

# if you could ask God ANYTHING...

## Sermon 2 – Acts 17:22-31 “Why aren’t you more obvious?”

### Introduction

- i. What insights have you gained from Kevin’s second talk? Did the talk raise questions for you?
  - ii. What did you make of the quote from Bertand Russell - “If I do come face to face with God when I die, I will demand an explanation as to why he made the evidence for his existence insufficient”? What does the question reveal about him?
  - iii. Read Job 23:8-9 and Isaiah 45:15 and discuss why even Job and Isaiah feel that God is hiding.
  - iv. Have you ever felt – or do you know people who feel – that God is hard to find?
1. **God’s hiddenness partly due to the fall**

What difference did mankind’s first rebellion make to our relationship with God such that we do not walk and talk with him as Adam and Eve once did? (Refer sermon to refresh your memory if need be).
  2. **God’s hiddenness also due to his nature**
    - a. Remind yourselves of John 4:24, Isaiah 48:13 and Acts 17:27.
    - b. What was Kevin’s point under this heading? Does this make sense to you?
  3. **If God did manifest himself to us more obviously, it would have little impact**
    - a. What happened among the nations and in Israel when God manifested himself very clearly by cloud and fire for 40 years?
    - b. What do you think might happen if God began to regularly manifest himself to today’s world in some dramatic and regular way? (See also the end of Jesus’ parable in Luke 16:30-31)
  4. **The appearance of Jesus on our planet is God’s clearest manifestation to us**
    - a. How is Jesus the ultimate in God making himself obvious? (See John 1:14 and 18).
    - b. What does the Bible promise for those honestly seeking God? See Jeremiah 29:13 – note the condition! See also Acts 17:28 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 and explore the implications.
    - c. Kevin said “Over the years I have discovered that the majority of Christians struggle to answer some of the common questions thrown up by seekers and sceptics.” How can we better prepare an answer for those who ask? (2 Peter 3:15).

*As Kevin asked people who aren’t Christians, ‘why not?’, we too may need to ask unbelievers we know and love ‘why not’? It may be one good way of opening conversation and sometimes we discover that there is no good reason for their unbelief!*

*Pray for those you’ve invited to this series. Pray that through this series, our non-Christian friends and family may be greatly helped and that we as Christians may become better equipped in talking to them about Jesus.*

## WHY ISN'T GOD MORE OBVIOUS?

(Acts 17:22-31)

This morning I want to deal with the question, "Why Doesn't God Make Himself More Obvious?" If God wants people to believe in Him, why doesn't He make it easier to see Him?

I once saw a T Shirt with the message, "*I don't believe in God, and I bet he's really ticked off with me for saying that!*"

So, why doesn't God make Himself more obvious? It's a good question isn't it?

Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist of the 1900's, was once interviewed by a reporter and asked the question, "*What if you're wrong? What if, when you die, you come face to face with God? What will you say to Him?*" He replied,

***"If I do come face to face with God when I die, I will demand an explanation as to why he made the evidence for his existence insufficient"***.

Of course, Bertrand Russell DID come face to face with God, in 1970, and I can guarantee that he would not have been making those arrogant demands - he would have been flat on his face in mortal terror.

Even the Bible admits the elusive nature of God ... Job 23:8-9, **"If I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him."**

Even the great prophet Isaiah complains, **"Truly, you are a God who hides himself" (Isaiah 45:15)**. Isaiah is speaking here, not as a skeptic or an outsider. Isaiah was one of God's special ones. He enjoyed a special relationship with God. He heard from God from time to time; and God spoke through him to the nation. Yet even the great prophet Isaiah lodges this complaint with God....

*"God, why are you so often silent and invisible? Why do you hide yourself from humanity? Why aren't you more obvious? It'd save a whole lot of heartache, Lord, if you just made yourself more obvious! Then a whole lot more people would believe in you and follow you! Isn't that what you want?!!"*

What about you? Have you ever felt a similar frustration? Have you ever prayed and prayed and prayed and you've got nothing back from God. And you find yourself asking God "*Why are you so silent? Why are you hiding? Why don't you reveal yourself to us more clearly?*" Certainly this is the common complaint of sceptics and atheists.

I want to suggest to you that there are several profound reasons why God's presence is not manifestly obvious to us. And the first is that God's hiddenness is partly due to the Fall - mankind's rebellion against God at the beginning of creation.

It's quite fascinating to me that Michelangelo's famous painting of the fall on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, has, over time, developed a stress fracture in the most remarkable of places, exactly separating the hand of man from the hand of God. This accident of degenerative plaster is an extraordinary metaphor depicting the enormous gulf that was created between the physical and spiritual realms when mankind rebelled against God in the beginning. In the words of the old saying, "*If God seems distant, guess who moved.*"

You see, the story of the fall, in Genesis 3, is *foundational* for our understanding of the apparent hiddenness of God today. According to the Bible, God was manifestly, visibly present with mankind at the beginning of creation. God manifested to Adam and Eve in a tangible way. They walked and talked with him. But that intimacy and immediacy was destroyed when mankind deliberately disobeyed God and rebelled against him. We effectively pushed God aside and said, "*We don't want to live under your rule, we want to make our own decisions.*" And we've all been saying that ever since. And the result of that rebellion is that our fellowship with God has been destroyed. A huge gulf now separates us from God, and we created it.

At this point, a sceptic might say, "*You mean God is hiding from us because of something someone else did thousands of years ago? He needs to get over it!*" Well, story of the Fall is only the beginning of the

issue. We're only still scratching the surface, because there are even more profound reasons for God's hiddenness.

The second reason is that "God's hiddenness is also due to His nature".

The Bible says that "*God is spirit*" (Jn 4:24). He is not a physical being that we can see or touch. He is a transcendent, transdimensional being who exists in a form that completely surpasses this physical realm.

**Isaiah 48:13** says "*God holds the universe in the span of his hand*", not to infer any inherent physicality in God's being, but simply to point out that should He decide to manifest himself in a physical form, he could quite easily encapsulate the entire universe with it's billions of galaxies within the palm of a single hand.

The Apostle Paul refers to this transcendent nature of God, in Acts 17:27, when he says, "*God is not far from any of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being*". IE: Our planet, our solar system, our galaxy, our universe, resides *within* God. We live our whole lives within Him. He is simply too big for us to see.

When I used to teach Biblical Studies classes at school, I often asked the question: "*Do you believe that something can be too big to see?*" ...

Red blood cells ...

This is what Paul was referring to when he said in Acts 17 ... "*God is not far from any of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being*".

You see, mankind's insistence that we should be able to see God at our miniscule level is extraordinarily naïve, and illustrates how completely inadequate our concept of God is. The God who is capable of creating the entire universe, with it's billions of galaxies, is not going to be someone we will bump into down the pub, or in the checkout queue at Coles.

The third point to make is that even if God DID manifest Himself to us more obviously, it would have very little impact.

Carl Sagan was the notable astronomer and very outspoken atheist, who was responsible for the design of the plaque that was attached to the voyager spacecraft. he once said, "*Why doesn't God place a glowing cross in the night sky to serve as irrefutable proof of his existence?*" If I could have met Carl Sagan before he died ...

... I would have pointed out to him that God *did* basically do this at one point in history. For a period of 40 years He manifested Himself to the Israelites as a Pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

**Exod 13:21-22.** *By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

The Surrounding nations all saw it too and were convinced ...Numbers 14:14 says, "**They [the surrounding nations] have already heard that you, O LORD, are with these people and that you, O Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a *pillar of fire* by night.**

... If you could go back in a time machine and ask anyone from these surrounding nations "*Does the God of the Jews exist?*" they would have said "*Of course he does! Just open your eyes and look! There he is!*"

*So amazing was this incident that Nehemiah was still talking about it 1100 years later ... In Neh 9:12,*

? So... - What was the result of all this? - This physical, tangible, incontrovertible presence of God in the world for 40 years. Surely it resulted in mass conversion? Surely the surrounding nations lay down their swords and repented and placed their faith in this great God that they could see before their very eyes?

No. The surrounding nations continued to oppose God and his people. They continued to worship their false idols. They refused to repent and submit to God.

And what about the Jews themselves? Surely this indisputable physical sign strengthened their own faith and their resolve to follow God?

No. Shortly after the pillars of cloud and fire appeared, Moses went up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments from God, and while he was gone everyone got together and someone said, *"Hey I've got a great idea! Let's make an idol and worship it!"* And everyone else said, *"Brilliant! Great idea! Let's do it!"*.

And so that's what they did. With the awe inspiring, tangible presence of God right in front of their eyes, they turned their backs on it, and made a little golden calf, and started worshipping it. It's gob-smackingly stupid isn't it? It's almost too hard to believe that they could be that stupid. And yet that incident provides us with a window into the true state of the human heart.

You see, the truth is that God could do a lap of the earth in a fiery chariot every hour of every day, and people would not repent. *"Yep there goes God again. Good old God. Regular as clockwork. Pass me another beer would you Joe?"* When it became obvious that God wasn't instantly smiting people when they sinned, they would go on lying, cheating, stealing, committing adultery, cheating on their tax returns, fighting, abusing, living selfishly.

Of course, there was an even clearer manifestation of God to mankind – much clearer than pillars of cloud and fire ... **"The appearance of Jesus on our planet is God's clearest manifestation to us"** ... God in the flesh, who walked among us, who became a red blood cell so that we could perceive him at our miniscule level.

He healed the sick.

He healed the blind

With just a word, he healed quadriplegics and paraplegics

He raised at least 3 people from the dead -people who were certifiably dead!

He turned water into wine

He multiplied food to feed thousands

He calmed storms with just the command of his voice

He walked on water

He died for the sins of the world

And he rose from the dead - an event witnessed by hundreds of people over a 40 day period.

And all these events are not only recorded in the Bible, but many of them are corroborated by respected independent Greek, Roman and Jewish first century writers such as

Flavius Josephus,

Cornelius Tacitus,

Lucian,

Seutonius,

Thallus,

Philegon,

Pliny the Younger and

Mara Bar-Serapion.

What more could God do to prove himself to humanity? And yet most people, even then, chose not to follow him.

On one occasion a religious leader came up to Jesus and said, *"If you are from God give us a sign from heaven (Matt 12:38)*. And this was *after* Jesus has healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on water.

And Jesus replied, in Matthew 12:39, *"A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given to them, except the sign of Jonah"* ... It was a very enigmatic

statement. And I'm sure the religious leader walked away scratching his head. But Jesus was speaking about his forthcoming death and resurrection. And he was effectively saying that just as Jonah was taken from sight, in the belly of the whale for 3 days and 3 nights and then emerged again into the world, so too, He, Jesus, would die and be buried in a tomb, but would rise again, 3 days later. He was speaking of His imminent death and resurrection, and effectively, He was saying ...

**The death and resurrection of Jesus is enough of a sign for those who are earnestly seeking God** ...

... **and no sign will ever be enough for those who aren't.** Jesus was saying to this religious leader – you've had enough signs. If you're not convinced now, you never will be.

You see, ultimately, finding God requires that we take a step of faith. ... There is a very well-known verse in Jeremiah 29:13 which says ...

*“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”.* ... In other words, God wants to be found! If He seems to be hiding, He's not hiding very well! And He promises that you will find him if you earnestly seek him with all your heart.

So as we finish this week, let me ask the question: *“Are YOU seeking God?”* ... Perhaps you want to believe, but you still have unanswered questions and doubts. If so, don't give up! You've come to the right place. This is an excellent church where the truth is proclaimed week by week, where God's Word is taught faithfully, and where there are many Christians who can help you on your faith journey.

I urge you to not give up. Seek God with all your heart, and He will reveal himself to you. I have absolutely no doubt of that!

If you are already a Christian, are you adequately prepared to answer other people's questions?

The apostle Peter urges us to *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* (1 Peter 3:15).

Over the years I have discovered that the majority of Christians struggle to answer some of the common questions thrown up by seekers and sceptics. Despite the fact that the questions that are commonly asked are easy to predict ... most Christians are ill-prepared to answer them. So I urge you to do some research, do some reading, do everything you can to equip yourself, so that you will ...

*“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* (1 Peter 3:15).

.....

Let me finish. After everything I've said, *“Why Isn't God More Obvious?”*. Actually, I think He's *very* obvious. He's done quite a lot to make Himself obvious to us ...

I spoke last week about how He's stamped His image into creation

He's painted the most extraordinary message in the stars

And most importantly of all, He's personally visited our planet, in the person of Jesus, who proved his divinity through the most amazing miracles, and proved his love by dying on a cross for our sins and rising from the dead to open the way back to the Father.

Listen to Paul's words in Acts 17, part of which I read earlier, but I want to add the next verse ... *“God is not far from any of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being, and now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the One He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.”*

Every sceptic and atheist in the world will one day stand before the God who created them and give an account of their lives. You will one day stand before God. It's a sobering thought isn't?

If you are not yet a Christian, WHY NOT? What is stopping you? God has done everything possible to reach out to you! He's sent His Son to die on the cross and rise from the dead to forgive

you for your rebellion and to restore you to Himself. And he is offering you eternal life. What is stopping you from accepting this incredible gift?

#### PRAYER

*"Dear God, I confess that I have lived my life to this point without any meaningful reference to You, my Creator. Please forgive me. I acknowledge that You are the God of the universe and my rightful King, and I submit myself to you now. Jesus, I believe You are the Son of God. I believe You died on the cross to forgive my sins and rose from the dead to reconcile me to God. I trust You now as my Saviour and I submit to You as my Lord. I open my heart to You and ask that You will come into my life, fill me with Your presence, and strengthen me to follow You all the days of my life. Amen."*

May God continue to strengthen and guide each one of us, as we continue our own journey of faith, and as we reach out to others, to lead them to the Saviour as well.