

How Do We Know What's True?

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, I want you to picture a passage, a passage with a closed door at the end of it. And there's a number of people standing in this passage, staring at this door.
- And they're discussing what's behind it. So one of them says, well, you know what happens? When you go through that door, it opens up to this amazing landscape with mountains and waterfalls and all these different creatures that speak.
- So it's kind of like the Narnia books, if you've ever read those. But someone else disagrees. You see, they don't actually know what's behind the door. Someone else says, no, no, no, that's ridiculous. Actually, you know what's behind that door.
- It just leads on to another passage and another door. That's what happens if you open the door. And another person says, no, no, no, no, no. What's behind the door is nothing. All right. When you go through that door, you just go into oblivion, into blackness.
- And it seems everybody has a very different opinion as to what's behind that door. And there's really no agreement on it. And they just keep on at it. They just keep on arguing about what's behind the door. Everybody's got their own opinion.
- [1 : 0 7] Now, that, I wanted you to think of that because that's a picture of religion in our world today, isn't it? Religion. There are at last count as much as 270 different religions in our world, all having a very different opinion to what exactly, if anything, exists beyond what we can see and what happens after this life on earth.
- So, some, like Muslims, believe in a paradise like afterlife. Some, like Buddhists, believe in reincarnation. While other religions, like atheism, believe in nothingness after death.
- But none of them really knows for sure. And so, we live in a world with this mishmash of beliefs, which seem really, at most, best guesses as to what's true.
- And so, the question is, in all this confusion, how do we really know? How do we really know what is true? How do you know that what you believe is true? Well, our world, with all this religious confusion, is really no different to the world that Paul found himself in, in ancient Athens.
- Athens was a very impressive city. It was one of the gems of the ancient world. And it was known for its education and its schools of philosophy. It produced some of the greatest thinkers the world has ever known, like Socrates and Plato.
- [2 : 3 1] They all came from Athens. Athens. And yet, what we find here in Acts 17 is, despite its great philosophy and education, it was a city that was very confused when it came to religion.
- Because we read here that the Apostle Paul, when he arrives for the first time in this great city of Athens, what does he find? Well, verse 16, while Paul was waiting for his companions in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see the city was full of idols.
- It was full of idols. The word used there literally means it was drowning in idols. There would be idols on every street corner, these little representation of various little gods, these little statues.

The city was just full of them. And Paul's reaction is quite interesting. He's distressed. He's distressed to see all these idols. Now, why? Why is Paul so distressed when he sees all the different idols in Athens?

Well, because unlike the Athenians, Paul wasn't just another person in front of a closed door guessing what's behind it. You see, Paul had met someone who had been through the door and come back out again.

[3 : 37] And that's the difference. He had met the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And so not only was Paul qualified to speak about what's behind the door, but he was burdened.

You see, he had a real burden to speak about it. He couldn't keep quiet. Look at verse 16 onwards. He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. And so, verse 17, so he reasoned in the synagogue.

You see there, the reason that he opened his mouth to tell people about Jesus was because he was distressed to see just how lost they were. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

He took every opportunity that he could to tell people what he had discovered because he knew someone who had been through the door and come back out again. So when Paul came to Athens, what's interesting, now Athens, if you go to Athens today, you'll go and you'll tour the sites and you'll look at the beautiful landscape and the Acropolis and all that.

But when Paul came to Athens, he wasn't impressed by the tourist attractions. He wasn't impressed by the beauty or the sights or the architecture. And it was a beautiful city.

[4 : 49] But what Paul saw when he looked at Athens was the spiritual poverty. He saw people in desperate need of truth. When you look at Cape Town, do you see its poverty?

And I don't mean its material poverty. I mean, do you see spiritual poverty? Do you see Cape Town with the same eyes that Paul saw Athens? When you look at your work colleagues or your friends at school or college, do you see them as people who are desperate for truth?

Because that's what Paul saw when he looked at Athens. Those are the eyes that he looked at the world through. He was burdened about it. When he saw the world through those eyes.

And we've got to train ourselves to see the world through those eyes as well. When he saw the world through those eyes, he was burdened and so he spoke. He opened his mouth. And when he spoke, people soon took notice.

In fact, it wasn't long before his preaching reached the attention of the biggest bigwigs in Athens. The governing council called the Areopagus. Now, these were really top guys.

[5 : 54] They were the top academics, not only of Athens, but of the ancient world. And they actually heard about what Paul was speaking about. So they called him in, almost dragged him in to come and explain himself.

And so there he stood in front of all these bigwigs staring at him. And in today's terms, it was effectively standing before the General Assembly of the United Nations. In front of all these most educated professors and doctors in various fields.

And so there he was. You would imagine he's quite intimidated. And yet, the first thing he says to them is that they don't know what they're talking about. Which is quite bold. And yet, he does it in such a nice way.

It's kind of one of those insults that you don't realize is an insult because it's so polite. Look at verse 22. He says, People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

And they're probably going, yes, yes, yes, we are, aren't we? Very religious. 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.

[6 : 56] But then, he brings the hammer down. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship. So you see what he does there. He's very, very smart. He acknowledges the religious diversity of this great city of Athens as a compliment to them.

But then he makes the excellent point that the reason for all of their diversity is actually because of their ignorance. It's because they really don't know the first thing about what they're talking about. And yet, he does this in such a nice way.

But you see, their diversity is because of their ignorance. That's the point he's making. And it's the same reason for the religious diversity in our world today when we look around and we see all these religions and all these different faiths and beliefs.

Now, people, especially in our country, the Rainbow Nation, people value diversity and variety. It's seen as a good thing. But religious diversity is not a good thing.

It's really just a sign of religious ignorance. And that's Paul's point. But he doesn't leave them there. He doesn't say, well, you know, you've got all these idols. You've got all these religions because you actually don't know what you're talking about and then leave.

[8 : 01] He doesn't leave them there. No sooner does he point out their problem, then he offers them a solution. Look at verse 23. He says, So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I'm going to proclaim to you.

So he gets their attention by showing them what they're lacking. And then he says, but I'm going to tell you what you're missing. And if they had followed his argument, they would really have no choice but to listen to what he says.

Because, I mean, by having an idol to an unknown god, now why did they do that? Well, it was kind of a religious insurance policy. They wanted to make sure that they had all their bases covered in case there was a god out there that they hadn't made an idol to.

They just made this one as a cover. But by doing that, by having this idol to an unknown god, they are admitting their ignorance about god. They're admitting that they don't really know. So they're what we call today agnostics.

Ever heard that word? Agnostic? An agnostic is someone who admits that they don't know the truth about god. Agnostic, the word, it comes from two Greek words. It literally means without knowledge.

[9 : 02] Agnosis. So that's an agnostic as opposed to an atheist. An atheist is very different. An atheist is someone who claims to know that God doesn't exist. So you see the difference between an agnostic and an atheist.

These Athenians were agnostics. By the way, it's actually quite easy to convert an atheist to an agnostic in a few minutes. All you've got to do is ask the atheist if they can scientifically prove that God doesn't exist.

Which, of course, they can't. And so they'll have to admit, well, we can't prove it for sure that God doesn't exist. Which means they're actually an agnostic because they don't know that God doesn't or does exist.

And if they're still adamant that God doesn't exist, it means that they've made their mind up about God without any shred of evidence. Which is unwise.

My wife said I must never call anyone stupid from the pulpit. So they were unwise. But you see, the Athenians, they weren't unwise. The Athenians, because of their reputation as wise men, they were wise because they knew they didn't know.

[10 : 07] And that was what made them wise. If you admit that you don't know, that's the first step to really being wise. And because they didn't know, they had to entertain every idea that came along.

Which we see they do. They demanded that Paul share this new teaching in verse 20. And in fact, they spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. These Athenians were actually wise because they knew they didn't know.

And so they had to listen to everything until they found the truth. They were still searching, you see, and they knew it. And maybe this morning you are like one of the Athenians.

Maybe you are still searching. Maybe that's what brought you here this morning. Maybe you know that you don't know what is true. And let me tell you, I applaud you for admitting that.

It takes guts to do that because then you need to, you kind of give yourself the responsibility to have to explore until you find what you're searching for. But maybe you're feeling that despite all the searching you've done, the God who made all of this that you know is out there somewhere, he's still unattainable.

[11 : 14] You still can't connect with him. He's still unknown to you like he was to the Athenians. He's an unknown God. Is that God to you?

Well, I hope this morning that I can save you some trouble. The trouble of endless searching for this unknown God. Because Paul wanted to save the Athenians some trouble by telling them how the unknown God can now be known because of Jesus Christ.

And that's what he goes on to do. And in fact, before he's even at the Areopagus, we read in verse 18, he was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

You see, that's what his message came down to. If you want to know the heart of what Paul went around the ancient world preaching, it comes down to this. Jesus and the resurrection.

And that's why he could be so confident about what he was saying. Because of those two facts. And that's why you, if you are a Christian this morning, can be so confident about what you believe.

[12 : 18] Because Jesus was a real person who walked this planet and did amazing signs recorded in history to show us that he was from God. And Jesus rose from the dead. Which is confirmed by history and eyewitness testimony.

And that alone is a game changer in world religion. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead changes everything. Finally, someone has come back from behind the door.

You see? And so finally, the unknown can be known. We can know what's behind the door. I heard a Christian interviewed on TV.

And he was asked, he was put on the spot, this Christian, on live TV. And he was asked, as a Christian, why are you so confident that you're right? What about the other religions and philosophies in the world, huh?

You know what he said? He said, what about them? Listen, if you're walking down a street. And then it comes to a branch in the road and branches into two. And you don't know which way to go.

[13 : 19] And there are two men there. One's alive and one's dead. Which one would you ask for directions? And then he said, the reason I'm a Christian is because Jesus is alive. And that's why I know the truth.

You see? And to Paul, it was the same. To Paul, the resurrection of Jesus, it changed everything. It made the unknown all of a sudden known. And so people can stop guessing about God now because Jesus rose from the dead.

And that's exactly what Paul goes on to say. He says, you don't have to guess about God. You don't have to wonder what he's like and who he is and what he says anymore. Because Jesus shows us. Jesus has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is from God.

And his word is God's word itself. And so we can stop guessing. And so what Paul then goes on to do in his sermon to these Athenians is that he shows them three mistakes that they had been making so far in their understanding of God.

And I want us to go through these three mistakes and what he says to correct them. Because these are three mistakes people make today. People that you know. Maybe yourself. In your understanding of God.

[14 : 23] So let's look at these three mistakes and what Paul says about them. So the first mistake we see here that he corrects. The first mistake is the idea that different cultures have different gods.

Which of course was very common back in the ancient world. Each country or culture you would go to had their own national gods who were only concerned with that particular nation.

So Greeks had Greek gods. Romans had Roman gods. And Paul as an Israelite was supposed to have an Israelite god. And so for the Greeks in Athens it didn't make much sense for him to come and promote his Israelite god to Greeks.

You know they were like well Paul that's your god not ours. We've got our god. You've got your god. But that sounds familiar doesn't it? It's very similar today. You believe your religion.

I'll believe my religion. You know people in India are typically Hindu. People in the Middle East are typically Muslim. You've got your god. We've got ours. Everyone's happy now. Let's leave each other alone. That's generally the idea.

[15 : 26] But Paul knows that that doesn't work. Because he knows the truth. So look what he says in verse 24. 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 human hands. So he's not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their land. So you see the point he's making is that the world was made by one god.

The same god who made not just one nation but all the nations. It's not like one god made India and another god made the Middle East or Saudi Arabia and another god made Canada.

No. It's one god who made everything. And it's not like one god made that Muslim person and another god made me. One god made all of us.

[16 : 25] Made all the earth in which we live. And that same one god is in charge of the history of all nations and all people. And so you can't have different nations and people groups following different gods. If they all came from one god.

See the logic is very simple. If they all came from one god you can't have them all following different gods. But you see if we were all created by the same god. If that is true then it makes no sense to say well you've got your religion I've got mine.

It doesn't work. At least one of those is wrong and needs to change. And we need to have the guts to tell people that. In our world today of religious tolerance and everybody's right and everybody's got their.

No it's not that way. If we were all made by one god there is only one god. And if I believe a different god to you one of us is wrong. And we've got to change. We've got to talk about that. But the question of course is who needs to change.

Right. Okay so yes there's one god. But how do we know who that one god is. How do we know where to find that right god. He seems to have hidden himself in today's world.

[17 : 24] It's like he doesn't want to be found. And you'll hear that today won't you. You'll hear people saying well if god is real he would show himself somehow. But he doesn't. I can't find this god that you're talking about.

And that's the second mistake that Paul corrects here. The mistake that god can't be found. Again a very common idea in our world today.

In verse 18 some of the philosophers that Paul was speaking to were Epicureans. Now I know it sounds like some kind of cosmetics brand. But they were actually a school of philosophy.

And Epicureans believed that the material world was all that really mattered. What you could see and taste and touch and smell. This life here and now was what it's about. And if there was a god then he wasn't really concerned with us on earth.

He was distant and he was inaccessible. Again that's a very very popular way of thinking today. Probably one of the most popular mindsets. Secularism. That what matters is the here and now.

[18 : 27] And if there is a god I'm not too bothered about him. Because he's not concerned with us on earth. But then Paul corrects this understanding. In verse 27.

Have a look. He's just spoken about how god has set up the earth for humans to live in. And then he says this. Verse 27. And God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.

Though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. And he's quoting there an Athenian philosopher. But the point that Paul's making is that rather than withdrawing from the world he had made.

God's intention in making the world was so that we can know him. That's why he gave us life. That's why he created the world and us. And nations and people. It's so that we could know him and draw close to him the creator.

The creation is given to point us to the creator. The creation around us and our enjoyment of things in the creation. When you go for a bike ride in the mountains.

[19 : 29] When you go for a hike. When you watch a sunrise. When you enjoy creation. That is only ever meant to be an invitation to having a relationship with the creator himself.

The source of that beauty and enjoyment. I don't know if you've ever been to a fancy party. Now I mean a really, really fancy party.

Where you have to wear a tuxedo and a ball gown. Whatever. Not at the same time. Men wear tuxedo. You know what I mean. But I'm talking about really fancy parties. So where there's dignitaries and maybe royalty at the party.

I don't know if... I've never been to a party like that. But if you do get invited to a party like that. Typically you'll get a really fancy invitation to that party. It's got like really fancy embossed paper and gold trimming and calligraphy and some wax seal.

But now it would be pointless, wouldn't it? To be so taken with the beauty of this invitation that you don't read it and go to the party. But that's what people do with God every day.

[20 : 36] By concentrating so much on the created world and its pleasures. And yet not realizing that that's only meant to be an invitation to come to its creator. You see we concentrate on the invitation.

We ignore what it's inviting us to. This world is inviting us to a relationship with God. And yet we're so fixated on what we have. On the gifts. That we forget the giver.

And we all do it. And we wonder why we're so unsatisfied with life. We wonder why we're never happy. Well the reason is we were never meant to find our satisfaction in the gifts themselves.

We're meant to find our satisfaction in the giver. These things that we enjoy in life are just tasters of God who gave them to us. Don't neglect God for the sake of trying to enjoy the things he gives.

Because you see God intends for you to know him. To be in personal intimate relationship with him. Not just in this life but in eternity to come.

[21 : 33] God intends for you to enjoy him. Far more than enjoying the gifts that he gives. He is not far from you. He is not far from any one of us.

That you know what the truth is. It is us who are far from him. You know when people say well God is far. God is inaccessible. God is not far from you.

You are far from God. You see creation. The world around us. What we see. At its very least. That should cause us to want to seek our creator.

And put everything else aside and seek him until we find it. But we don't. We do the opposite. We run the other way. We shut God out. And we chase after things. And we take no notice of God. Or even worse.

We create another God in our minds. To suit us. Rather than seeking the true God. And that's the last mistake. That Paul wants to point out to the Athenians.

[22 : 31] Here that they were making about God. And that is the mistake of making God in our image. Making God in our image. Which is exactly what the Athenians were doing.

With their idols. Literally they were making God in their image. With human craft and skill. Rather than seeking out the one true God. They decided to make their own gods.

Who were visible. Who were easily accessible. And who made no demands of them. A little stone statue. Can't tell you how to live. That's why they loved worshipping those gods. Because they were mute. But we do the same.

Don't we? Whenever we keep our Bibles closed. We may not have physical little idols. And yet you know what we do? Tenancy that we all have is.

We tend to believe whatever best suits. The lifestyles that we've already decided to live. We choose what to believe about God. And what to ignore. Even as Christians. We cherry pick from the Bible.

[23 : 27] What we like. And we ignore what we don't like. We just don't read it. We're all guilty of that. And you know what that is? That's idolatry. It's idolatry.

Because rather than seeking the true God. We're slowly constructing in our minds. A God that suits us. We're making God in our image. But look what Paul says.

In response to the idolatry of the Athenians. From verse 28. He says, As some of your own poets have said. We are his offspring. 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 human design and skill. See what he's saying there? Even pagan poets recognize that we derive from God.

God doesn't derive from us. We are made in his image. He is not made in our image. And that's an important distinction to make.

[24 : 25] Because if you are made in God's image. You've been made with a purpose. With a plan. With a design. A right and wrong way to live. See if you are made in God's image.

There is a right and wrong way to live. Because you have a purpose. And so if that is the case. Instead of making God who you want him to be. To fit your lifestyle.

You should be seeking what he made you to be. Even if that means changing your lifestyle. And if you want to know what he made you to be. Look at the Lord Jesus Christ. But sometimes.

For all of us. That will mean changing parts of our lives. To be what God made us to be. And that's the challenge Paul ends with. It's a challenge to change.

You know we don't want to change. We resist change. We want to carry on living like we have decided to live. But the Bible. If we read it properly.

[25 : 25] And we open it up. It will always demand us to change. Every Sunday. You know what I want? I want you to leave here. Challenge to change. And I want to leave here. Challenge to change.

That's what the effect of God's word should be on us. And the word that Paul uses is repent. That's what repent means. It means change. It means turn away from what you know is not the way God wants you to live.

And follow him. So verse 30. Look what Paul says. And this is the importance of doing that. Making sure we're changing. Making sure we're repenting. Constantly. He says in the past God overlooked such ignorance.

Ignorance about him. But now. But now that Jesus has come. He commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice.

By the man he has appointed. And he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. You see now. Now that God has fully and finally revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 21] Who has proved to be his son through the resurrection from the dead. Now there is no more excuse for ignoring him. No human on earth has an excuse for ignoring God anymore.

And so the only option is to repent. Is to change your lifestyle. To turn around. Away from living your own way. And towards God. The true God. Living his way. Who is now revealed.

And who wants to draw close to us. And you know what the excellent thing about Jesus is. Is that you can do that now. You can turn to God. Even though you're a sinner.

Jesus came specifically to take those sins away. When you put your faith in him. And allow you full access to God. God. So not only must we repent and turn to God.

We can. We can do the very thing we were made for. We can turn to God. You can turn to God. But you must turn to God.

[27 : 15] Notice that God commands all people to repent. He doesn't say repent if you want to. He doesn't say oh here's another option for your life. No. It's a command.

From God. Your creator. To repent. He made you. And you are accountable to him. And he is waiting for you to come to him. Before it's too late. The door is only open for so much longer. God commands all people now to repent.

And if you haven't done that. If you haven't taken that step. Of turning to God through Jesus Christ. Don't waste time. Tomorrow is not a guarantee.

You don't know you'll wake up tomorrow morning. Make a change today. And I've got a booklet that I want to give you. If you haven't done that and you want to. If you want to turn to God today.

I've got a booklet that you can read to help you to know how to do that. Just come to me after the service. And I will give you one for free. No questions asked. But if you have done that.

[28 : 15] If you have done that already. If you are today following Jesus. Then I want you to notice something in closing. If you take one thing from the sermon this morning. From this passage this morning.

Take out this. Notice why Paul was so passionate to speak out. In Athens about Jesus. Notice why. The reason is because he was so distressed. At the predicament that these people were in.

That he saw. He was distressed at their spiritual poverty. And so he spoke out. But you know what? We don't speak out do we? At the best of times. We keep quiet about Jesus. And you know why we don't speak like Paul?

It's because we don't feel like Paul. We're not distressed enough. At the lostness of the people around us. And you know why we don't feel like Paul?

It's because we don't see like Paul. We're so often caught up. In daily life. In the physical world. We forget to notice the deep spiritual needs around us every day.

[29 : 15] We've got to start looking at the world through Paul's eyes. Seeing the spiritual state people are in. And so we need to pray that God would give us those eyes.

To see like Paul did. So we can feel like he did. So we can speak like he did. Let's pray that God would help us. Yes Lord God.

You have done everything for us. To know you. You have sent your son to die for our sins. To bring us to you. And yet we know our tendency is to run the other way.

You want to draw close to us. But we so often. Are just taken by. By the world. And its pleasures. We forget. Who gave us those things. And so.

We do pray Lord. Change our minds. Help us each to repent. Help us to change. When we leave this place. And to keep changing every day. As we open your word. Help us not to make.

[30 : 14] A God in our mind. To suit our lifestyles. But rather. Help us to seek you. So that we will change. According to your will. And then we pray Lord. As we go out. Into our workplaces.

Into our schools. Give us eyes like Paul. To see the world as it truly is. Its spiritual state. So that we would feel distressed. Like he does. And so we would be bold.

To open our mouths. And tell people about Jesus. And we pray this in his name alone. Amen.