

“Paul Witnesses To The Philosophers In Athens”

Acts 17:16-34

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Teaching Aim: To examine the circumstances surrounding Paul’s visit to Athens. To understand why Paul was so troubled at the sight of idols all around the city. To realize how much influence the philosophers held over the people of Athens historically. To recognize the importance of meeting people where they are at spiritually and then pointing them to their need for Christ.

DIGGING DEEPER INTO GOD’S WORD (BIBLE STUDY)

Part I: Paul encounters the Epicurean & Stoic philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:16-21)

1. As we come to the last half of **Acts chapter 17**, Paul had moved to Athens as persecution from the Jews seemed to follow him everywhere he went. Paul left Thessalonica, not out of fear, but in the hope of protecting Jason and the other believers who had been targeted (**vv. 1-9**). Jason and some of the believers had been dragged before the rulers of the city for apparently having Paul as a houseguest; as a result, Jason had to post bond (**vs. 9**). What was the danger for Jason? Why do you think Paul never went back to Thessalonica?
2. How was Paul’s visit to Berea different from that of Thessalonica (**vv. 10-15**)? Did the persecution of Paul by the Jews in Thessalonica discourage him from following his practice of ministering at the synagogue first (**vs. 10**)? What can we learn about the Bereans from **verses 11 & 12**? What interruption interfered with Paul’s successful ministry in Berea (**vs. 13**)? How did the brethren protect Paul (**vs. 14**)? Where did Paul travel to next (**vs. 15**)?
3. What sight in Athens greatly disturbed the Apostle Paul (**vs. 16**)? What does the word “*provoked*” mean and why is this word a good choice to describe how Paul felt? (See Dictionary) Athens was known for its beautiful architecture, philosophy, and rich art forms. What made the beauty of Athens and the values of the people so repulsive to Paul? What is an “*idol*”? According to the Apostle Paul, who were the Gentiles sacrificing to? (See **1 Cor. 10:10-21a**) What kind of idols do people allow into their lives today?
4. In spite of all the persecution Paul received from the Jews, where did he go after he arrived in Athens (**vs. 17**)? Why? Where was Paul for the rest of the week and what was he doing?

5. Athens was famous for its rich history in philosophy, it had been the home of world renowned philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. What two schools of philosophy did Paul encounter at the marketplace (**vs. 18**)? What did each of these schools believe? Which of the two philosophies best represents what we are seeing in our own country today?

6. Warren Wiersbe put it this way, *"The Epicureans said, 'Enjoy life!' and the Stoics said, 'Endure life!' but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God's risen Son."* It is ironic that these two schools are the only two schools of philosophy specifically mentioned in Scripture. Note: The philosophers dislike of Paul and his message brought these two opposing philosophies together. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was always central to Paul's message, why would the Greeks be so offended at the thought?

7. Where did the representatives of these two opposing schools of philosophy take the Apostle Paul (**vs. 19**)? For what purpose (**vv. 20-21**)? Note: *"Ares"* was *"the Greek god of war."* The word *"Areopagus"* can also mean *"the hill of Ares"* or *"Mar's Hill."* The main buildings in Athens were called the *"Acropolis,"* while the rock 50' high and 150 yards long outside the city where the council met was called the *"Areopagus."*

Part II: Paul's witness to the philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-28)

1. As we come to **verse 22**, we find an excellent example of how to evangelize Gentile unbelievers. As Paul stood on the rock before the council, he acknowledged that the men of Athens were very religious. What is the difference between religion and theology? Why is it alarming that *"The Theology Departments"* in many Christians universities are being changed to *"The Department of Religion?"* Why was it important that Paul began his discourse by addressing the council politely?

2. What particular altar caught Paul's attention (**vs. 23**)? Why did Paul choose to use this altar as his starting point? How should we connect with unbelievers today? Is it possible that Paul used the temples of the Acropolis in the background to connect with those listening to him (**vs. 24**)? Do we find Paul using the same point as was used earlier with the Jews? (See **Acts 7:48-51**)

3. The pagan temples and most of their idols were shaped and built by the hands of men. What biblical truth do we find in **verse 25**? Why is this truth important to each of us today? It is also important to note that the giver of physical life is also the giver of spiritual life.

4. According to **verse 26**, where has every person on planet earth come from? Did Paul confirm the historicity of Adam and Eve by sharing this? Why should this truth kill racism around the world? How was putting all people on a level playing field a blow to Athenian pride? What can we learn from **verse 26** about the establishment of nations, where we live, our time of birth, & our time of death? (See **Dan. 2:19-21; Psalms 139:13-16**)

5. Today God reveals himself to the world through His “*general revelation*.” What is “*general revelation*?” (Hint: Search Online) If God is the Creator of all things and has revealed this to us, shouldn’t we be groping after Him? What does the word “*groping*” mean? (See Dictionary) How fallen are fallen men and women? What truth do we learn from **Rom. 3:9b-12**? What is the prerequisite for anyone to love and follow the God of the Bible? (See **John 3:3,5**)

6. Paul informed the Athenians that they were totally dependent upon the God of Scripture. Which three Gentile poets did Paul quote from in **verse 28**? Does this mean these writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit on the same level as the writers of the Bible, or did Paul use these quotes for a specific purpose? If so, what was that purpose?
 Note: William MacDonald clarifies, “*For we are also His offspring.*” *This is not to be interpreted as teaching the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. We are the offspring of God in the sense that He created us, but we only become sons of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Part III: Jesus is God’s Son and the future Judge; the resurrection proves this (Acts 17:29-34)

1. Paul had earlier said and now the Greek poets confirm, our very lives are totally dependent upon God. As a result, it is foolish to think God is confined to items like gold and silver or stone shaped by the hands of men (**vs. 29**). Why do you think so many people in the world are drawn to use idols in their worship? Why is this type of worship an insult to God? According to **verse 30**, everything drastically changed after the cross. Why? (See **vs. 31**)
 Note: R.C. Sproul writes, “*Until the coming of Jesus Christ, God’s special redemptive revelation was addressed almost exclusively to Israel, leaving the pagan nations largely in ignorance (except for the general revelation throughout the cosmos that left them without excuse, Rom. 1:18-25). God did not impose on the Gentiles the judgment they deserved, and now He has sent Paul to proclaim His truth to all people everywhere, calling them to repentance.*”

2. What are some ways that the Old Covenant is different from the New? Did Paul compromise the gospel message in any way by finding common ground with the Athenians? Why is it important for us not to compromise the gospel message today as we witness to others?

3. How did the members of the “*Areopagus*” respond to Paul’s teaching about the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Why? What is the only way anyone will ever come to faith in Christ? (See **John 6:44, 65**) What did Paul do when the Athenians had heard enough (**vs. 32**)? Was Paul’s ministry in Athens a failure, as some suggest, or did some people come to faith? Is there any further mention in the Bible of a church being established in Athens?

4. What can we learn about evangelizing people today from Paul’s example on Mar’s Hill? Discuss each of the following bulletin points.
 - We need to meet people right where they are at spiritually.
 - If the person has a Jewish or Christian background, we are to start with the Scriptures.
 - If the person is an unbeliever, we are to start with creation and God’s “*general revelation*.”
 - Though we meet people where they are, we are never to compromise the gospel.
 - The sinless life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are central to the gospel message.
 - We are the bearers of the good news of the gospel, but it is God who does the saving.

MINER’S CORNER ~ Manna to live by!

- Our spirits should be provoked like Paul’s was when we see idols in our own country today.
- The Epicurean philosophy is very similar to the philosophy of many in the United States today; the goal of life is personal pleasure and the absence of pain.
- The Stoic philosophers taught that people should live in harmony with nature and that they should suppress any emotional feelings.
- Paul’s method of evangelism changed with his audience and so should ours.
- To the Jews Paul started witnessing through the Old Testament Scriptures; to the Gentiles he started by pointing them to God who created the universe.
- Paul used quotes from pagan poets as a means of connecting with his audience.
- Ultimately Paul pointed the Athenians to Jesus Christ as God’s Son and the future Judge.
- Paul used the resurrection as proof that God had ordained Jesus to this ministry.