

In the beginning

Part 1 - Jesus' resurrection takes us back to the beginning

Imagine being Paul in Athens in **Acts 17:19-20**, and having a group of high and mighty Greek philosophers challenge you in public to explain “what this new teaching is that you are presenting,” and being told that “You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.”

These Athenians were usually open-minded about “the latest ideas” (21), but Paul’s preaching “about **Jesus and the resurrection**” had not gone down well with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who accused Paul of being a “babbling advocate of foreign gods,” **verse 18**. So they managed to get Paul hauled up before the high Council of the Areopagus to explain himself.

So there was Paul standing before the most authoritative court of judges and noblemen in Athens with the opportunity handed to him on a plate to explain the gospel. On a smaller scale it would be like one of us being asked at the dinner table, with all the family present, to explain what it is we believe, or what a strange idea like the Trinity means, or as one member of my family asked me at a family gathering in earshot of everyone, “What is your religious capacity?”

That was exactly what the Greek philosophers wanted to know about Paul. What religious right, or capacity, did Paul have to teach and talk about another god in a sophisticated city like Athens that already had 30,000 gods? The city was “full of idols” (16), including an altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD to make sure they had every god covered and they hadn’t missed one, so what did **Paul’s God** have to offer that they hadn’t already got? And likewise, what right or capacity did I have to promote my version of God, when the world is already full of religions and churches that are fully convinced their version of God is the best? Who’s to say what I believe and teach is any better?

I was facing a similar challenge to the one Paul faced. Could what I say to my family member make the God I believe in stand out as being any better than the ideas about God he already had in his head, or that my God was worth looking into compared to all the other versions of ‘God’ out there? Like Paul, I’d been landed with the chance to say something, but what?

I look back and wish I'd remembered how Paul dealt with those Athenians, taking into account that Athens was a culture just like ours today. It had all sorts of "objects of worship" that made it appear "very religious," **Acts 17:22**. And it's typical in our culture too for people to think of themselves as being "very spiritual." People get all tingly about music, art, ancient philosophy, eastern religions and all sorts of other human-devised stuff, believing they've tapped into hidden powers or discovered the divine within themselves.

So we understand the Athenians. They believed they were bringing the spiritual to life in their gods, idols and great temples, just as people today think they're bringing their spirituality to life in drug-induced altered states of consciousness, or in mystical experiences while watching sunsets, or meditating like Buddhists, or going on pilgrimages, or in visions of heaven. So in a confused, jumbled mess of a culture just like ours, believing it's discovered 'God' and 'the spiritual' in all sorts of things, where did Paul start in making HIS God stand out as different?

He took his cue from the Athenians themselves, **Acts 17:23**, "For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God." Despite all their religiosity and spirituality there was still an element of doubt in their minds, that maybe they were still missing something. And that exists today as well, when people ask, "Why does a loving God let innocent people suffer?" In other words, they accept the possibility that God exists, and maybe they even **want** to believe he exists, but it's hard making sense of him, so can somebody please help them out? And that was the situation Paul found himself in, that despite the Athenians coming across as very religious they were still open to someone making sense of God.

So in front of some of the best brains in Athens Paul talks about God, and in such basic terms too. In **verse 24** he sounds almost like a Grandpa telling a bedtime story to his grandkids, because he starts off with, "The God who made the world and everything in it." He starts off with the first verse in the Bible: "**In the beginning, God...**"

It's so basic, but this is the picture Paul cements in their minds first of all, that in the beginning there was ONE God who made everything, and that this one Creator God was also "**the Lord** of heaven and earth." In the beginning, therefore, there was one God who made the universe - and, take note - he's also in charge of it and in complete control.

There were no yells of resistance from the Athenians at this point either - despite the Greeks believing the world did NOT begin with a Creator God. To them it began with what they called *chaos* and somehow gods and goddesses were produced in this chaos, most of which were completely bonkers - including their top god, Zeus, whose entire family was certifiably insane and should have been locked up. They abused women, ate children, and did amazingly sickening things in their craze for supreme rulership over the gods' HQ on Mount Olympus. A warning to parents, therefore: Greek mythology does not make for happy reading at bedtime for children. It's the stuff of nightmares.

But even the mighty Zeus was subject to fate, or The Three Fates as they were called, pictured in Greek mythology as three old women (wonderfully displayed in all their nuttiness in the Disney movie, Hercules). So Paul is really putting out a challenge here, to compare the infighting, immoral, insane mess of Greek gods, whose divine will and power could be overruled by three old women, to his one Creator God who planned everything from the beginning, controls every aspect of human life and death, and was on course to making his plan for creation work out exactly as he purposed.

In Paul's mind this is where it all began. He doesn't start off with "God loves you," or "Are you saved?" or "Have you repented of your sins?" Nor does he give a detailed explanation of the Trinity. What he starts off with instead is where the Bible starts in the book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

So there you are with your family round the dinner table with their forks poised in midair waiting for your answer to what you believe, and you say, "Well, I believe God made the universe and he's doing a jolly good job of running it." And with a casual wave of your own fork you add, "It's all there in the book of Genesis," and you stab a carrot and carry on eating.

And amazingly this is where Paul began with some of the best brains in Athens. He talked about God, just like Genesis talked about God. He then went a bold step further too, that God doesn't "live in temples built by human hands" - which must have raised a few Athenian eyebrows, because looming over Athens was the Parthenon, an architectural gem of white marble built for the goddess Athena to dwell in. But Paul's God needed no such edifice. In fact, Paul says in **verse 25**, God doesn't need anything from humans, "because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

Imagine telling that to your family at the dinner table, that the God you believe in doesn't need massive cathedrals or any building dedicated to his glory. In fact, he doesn't need anything from us that costs money, nor does he require sacrifices, rituals, gifts, or human service of any kind, because he's already got everything he needs. It's an insult to God to even think he needs something from us, when he was the one who gave US existence and life in the first place.

And why not go one step further while your family is waiting for dessert, and add that God is nothing like the gods OUR ridiculous world creates and worships either, like the gods of fame, security and body image, that demand we serve them with huge dollops of our time and money - but for what, pray tell, when one day we all die?

Paul, therefore, is presenting a God that's nothing like the gods we create today, nor was his God like any god the Athenians knew either. And what a relief that should have been for them, because their gods were a pain in the neck. They demanded all sorts of rituals and sacrifices, and temples and statues (like the massive golden statue of the goddess Athena in the Parthenon) to keep them happy and placated. The Greeks also lived in fear of their gods every day, because the gods would severely punish any human who stepped out of line.

The hypocrisy of the Greek gods, therefore, was staggering, because their OWN behaviour on the most part was deplorable. If you think movies today are stepping way over the line of human decency, the lives of the Greek gods were ten times worse. Their morals and ethics were far worse than the humans they demanded service and worship from.

The Greek gods also showed little interest in humans - beyond abusing them or punishing them - and they deliberately hid themselves from people too. Any human who dared venture too close to Mount Olympus where the gods dwelt and ruled from was sent packing, like poor old Bellerophon on his trusty steed Pegasus, who was sent hurtling back to earth by the lunatic Zeus to spend the rest of his life as a crippled wreck.

But Paul paints a completely different picture of his God as being intimately involved with humanity all through our history, as he explains in **Acts 17:26**, how "From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."

Here was a God who actually chose where nations and races of people would live, and was personally involved in when nations and empires would rise and fall. And Paul's God was **never hiding** from people either, because as Paul explains in **Acts 17:27**, "God's purpose in populating the Earth and creating nations was to get a response from people, that they seek him out and find him, because that's when they discover he's not that far away at all." And anyone could discover that too, that no matter who he was or where on the planet he lived he could get in personal touch with the Creator God at any time.

And this, Paul is saying, is what God designed this Earth and all that happens on it for, which - as an aside - helps explain why bad things happen too.

And this again is where Paul's God differed, because with the Greek gods bad things happened to people as punishment, but with Paul's God everything, good and bad, was designed to stir people to seek him. It explains why there are wars between the tribes, nations and empires that God set up. All these unstoppable horrors teach us, as one Christian minister wrote, that "It is ridiculous, absurd, nothing but a self-delusive, deceitful trick, and dishonest in the extreme, to think that anyone can operate, as a man or a woman, without God."

The Greeks were soaked in this self-delusion too, because their entire system did not start with God. It began where most people today begin, with no idea why evil exists, or why we can never stop people of different nations, races and genders attacking each other. It's all so horribly confusing, but our world has always been in a state of chaos, with endless tragedies happening to innocent people and helpless children, and we still have no answers. And at some point that chaos hits close to home as well, when a marriage falls apart, or a tragedy happens to a family member, or a natural disaster wrecks the family home, and suddenly you wonder, "What's the point of it all? What is there to hope for?" and it dawns on you that if God does not exist life is completely pointless.

But that's what human history exists for, Paul says, so that God in some way or other can reveal himself through our human circumstances to stir us to seek him. It could be out of desperation that eventually we seek him, or out of anger, or depression, or curiosity, or from frustration at our helplessness, but one thing God has designed into his creation for ALL of us is the gradual or sudden realization in **verse 28** that "in him we live and move and have our being," because, Paul writes - quoting a Greek poet from his own hometown - we are in fact God's "offspring."

The poem Paul quotes from was written by Aratus, a well-known Stoic, so Paul is tapping into what the Stoics in his audience believed, the first few lines of the poem being:

“Let us begin with Zeus, for every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.
Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity.
Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus.
For we are indeed his offspring...”

In other words, everything exists because of Zeus. He’s the father of all creation; we are his offspring. It’s in him, therefore, that we humans live and move and have our being. So Paul simply takes their Stoic belief about Zeus being the reason for life and existence in all things - which must’ve surprised his audience that he even knew what Aratus wrote - and he applies it to God. John did the same thing in his gospel when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word,” the Word being Logos in the Greek, Logos also being the term used as the reason for life and existence of all things. John simply takes the Logos and applies it to Jesus. Paul takes Zeus and applies it to God.

In both cases God is being revealed in terms a Greek audience would understand. It’s also telling them that such a God exists, that there really is a Creator who is the cause and reason for life and existence in all things. It is true, then, that “in him we live and move and have our being,” and therefore **we are truly his offspring** as well.

So in one way the Greeks got it right, that we are the offspring of a great God. But they had no idea that this one great God was calling out to his children through his creation and through their circumstances, nor did they believe that God was there for them any time they needed him. They were open to all sorts of **other** ideas and philosophies offering an explanation for the sad, mad world they were living in, but they’d never heard of the explanation Paul was presenting.

But here’s your family at the dining room table living in exactly the same kind of world as those Athenians. Our world is sad and mad too, and it too is chock full of theories on how to explain this chaos we live in, and how to live in hope when there are no solutions to evil and no guarantees of anybody’s life being lived happily ever after. But here WE are, armed with what Paul has just said in Acts 17, that there really is a God who made everything, and **the reason** he made everything the way he did is because we are his offspring, he’d like us to get in touch with him, and we’ll soon discover HE ISN’T hiding too.

Well, imagine the excuses leaping into your family members' minds for NOT getting in touch with him, like having to join some church or religion, and having to go along with all their rituals and weird doctrines, and putting up with horribly self-righteous, religious-sounding people.

Paul has an immediate answer for that too, though, in **Acts 17:29**, "Therefore since we are God's children (and HE created us), why do we think he's like something that WE would create?" We've created temples, statues, religions, works of art, icons, rituals and rules, all focused on **our** ideas of what God is like and what God wants, when all God is really interested in is his human children realizing they're his kids and getting in touch with him.

In other words, all this paraphernalia that religions churn out, all based on "an image of God made by man's design and skill," **verse 29**, is actually a complete waste of time and money. So tell that to your family members and watch their reaction, including the Christians in the group, who've probably been loaded up to the gills with their own denominational rituals, icons and weird ideas about heaven and hell, and when the Earth was created, and should we drink alcohol or not, and is the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday, and is the Holy Spirit a power or a person, and is Jesus God or not, and how do you fit three days and three nights between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and should baptism be by sprinkling or immersion, and why do we need unpronounceable Greek words to explain the Trinity? And on an on it goes.

Paul, meanwhile, has just taken a large broom and swept the lot of it into a big pile and said, "Let's put all that aside for a minute, shall we? And let's go back to the beginning and ask the question, that if there truly is a God who created this world of ours - and we **include** in that the evil and the chaos too - then what on earth did he have in mind, and why on earth did he do it this way?"

And isn't that the question your family members would like answered too, as to why bad things happen, and why innocent children suffer at the hands of predators, and why, if God is truly loving and all-wise he lets brutally selfish people get away with their greed and exploitation of the poor? And wouldn't they like to know why bad things happen in their **own** lives too, like accidents, natural disasters, the tragic death of a child, or dementia in a loved one?

But to what - or to whom - are they looking for answers? Do they think the answer is in something of their **own** creation, or in the God who created them?

And this was the question facing those Athenians too, because up to this point in their lives (in Acts 17) they'd been looking for answers in the gods of their own creation. The Greeks had thousands of gods covering every aspect of life, but how could intelligent people like themselves think there were solutions in these gods when they'd actually **made these gods up** in their own imaginations?

It's time, then, Paul says, to grow up - or as he phrases it in **Acts 17:30**, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

Enough of this nonsense, let's get back to basics: In the beginning there was a Creator God who made humans to be his children, and he created a world that would enable and encourage his children to seek him and find him. What we humans have done in response to that is ignorant, stupid, and as dumb as the gods we've created, because what have the gods of our creation and imagination done for us instead? The world hasn't changed one bit for the better because of them; and we still live without solutions to evil and awful things happening too.

So we can either persist with our nonsense or consider Paul's alternative - that there is a Creator, we are his children, and he hasn't given up on us. And to prove how much he hasn't given up on us, **verse 31**, he's "set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed."

Oh no, that dreaded phrase **Judgment Day** and all the negative things it brings to mind, right? But where is the negativity in the word "justice"? Isn't that exactly what we all want? We'd love to have justice done, where evil gets it just desserts, and so do the people who are bent on evil too. So, yes, the Creator God who loves his children is going to sort this mess out, because he can and wants to. But notice HOW he sorts it out. It's not by a group of insane Greek gods unleashing their vicious anger and revenge on humans, it's by A MAN who understands humans, **who can dispense justice correctly and appropriately.**

This was radical, because the Greek gods would never trust a man. The gods loved power, and any threat to their power by humans was crushed. The idea, then, that a HUMAN had been appointed by the Creator God to do the judging was staggering, because it did away with all the Greek gods and their nonsense. And isn't that what we'd love our family to know as well, that the solution to all our ills isn't religion, nor is it joining a church or trying to be spiritual; it's about a man, a human like ourselves, who has the power to put things to rights.

It's like a great big broom sweeping away all our human religiosity and so-called spirituality, and in the empty space where that huge pile of confusion about God stood, there is a sign that says, "It all comes down to that man." And **the reason** it comes down to that man, and why he's so special and credible, is God "raising him from the dead," **Acts 17:31**.

And in God raising him from the dead, we've got a man who can now take us right back to the beginning to start all over again with what God created us for, which is exactly what Paul is telling these Athenians. Paul has gone right back to Genesis and what God intended for humans from the start, because **that's what God appointed his man to do**, to straighten out the whole sordid story of what has happened to his children and to his creation since the Garden of Eden.

And that's what makes our God different and better than anything this world has to offer with all its human-inspired religiosity and spirituality and its many idols and gods. Our God raised a man from the dead as proof that a great Creator God really does exist, and as proof that he cares, as proof he is in charge, as proof he has a plan, and as proof he's working that plan out through humans who clue in to what he's up to, who then repent of their ignorance and want a part with God's appointed man in straightening out this mess of a world we live in.

It's interesting to see, then, what those Athenians objected to most of all in Paul's presentation, as a clue to what our family members might object to most of all as well. It wasn't about there being one Creator God, or that he's intimately involved in everything that happens on this planet, or that we're his offspring who can contact him at any time. None of those things were the issue for the Athenians.

What they objected to most of all, **verse 32**, was "the resurrection of the dead" - a human coming back to life again as a human. But that's totally understandable, because like most people today, including probably our family members too, the Greeks thought the future of dead humans was life in some other world, or some other existence, not life as humans back here on the Earth.

But what our God has done in resurrecting Jesus is give us hope, that this mess we've made of his purpose for us can be repaired and we can try again, thanks to him not only resurrecting a man capable of straightening out the mess, but also offering us the chance to join him as humans now and as resurrected humans later. And with his help and wisdom we can begin to experience for ourselves what God made us and his creation for - **in the beginning**.