

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 26, 2018
based on Acts 17:22–31

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a summer sermon series entitled, “Why Believe,” which was designed as an answer to the widespread skepticism, unbelief, or false belief of our time. During this series, we have considered the many solid reasons to believe in God, as we have journeyed through all of the classic “proofs for God,” and we have considered further what true belief is. If you missed some of the series, or if you want to look again or further at the themes covered, you can get the book based on the series that we will be publishing in a few weeks. {prayer}

Last Sunday, we looked at the many ways in which belief matters. We noted that authentic belief in God has a tremendous positive effect on one’s personal life and on society at large. At the same time, we noted that this positive effect occurs only when it is true belief.

It has become quite apparent in the present day that it is not enough to believe in “God.” It is important to have a clear understanding of who God truly is! When terrorists shout “God is great” while gunning down innocent people, most people would say that they have an utterly false notion of God. But how then does one come assuredly to a true picture of God?

The apostle Paul addressed this question in a very enlightening way in his speech to the people of Athens, recorded in the book of Acts. The Athenians at the time were the philosophical heirs of Plato and Aristotle, and most of them strongly affirmed a divine reality. As Paul noted at the outset of his speech to them, “I perceive that you are very religious.” (Acts 17:22) The popular Greek notion of divinity held that there are multiple gods; and Paul observed in the city that the Greeks were so intent on honoring all the gods that they had even erected an altar inscribed, “To an unknown god” (Acts 17:23)—just in case they missed one.

Paul affirmed the authenticity of their spiritual quest and their general awareness of God. He approvingly quoted Greek poets, who had said “In God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)ⁱ and “We are indeed God’s offspring.” (Acts 17:28).ⁱⁱ He referred to the well-known cosmological argument for the existence of God, which had its origins in both Plato and Aristotle, as he talked about “the God who made the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:24); and he acknowledged the validity of widespread religious experience, as he talked about how people “seek God, in the hope that they might feel after God and find God” (Acts 17:27). Paul thus affirmed the basic premise that is reflected in all of the classic proofs for God—human beings everywhere have the ability to come to know the reality of God, and can enter thereby into connection with God.

At the same time, Paul asserted that the specific understanding that the Greeks

had of God was still incomplete and flawed. He referred to the Greek practice of having numerous statues of gods, and said “We ought not to think that the Deity is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination.” (Acts 17:29) The basic perspective shown forth by Paul is that various religions are not to be condemned, but rather are to be honored for their awareness of God; while at the same time it must be acknowledged that in diverse ways they often come to misconceptions about the nature of God.

How, then, can human beings arrive at a true picture of God? Paul’s central point, reflected at many places in the New Testament, is that God reveals the perfect picture of God’s reality in Jesus Christ. But how can one know that Jesus is the perfect self-revelation of God? There are many elements that testify to Jesus’ identity. The extraordinary miracles of Jesus, the sublime nature of his teaching, the moral perfection of his character, the way that he fulfilled ancient scriptures, and the spiritual authority he embodied all point to his identity as the Messiah—the one who reveals God fully to humanity. But Paul finally stated that there is one element that absolutely establishes Jesus as the culmination of God’s self-revelation. As Paul said at the conclusion of his speech to the Athenians, “God has fixed a day on which God will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed [namely, Jesus], and of this God has given assurance to all people by raising Jesus from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

The resurrection is the absolute confirmation that God has acted through Jesus to bring humanity to a complete and right relationship with God. But how can one know that the resurrection is not simply a pious legend? There is tremendous evidence for the reality of the resurrection. It has been historically established that reports of the resurrection arose very quickly after the crucifixion of Jesus. Legends typically take much longer to emerge. At the heart of those reports was the fact that the tomb in which Jesus had been buried was found empty. It is significant that none of the early opponents of Christianity ever disputed the fact that the tomb was empty. They never doubted that Jesus had in fact died during the crucifixion—no one survived Roman crucifixion—and they admitted that the tomb was empty; but they suggested that the body of Jesus must have been stolen. Yet the reports of the resurrection also include many reports of resurrection appearances of the Risen Jesus, and these reports came from hundreds of eyewitnesses. Moreover, those who want to suggest that the resurrection must have been a hoax have to reckon with the fact that those early witnesses of the resurrection went on to devote the rest of their lives to spreading the message about the Risen Jesus, often at great personal sacrifice. Would people devote their lives for something they knew was a hoax? The tremendous commitment of the early apostles shows that they were absolutely sure that Jesus, who was dead, is now alive.

The reports of the resurrection in the gospels also have a number of quite notable features which point to their authenticity. All four gospels report that women were the

first eyewitnesses at the empty tomb. In the first century Jewish world, which was heavily patriarchal, women were not considered to be the most reliable witnesses.ⁱⁱⁱ Anyone concocting a story at the time would never say that the primary witnesses were women! The fact that the gospels do report that all the initial eyewitnesses were women indicates that the gospel writers were not inventing their material but were reporting the actual events. The women are also named, indicating that they were known in the Christian community at the time when the gospels were written. This points to another important feature of the gospels—they were written within the decades when many eyewitnesses were still living, who would have been both a source of accurate and credible memories and a check against any false reporting. Still another key feature of the resurrection accounts in the gospels is that while all four gospels agree as to the central elements—the empty tomb, the stone rolled away, the women witnesses, the appearances of Jesus, and so forth—they also differ in the many of the particular details recounted. This corresponds with the nature of authentic testimony. When different witnesses give reports about some surprising event, they will generally recall different details and will describe the event somewhat differently, but will agree on the key features of the event. The four gospel accounts have precisely this characteristic of authentic testimony—different tellings of the story with consistent central facts. If different witnesses were to give precisely the same description of an event, one would suspect that they colluded with one another! The variations in the gospel accounts, along with their central agreements, thus point to the veracity of the gospels as genuine testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus.

The final proof for God is the resurrection—for it is a demonstration of the power of God and the truth of everything that Jesus proclaimed about God. Furthermore, the resurrection confirms that God has acted most centrally in Jesus. This means that while people may come to acknowledge the reality of God through many avenues, there is one place where people can see the perfect picture of who God is, there is one person in whom people can find the ideal model for how they should live, and there is one point where God has acted decisively to bring eternal salvation to all humanity—in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6)

Paul thus called the Athenians to move beyond their basic belief in God to believe in Jesus as God’s Messiah and the Savior of humankind. The Scriptures call us to do the same, because it is in Jesus that we fully experience God’s truth and God’s saving power. As the gospel of John—at the conclusion of its resurrection accounts—declares, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

ⁱ Epimenides, Cretica.

ⁱ Aratus, Phaenomena.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 4.219, where Josephus enumerates a basic rule as follows: “Let not the testimony of women be admitted.”