

Acts 17:16-24

One, Two, Three, Forum!

? 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.

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 find 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.

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 babbling 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

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.

worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very

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>

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.

Discussion Questions

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

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

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

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

? What are some of the idols our culture worships today? How are those idols trying to fill a void in our lives that only God can fill?

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

? 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?

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

? 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?

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

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?