

Acts 17:16-24

One, Two, Three, Forum!

Learning Objectives

- To acknowledge the Gospel truths God puts all around us and to help reveal to people their desire for the one, true God!
- Explore how we can better communicate the Gospel to the culture around us and meet people where they are.

? Think of a time when you saw the Gospel message or glory of God in a “secular” piece of music, art, or literature. Tell us about it and how you felt when thinking about it.

Possible Answers: Examples: Description of leader/follower as described in partnered dance, beautiful descriptions of forgiveness in Les Miserables, the messianic qualities of Gruff in Tinkerbell and the Neverbeast.

Leaders’ Note: If you have a laptop, considering watch the following clip as a group and discussing how you see God’s truths in it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMUKGTkiWik>

Read Out Loud: Previously In Acts

Acts has been the story about how the Holy Spirit – working through early believers – spread the Gospel and built the global church. The book also introduces us to the Apostle Paul – one of the Church’s first missionaries as well as one of Christianity’s most important theologians. Acts 17 brings Paul to Athens where he encounters a radically new culture. Until now, Paul has engaged with Jewish culture or with Gentiles who live nearby and were at least aware of Jewish practices. However, now Paul finds himself in the hub of Grecian philosophy – among some of the world’s most well-educated artists and thinkers. Paul continues his mission to share Christ with the world, but his approach to this new culture is markedly different.

Read Out Loud: Acts 17:16-34 (NIV)

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Who Were The Epicureans?

Epicureanism is a system of philosophy based upon the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, founded around 307 BC. Epicurus considered religion a form of ignorance. He believed that the gods existed – they just lived far away and had little to do with humanity. Epicurus argued that the world was made of atoms, and even deities were made of atoms, which is why all gods were limited beings and had no real effect on the world. Upon death a person simply ceased to exist. For Epicureans, the ultimate goal of life was happiness and the search to experience the fullness of physical pleasure.

Discussion Questions

? What were some of the things that distressed Paul while in Athens, and how did he respond to those feelings?

Possible Answers: Paul’s heart was so aligned with God’s that he cared about what God cared about, so he was provoked by the Spirit and by the pagan idols all around him. Paul responded by wanting to care for the Athenians by spreading the Gospel of Jesus which they seemed to be missing.

? Have you ever felt similarly to Paul? How did you react?

Who Were The Stoics?

A contemporary of Epicurus, Zeno of Citium founded Stoicism, which stood in stark contrast to Epicureanism. Zeno believed that the purpose of life could be found by submitting to the Divine will. While Zeno did believe in only one god, he did not differentiate that god from nature. Stoics practiced controlling their emotions and physical desires. A Stoic believed that man conquers the world by first conquering himself. They worked to develop an indifference to pain and pleasure through meditation and believed that evil occurred when passions controlled men. Ethically, Stoics attempted to live in peace with nature. Stoics believe death was liberating because it freed people of their material passions and united them with the divine.

For more information on the Epicureans and Stoics, see Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/acts-17-18.html>, or <http://www.compellingtruth.org/Epicureanism-Epicurean.html>

a void in our lives that only God can fill?

Possible Answers: Food, comfort, entertainment, success, relationships, individual freedom, reputation. An idol can be anything we choose to put before God. We all have a hunger for something more, and we try to fill ourselves with many Earthly things, but only God can fill that hole and give our lives true purpose.

? Paul faces a lot of philosophical opposition in Greece. How do you see Epicureanism and Stoicism alive in our culture today?

Leaders' Note: Depending on the level of background knowledge of your group, you most likely will need to read/reference the two side bars regarding the basic components of Epicureanism and Stoicism.

Possible Answers: Epicureanism and Stoicism seem to be at the heart of new age practices and atheism, which have been around as long as Christianity. Concepts such as, "you only live once" and therefore do what you want, when you want – get all the pleasure you can out of life – are actually detrimental to us. Conversely, it's just as bad to seek our own salvation – to try to work so hard to be a good person that we will deserve eternal honor.

? How does Paul show that God is different than the Athenian idol in verses 24-25?

Possible Answers: The Athenians created gods to worship, but the only thing that gave those gods value was the Athenians' worship. The one true God created us, and He has value in and of Himself. He does not need to be served, and He holds His worth, power, and majesty without the recognition of humans.

? What are some of the idols our culture worships today? How are those idols trying to fill

? In verse 27, Paul reveals God's heart toward man. What does God desire from us and why?

Possible Answers: God desires that we seek Him and that we worship Him as he is the only being truly worthy of praise. Through this, He desires that we should have life and have it abundantly. Only in Him can we really find a life worth living. Ref: John 10:10.

? In verse 28, Paul quotes from two of the Greek's greatest Hellenistic poets, Epimenides and Aratus.

How does Paul use these quotes (originally written in reference to Zeus) to help reveal the one true God?

Possible Answers: Paul explains that there are elements of truth inside the Athenian's current belief system, and then uses the writings of their own respected poets and philosophers as a meeting point, helping him find a common ground they can all agree on before revealing a greater truth. Paul acknowledges these philosophers' wisdom, but then directs the Athenians to what they missed.

? Optional: How would you communicate the Gospel today using secular culture, entertainment, art, etc.?

Leaders' Note: You may have already taken the opening question in this direction. If so, feel free to skip this one.

? Why do you think the Athenian philosophers were drawn to worship gods in the first place?

Possible Answers: God designed us to want to worship; sometimes we just worship the wrong things. It is part of our internal make up – Romans 1:18-23. If we're not all inclined to worship why does God have to command us not to worship other gods?

? Until the very end, Paul meets little resistance. However, as soon as he mentions the resurrection, the

Athenian philosophers start to mock him. Why do you think the resurrection was challenging to them?

Possible Answers: The concept that someone would rise from the dead is ridiculous – it's an affront to our sensibilities. No one has ever done that, so the idea of the resurrection isn't logical so it can be hard to reason through. However, God's grace is ridiculous, because we are imparted a righteousness that we don't deserve.

? How do you think the resurrection is a challenge to our society today?

Possible Answers: Our society is more logical and scientifically minded than ever before. We've been able to scope the depths of the atomic universe and chart the distance between stars using logic, but our society still have trouble believing in a Creator. Since resurrection continues to be an uncommon occurrence, it requires faith to believe in such an event. Faith itself is not easily come by in a society of tangible and proven results.

For Discussion and Accountability

? How is God provoking you in your spirit to reveal the Gospel to the culture around you? How might reflecting upon your own salvation ignite your heart for others?