

Why God sent Jesus

Part 1 – God proves to us what we instinctively believe him to be

In **Acts 17:22**, Paul made a fascinating comment about the Athenians. He said, “I see that in every way you are **very religious**¹.” But wouldn’t Paul have said the same thing about our world today and **our** natural bent to being “very religious,” too? Because where ever he went, whether high up in the Himalayas, deep in the darkest jungle or surrounded by nothing but sand dunes, he’d find people celebrating religious festivals, and there’d be all kinds of rituals, sacred objects and buildings to honour the gods. In a sophisticated culture like Athens or in our advanced civilization today, we take religion seriously.

Why is that? Well, Paul explains why in another fascinating comment in **verse 27** when he talks about why God created human beings. And the reason is? “**God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.**”

No wonder we’re religious. It’s because God **put it in us** to be religious. Deep down we’re not against God at all. Quite the opposite: we have a desire built right into us to make contact with him, and we believe he welcomes that contact with us too. Paul quotes an amazing example to prove his point in **verse 28**: “**As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’**” Imagine that: in amongst all this confusion of religious ideas, there were several well-known poets who believed all human beings are God’s children, and a relationship **that close** with God was possible. But where on earth did they get that idea from? It wasn’t from hearing the gospel, because they hadn’t heard it yet. It was something they **already** believed, therefore, that was already instilled in their heads long before the gospel confirmed it, and out it had sprung in their poetry.

What wonderful encouragement that is to anyone preaching the gospel, knowing God has already put into people’s minds what we’re trying to tell them! We’re not preaching anything new to people, we’re preaching what they already instinctively believe to be true. The problem is, most people have had their instincts covered up with tons of religious rubble, which Paul talks about 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.**” Why were the Athenians still thinking they had to imagine or create God by all this manmade stuff, when it was already built into them as “God’s offspring” to seek out the real God and find him?

¹ The old King James Version says “superstitious.” The New King James Version says “very religious,” as do other translations.

Paul is simply reminding these people of what they instinctively believed to be true, because God had already put those instincts in them. It was like having a vein of gold deep down in the recesses of their minds, and all it needed was digging out and hauling to the surface. Which is what Paul did by quoting their own poets. **They** knew about being “God’s offspring,” so why all this other man-made stuff trying to picture God, when here was proof from their own poets that it was in them to know God already?

Oh, they knew all right, because Paul then says in **verse 30**, “**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.**” Their ignorance had gone on long enough, it was time to repent. Repent of what, though? Repent of covering over what God had put in them, to the point their instincts had become so buried by their superstitious rubbish they didn’t even know they had these instincts **in** them anymore. It was tragic.

Two things we learn, then, from this episode – first of all, that it’s instinctive to every human alive to seek after God and to want to find him, but secondly, most people have no idea such an instinct even exists in them. They’ve lost all sight of it, to the point of total ignorance. But this is where the gospel comes in. It taps right into the vein of gold God’s tucked away in the deep recesses of every human mind, and brings it to the surface. Or as Paul puts it in **2 Corinthians 4:2** - “**by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.**”

What tremendous encouragement (again) to anyone preaching the gospel, because the truth plainly spoken “commends” itself to people. Commends means it rings true. Well, of course it rings true, because God put an instinct for it ringing true **IN** us, tucking it away in the human conscience where it waits for the gospel to clear away all the rubble and bring it to life. And the gospel is perfect for doing that; it’s perfectly designed for digging down into a human conscience and exposing what’s already there. No wonder the gospel commends itself, because what it’s saying is what people already believe in their conscience to be true. The gospel isn’t something weird and odd; it’s actually verifying what people instinctively believe.

So what was the message Paul was preaching? It’s in **verse 4**: the “light of the gospel” was “**the glory of Christ**” - or the expanded version in **verse 6**, that “**God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.**” The means by which the gospel commends itself is in what God reveals of himself in Christ. And as people come to understand what God’s like in Christ it rings true and wonderful, because God sewed it in the seams of their conscience already.

But like the Athenians, most people aren’t *aware* of this because, **verse 4**, “**The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.**” That’s why the gospel has to be “spoken plainly” (verse 2), to break through the layers of religious rubble the “god of this age” has piled into people’s consciences to hide and bury what God put there in the first place.

Speak the truth plainly, however, and what God put in our conscience comes alive, a point Paul brings out in **1 Corinthians 14:24**, which The Message phrases this way: “**But if some unbelieving outsiders walk in on a service where people are speaking out God’s truth, the plain words spoken will bring them up against the truth and probe their hearts. Before you know it, they’re going to be on their faces before God, recognizing that God is among you.**”

When people hear the truth of the gospel, for some of them it’s like an echo rumbling up from deep within themselves. It stirs them in their innermost being hearing things that sound so familiar and true, and in only moments the doors to their conscience break open, and all those things God tucked away in there burst through the rubble and flood their minds with a sense of God’s presence.

Paul realized, therefore, that it was just fine “in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2) to speak out God’s truth and say it like it is, because this was the best digging tool in the business for breaching a cluttered conscience and releasing all the good stuff God put in it from the start. God not only gives us a conscience that can be reached, he also gives us Christians the best tool for reaching it. First, he gives everyone an instinct for him, and then he gives us the gospel to bubble that instinct to the surface.

The primary purpose of the gospel, therefore, is to awaken the conscience, because what the gospel is saying is tucked away in our conscience already. We have further evidence of this in **Romans 2:15**, where Paul talks of the Gentiles who, even though they have no knowledge of God’s law, “**show the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness.**” Even in people who have no outward interest in God, no visible signs of belief in him, and no knowledge of his law, there is a heartfelt desire to do what is right. Why? Because of what God put in them in the first place, a conscience, an instinct for him, a natural desire toward the spiritual and moral.

So many people are blind, however, to these desires and instincts that lurk inside them. But this is why God sent Jesus, **Luke 4:18** - “**He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind.**” It’s why Jesus then sent Paul, **Acts 26:17-18** - “**I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light.**” Open people’s eyes to what, though? To what God already put in them to believe about him, and to what they already know to be true.

The message about Christ making atonement for us by sacrificing his life, for instance, rings a familiar bell in the human conscience. It’s not a strange idea at all, because it’s built right into us to lay down OUR lives too when faced with evil. It’s why we go to war. Evil requires self-sacrifice because there’s no other way of stopping it, and millions upon millions of people have gone to war - on both sides of a conflict - driven by the same instinct within their conscience to crush evil by self-sacrifice.

So when the gospel comes along and people hear about God being driven by the **same** desire and method to crush *all* evil, it rings true and honourable. There is nothing more honourable to the human mind than giving up one's life to rid the world of evil. No wonder, therefore, the gospel "commends" itself to people: Christ sacrificing his life on a Cross is familiar and honourable territory to the human conscience. It echoes what rumbles deep within us, as the necessary, honourable and right thing to do. The gospel simply bubbles those heartfelt instincts to the surface, awakening an easy connection between what Jesus did for us and what we instinctively believe to be right.

And when the gospel boldly faces us with a true picture of ourselves through the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus, **that's** familiar territory to our conscience too. Because deep down within us we know what we're like, and there's probably nothing more relieving to a human mind than admitting it. You see it so often on TV when the criminal is finally caught out in his lies and it's like a huge relief to him, that at last he can be honest, spill it all out, and not have to live a lie anymore.

But our conscience never stops bothering us, does it? And it won't until we confess. We can't stand a guilty conscience, so owning up to our guilt and wanting to clear the air is instinctive to us. Imagine, then, when the gospel comes along and says in **Luke 4:18** that God sent Jesus "[to proclaim freedom for the prisoners](#)" and "[to release the oppressed,](#)" and it's no wonder the gospel commends itself so easily to our conscience because it's the very thing our conscience cries out for!

Think of Paul, for instance, in **Romans 7:24**, when the reality of his sinful nature dawns on him, and he cries out "[What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?](#)" Up from the depths of his being came this wail of confession, pent-up guilt and self-loathing as the gospel brought the truth of himself to life and hauled it to the surface.

But all the gospel had done was simply give vent to what his conscience already knew and wished for. Deep down he already knew what he was like, because for years he'd tried to live an upright life in line with God's law, but the law had only revealed more sins he was guilty of. What he wished for more than anything, then, was to rid himself of all that guilt eating him up and to clear his conscience. So when the gospel came along offering him exactly that, no wonder it commended itself to him, just as it does to us, because isn't that what we all wish for too, to get all our guilt off our chests forever?

The gospel also talks of forgiveness and mercy, and that rings a familiar bell too, because deep down inside us we believe God is merciful. Religion, unfortunately - and much of Christianity too - clutters up that instinctive belief in us with its awful picture of an angry God demanding payment for our sins and requiring constant good works to keep ourselves in his favour. Despite all this clutter, however, there are huge numbers of people who turn to God, even after doing terrible things in their lives, because they believe he's a God of mercy and forgiveness is possible.

And why do they believe that? Because it's already tucked away in their conscience that there's forgiveness with God. My best evidence of that is the funerals I have to do, where people who have no affiliation with any church or any interest in God are quite at peace with death. They don't worry about their dead relative's future, because for all the obvious faults he had there's this underlying belief that "all is forgiven". It's an amazing phenomenon. Instinctively we believe it's going to go be fine, witness the reception after the funeral, where everyone happily munches away on sandwiches and cake in much the same mood as a wedding!

But this is why God sent Jesus, to prove and demonstrate what we instinctively wish, hope and believe God to be. Who doesn't wish for a Dad, for instance, who doesn't get mad at us when we make mistakes, who can put himself in our shoes and doesn't hold anything we've done against us? Or a police officer who rightly stops us for speeding but instead of writing out the ticket we deserve he uses the occasion as a merciful reminder. Don't we all hope for authority figures like that, who "desire mercy, not sacrifice," as it says in **Matthew 9:13**?

But isn't that what we instinctively believe God to be - a God of mercy? Well, along comes the gospel and "in the face of Christ" God **proves** to us what we instinctively believe him to be. He proves it in scriptures like **Romans 5:8**, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and **verse 10**, "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son," and **Ephesians 2:4-5**, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."

He also proves it in Christ's teaching, **Matthew 5:45**, in how God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." What better proof of God's mercy than the weather? It would be so easy for God to punish evil people with drought and flood, but God is merciful, he doesn't play favourites. His grace extends to all people, good, bad and ugly.

And there's something else in the gospel that so easily commends itself to our conscience, too. We know deep down we're not completely evil. We know there's a lot of good that remains in us still. And it's from that good part of us that springs the heartfelt desire to make things better. We'd love to solve our problems and make the world a better place for everyone. All religions aspire to that, too. Religion is simply an expression of our deepest yearnings. We yearn for a wonderful future, for a code of behaviour that all people live by to maintain peace, and religions try to make that possible.

Our conscience keeps telling us it **is** possible, too. Deep down we believe we can make things better. We know what we're capable of and the good we could do if only our egos didn't get in the way. And then along comes the gospel and commends itself to

this part of our conscience too because it speaks directly to what we yearn for, hauls it to the surface and gives it life and hope by explaining **how** it's possible.

But that's why God sent Jesus, to awaken in us what God has already put in us. God put these desires in our conscience so that we can recognize the excellence of the gospel when it's preached to us. It commends itself to us, because it's instinctively what we ourselves already, deep down, believe. Things like self-sacrifice, honesty, mercy and hearing about the good that we know we've got in us still, all ring true and right to us. They've been buried and warped by our sinful nature, yes, and sometimes so badly our consciences are seared. But along comes the gospel about God as seen in the face of Christ and it hacks a way through the rubble to those little sparks of our conscience still remaining, and suddenly a hole appears, a little light shines through, and all those instincts God stored in there from the start begin to stir and come to life.

That's the power of the gospel on a human conscience. It acts like a light, just as Paul said in **2 Corinthians 4:6** - how **"God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."** But there has to be a heart in a person in the first place for the light to shine into, right? Well, God gave us that heart. It was there in obvious evidence in those Athenians. They were utterly confused, yes, but their instinct for God was still alive.

So notice what Paul did? He gave them the gospel, both barrels, **Acts 17:30**. "The times of ignorance are over," he cries, **"For," verse 31, "God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed."** Why justice? Because God isn't judging us for something we don't know. We do know. If he'd hidden the truth from us, or made it so difficult for us to understand that we gave up on it, how could he justly judge us for rejecting it? But he didn't hide the truth. Quite the opposite: he made it easy for us to understand the gospel, because he already put it in us to understand it. And it's not some awful, negative message battering us over the heads for how bad we are, either; it's talking instead to our deepest heartfelt desires and yearnings.

To not respond to the gospel, then, is silly, as Paul points out to the Athenians, because God is only showing us in Christ that he's exactly what we hope, dream and wish for. So "wake up," he says to the Athenians, throw off all that religious rubble they've buried themselves in and hear what the real God is saying in Christ, because it's exactly what we've all been seeking, reaching out for and hoping to find – thanks to God who put those desires in us in the first place.

The question is, then: What is God saying in Christ? The search begins in Part 2...