

As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.

Scripture Guide **Acts 17:16-34**

This section of Acts takes place during Paul's second missionary journey. Up to this point, Paul and his teammates have traveled from Asia Minor through Philippi (16:11-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), Berea (17:10-15), and then down through Achaia (Greece). Now the spotlight focuses on Paul's time in Greece's intellectual hub: the city of Athens.

17:16-21 The city of Athens was littered with statues and shrines to various gods - foreign and domestic. Luke says that after Paul arrived, he was not simply surprised by the number of idols. He was irritated,¹ apparently to the point of being motivated to preach and teach them the truth about God. Despite being irritated, he does not seem to have been antagonistic or combative with the pagan Athenians. He appears to do and say everything out of genuine concern and compassion. So, he reasoned² with them and attempted to persuade anyone who would talk with him (v. 17).

Up to this point, Paul has already taught in the synagogues (17:2, 17), presumably preaching and proving Jesus' messiahship from the Hebrew Scriptures for his Jewish audience. Now Paul addresses his Greek intellectual audience on their terms. In his speech, he makes no direct references to the Scriptures, but he uses their own religious and philosophical assumptions as his starting point to make his case. In it, we see an application of what Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 9:21-23, "I became all things to all men so that by all means, I might save some." He humbly approaches them in their own language and on their own turf and stakes out common ground.

Among those he met were proponents of two of the major philosophical systems of the day, Epicureanism³ and Stoicism.⁴ Their response to Paul's preaching was a mixture of disdain and curiosity because he preached the gospel of Jesus and His resurrection. They called him a "seed picker,"⁵ considering him just a pseudo-intellectual. Yet, he was winsome and engaging enough to earn an audience with the city's leading intellectuals. They were intrigued and open to knowing more precisely what these ideas meant, and they allowed Paul to try and convince them. Though the Athenians were polytheistic, they would not have simply accepted⁶ any-and-all deities or religious teachings.

To examine Paul's teaching, they invited him to the Court of the Areopagus⁷ (also known as Mars Hill). This was the public counsel of contemporary thought leaders. Traditionally, the Areopagus exercised jurisdiction in religious and moral issues and could examine whether religious and philosophical teachings were worthy of institutional approval or censure. Yet Luke summarized their usual goings-on as nothing but talking about the latest intellectual novelties (v. 21).

17:22-31 Luke records Paul's speech (albeit perhaps an abridged version) with the major points being: (1) You worship many gods, but you don't even know the one true God (vv. 22-23), (2) you know that God made us, but God does not need us, we need Him (vv. 24-27), (3) so stop worshiping idols; worship God (vv. 29-30), and (4) the resurrection is how we know Jesus is God (v. 31).

¹ παροξύνω - par-ox-oo'-no - provoke, urge, irritate; or arouse to anger, scorn, or exasperation.

² διαλέγομαι - dee-al-eg'-om-ahee - converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss.

³ Epicureans lived in such a way that would result in the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain, and instead strive for inner peace of mind. They would suppress sexual desires, passionate love, fame, even the fear of death, and anything else that they felt would disturb their peace. They thought that we should suppress our appetites, which were merely physical, and only pursue the spiritual. Epicureans believed in the immortality of the individual soul. See Epicurus' Letter to Menoecus <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>

⁴ Stoics aimed at living consistently with nature, and in practice they emphasized rationalism and individual self-sufficiency. They were marked by moral earnestness and a high sense of duty. Bruce, F.F., p. 330, *The Book of the Acts* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), Eerdmans, June 30, 1988.

⁵ σπερμολόγος - sper-mol-og-os - literally: seed-picker or "one who picks up scraps"; figuratively: loafer, gossip, tale-bearer

⁶ Rowe, C. Kavin. *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Setting*. 2009. Oxford University Press.

⁷ Literally: the hill of Ares. Ares was the Greek god of War, who was called Mars by the Romans.

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Paul starts with the questions the Greeks have sought answers to, *Who should we worship? And Where did mankind and the world come from?* He hones in on the fact that they understood mankind was made to honor and revere something greater than themselves. Paul grants that the Athenians know worship is proper, and perhaps they know deep down that worship is what they were made for. All human beings, as creatures of God created in his own image, have the responsibility to give him the honor He is due. Essentially, Paul says that even these pagan Greek poets had some dim knowledge of who God is, though they do not know Him. They still did not have the answer.

So Paul declares what the answer is: this "unknown God"⁸ is actually the God who made everything (vv. 23-25). The Greeks served their gods by bringing offerings to please them, or even fill up the gods' lacking glory on earth (see Acts 19:27). Paul says that the true God, "is not served by human hands" (v. 25). In fact, God sustains and governs everything - where we live, what we'll do, and the appointed times for everything (v. 26). This God made mankind to find relationship and wholeness in Himself (v. 27). We need him, and He has no needs at all.⁹

Paul then connects this truth with their philosopher-poets, "as even some of your own poets¹⁰ have said, 'for we are indeed his offspring,'" (v. 28). There are even parallels both the Epicurean thought that the "divine being" needs nothing from mortals and to the Stoics' thought that "the divine" is the source of all life. Paul grants that the Greeks have understood ontologically that they need God and depend on him for existence. They knew that worship was necessary, yet they worshiped idols and not God. They thought that they could somehow distill God down and represent Him with an image or a statue. Paul refutes their inconsistency and error, "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," (v. 29). He says that they have falsely ascribed God's character and worth to man-made and imagined gods.

In vv. 30-31, Paul connects the Greeks' questions with the message he first began to preach to them. This God has shown himself in the person and work of Jesus, "a man He has chosen." His contextual engagement as a philosopher was not complete without a preacher's call, "now God commands everyone everywhere to repent." The God whom the Athenians have sought and have dimly understood will no longer overlook their ignorance. Paul has declared who God is, and His judgment is coming. Paul says the only validation required is the empty tomb. A man has defeated death, and that man is God's appointed judge of the world.

Greece's Stoic and Epicurean thought had no room for an eschatological judgment like Paul and the rest of the Scriptures announce. Even though they might have accepted God as the creator of all, they had no category for a judge of all - a judgment after death. Paul broke their categories, so some mocked him and others still had questions.

Application

Paul preached the exclusivity of Christ, and this was just as offensive in Paul's day as it is in our own. Paul's philosophical Greek audience were not atheists and they were not "post Christians," yet Paul finds common ground with them and their real observations about God and themselves. This was his spring-board to preaching the gospel to people that had no other point of reference to the God of Scripture. Paul gives us a great example for how to attempt to engage unbelievers and bring truth into the conversation. People today, similar to the Greeks, may believe in a higher power, but the gospel highlights Christ alone as God and Savior.

⁸ The inscription could also have read, "to an unknown god." Jerome also postulates that what Paul quotes may have been a phrase from a fuller inscription, "to the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa, and to unknown and foreign gods." see Bruce, p. 335

⁹ Some Greek philosophers taught that the gods did not actually need anything from people. But Paul's teaching is derived from the Hebrew Bible. See Psalm 50:9-12, Romans 11:35-36. Opposed to the idea that God has no needs from His creation is "process theology", which teaches that God and the world are mutually dependent. See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/eternality-aseity-god/>

¹⁰ Paul seems to quote lines from two different poems written about Zeus from the Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus.