver. This is the God that the Apostle Paul declares to us.

This is the only true living God. The God who created the world and created you. The God who rules over all. And the God who gives us all that we receive.

The God who cannot be manipulated by human wisdom or by human effort. And then secondly the Apostle Paul speaks of the nearness of God.

And here he speaks of God as being a personal being. Look at the very kind of language that the Apostle Paul uses. He speaks of God making, God creating.

He speaks of God giving. He speaks of God determining, of God having a purpose. He speaks of God commanding. These are all the kind of words that the Apostle Paul uses here concerning God's actions.

[16 : 39] And all these things speak of personhood. This is not the language that applies to a force or an energy. This is the language that applies to a person.

And so the Apostle Paul is declaring the personhood of God. And he makes this even more clear when he speaks about how God created us.

He doesn't just stress God's sovereignty in his creating of us, that we are made by him and not the other way around. But he stresses that we are made in a very special way.

He quotes even some of the Greek poets themselves to support this. He recognized that this was something that was understood even by pagan people. That there was some kind of relationship, some kind even of similarity between man and the God.

And he quotes the poets to say, we are his offspring. We are the children of God. And that is exactly what the Old Testament says, exactly what God revealed to man.

[17 : 48] That he created us in his own image. Just as Adam's son was in the image of his father, so in the beginning God created a human being, Adam, who was in his image.

In other words, he created a personal being. He created someone that was able to create, to think, to determine, to purpose, to choose, to command, to speak.

So as we think of God, the living God, yes, we are thinking of his greatness. Yes, yes, we are thinking of his being infinite, that he is the creator, and the ruler, and the sustainer, and the giver. But we also think of the God who is personal. The God who is near to us. Not because we have achieved something by clawing our way towards him, but because he created us in the beginning, to be personal beings, to be similar to him in certain ways, to have similarity, so that we are personal beings, able to relate to him, able to hear his word when he speaks to us, able to understand it, able to respond to it.

All these capacities he gave to man in the beginning. But then, it's spelled out here specifically by the apostles, that God had a purpose, in doing this, in verse 27.

[19 : 29] God did this, so that men would seek him, and perhaps reach out for him, and find him. So, he is not far, from each one of us.

God is near to us. God is near to us, because he's made us in his own image. God is near to us, because he sustains us. In him we live, and move, and have our being.

Yet, implied here, as we'll see in a moment, is our sin. That things are not now, as they once were, not as they ought to be. We have to seek him.

But the great, the great emphasis here, is that God is stressing, that we can seek him. We can come to know him.

That is his desire. That is his purpose. That is what he has determined, that man should come to know God. So this, is right at the heart, of what the apostle is saying, into this pagan city of Athens.

[20 : 42] He's saying, with all your knowledge, about the world, and about the gods, you do not know God. You do not actually, have a personal relationship, with the living God.

He is God unknown, as far as you're concerned. And that's what God is saying, to us today here. He's saying to us, with all our knowledge, about God, perhaps with all our religiosity, we don't know God, perhaps.

You this morning, you know about God, but do you know God? Do you have a personal, relationship with him? It is God's purpose, he created you, for this purpose, so that you would, seek him, and perhaps reach out, for him, and find him.

And God is near to you. God is near to you, because he's your creator. God is near to you, because he's sustaining you. The very breath you breathe, is given by God.

God has come near to you, especially, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So that here today, he is telling you these things, and he's asking you, to turn to him, to seek him, and to find him.

[21 : 59] So God is great. God is near. But God is also just.

And the Apostle Paul speaks next, of the justice of God. Now the background to this justice, is human sin.

In verse 29, the Apostle immediately goes on, after he's spoken about our relation to God, as being made in the image of God, as being God's offspring, he immediately goes on to speak, about the fact, that we have sinned.

Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think, that the divine being, is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image made by man's design, and skill.

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. The Apostle Paul says two things here, about human sin. At the very core of human sin, is the worshipping of the creature, rather than the creator.

[23 : 07] As the Apostle puts it in Romans chapter 1. Worshipping the creature, rather than the creator. Instead of mankind, seeking after God, and finding him, honoring him, and worshipping him, and having a personal relationship with him, what has mankind done?

We have looked after everything else. We have sought everything else, for our purpose in life, for meaning and significance. In the ancient world, yes, there were these real, gold and silver, statues and idols, by which they worshipped, certain aspects of the natural, or social world.

God of war, or the goddess of love, or the god of harvest, or the god of thunder, or whatever it was. In these physical, and outward ways, they worshipped, the creature, rather than the creator.

And so today, in our own modern world, we have so worshipped, the creature, instead of the creator. We have done it, in materialism, in the two senses, of the word.

In the philosophic sense, of materialism, in neglecting, the creator, neglecting, the existence, of the god, who has created all this, we try to explain everything, just according, to natural law.

[24 : 31] God. And in the other sense, of the word materialism, we have lived, for the things, that can be bought, with silver and gold. And we have worshipped, these things, we have spent our time on them.

So, this, is right at the core, of what sin is. It is rebelling, against God, and saying, I'm going to be interested, in your creatures, in what you have created.

And I may not even recognize, that you have created it. I'm going to spend, all my time, on the creature, and not think, about the creator. And this, also can be characterized, the apostle says, it can be characterized, as ignorant.

In the past, God overlooked, such ignorance. Now the word, ignorance, and the word, agnostic, are very close together.

They are both saying, I don't know. Although the word, agnostic, today I suppose, has a kind of, respectable ring to it, whereas the word, ignorance, has a, sort of, less respectable ring.

[25 : 41] In other words, nobody wants to boast, about being ignorant, but many people, may want to boast, about being agnostic. But it's basically, the same thing. It is Athens saying, God unknown, I don't know God.

And it is basically, the same today, when people say, well, yes I believe, in the existence, of a God, but no, I don't really know him. I don't have a personal, relationship with him.

And God is saying, here in his word, this is a culpable, ignorance. We ought to know, our creation. We have turned, from him, to be obsessed, with the creature, rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

And so, we have here, characterized by the Apostle Paul, human sin. But all other, kinds of evil, flow from this, very root of evil.

The turning from God. Turning from God, in our own, self-centeredness, and self-interest, to use, and abuse, the creature, without reference, to the creator, who has given us laws, as to how to use, the creature, how to look after, the creation, and how to live, for his glory.

[26 : 59] So, the Apostle, goes on to speak, about the justice, of God. And it's in the light, of our sin, that this emphasis, on the justice, of God, comes in.

The Apostle Paul, speaks here, concerning a day, of judgment. A day of reckoning. In verse 31, he says, for he has set a day, when he will judge, the world with justice, by the man, he is appointed. He's saying, yes, God has been patient. God has overlooked, such ignorance. God has given, days, and years, and centuries, of opportunity, for people, to turn to him.

And he will continue, doing that, to the end of time. But the Apostle says, make no mistake, the day is coming, when time will run out.

The day is coming, when there will be, a day of reckoning. The day is coming, when our sins, will confront us, before the face of God. There will be, a day of judgment.

[28 : 04] A day, when God, will set all to right. A day, when all the appearances, and facades, of this world, will be ripped away, and will be confronted, by human sin, in all its horror, in all its rebellion, against God, in all its destructiveness, in all its plain evil.

That day will surely come, the Apostle says. And he says, a remarkable thing here. He says, that the judge, for this day of judgment, has already been appointed.

Now we may think, that God himself, is to be the judge. Well yes, of course, in one sense, that is true. And the Apostle Paul, spells out something here, quite amazing.

He says, that he will judge, the world with justice, by the man, he has appointed. The judge, that God appoints, is a man.

And this, amongst other things, ensures, that God's judgment, will be absolutely, just and fair. It is not, the judgment of someone, as it were, coming in from outside, and looking at us, and not understanding us.

[29 : 29] The judgment of one, who is one of us. The judgment of one, who has lived amongst us. The judgment of one, who knew our sins.

Who was faced, with the same temptations, the same privations, the same struggles. And yet one, who was perfect. One who did not sin.

So we have here, appointed as the judge, on that great day, the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who lived amongst us. The one who knows us. And so we can be, absolutely sure, that that judgment, will be absolutely fair.

For he knows us. And he knows sin, intimately, having lived amongst us. Although he himself, had no sin. So here the question, that confronts us is, do we know God as judge?

We've come to see God, in his greatness. We've come to see God, in his nearness. But what about God, in his justness?

[30 : 40] Do you know, that this is the true living God? A God, who will not ultimately, disregard sin? A God, who one day, will bring in justice? A God, who will not allow, the unfairness, and the brutality, and the cruelty, and the rebellion, against himself, continue forever.

But he will put a stop, to it forever, on that great day. And do you realize, that he is the God, who will one day, confront you, with your own sins? And you will have to, give an account to him.

There'll be no, ligging out of it, in that day. No making excuses, no passing the buck, to somebody else. But we will be confronted, by the face of God, in Jesus Christ.

That face of glory, and of purity, that will make us ashamed, all our sins. But finally, the Apostle Paul, speaks here too, of the love of God.

I think it's obvious, that the Apostle, didn't have time, to enlarge upon this theme. He was interrupted, he was brought to a halt, by the sneering, and the mockery, of those, who wouldn't accept it.

[31 : 52] But here, he speaks of the Lord Jesus, not only as judge, he speaks of God, commanding all men, everywhere to repent. He speaks of God, giving an opportunity, of repentance.

It's not a message, of pessimism, that he brings to them, saying, God is going to judge, the world. He's saying, yes, God is going to judge, the world, but he's giving, an opportunity, of repentance. Repentance, means a change of mind, a change of life. In other words, he's holding out hope, to us. He's not condemning us, to our own situation, to our own hopeless, dependence upon ourselves, and our own wisdom.

He's not leaving us, to our own sins, shut up to it forever. He's holding out, the opportunity, of a change. He's commanding us, to change our mind, to change our mind, and to turn to him.

He speaks to us, in love. He gives to us, this opportunity. Do you know, that voice of God, speaking to you in love? Do you know, that this is the God, who's desiring to enter, into personal relationship, with you?

[33 : 06] He has established, the grounds, upon which, which this personal relationship, can be established, and can be conducted, because he sent his son, into the world, to be the savior of sinners.

He provided the way, by which sin, can be taken away, and those, who are sinners, and unrighteous, and unjust, and be declared, righteous in Jesus Christ, and accepted, as righteous by him.

And of all of this, the apostle says, God gives proof. And here we see again, God's love. He doesn't just ask us, to accept this blindly.

He says, this is God's word, coming to you, and God has given proof, of its reality, and its truth. He has given proof, of this, to all men, by raising him, from the dead.

That is, raising, the Lord Jesus Christ, from the dead. In other words, God has acted, in history. God has done something, at a particular point, in time, in the life, and death, and resurrection, of Jesus, that stands scrutiny.

[34 : 16] You can come to today, and you can read about it. You can come today, and investigate it. You can come today, and see that something, real happened there, that has changed, the course

of history, and has changed, the course, of the personal history, of the lives, of many people.

He has given proof, of this. Here we see, his love displayed to, that he doesn't seek, to browbeat us, into obedience, to himself. He offers to us, the evidence, the proof, of these things.

And he, in his word, speaks to us today, in this reasonable way. He says, come, let us reason together. Though your sins, be as scarlet, they shall be as white, as snow. So we ask you today, to come, to draw near to him, as he is drawing near to you.

And to come to know him, as the God of love, so that one day, you will not come to know him, only, as the God of judgment.

But what was the response, in Athens, to this great declaration, by the Apostle Paul, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The response, as I'm sure, is the same everywhere.

[35 : 31] The response, was threefold. There was mockery, first. Some people smeared, when they heard about, the resurrection of the dead.

There was a particular reason, for that. This was something, that was totally obnoxious, to the Greeks. At the very founding, of this Areopagus, this council, of the Areopagus, one of the Greek poets, put it into the mouth, of one of their gods, that, when the earth, drinks up a man's blood, after he dies, there is no resurrection.

It was a fundamental, it was a basic truth, of the Greeks, that there was no such thing, as resurrection. And so, when the Apostle Paul, declares, that God actually, has done, a resurrection, he actually, has raised, the Lord Jesus Christ, from the dead, they simply, wrote that off.

They weren't prepared, to listen any further, because this one item, did not fit, into their worldview. It did not fit, into their philosophy. It did not fit, into their religion. And it's the same today, and it always has been.

If we try, to take some snippet, out of the gospel, and try to slot it, into our experience, our wisdom, our philosophy, it will not fit. It will not fit.

[36 : 54] It's like, what Jesus said, about trying to take, the new patch, and put it on, an old garment. It will not fit. The new patch, will shrink, and it will tear, away from the old.

And Jesus said, the same thing, to the Pharisees, in his time. They weren't prepared, to accept him, because he wouldn't, fit in, with that already, worked out, and conceived, view of life. You see, it's a total acceptance, that we must have.

We must repent, truly, in this total sense, of a total change, of mind, of rejection, of our own faults, and mistaken, and foolish ideas, to accept, what God has actually, done and achieved, in Jesus Christ.

There were those, who mocked, and those who sneered. But there were also, those, who procrastinated. Those who said, we want to hear you again, on this subject.

And I'm sure, that is the response, of some of you, here today. You'll say, well, that's very interesting.

[38 : 09] You may say, I never heard it, just put quite like that, before. I want to think about this. I'd like to hear more, about this. In fact, I'm quite interested, now, in hearing, about what the gospel is.

Well, that's good. That's good. But you know, there's a great danger, in saying, I'll hear you again, about this.

Because that is something, you do not know. How many people, have said that? They've heard the gospel. They've been affected, by it.

They've seen, its truthfulness, but they say, well, I'll think more about this, I'll hear you again, about it. And they never did hear it again. Because the time came, when God said, as he said, to another, you fool, this very night, your soul is required of you.

The time, may be gone. And so, we have to ask ourselves, today, have we got, the opportunity, to hear this gospel, again?

[39 : 16] And we may not have. But, there were also, those there in Athens, who responded in faith. There were those, who heard this gospel, who heard this invitation, and it was, it seemed as if it was cut short.

It seemed as if the apostle Paul, didn't have time to explain it all. Yet, what they did hear, was enough to convince them, that this was the truth, that they had been waiting for, all their lives.

This was the explanation, of things, of which they could conceive, of no explanation before. God's greatness, of his nearness, to them, of his justice, and of his love.

Is that the response, of your heart today, as God speaks to you? If so, you too, can become, like Dionysius, one of these philosophers, of Athens, or the woman, named Damaris, and the number of others, who came to faith, in Jesus Christ.

As simply as that, there was no great, blinding flash of light, there was no, kind of grotesque experience. Simply there, listening to the apostle Paul, speak of God, the living God, speaking, of the gospel, of Jesus Christ, and his death, and resurrection, they responded, by the grace of God, they opened their hearts, to receive, the Lord Jesus.

[40 : 51] And so too, you today, sitting here, quite simply, in church, in your own seat, can believe, in the Lord Jesus, and be transformed. Let us pray.

Amen. Our gracious, and loving, Heavenly Father, we thank you, for the way, in which you, bring your word to us.

A way, by which you speak, seriously to us. There is so much, in the world, that is frivolous, and trivial. We thank you, that you, give us, the respect, of speaking to us, seriously, for you have created us, in your own image.

And you know, the great serious issues, involved. Enable us then also, to treat your word, with respect today. And not to treat it, lightly, or frivolously, in any way.

But may we, by your grace, respond to it. And those of us, who already know, the Lord Jesus Christ, and have entered, into a personal relationship, with you through him, may we treat this word, seriously, and seek, its blessing, upon others also, that we would seek, the glory of Jesus Christ, in the response, of many people, to this gospel.

[42 : 20] We ask these things, in Jesus name, and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.