

Acts Series Part 50

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Did you hear the news? Did you hear the news? The day has been set. That's right. He has set the day.

It's fixed. Definite. No turning back. The day has been set. He has set the day. I wonder, did you hear that? What day? Have you any ideas of what day I might be referring to? Maybe William setting the day for the wedding.

We're not talking about that day. We're talking about the day. Or maybe Alex Ferguson finally setting the day of his retirement. Well, it's certainly a much bigger deal than William and Kate getting married, with apologies to all royalists among us.

But it hardly qualifies as the day. The day that has been set. Well, I'll cut to the chase. Listen to the Apostle Paul as he concludes his sermon at the Areopagus in Athens.

And there, at the conclusion of that sermon, he says the following, For he has set a day when he will judge the world.

[1 : 28] The day of judgment. He has set a day. Now, as we continue to follow the footsteps of Paul through the book of Acts, as we have been doing on and off these past months, we rejoin him in Athens.

And his sermon, which in a moment we will read, his sermon to the intelligentsia of Athens at the Areopagus, has been analyzed and deconstructed to death.

More ink has been spilled commenting on this sermon that Paul preached in Athens than perhaps on any other in the New Testament, rivaling even perhaps the Sermon on the Mount for column inches of commentary.

Well, let's read the sermon in question, or in any case, the summary that is provided for us by Luke in Acts chapter 17. Turn with me to Acts chapter 17.

It's on page 1113 of our Bibles. Acts 17, and we'll read from verse 22, the very moment at which Paul begins his address, or in any case, that record of it that we are provided with.

[2 : 47] Acts chapter 17, reading from verse 22 and through to verse 31, where we find his conclusion that we have already in part commented.

Acts 17, verse 22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are 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. Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.

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 hands, and He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and He determined the time set for them, and the exact places where they should live.

[4 : 01] God did this so that men would seek Him, and perhaps reach out 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 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 man's design and skill.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now 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.

He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead. The Word of God. Now this morning, as we consider this sermon, I will say nothing of Paul's genius for capturing the attention of a pagan audience.

I will cavalierly ignore his cunning employment of the Greek poets as an intellectual Trojan horse transporting his message into the mindset and perhaps even the sympathies of his cultured listeners.

[5 : 30] My concern this morning is with his blunt, anything-but-subtle, in-your-face conclusion to his address.

He has set a day. He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice.

The day of judgment has been set. The men of Athens, some of them hearing Paul for the very first time, needed to know that the day had been set.

And men and women of Aberdeen, likewise, need to know. You need to know. I need to know. He has set a day.

What can we know about this day from Paul's sermon? Only one verse explicitly deals with the subject.

[6 : 33] The verse we have read there, the final verse of our reading in verse 31. But in a very real sense, the whole address is leading up to Paul's broaching of this solemn subject of God's impending judgment and the day that has been set for it.

So as we consider that verse and some of the material that leads up to the verse, let's see what we can discover concerning this day, this day that has been set.

The first question that we want to broach and tackle is, who has set the day? Then in verse 31, the manner in which Paul expresses himself is as follows, for he has set a day when he will judge the world.

He has set a day. Who is he? Who is this one who claims authority for such a thing as to set the day of judgment?

Who is he? Well, as we read what comes before, it's clear that the he refers to God. God has set a day.

[7 : 47] Leads us to another important question, a very huge question, but one that is answered by Paul in this address. Who is this God? Who is God?

Who is this God who has set the day? Paul has spent the bulk of the time that was available to him answering that very question.

And it is a crucial question because we will only appreciate the gravity and the monumental importance of the day that has been set if we know who is the one who has set the day.

The identity of the one who has set the day is what establishes the importance and the gravity of the day. Well, who has set the day?

Well, let's read again the verses that Paul or that describe what Paul says concerning this God. From verse 24, who is this God?

[8 : 50] 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. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live and so on. Here it is described for us the God who has set the day.

What can we say concerning him as we would very fleetingly comment on the description that Paul gives of this God who has set the day?

Well, first of all he is presented to us as the creator and Lord of heaven and earth. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.

The one who has set the day to judge the world is the creator of the world. And as creator he has set a day for judging his world.

[9 : 58] And that is important. It's his world. He has created the universe. He is the Lord of it. He sustains it. And as such he has every right and every authority to set the day when his world will be judged.

He is the creator. He is your creator. And he has every right and authority to judge you. And he has set the day when he will do so.

What else does Paul say as he describes this God who has set the day? Well, he is described as the giver and sustainer of life. In verse 25 he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

Here there is this stark contrast with the idols that the Athenians would bow down to and craft objects of great artistic merit. But they were served by man.

They were maintained by man. They could do nothing for man. And Paul says, well, the God I am speaking of is not such a God. He is the giver and sustainer of life.

[11 : 08] The God who has set the day is not a construct of human imagination. He has not been crafted by and so subject to the religious appetite of humankind.

No, this God who has set the day is the giver and sustainer of life. He is the one who has set the day. The creator and Lord of the universe, the giver and sustainer of life.

And Paul goes on, he is the ruler of the nation. There in verse 26, we read, from one man he 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. He has determined the times set for the nation and the exact places where they should live.

Why did Mubarak fall on day 18 of the protests in Cairo and not on day 17 or on day 19?

[12 : 15] Why on day 18? Was it the irresistible will of the people as they raised their voice of protest courageously, exposing themselves to danger and violence?

Was it because on that day the military turned against him and he could no longer count on their support? Was it because on that day the U.S.

pulled the rug from under him and no longer was willing to support him? Well, maybe all of these things, possibly, I leave it to you to come to your own conclusions.

I claim no expertise in the matter. Perhaps these things were secondary causes that can explain why on day 18 Mubarak had to step down.

But what is the primary cause? Well, Paul gives us the answer in this message he delivered in Athens 2,000 years ago. It is God who determined the time set for him.

[13 : 22] Hosni Mubarak's time was set by God. He raises up rulers and he brings them down as and when he chooses.

But not only does he do so for the rulers of the nations, he does so also for you. He determines the times and the places of your habitation, the day you were born and, yes, the day you will die.

It is this God, it is this God who has set the day. He has set a day when he will judge the world.

Paul goes on as he describes this God who has set the day. He describes him as the father of the human race. We've read there in verse 26, from one man he made every nation of men and then towards the end of verse 28, as some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring.

We are his offspring. He is our father by creation. Whether we acknowledge him as such makes not a jot of difference to the truth of the matter.

[14 : 37] It is important that we acknowledge him as such, but whether we do or we don't doesn't change the reality. He is the father of the human race. He is the one who has created all from one man.

And he is the one who Paul assures us has set the day. And so, as you ponder, and I hope you do ponder, on whether it is important or not, this claim by Paul that he has set the day when he will judge the world, is this a matter of consequence or not?

Is this something that you should take seriously or not? May your answer to that question be determined by your consideration of who it is that has set the day.

Who is the one who has set this day when he will judge the world? It really all depends on who he is.

But there is another question that we can pose and try and answer concerning this day that has been set and it is this, what will happen on that day?

[15 : 52] The day has been set, but what will happen? Well, what does the verse say? For he has set a day when he will judge the world. He has set a day when he will judge the world.

The picture being painted by Paul rather curiously and what can we say creatively because he himself was standing in what had been certainly a courtroom of the Greeks.

They were more reduced in their powers now under Roman dominion, but still the Areopagus was a place where judgments were arrived at, a kind of courtroom. And so Paul sets the scene and says, well, this is a courtroom scene.

The day that has been set, it is a day in court, this day that has been set. All will be summoned and all will be judged.

All will have their day in court. Sometimes you hear people saying that, I just want my day in court. Well, all will have their day in court. And in this courtroom, this judgment that there will be will result in one of two possible verdicts.

[17:06] There are only two. Those who are summoned before the bar will be declared guilty or will be declared innocent. We've already read in the book of Revelation of the solemn fate of those declared guilty, thrown into the lake of fire.

Language that, no doubt, is figurative, but no less dreadful for that. What will happen on that day is that you will be judged and that I will be judged and all will be judged.

That is what will happen on that day that has been set. We'll think a little bit more about the significance of that and how we should respond to that just a little further down the road.

But before we do that, there's another question that we find an answer to in the material we have before us concerning this day. And the question is this, how will God carry out this judgment?

How will He carry it out? What does the verse say? He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed.

[18:19] Now two crucial pieces of information are provided by Paul concerning the manner in which God will carry out this judgment. The first thing we want to notice is that we're told that He will do so by the one He has appointed.

It is clear that God is the one who judges. He has set the day when He will judge the world. But He does so, we are told, through an appointed judge.

And who is this? Well, we're told He is the one who has been raised from the dead. There, in what follows after the description or the declaration that He will do so by the man He has appointed.

We read, He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him, that is, raising the appointed judge, by raising Him from the dead. Well, that gives us the answer to the question, who is this judge that has been appointed?

Well, He is the one who has been raised from the dead. Jesus Christ, the one who today, on the first day of the week, we celebrate His resurrection. It is Jesus who has been appointed as the judge for that day that has been set.

[19:39] He is the judge. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. I don't think so. Rather, the one who has been exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow and every tongue confess, and that includes your tongue, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is the one who has been appointed as the judge for that great and dreadful and solemn day.

That is the first thing we are told concerning the manner of judgment, the one who has been appointed, but we are also told something else.

We are told that the judgment will be characterized by justice. For He has said today when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed.

He will judge with justice. Is that not what we all in our guts know to be most needful, that justice be done?

Is that not the cry of the people through the centuries and across the continents? The cry for justice, that human revulsion against injustice that is so, so fills us with indignation.

[21:08] Well, on this day, this day that has been set, justice is guaranteed, and it is guaranteed by the identity of the judge.

For the judge is Jesus. I remember when we lived and through and would occasionally be interested in court cases that were coming up. I won't explain why we were interested in them, but there were reasons to be interested.

And the big question that people would ask when the day had been set for the court case, the big question people would ask was, who is the judge? Because that would almost determine everything.

Is he corrupt? Will he determine on the basis of who pays more? Is he incompetent? Will he determine on the basis of his own prejudices and preferences and friendships?

Who is the judge? Whether justice would be had was ultimately dependent on the judge. Who is the judge? People would ask. Oh, it's that man.

[22 : 10] Then there's no hope. Ah, it's this other fellow. Well, maybe there will be justice done. Well, on this day, that justice will be done is guaranteed by the identity of the judge.

It is Jesus who will judge on that day. Yes, Jesus, the one who was victim of the most obscene miscarriage of justice, the one who was part of a parody of justice as he was condemned to death. He who has experienced injustice in its most ugly and obscene form, he is the one who will judge. And we can be sure he will judge justly.

Now, we may not understand all that the Bible teaches concerning judgment. And we may struggle and even recoil from the very notion of eternal punishment as we have read of it in the scriptures even this morning.

But be assured of this, that on the day that has been set, the judge will judge justly. There's another question that is answered here by Paul, a question that maybe could be raised by a skeptic.

[23 : 37] And the question, it's a reasonable question, is well, how can I be sure? How can I be sure of all that you're saying? You say to me, he has set the day.

You say that he has appointed the judge. You say that he will judge with justice, but how can I be sure? Where is your proof for all of these things?

A very reasonable demand, a very reasonable question to pose. Well, Paul anticipates that question of his own audience 2,000 years ago. For he goes on to say there in verse 31, having declared that the day had been set, having declared that the judge has been appointed, having declared that it will be with justice, anticipating the protests of the skeptics.

He then goes on, he has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. The proof that this day has been set, the proof that this day will most assuredly come to pass on the day that it has been set, the proof that Jesus himself will be the one who will judge justly on that day, is that Jesus is alive.

That he has been raised from the dead. That yes, he died on Calvary's tree, but on the third day he rose triumphant from the grave. This is the proof that is provided by Paul.

[25 : 11] This is his argument to give substance to what he claims will happen. What do you think of that? Do you believe that to be so?

Do you believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? Because if you do, then you must then be consequential with what that implies concerning what we are reading even this morning.

This is the proof that the day has been set. This is the proof that Jesus will be the judge on that day and will judge you as he will judge me with justice.

What do you think? On this matter you can't sit on the fence avoiding your own judgment on these matters.

There's another question we need to answer. I hope a question that you are concerned about. What will determine my guilt or innocence?

[26 : 13] I've already suggested or stated that there are only two verdicts possible on this day of judgment. Guilty or innocent. Well, what will determine? Verse 30 gives us a clue.

In the past, Paul said, God overlooked such ignorance. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Of what ignorance is Paul speaking?

Well, let's go back a further verse. In verse 29, 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 man's design and skill.

This ignorance concerning who God is, concerning what God is like, concerning our duty to worship him. This ignorance we are told God has overlooked in the past.

But this is the ignorance of which men are guilty. This is what the men of Athens were guilty of.

[27 : 17] And it is for this that they will be judged. And in the absence of change, be found guilty of on that day that has been set.

This ignorance concerning who God is, concerning what God is like, concerning our duty to worship him as he has instructed. This ignorance, Paul assures his audience, is culpable ignorance.

We can call it sinful ignorance. This is the thrust of Paul's sermon. Throughout what he says, he makes it clear that knowledge of God was available to them.

But they chose to ignore it. They chose to distort it. They chose to fashion their own gods, that they could manipulate and domesticate and fashion according to their own prejudices and pleasures.

And what the men of Athens had done, men and women have done through the ages and continue to do to this very day. This is the very point that Paul goes on to further develop, perhaps we might

say more theologically in his letter to the Romans.

[28 : 31] And in chapter 1, we haven't got time to consider all that he says, but just listen to what he says on this same theme in chapter 1 of Romans from verse 18. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. So that men are without excuse.

See, the very same point that he makes to his audience at Athens, he develops and further explains, we might say, in the setting of a letter that allows him to do so.

Men are without excuse. The men of Athens were without excuse. Their ignorance concerning God, their failure to worship God was culpable ignorance. It was sinful ignorance.

This is the big issue on which we will be judged. Not how much bad stuff you did or how much good stuff you've done, but who or what did you worship?

[29 : 53] This is the big question. Do you worship the living and true God, the God described by Paul in this address, the Father of Jesus Christ?

Is this the God you worship? Or do you worship a God of your own creation? Do you worship yourself? Money, status, power, pleasure?

Who? What do you worship? This will determine your guilt or innocence on the day that has been set. Which leads us to a final question.

What must I do? What must I do in the light of the day that has been set when I will be judged?

What must I do? Paul gives an answer to that question also. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.

[31 : 01] There is something to be done. There is something that can be done. There is something that will prepare us for that day. Now He commands all people everywhere to repent.

Who are to repent? The pedophiles and the murderers and the really nasty people? No. All people everywhere. You don't get more inclusive than that.

Very popular today to speak of inclusive religion. Well, this is inclusive religion. All people everywhere are commanded to repent.

When are we to do so? But now. But now He commands all people everywhere to repent. What does this involve? Well, to repent is to turn from your sin.

As we think particularly of the message that Paul has given, to turn from your ignorance and your failure to worship the living and true God. If you as yet have not bowed the knee to the one who has been raised, if you as yet have not bowed the knee to the King of kings and Lord of lords, the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, then repent of your failure to do so.

[32 : 15] Turn from your stubbornness to do that which you must do. Repent. Turn from your ignorance, your failure to worship the living and true God, and begin to worship Him as you ought.

Indeed, as you were created to do. How can I do that? I want to do that. How can I do that? Well, the one who has been appointed judge is also the one who has been appointed Savior.

Remember, He is the one who, Paul tells us, has been raised from the dead. What was He doing dead? Well, He died for you.

He died for sinners. He died for the ignorant Athenians, and He died for proud Aberdonians. He died as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He died for our sinful ignorance and failure to worship God aright.

He died to pay the price and bear the punishment of our sins. And as you recognize, if you will, and as you confess, if you will, your guilt, and put your trust in Jesus as your Savior, then your sin and the guilt that goes with it is removed because the price has already been paid at Calvary.

[33 : 43] And so on that day, the day that has been set, when you stand before the judge, as you most assuredly will, you will be standing before the judge who is also your precious and loving Savior.

He is the one who will be standing there before you, and He will look at you, and He will declare, this one is innocent. I see no sin in Him.

This is one who bowed the knee before me and confessed with His tongue that I am Lord. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed.

Are you ready for that day? Let us pray.