

# Seeking God

Acts 17:16–34

January 27, 2002

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.” That is to say, God has made us to seek God. This is how we were designed. This is how we were created. This is how the world is put together, for us to seek that which is greater than ourselves. This is, in fact, the reason we were put here: to seek God and, in seeking him, to find God.

There is something deep within us that yearns for God. There is something deep within us that strives after God. There is something deep within us that aches for God, that wants to find God and to be with God. We have not always realized what that something is, but now Paul has named it for us. This something, in and of itself, is evidence that we belong to God and that we were made by and for God. Moreover, this something, in and of itself, is evidence of the presence of God, and of the reality that God has not forsaken us. God has not abandoned us. God has not left us here alone. This very yearning, even before it is satisfied, or even if its goal is never realized, shows at least that we are meant to be together with God. We need to admit this, to acknowledge this, to find again this yearning, to engage again this striving, to awaken again this aching after God. For without it, we have lost our way. Without it, life has grown cold and desperate. Without it, the world is flying apart. And even with it, even with the aching for God, we have too often groped in the darkness, headed the wrong direction, followed the wrong paths, reached the wrong goal, and worshiped false gods.

This is why Paul proclaimed God to the men of Athens. He hoped to set them straight, to appeal to their God given yearning for God, and to tell them of Jesus Christ. They were intelligent, sophisticated, and highly educated philosophers and academicians. Athens was the seat of culture, learning, art, and wisdom. It represented the best of the best which humanity had to offer. The citizens there were even very religious, in the sense that they worshiped many gods. They were seeking, or at least outwardly seemed to be doing so, but they were headed the wrong direction. They were worshiping false gods. They were even trying to hedge their bets with altars to many different gods and with one inscribed, “To an unknown god.” Paul told them that with that hedge they had, unknowingly, found the real thing. Paul wanted to take their seeking, build upon what was good in it, redirect its efforts, and point them toward the true God. That is why he took their acknowledgment of “an unknown god” and dared to name in its place the name of the real God “who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth.” And having caught their attention with that, Paul went on to tell them about Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected.

Paul continues to do the same for us today. We live among a people who worship false gods. There are people who satisfy their seeking for God by worshiping the gods of war, the gods of race, the gods of hate, the gods of fear, the gods of wealth, the gods of sex, the gods of state, and on and on and on. These are diversions, and worse than diversions they are falsehoods, harsh

masters sucking the life out of us by disorienting us at the very core of our being. When our seeking begins in the wrong direction, we are led far afield. When these diversions become absolute loyalties, we have worshiped wrongly.

So, it is there at the core of our being that we need to begin again, and this time we need to head in the right direction and seek the true God. The God who made heaven and earth made us to live here on earth, giving us life and breath. And he set up everything for us to seek and find him. Having heard this, we come to know that everything else in the world is a means to this end. Everything else is meant to point us toward God. The nation did not make us. The sun and moon did not make us. The vitalities of nature did not make us. Greed and money did not make us. God alone made us, and we belong to him alone. If we were to stop prematurely along the way of our seeking and to worship anything in the world, we would have stopped too soon. We would have fallen short of the purpose of life. We would have missed the goal of our yearning. We would have forfeited the true worship of God. We need to press on to the goal.

Lest the effort sound too hard, and the whole enterprise overwhelm us, Paul assures us that God “is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” That is, not only are we made to search for God, but also God is not too far away. The search is not impossible. God does not mock us. God does not ask us to do something we cannot do. Instead, God is near. God is waiting for us. In fact, God is yearning for us.

But there is even more. Not only are we made to seek God, and not only is God not far away, but also, and even more importantly, God has sought us out and come to us in his son, Jesus Christ. That is where Paul started, and that is where Paul ended. The rest was a way to appeal to people who were searching but who knew not for what they were searching, a people who thought they were intelligent but who were really ignorant. Paul started with Jesus and the resurrection, and he ended with Jesus and the resurrection. This is what first caught the attention of the Athenians, and this is what drove most of them away. But some of them believed. And for that we give thanks.

To all outward appearances, Jesus was an ordinary human being. But there was more to him than appearance. There was life and truth. He loved where others hated. He was humble where others were proud. He took on the suffering of the oppressed while others ran the other way. He was wrongly convicted though he had committed no crime. He took on the sin of the world though he had no sin of his own. And most remarkably of all, on the third day after he was crucified, dead, and buried, God raised him from the dead. Yes, God raised him from the dead.

This was the sign that God is in Jesus Christ. This is the assurance that Jesus is the man appointed by God to judge the world in righteousness. Jesus is the fulness of the mercy of God, come to us as one of us, seeking us out and finding us even while we are supposed to be seeking him. The resurrection establishes this.

Of all the gods the Athenians worshiped, they had never worshiped this one. Of all the new things they loved to tell and hear, they had never told or heard of this one. From all the philosophies under the sun, they had never learned of a power greater than death. It was one thing to say God created the world. It was quite another to say he had defeated the power of death. This was no longer a matter of theology from nature; this was a theology from revelation, counter to nature, running against everything else we have ever seen. But this is what Paul taught them. God is greater than death. God is greater than the sun and moon. God is greater than the earth. God is greater than heaven. And most importantly, most remarkably, most incredibly, God is greater

than death. God is not stopped by death. God is not stymied by death. God is not undone by death. God is not defeated by death. God is greater than death.

“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed.” It was too good for some people to believe. It was too out of touch with observed reality for some people to believe. It was too ridiculous for some of the sophisticates. But for some, this clear word of the goodness, power, and nearness of God wakened again deep within them that yearning, searching, longing, and seeking for God for which they had been made and for which we have been made. Some believed in the resurrection. Some believed in Jesus Christ. Some believed in God his Father. And they joined Paul and joined the Christian church. Once again, in their seeking God, almost before they began seeking, God found them and met them in his seeking them, just as he does in his seeking us.

An anonymous hymn in *The Hymnbook* captures this well:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
 He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;  
 It was not I that found, O Saviour true;  
 No, I was found of Thee.

Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;  
 I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;  
 ‘Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold  
 As Thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love, but O the whole  
 Of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee!  
 For Thou wert long beforehand with my soul;  
 Always Thou lovedst me.

What is the continuing significance of this seeking God today? “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.” The times of human ignorance have been long and vast, but they are being tolerated no longer. Today is a day of light, truth, and knowledge. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. Having done that, he calls upon, indeed he commands, all people to repent and to believe in his Son. There is no other way to the God whom we seek. And God is not to be trifled with.

At our last Wednesday night supper program, the director of the Circle Center Adult Day Services told us that one of the most important parts of treating senior adults with dementia is to provide them meals frequently and on a regular schedule. Otherwise, a strange gnawing feeling disturbs them, and, not knowing what it is or what to do about it, they tend to become upset and perhaps even violent. Instead of letting this happen, then reacting to what is going on, it is far better to keep people fed sufficiently and on time. God made us so that we all get hungry. It is a signal to eat and receive nourishment. Most of us understand the signal and know to go eat. But

for those who do not know, both for infants who do not yet know and for those who no longer can know, it is up to us to feed them.

It is also the case that God made us so that we all seek God. We all hunger for one greater than ourselves, one whom we can love, honor, obey, admire, serve, and worship, one who can account for both the origin and the goal of our lives, one who can provide us with meaning and purpose along the way, one who can take away the gonewrongness of life and make us whole and clean again. But many people do not even know what that empty feeling inside means. So they look for God in all the wrong places, in all the wrong ways, sometimes becoming upset or even violent, not knowing what is driving them or what to do about it. For those who do not yet know, for those who have not yet heard the gospel, and for those who do not yet know Jesus Christ, it is up to us who do know to tell them about the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Just as Paul preached to the Athenians, so are we to tell our neighbors in all the world about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.”

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be all praise, honor, and glory  
now and forever! Amen.*

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