

# BIGGER THAN YOU

## Lesson 17 Proclaiming the Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

*At the end of our previous lesson, Paul was taken to Athens to escape trouble in Berea that had been instigated by the Thessalonians. At that time, even though the heyday of Athens had long passed, Athens was still considered the Greek cultural and intellectual capital. Athens was located in the Roman province of Achaia, known today as southern Greece. In this lesson, Paul engages the local intellectuals in the marketplace of ideas. He is taken from the marketplace to the Areopagus (also called Mars Hill), to meet with the council of city elders. His Mars Hill sermon is remarkably relevant to us today, as we preach Christ in our culture that is not so different from Athens of long ago.*

### Read Acts 17:16-21

1. Paul waited for Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens. Athens in Paul's day was filled with Greek statues. Today we appreciate the artistic value of the statues; back then the statues were deemed holy.
  - a. Find Athens on the map on page 3. Trace the journey from Berea to Athens.
  - b. Read verse 16 and pretend you are in Paul's shoes. What is so distressing about a city full of idols?
  - c. Is there a contemporary definition of idolatry that is broader, and more inconspicuous, than pagan idol worship? If you think so, describe it.
  - d. In Athens, a city full of idols, there is a synagogue (verse 17). To whom does Paul preach in the synagogue?
  - e. The response to Paul by those in the synagogue is not recorded. Why do you think Luke is silent on this issue?
2. Philosophers gathered in the marketplace to exchange ideas. Epicureans, generally speaking, advocated the pursuit of pleasure as the highest goal in life. Stoics equated virtue with wisdom and held that the absence of emotions was most desirable.
  - a. How would you characterize the tenor of the discussion between the philosophers and Paul (verse 18)?
  - b. What might Paul have been saying about "the good news about Jesus and the resurrection" (verse 18)?
  - c. What is today's equivalent to the marketplace of ideas in Athens? Where do people have serious exchange of ideas?
  - d. What are various responses to Christ in our "marketplace of ideas"?
3. The philosophers take Paul to the Areopagus, the main legislative and judicial council of Athens. It met on the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, to conduct business. The council and the meeting place have the same name.
  - a. Describe the intellectual mood of that day from (verse 21).
  - b. Do you think we are vulnerable to keeping up with the latest thinking in Christianity today? If so, explain.
  - c. Paraphrase the question posed to Paul (verses 19-20).
  - d. How would you describe the inclination toward Christianity of today's leaders in comparison to the Athenians?

**Read Acts 17:22-29**

4. Paul is not introducing a new god to the Greek pantheon. Rather he is proclaiming the identity of the one true God.
  - a. Why does Paul launch his sermon by mentioning the very idols that had distressed him (verse 16)?
  - b. For what purpose might the Athenians have an altar dedicated to an “unknown god”?
  - c. Today, how do people worship “unknown gods”?
  
5. On Mars Hill, Paul presents a simple gospel to sophisticated Gentile intellectuals. Find the verse from Paul’s sermon that corresponds to each of the following tenets of the Christian faith:
  - a. God made the world. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. God does not live in temples created by human hands. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. God is self-sufficient – He needs nothing from humans. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. God is near to His creation. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. All people descended from one man. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. God controls human destiny. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. God’s sovereignty is designed to cause people to seek him. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. God is not like a man-made image. Verse \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. Some of the philosophers Paul spoke to believed that there was no divine intervention in the affairs of men.
  - a. How does Paul refute this idea (verse 26)?
  - b. Many people today do not believe that God is involved in human affairs. How can we testify to a personal God?
  
7. Paul addressed other philosophers who worshipped nature.
  - a. What does Paul say about God and nature (verse 24)?
  - b. What does Paul say about God and men (verse 25)?
  - c. How does Paul distinguish between the biblical God and a god that lives in nature (verses 24-25)?
  - d. Since God created both nature and man, what should our attitude be toward nature?
  
8. The Greeks of Paul’s day had a sense of racial superiority. They believed they had sprung from the very soil in Greece and had not been transplanted from anywhere else. Thus, they thought they were from racially superior stock.
  - a. How did Paul counter the idea of racial superiority (verse 26)?
  - b. How can Christians today witness to the unity and equality we have in Christ?
  
9. Paul quotes a Greek poet in verse 28.
  - a. From verse 29, what was Paul’s purpose in referring to the offspring of God?
  - b. In Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41), Paul preaches in a synagogue, using Old Testament scripture and rehearsing Jewish history. How did Paul adjust his message in Athens to suit his audience?
  - c. What can we learn from Paul as we present the gospel today to many different cultures?

**Read Acts 17:30-34**

10. Paul says that in the past God overlooked “such ignorance” (verse 30).
  - a. Looking in context at the prior verse, what is the ignorance Paul is speaking about?
  - b. Yes or no, “overlooked” means the following:
    - i) Excusing the behavior yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_
    - ii) Failing to notice the behavior yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_
    - iii) Withholding deserved punishment for the behavior yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

**You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**

**Acts 1:8**

- c. Now that the time of overlooking is over, what does God command all people to do? Why? (verses 30-31)
- d. Do you think the whole world has heard that the time of overlooking is over? Does everyone know they must repent because God's judgment is coming? If not, what should be done?

11. In verses 32-34, we read the various responses to Paul's sermon.

- a. List the different types of responses.
- b. What particular point in Paul's sermon seemed to provoke the Athenians (verse 32)?
- c. Why is this fact a sticking point for unbelievers even today?
- d. Paul's message in Athens was not met with hostility as it had been before in Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi. Why do you think hostility was absent in Athens?

12. Read Romans 10:12-15 and discuss our responsibility in proclaiming the good news about Jesus.



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**Acts 1:8**