

Making Faith Relevant in a Modern World

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[0 : 0 0] and were filled with people who wanted to hear more and more about and talk about all different types of philosophies. And they were searching for meaning in their lives. And when we see the Apostle Paul walking around the city and he comes to this statue, it's pretty obvious that they even were looking to someone they didn't even know, a higher power, that they wanted to make sure that they didn't leave anybody out. So Paul saw this as an opportunity to reach people, just as we should be as we're going about our daily lives, looking at how people are bustling about shopping and doing everything they do, going to work, going out to play. We look for opportunities and we look for common ground where people can, where we can reach out and maybe build a bridge so people can learn about God and learn about Jesus Christ. So Paul was looking for something beyond the idols and beyond the philosophies they knew. And the thing is, Paul knew exactly who this unknown God was.

He knew the God that they didn't know. And he knew him as Jehovah God. He knew him as the creator of the universe. So Paul used this moment as an opportunity to introduce these free thinkers, these philosophers, these very high thinking individuals. He used it as an opportunity to introduce them to the God of the universe who had revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

And as we explore this story today, it really makes us think about the world in which we live in. Just like Athens, our world is filled with people who are searching for meaning. They're going about life, going about their job, going about their play, going about their hobbies, and they want to find purpose.

Now they may not have altars in the sense that they did then. There are cultures today that has their altars. When we were in other countries, when we were places like Japan, there was ancestor worship.

They had little altars, they had little altars, and they would put fruit there for their ancestors. But even though there's no altars today in people's homes, most homes, there's things that they turn to for fulfillment.

[2 : 5 1] Things like success, things like job, things like relationships, or their possessions. And just like Paul, our challenge today is to meet people where they are, and then help them to discover who God is, and the relationship they can have through Jesus Christ.

So let's unpack this very fascinating portion of the book of Acts this morning, and the people that Paul encounters in Athens, and how we can make faith relevant in our world today.

But I need to clear up one thing. Please understand, the gospel is relevant in all times. We don't need to make the gospel relevant, because the truth of the Word of God is always relevant, has always been relevant, and will always be relevant.

Our challenge is, however, to make and proclaim faith in a relevant way that people will get.

So people are not thinking the way they did about certain things as they were 50 years ago, or 100 years ago. People aren't concerned about some of the same things they were concerned about then.

[4 : 10] You see, we have to reach people in a way that resonates with them. Paul could have chosen to speak to these Athenians the way he would have spoken to Jews in Jerusalem.

But had he done so, they would have had no background from which to understand. He would have used terminology that they would say, What are you talking about?

When he spoke to Jews, he could use Jewish language. He could use Old Testament language. They would have gotten it. But these Athenians, who were thinkers, philosophers, who had absolutely no frame of reference with the Old Testament, and Jehovah God, and the Messiah, so what he did was, he had to start with something they knew and understood, and then work backward, and then work forward, if that makes any sense.

That's kind of the way we have to do with people who were never raised in church, and who don't have a frame of reference about Bible language or Sunday school language, and so we have to start with them where they are.

They're searching for meaning in their job. So what do we do? We say, Well, you know, there's a lot of jobs where we can find meaning, but really does that last? And what if that job goes sideways?

[5 : 29] What if you lose your job? Where's your fulfillment going to be then? Well, what if I can show you a place to find fulfillment that is going to be way beyond what you could find in a job and will last forever?

Wouldn't that be something you'd like to find? Well, yeah, if I could find that. Okay, well, let me show you about what God says about how you can have a brand new life and a life filled with hope and a life filled with purpose.

Well, what did we do? We didn't. The gospel was always relevant, but what we did was we go to the people that are hungry and we give them the food that's going to be able to satisfy their hunger.

And this is exactly what Paul did. So let's take a look. Let's start with verses 22 and 23 of Acts chapter number 17.

Verse 22 and 23. Then Paul stood in the midst of the Oropagus and said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious.

[6 : 39] For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God, therefore the one whom you worship without knowing him, I proclaim to you.

So let's start imagining this scene in Athens. So he is in the middle of the Oropagus. The Oropagus, by the way, was a hill in Athens that was also referred to as Mars Hill.

Some of you may have heard talk about Paul's address on Mars Hill or Paul's message on Mars Hill. This is it, the Oropagus. So Paul is here on this hill overlooking the city of Athens.

And here's Paul, a very passionate follower of Jesus Christ, walking around the city of Athens. And he's just observing. He's window shopping. He's trying to figure out a little bit about the city.

And this city was a hub of culture. This city was filled with philosophers, as we said, thinkers who loved to debate about any new philosophy.

[7 : 53] You know, it's like today. We solve the world's problems. We talk for a while and, yep, we've got it all solved. Well, they like to talk and debate and figure out what new thing they could figure out.

It was also a city that was filled with temples, a city that was filled with idols, a city that was filled with idol, idols, pagan worship.

So Paul finds this probably not in the middle of everything, but maybe relegated to a corner somewhere, an altar with the inscription to the unknown God.

And some people will say, you know what? We don't want to leave anybody out. So we're going to make an altar to, hey, everybody else, if we forgot about you, we're sorry. Here it is. So here's your altar.

And so Paul uses this. He saw this as a perfect opportunity. Instead of criticizing the Athenians for their paganism, instead of going in and carrying a sign and saying, repent or perish, what he did was, he said, good for you.

[9 : 04] I see that you all are very devout. And so he gives them a pat on the back. So here he is.

And he starts by acknowledging their spiritual curiosity. For as I was passing, I saw this inscription to the unknown God.

I see that in every way you are very devout. You are very religious. The word Paul used for that there, that word there means pertaining to me religious.

It could either be used in a good sense or a bad sense. That is, it may mean either devout or religious. And in later years, in the language, it came to also potentially have the meaning of superstitious.

But when Luke wrote this, there seems to be every reason to believe that Paul meant to use the term in a positive sense.

[10 : 10] Paul didn't want to close the door before he had a chance to share the gospel. So what I think he did was, he said something that was encouraging to them so they wouldn't shut their ears and say, oh yeah, you're going to tell us that we're wrong?

No, he said, I see that you all are very devout. See, you all are very religious. And how about if I share with you who this unknown God is? I'm going to proclaim him to you.

And they listened. They listened to the apostle Paul. So what do we learn? We learn from this, if you're taking notes, we should start where people are. Paul started where they were.

They had all these idols. He picked one of their idols and he said, well, let me tell you who this idol is. Let me tell you who this God is. You may be wondering, and maybe some of you might have thought, you know, I wonder how many gods are associated with this idol.

I wonder who we forgot. So Paul starts where they are. He didn't begin with judgment or condemnation. He didn't point fingers. He didn't tell them how wrong they were.

[11 : 19] Instead, he found common ground. And he recognized they were searching for something greater. And that's what I think Paul keyed in on. He didn't jump on their paganism.

He used their desire to know something greater as a springboard to help them understand who God was.

And he wanted to bring them beyond what they already knew. I think this is a powerful lesson for us today. You see, we live in a world where people are searching for meaning, searching for purpose.

You know, often, without realizing, they're really looking for God. They want to get up in the morning. And they want their lives to matter. They want to go to work and do something that's meaningful and not just a means to a paycheck.

And when they get off, they want to, you know, have their life mean something. And so Paul says, let me show you who this God is.

[12 : 25] Now, while they may not have physical altars, you know, they have unknown, they have their own altars, altars to their job, to relationships, careers, even sometimes social media.

These are things they turn to, hoping to find satisfaction and identity. Now, our job, just like Paul's, is to find out where people are, find out what they really crave, and then to say, okay, how does the Bible meet this craving?

How does the Bible fill this hunger in their lives? So we start, maybe we can start conversations with curiosity and respect, you know, not by pointing out where they're wrong, but instead finding common ground.

It's recognizing their spiritual hunger and guiding them toward the truth of Jesus. So when we approach people with understanding and empathy, I believe we open the door for meaningful conversation, rather than them shutting the door because they don't want to hear how wrong they are.

They don't want to hear that we know better and that we're going to school them on what's right. No. You know, I can see that, that you're really searching for something, or I can see that you're religious.

[13 : 44] You are very devoted to that which you serve. So let me, let me show you how you can find real fulfillment. For instance, when we're talking to a friend and they find fulfillment in their career, and they're really sold on their career, maybe we can acknowledge their dedication and maybe the importance of what they're doing and then gently introduce them to the fact that they can have lasting purpose and lasting meaning beyond their career, beyond retirement, and find lasting purpose.

And that purpose comes from a relationship with God. So as we think about our friends, our families, our co-workers, the people that we rub shoulders with, you know, let's look for those unknown altars in their lives and use them as a springboard to begin conversation.

Just like Paul, we can make a difference in people's lives today just by starting where they are. So let's move on. Let's, let's look at verses 24 to 28.

So Paul has met them on this hill, Mars Hill. He encourages them for, he praises them for being devout.

And he says, I see that you have an altar to an unknown God. Let me, let me proclaim him to you. So in verse 24, what does he start off with? God, the God, capital G God.

[15 : 18] So he says, this God who made the world and everything in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temple made with hands, nor is he worshiped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, since he gives to all life, breath, and all things.

And he has made from one blood, every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth. And he has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord.

That was the purpose of what God has done in the hope that they might grope for him and find him. Though he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said.

So what Paul did, Paul even reached into their culture. And he said, some of your poets said that we are also his offspring. And imagine standing on a hill, overlooking this beautiful landscape.

The sun is shining, the sky is filled with vibrant colors, and you feel the breeze on your face. You know, in moments like this, if you see a beautiful sunset, you know, it's not hard for us to imagine an intelligent designer, a creator, who put all this.

[16 : 48] It has to be somebody, something that put this together. And I think that's the kind of experience Paul wanted these Athenians to have. So look at all around us. Look at the beauty around us.

Let me show you the one who put all of this in place. It didn't just happen. It wasn't a big bang that just threw everything and a big bang and then order resulted from chaos.

That doesn't make sense in any realm. That doesn't make any sense. So after acknowledging their spiritual curiosity, Paul took the next step by revealing the creator behind all of creation.

He told the Athenians about the God who made the world and everything in it. So this, Paul explains, that God doesn't live in these temples.

God doesn't live in anything that man can make. So today, an idol is nothing more than a block of stone or a piece of wood and there's no God, no capital G God living in those.

[17 : 56] He isn't confined to statues. He isn't confined to altars. Isn't that amazing? We don't have to be in a temple or in a church building in order to meet God, in order to be able to commune with Him, in order to be able to have a relationship with Him.

He is just as much there with you 10,000 feet up in the air, in the airplane or in the deepest part of the ocean.

He's there with us no matter where we are. He's the Lord of Heaven. He's the Lord of the Earth. He's the one that gives life and breath to everything. Many people today wonder, maybe even wonder, if there is a God.

So in verses 24 to 28, we see that what Paul did was he revealed the Creator behind the creation. So the same thing goes for us. We are to reveal the Creator behind the creation.

He wanted the Athenians to see that God wasn't this detached God. He was a God who was involved in their daily lives or in our daily lives and he could be involved in their daily life as well.

[19 : 10] Paul emphasized that in God we live and move and have our being. This means that God's present in every area of our life. When you're on the mountaintop and having an awesome time, it could be a vacation, it could be just an awesome time, a birth of a new baby, it could be anything.

It could be a relationship. God's there in your worst time, in the loss, in sickness, in health, in misery, in pain.

You know that God's just as much there with you in that time as He is in any other time? That's the God we serve. That's the Creator God. That's the God of the universe. He created us to have a relationship with us.

And so what Paul is going to introduce these Athenians to is the God who created but the God who also wants to have a relationship with you in the good times as well as the bad times.

So in our world today, many people struggle to see God in the everyday. You know, they think, well, you know what, I'm going to go to this temple, I'm going to go to this synagogue, I'm going to go to this church building.

[20 : 31] Might be beautiful on the outside, might be beautiful on the inside, the stained glass and all that they see and the, not that that's wrong because I think if we had gone to the Old Testament and seen the temple, the temple would have been full of gold.

The temple would have been full of gems. The temple would have been full of ornate trappings because God wanted His people to realize that He is not mundane, He is not ordinary.

But people don't, we can't go to a place like that to find God, just to find God. God is there just as much as He is in our house, God is just as much there on the beach, in the woods, and in your backyard.

God is everywhere. So as we engage with others, we can talk about how God's, they're all around us and how we see God in our own lives.

You know, we can talk about what God means to us, the things we've seen God do in our own lives. And what does that do? That makes God personal. So we can introduce God, we can introduce people to the personal God that you and I serve.

[21 : 47] So after Paul connected with the Athenians, he praised them for their devoutness, he praised them for searching, even for someone they didn't know. He says, let me proclaim this God to you.

He is God, God of the universe, the creator, one who, who in Him, we all live and breathe and have our existence. And then he took a bold step.

He moved from talking about God to what God expected them to do. Let's look at verses 29 to 31. Therefore, since we are, what did he do?

It's a cool thing that Paul did here. He used their own poet. You know, your own poet said that we are his offspring. And then he said, since we are the offspring of God, God used their own terminology.

He used their own language. And he says, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature, the term he used for God, is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

[22 : 58] He says, truly, these times of ignorance, God overlooked. You know, it reminds me of Romans chapter 1 where Paul talks about God has revealed in creation the sunrise, the sunset, the rainbow, the beauty of the azure sky and the ocean and all that's around us.

Everything that we need to know about God is evident in his creation. But he said, what has mankind done? Mankind has looked at all of that, ignored it and chose to worship the creation or the creature rather than the creator.

He chose to worship creation rather than the one who created it. And so, here Paul says, God's overlooked all of that. God's overlooked ignorance like this, but now God commands all men everywhere to what?

to repent because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the capital M, the man whom he has ordained.

He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead. Of whom is Paul speaking? Jesus, the Messiah.

[24 : 26] He gave Jesus, he ordained Jesus to be the Savior of all mankind and he died on a cross and the third day Jesus rose again.

It's the resurrection of Jesus Christ that is the bedrock of our faith. If not for the resurrection, our hope would be in vain. We would have nothing. And so, Paul challenges the Athenians to rethink their lives, to turn away from their idols and their ignorance and turn to the one true God.

He's not an image crafted by human hands. Instead, God is living, he's active, and he calls people everywhere to repent. You know, no gospel presentation is ever complete without letting people know what God expects of them.

You know, it's like a salesperson who talks about their product and says, thank you for listening to me. Let me go next door. And, what do you have to do?

Well, are you willing to buy right now? I expect an answer. Yes or no? Whatever you answer, that's fine, but you need to make a decision.

[25 : 43] And that's what God expects of us. He gives us the opportunity. Anytime we share the gospel, anytime we share the truth of Jesus Christ, it's not enough for people to know who God is.

It's not enough for them to know what Jesus did for us. They have to know God expects you to make a choice. You either trust Jesus, accept him for who he is, and trust what he did on the cross of Calvary, and follow him, or choose to continue going your own way.

See, that's the choice, and Paul realized that. So, like Paul, we should give people a call to repent and to seek God. We should give people a call to repent and seek God.

Now, the word repentance might sound kind of heavy and old-fashioned, but it's still a Bible word. It's still a term that's used often.

It's really a word about change. It's just a word about change. It's like when you're using a GPS, and you've made a wrong turn.

[26 : 53] Sometimes, you might find yourself going in the opposite direction. Well, what the GPS does is it recalculates and it guides you back on track. So, you have a choice.

You can either choose to trust the GPS and do what it says, repent and turn around, or you can say, you know what, I know better, and then you end up 10 miles from where you want to be.

Repentance is similar. It's about recognizing that we've been heading in the wrong direction and now we choose to turn back to God and follow Him. That's all repentance really is.

And Paul didn't shy away from this. Paul didn't have a weak spine where he says, let me explain who God is and then hope people got it. No, he said, this is what God expects from you.

He made it clear that God commands everyone to repent because the day of judgment is coming. There's going to come a day that God appointed and one day you'll have to give account for your life.

[27 : 57] Either you chose Jesus or you didn't. Either you repented of your going the wrong way or not. So that day is coming, he says, and then he brings out the resurrection.

The resurrection really is the cornerstone of our faith, showing that Jesus is who he claimed to be, the Son of God who conquered death. Now in our world people often chase after idols.

People chase after money. People chase after fame. People chase after recognition. People chase after a lot of different things.

Hoping these things will fill the void in their life, fill the emptiness that they sense inside. that they want to fill this void, maybe of loneliness, maybe of feeling insecure or feeling inadequate.

These are people who are looking for things to fill these voids and to make them feel better. Those will always leave us empty eventually. They don't fulfill.

[29 : 03] It's like that awesome dessert that you have. It is decadent. It is sumptuous. Or that meal that you and I eat that is just our favorite meal.

What's going to happen a few hours later? You'll be hungry again. I don't care if you have the most wonderful meal that you've ever had in your life.

You're going to get hungry again. That's the same way with our attainments. That's the same way with the things in our life. The day is going to come when they won't fulfill anymore.

So as we share our faith we need to be honest about what God expects of them. He calls them to change direction. So as Paul wraps up this message he faced a range of reactions.

So let's see what these reactions were. Let's close with verses 32 to 34. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead some did what? They mocked him.

[30 : 05] What is this crazy man talking about? While others said we're not so sure. Let's hear some more.

We'll hear you again on this matter. So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed among them Dionysius the Oropagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

So some people mocked him. Some people said, well, the jury's still out. We want to hear some more about this strange idea. But a few believed, and a few began to follow.

And one was a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. I think this mixed reaction teaches us an important point.

And that is, you and I need to trust God for the results. You and I need to trust God for the results. Think about a farmer planting seeds.

[31 : 10] Think about when you plant seeds in your garden. You don't know which seeds are going to sprout and grow. But what do you do? You plant them anyway.

Now let's say half of the seeds you plant don't do anything. they don't sprout. Did you waste your time?

Why not? You planted three rows of something and a lot of seeds.

But maybe half of the seeds germinate and grow into a plant. Well, why was it not wasted? Even though half of them, didn't do anything.

Because you still had plants. And so if we share the gospel with 20 people, and let's say one person trusts Jesus, turns from their ways, repents, and follows Jesus, was it worth it?

[32 : 21] Because we didn't just gain somebody, we didn't just gain a behind and a pew. we gained a soul that was going to be in heaven with us one day.

That's the importance of the gospel, and that's the importance of the message that you and I have. It's the message that changes lives. It's the message that changes eternity for people.

So in our world, it's easy to get discouraged when people don't immediately trust. Some may mock us, some may turn away from us, some may say, that sounds interesting, yeah, you can talk to me some more about it, but they don't make their decision.

Sometimes people may seem indifferent, but we need to remember that even the apostle Paul, even the apostle Paul had people who chose not to believe, even the apostle Paul had people who were indifferent to the gospel, but yet, like Paul, some people will believe and some people will choose to follow Jesus.

So when we share our faith, we should do so with love, we should do so with patience, realizing that some people will have mixed results, mixed reactions. Sometimes it takes time for the seeds we plant to grow.

[33 : 41] Sometimes they may never take root, but we can trust God that God's using our efforts and God's doing what only God can do. So let's not be discouraged by what seems like small or unsuccessful efforts.

You know, sometimes we lament, you know, it doesn't seem like things are happening. It doesn't seem like big things are going on.

Sometimes it might feel like we might be going backward. But if we make a difference in one person's life, life, is it worth it? I think so.

So let's not lose heart. Let's not lose patience. And let's stop looking at what is not happening and let's start seeing what God is doing in the one and the two and the three lives, the four or the five.

So let's look at what God wants to do and that every step that we take to share the gospel, every step that we take to make a difference in another person's life, God can use.

[34 : 50] So as we wind up this morning, let's remember Paul's journey in Athens and really how it mirrors our world today. People have their own little maybe invisible altars that they're paying homage to to hope that they'll find some kind of fulfillment.

They have their own unknown gods. So this week, think about who in your life might be searching for something, might be searching for something beyond them, and then start that conversation.

Think about asking them, what gives you a sense of purpose? Or have you ever wondered if there's more in life than maybe what you can see? These questions open the door to maybe some deeper conversations of faith.

So let's be the bridge to the God who knows and loves them, and let's carry this message of faith, be bold in faith, compassionate in our approach, and trust in God's power to change lives one conversation at a time.

Let's pray. Dear God, we thank you for using the Apostle Paul's experience there on Mars Hill to engage a group in such a way that praised them, but yet used it as a bridge to introduce you, the Creator God, and Jesus Christ, whom you send into the world to be our Savior.

[36 : 26] Father, give us the courage and the boldness to go out and do the same, and to begin conversations, to meet people where they are, to show them the Creator, and to leave the results up to you.

Father, we thank you for what you're going to accomplish this week. We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen. Moses and I ■■■ an page with sign to an ■■■