

ACTS | Paul in Athens | Story 25

Acts 17:16-34

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Paul in Athens

Introduction

- Timothy and Silas stayed behind in Berea
- Paul took a boat to Athens—sent a note for them to join him when they can
- Paul was waiting for them in Athens— getting to know the lay the land

Where is Paul?

Athens — Mars Hill (Areopogus)

The Areopagus was a hill overlooking Athens that served as the chief courtroom of the day; it was also a place to hold philosophical discussions. It was a cultural and art center of the world — like Nashville.

The Romans would have called it “Mars Hill” because that is the name they gave to their God of war, Mars— who the Greeks called Ares. Who was Ares? Ares was the ancient Greek god of war, more properly, the spirit of battle. He represented the distasteful aspects of brutal warfare and slaughter. Ares was never very popular, and his worship was not extensive in Greece. The Roman version of the same God was Mars—that is why in some translations you will see this called “Mars Hill,” instead of the Areopogus, which would have been the local name of the location.

TURN IN YOUR BIBLES:

Acts 17:16-34

16 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.

Notice how Paul is provoked in his spirit—struck by deception and evil

Anybody grieved right now? Anyone had their Sprit provoked within you? In this unique season of my life I have been provoked to press into Him more and trust Him.

How we position our hearts:

2 Corinthians 10:3

3 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Acts 17:17-18

17 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. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

“Babbler” is a saying that people in Athens would use to describe someone—it meant a bird picking at seeds. The “burn” is that Paul is picking up ideas from here and there and throwing them all together.

Who is Paul speaking to? Epicureans, Stoics, Jews, devout believers, people in the marketplace...

Epicureanism was a school of Greek philosophy that emphasized the

- remoteness of uncaring gods
- a world governed by blind chance
- the absence of an afterlife
- the pursuit of pleasure, in all ways (not just hedonism)

This is very much like the spirit of atheism, pragmatism, and deism that we still see today—*these ideas are not new!*

Stoicism emphasized a world

- determined by fate, essentially, they were materialists
- where human beings must pursue their duty
- “resigning” themselves to be in harmony with nature and reason
- Independent and self-sufficient

Sound familiar? The world is full of empty strategies to make life work without God.

- Avoid pain?
- Lower your expectations?
- Trust in yourself?
- Get yours because this is all there is?
- Be good? Try harder
- Make a good life plan, and follow through? Believe in yourself!

Acts 17:19-21

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

We live in a constant changing news cycle—that’s always giving us new information. What makes us addicted to our phones, sports, TV? It’s looking for something new and distracting. Education is good, learning is good, but using information to constantly distract yourself from your real life is NOT good. Are we that much different than the Athenians?

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

Acts 17:22-23

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

Nashville is known as “The Athens of the South.” What would Paul see that would remind him of the Athens of his day?

What is an idol? An idol is always marked by the will **to use God for our own purposes**. It is 1) a strategy, 2) a rebellion, and eventually 3) a stronghold. Paul was very aware of what was happening, and he wisely spoke and shared the truth in love.

- We all have little systems that we try to use to make life work without God.
- Humans attempt to find identity or power.

Its common, as a believer, to be provoked by the false idols of the world—or even the false idols in our own lives that draw us away from the Lord.

Often the idols of the heart are even unknown to us—unless we seek them out.

Idolatry Examples: Lies V. Truth

Lie of idolatry: “If I just had great friends, I’ll be happy. If I fall in love, I’ll be happy.”

No! This makes idols out of the relationships in your life.

Truth of grace: God is with you, and He never leaves you (Joshua 1:9, Psalm 139).

Lie of idolatry: I deserve to be happy, and I need to do whatever works for me.

No! This makes an idol out of yourself.

Truth of grace: God will deliver you from this (Psalm 34:17).

Lie of idolatry: Being a wife or husband will complete me; after all, the 2 become 1.

No! This makes your spouse into an idol.

Truth of grace: Your spouse can never complete you; that’s not their purpose. He will complete you (Colossians 2:10).

Lie of idolatry: I’m a good mom and everything I do is for my kids.

No! This turns your children into idols.

Truth of grace: The only good things you do are established by God (Proverbs 16:9). Love God first and then love people, and this honors Him, but also seek Him first (1 John 4:7-8, Matthew 6:33).

Acts 17:24-28

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything, 26 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, 27 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, 28 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.”

What were the Philosophers grappling with?

1. What is reality? – There is an Attack on truth and reality

- **Truth** – The world is confused—My reality *and* yours.
- **Reality** – Your reality might be real for you—and my reality blah blah blah
- **Digital unreality** – Facebook is not reality. People are actually living in an unreal digital reality.
- **Ethics** – Some treat their character like ordering a pizza.
- **History** – is just someone’s opinion. The winners write the books. Accuracy is replaced with advocacy—it is what I want it to be—it is God who moves and acts and directs the history of the world.

Acts 17:29-34

29 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. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.” 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

WHAT DID PAUL DO?

- Notice that Paul doesn’t attack or condemn.
- He doesn’t accommodate and go soft or beg.
- He invites them to think.
- He proclaims the truth with sensitivity to the audience.
- He reasons with them, and whensome believe he leaves after he presents the truth to them.
- Why did he leave?
- Why didn’t he press everyone to make a decision? What a relief.
- He knew—ONLY GOD can save someone and he trusted Gods providence.

Principle?
Speak the truth in love
Then trust God with the outcome.

Paul looked for where God was working—he listened, he waited, he had the hard conversations— because he saw that God cared about them.

- **God is near—He is not far away**
- **We are his children**

Discussion Questions

Questions you can ask yourself as you seek to find the idolatry of your own heart.

1. Are You Willing to Compromise Your Beliefs for It?
2. Will You Get Angry if You Can't Do It/Don't Get It?
3. Do You Value It Over People?
4. Does It Push You Closer to God or Pull You Farther Away?

NOTES

- a. Acts 17:5 Greek *Ioudaioi* probably refers here to Jewish religious leaders, and others under their influence, in that time; also verse 13
- b. Acts 17:10 Or *brothers and sisters*; also verse 14
- c. Acts 17:24 Greek *made by hands*
- d. Acts 17:28 Probably from Epimenides of Crete
- e. Acts 17:28 From Aratus's poem "Phainomena"
- f. Alister Begg, Truth for Life 2017
- g. Grateful Abandon Website
- h. William Booth
- i. John Stott, The Message of Acts [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990], p. 281.
- j. Henry McRaven's book *Nashville, " (Athens of the South)*