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MINISTRIES

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Lessons from Paul’s visit to Athens (Acts 17:16-34)

A fascinating event takes place in Acts 17. During his second missionary journey, as Paul is passing through the city of Athens, he is allowed the opportunity to speak to the philosophers and Greek intellectuals there. The account of what happened in Athens gives us some insights into how we might be effective witnesses for Yeshua when we interact with those who have very different beliefs from our own.

At the beginning of Acts 17, Paul and his co-laborers, Timothy and Silas, came to the city of Thessalonica. There, Paul proclaimed the Gospel in the local synagogue each Sabbath for three consecutive weeks. While Paul persuaded many Jews and Greeks to believe in Yeshua, some Jews—likely the religious leaders and others under their influence—formed a mob and started causing trouble for Paul (Acts 17:1-9).

Because of the persecution they were facing in Thessalonica, Paul and his co-laborers fled to Berea. However, the Jewish antagonists from Thessalonica followed them there and started stirring up trouble again. So the believers in Berea sent Paul by ship to Athens, where he would remain until Timothy and Silas could join him and they could be on their way to Corinth (Acts 17:10-15).

The rest of Acts 17 is all about Paul’s stay in Athens and the events that transpired there.

The Date of Paul’s Ministry in Athens

Scholars date the events of Acts 17:16-34 to around the year 50 AD. We have external historical evidence that leads to this conclusion. Archeologists have discovered a letter written by the Roman emperor Claudius, dated from 51-52 AD. This letter speaks of Gallio, who was the proconsul of Achaia mentioned in Acts 18:12. Paul was brought before him when he was in Corinth. Gallio served as proconsul for only one year, from 51 AD to 52 AD. Craig Keener writes:

The Gallio inscription found at Delphi mentions Lucius Junius Gallio and indicates that he was the proconsul of Achaia. He is also listed as a “friend of Caesar,” which dates his governorship to AD 51/52. He is the same Gallio mentioned in Acts 18:12 [...] although the normal term of

office was two years, Gallio left office early because he was ill. The incident Luke reports here thus probably occurred in late 51 or in 52.

-Craig Keener, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016)

Since Paul's visit to Corinth in Acts 18 was immediately after his stay in Athens, the events of Acts 17 must have occurred around 50 AD.

The City of Athens

- By 50 AD, Athens was no longer as glorious as it was during the Classical era. Rome controlled the city, its economy was weaker than Corinth's economy, and its population was declining. Even as a university center, "it was eventually surpassed by other centers; Alexandria certainly surpassed it even in prestige by the early second century and probably long before" (Keener, p. 2566).
- Nevertheless, as an intellectual center, "Athens continued to hold high reputation" (Keener, p. 2566). The city was famous for philosophy and rhetorical study.
- One of the prominent features of Athens was its agora, or "marketplace," which functioned not only as a public space for commerce but also a forum for discussion and debate.

-See Craig Keener, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), vol. 3, pp. 2565-2567

When Paul arrived in Athens, what did he do? It's no surprise that he went to the Jewish synagogue, as well as the marketplace, to reason with others concerning the truth of the God of Israel and the Gospel:

Acts 17:16-17

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Paul was disturbed to see so many idols in Athens. The passage says, "the city was full of idols," which is no exaggeration! Some historical sources estimate thirty thousand in the Mediterranean world as a whole (Hesiod, *W.D.* 252; Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 5.26.2). Second-century Greek geographer, Pausanias, documents the numerous shrines and statues that pervaded most public space in ancient Athens. Citing Pausanias, Keener writes this:

Paul would begin seeing idols (17:16) immediately; sanctuaries lay in the ports (Pausanias 1.1.3-4), the top of Athena's statue on the Acropolis was visible even from the main harbor, and sacred memorials lined the road to Athens (Pausanias 1.29.2). As soon as one entered Athens one would encounter idols and temples of Demeter, Poseidon, and soon Dionysus, Athena, Zeus, and Apollo (Pausanias 1.2.4-5). Further along one encountered Hestia, Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaistos, the Disocuri, Serapis, and again Zeus, Apollo, and Dionysus (1.8.3-4; 1.14.6-7; 1.18.2-6; 1.19.1-2; 1.20.2-3); en route to the Acropolis, Asclepius, Themis, Gaia, and Demeter (1.21.4; 1.22.1-3). The imperial cult was evident throughout the city.

-Craig Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 428-429

Scripture says Paul's spirit was "provoked" by the sight of all these idols. The Greek term here is

paroxyno, which is used in the Septuagint often to describe God’s righteous anger toward Israel’s idolatry. This appears to be what motivated Paul to reason with the people of Athens—he couldn’t stay silent in the face of such idolatrous affronts to God. He had a burden to reach the people of Athens with the truth, so that they might be delivered from their idolatry.

Acts 17:18-21

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus [Yeshua] and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

As Paul was reasoning in the marketplace, some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers confronted him. William Lane Craig describes these philosophic schools like this:

Stoicism was a philosophy that originated around 300 years before Christ. Stoics were materialists and pantheists. They denied that there is any transcendent God, as Aristotle believed. The universe is imbued with a principle of *logos*, or reason, but this is not a personal mind. There is no immortality, and life should be conducted according to reason rather than the passions. Epicureanism, which also originated sometime after 300 BC, was an atomic materialism; that is to say, everything is composed of material atoms. Epicureans did not necessarily deny the existence of the gods of Greek mythology but they regarded them as material beings too who have no concern whatsoever for human beings. Hence, they are uninvolved in human affairs. Rather than live according to reason as the Stoics advised, Epicureans thought that the pursuit of pleasure was the greatest good in human life and that we should do what we can to maximize our happiness.

-William Lane Craig, “Acts 17,” *Reasonable Faith* (2020), www.reasonablefaith.org

In summary:

- Stoics were materialists and pantheists. They believed that *logos*, or reason, made up the structure of the universe. They believed that reason rather than the passions should govern one’s life.
- Epicureans were atomic materialists. They thought of the gods as material beings who were uninvolved in human affairs. They believed the goal of life is pleasure.

This group of philosophers mocked Paul as a “babbling.” The Greek term literally refers to birds that pick up seeds. As Darrell Bock explains:

[T]he term has the connotation of a person who picks up bits of information and passes them off as if he knows what he is talking about. Some translations therefore render it as “foolish babbling” or “show off.” The intellectual arrogance of the Athenians may be alluded to in this reaction.

-Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2007), pp. 561-562

Their second reaction was that Paul was a “preacher of foreign divinities.” This was the same charge the

Athenian Council brought against Socrates (Plato, *Apology*). In fact, scholars widely acknowledge that Luke, the author of Acts, intentionally connects Paul to Socrates in this passage. As Keener explains:

For Luke’s literary purposes, however, the charge evokes that against Socrates, of introducing “new” divinities. Later writers continued to note this charge and its absurdity, insisting that it discredited the Athenians instead. Socrates was by now the paradigmatic sage, regularly cited in this period by Stoics. Later speakers sometimes compared mockery of themselves or their heroes with that against Socrates, thereby turning the accusations to their favor. Luke thus depicts Paul as continuing the true philosophic tradition. Indeed, far from preaching foreign deities (17:18), Paul summons his hearers to turn from false gods to the true God, who is not far from any of them (17:27).

-Craig Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 435-436

While the philosophers are quite condescending toward Paul, they are curious about the “strange things” he was saying. So they bring him to the Areopagus to speak.

Areopagus, more popularly known by its Latin name Mars Hill, was not only a location but also the name of the city council of Athens. This council served as a court. According to Bock:

It had great power, trying crimes and regulating, for example, city life, education, philosophical lectures, public morality, and foreign cults.

-Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2007), p. 563

Paul being brought before the Areopagus was a big deal. This was an opportunity for him to share the Gospel with some of the most influential men in the city!

Paul’s Speech before the Areopagus

While standing in the midst of the council, Paul begins his speech by complimenting his audience for their religiousness:

Acts 17:22

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

How are the people of Athens “very religious”? Paul goes on to explain:

Acts 17:23

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

While Paul was greatly offended by the idolatry he saw throughout the city (17:16), he uses it to establish common ground with his audience. He recognizes their use of idols as an attempt to “feel their way” toward God (17:27).

According to historical sources, there were many inscriptions to unknown gods in Athens. In Athenian

tradition, the purpose of these altars was essentially to cover all the bases to avoid offending some deity that had been overlooked. The inscription Paul refers to provides an opening for him to reveal the true God. As William Lane Craig puts it:

In the altar to an unknown god Paul finds a point of contact with his pagan hearers. Paul is saying in effect, “You’re right. There is indeed an unknown god whom we should worship, and I am going to tell you who he is.” Paul then launches into a bold proclamation of Jewish monotheism. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. Such a transcendent creator is antithetical not only to pagan idolatry but also to Stoic pantheism and Epicurean materialism.

-William Lane Craig, “Acts 17,” *Reasonable Faith* (2020), www.reasonablefaith.org

Let’s continue:

Acts 17:24-25

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Here, Paul proclaims the biblical view of God—a transcendent creator, Lord of heaven and earth. He says that the true God “does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything.”

God cannot be contained in man-made temples. This was something that even King Solomon himself, who built the First Temple in Jerusalem, acknowledged (1 Kings 8:27). Moreover, unlike the pagan deities, the true God does not have “needs.” He doesn’t rely on humans for anything. Instead, “he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” God is the creator and sustainer of the universe.

While Paul’s statements are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, they do touch on some ideas expressed in Greek culture. As Bock explains:

The idea that a temple cannot contain the gods is something some other Greeks also recognized, as Euripides, frg. 968, expresses the idea that a house built by craftsmen could not enclose the divine form.

-Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2007), p. 565

Once again, Paul seeks to establish common ground with his audience where he can and moves from there to proclaim the truth.

Acts 17:26-27

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Paul continues to develop the notion of a transcendent God for his audience, moving from the creation

of the universe to the creation of man. He says, “[And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.](#)” This statement undercuts pagan ideas about the origins of humans. For instance, Isocrates, an ancient Greek orator, speaks of a myth about Athenians springing from Athens’ soil (Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 24). In contrast, Paul teaches the biblical view that God created all mankind from one man—namely Adam. Paul’s statement that God created people to “[live on all the face of the earth](#)” evokes Genesis 1:28—that is, God’s creation mandate to humanity to be fruitful and multiply and “[fill the earth.](#)”

As Bock writes:

The reference to Adam is intended to show that all people have their roots in the Creator God.

-Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2007), p. 566

Paul goes on to say that God “[determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,](#)” meaning that God sovereignly determines the affairs of humans and the destinies of nations. This was in contrast to the Stoic idea that human affairs were controlled by blind fate. God did this so that all people might “[seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.](#)”

In other words, Paul says the Athenians are feeling their way toward God in their own imperfect way, hoping they might grab hold of him. Thankfully, according to Paul, God is “[actually not far from each one of us.](#)” He quotes Greek poets in support of this idea:

Acts 17:28-29

[For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.” Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.](#)

It was a common expectation for speakers to include quotations in their speeches and arguments. Here, Paul uses these quotes to substantiate his case that humans are close to God as his children. Based on this, he concludes that God is nothing like what mere humans imagine and liken to their idols. William Lane Craig writes:

For in contradistinction to Epicurean thinking, God is not distant and removed. In line with Stoic thinking, Paul affirms the immanence of God. He quotes Greek poets in support. He says, “in him we live and move and have our being”—a citation that comes perhaps from the ancient Athenian poet Epimenides. “As some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” This citation is definitely identified as from the Stoic poet Aratus who happened to be a countryman of Paul also being from Tarsus. Here again we see Paul's rhetorical skill in building bridges to his audience by affirming the Stoics’ doctrine of divine immanence and citing their own sources and yet at the same time undermining Stoicism by affirming as well God's transcendence and sovereignty. Paul takes a last shot at pagan idol worship by saying that since we are created by God obviously God cannot be something created by us.

-William Lane Craig, “Acts 17,” *Reasonable Faith* (2020), www.reasonablefaith.org

Paul goes further than merely making a philosophical case for the true God and against idols. What he says next is controversial. He demands repentance:

Acts 17:30-31

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Paul says that God once tolerated idolaters' ignorance, but now the judgment is at hand. God will hold all people responsible through the "man whom he has appointed," Yeshua. And all are assured of this coming judgment because of Yeshua's resurrection.

Keener writes:

Having established as much rapport as possible, Paul now challenges his hearers. Although Greeks knew of conversion to philosophy, moral repentance was a more Jewish notion. Ignorance about God was less culpable than deliberate distortions about him (cf. Acts 3:17), but given God's self-revelation of his character in humanity (17:27–28), idolatry remained culpable (17:29); and now, given the climactic and more complete revelation of his purpose in the historic act of raising Jesus, it became inexcusable (17:31). They have brought Paul before an official hearing; audaciously, Paul warns *them* of the impending judgment against idolatry (17:30–31)!

-Craig Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 447

There was a mixed reaction to Paul's speech. Some scoffed, but others were open to hearing more. Remarkably, some joined with Paul and became believers. One person in particular that Luke singles out—Dionysius—was a member of the Areopagus council!

Acts 17:32-34

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

The fact that a member of the town's highest aristocratic court accepted Paul's message was no small success.

Paul's speech before the Areopagus gives us some insight into how we might effectively share the truth, and teaches us some valuable lessons. What can we learn from this passage of Scripture?

First, when sharing the truth, we should try to establish common ground as much as possible. When Paul interacted with other Jews in the synagogues, he reasoned with them from the Hebrew Scriptures. That was common ground that they shared from which Paul could make his case. But appealing to the Hebrew Scriptures would have been meaningless to Paul's Athenian audience because they didn't believe in the Scriptures. Thus, Paul referred to their own customs and authors to connect with them while also using those things to undermine their views.

To give a modern example of how we might apply this principle, consider interacting with an atheist about whether or not God exists. It wouldn't mean much to the atheist to just start quoting Scripture. Why? Because they don't believe Scripture to be a source of truth!

So try to find some common ground. Maybe your atheist friend has an interest in science. You could

explain how the scientific data points to the fact that the universe had a beginning and that it appears fine-tuned for life. You could quote respected scientists, like Stephen Hawking, who agree. From that basis, you can argue that the best explanation of those facts is that God exists. Or perhaps your atheist friend is deeply concerned about social justice and combating evils such as racism. Again, you could argue that the best explanation for those objective moral values is that God exists.

For more information on these arguments for God's existence, see our teachings: [Answering Atheists: Does God Exist? - The Beginning of the Universe](#), [Answering Atheists: Does God Exist? - The Design of the Universe](#), and [Answering Atheists: Does God Exist? - The Moral Argument](#).

Second, we must be uncompromising in our proclamation of the Gospel. Even though Paul knew that some within his audience would greet his message of repentance and Yeshua's resurrection with mockery, he didn't hold back out of fear. Likewise, we must stand firm on the truth. We can expect that some people will scoff at our beliefs, but we must not hold back. There may be some among the crowd who hear the message and come to Messiah because of our witness.

Finally, while not compromising the truth, we must show compassion and grace. Paul was deeply disturbed by the idols in Athens. And yet, he managed to connect with his audience on their level and minister to them. Likewise, we must not be so angry at the state of our fallen world that we come across as unloving. We must strive to speak the truth in love as best as we can.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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