

Unstuck: How the Apostle Paul Changed the World

Lesson 3

Acts 17:16-34

December 5, 2021

Wisely Speaking to Culture

Introduction

This passage of Acts opens with Paul waiting for his friends in Athens after having a successful missional visit to the city of Berea. On the other hand, Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of the Greek world and was a crossroads of cultures and philosophies. As a result, there were many different belief systems in Athens. None were Christianity.

As Paul entered Athens, his heart broke when he saw the multitude of altars and statues of man-made gods. These graven images represented Athenian's polytheistic culture. But at a deeper level, they represented the empty hearts of thousands of individuals searching for a living, personal God who would know them and love them. The altar that best represented this collective desperation was the altar captioned "To an Unknown God." Paul used that phrase to both provoke and intrigue the Athenians with the good news of the gospel. Although Paul convinced some of his listeners of the goodness of the living God, most responded with skepticism.

Our city of Portland, Oregon, is frequently described as one of the most unchurched cities in America. Like Athens, Portland is filled with many beliefs and many people who are skeptical of the gospel. Belief systems in Portland range from atheism and agnosticism to Mormonism and even the occult. As was the case with the Athenians, this plethora of belief systems outwardly represents empty hearts searching for unknown gods. Our jobs as ambassadors of the gospel are to do the same thing that Paul did: engage with those in our culture and present the gospel in prayerful hopefulness that people will be receptive to the good news.

Memory verse: “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. 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.’”—Acts 17:22-23

Pray and read Acts 17:16-34. What questions or observations do you have about this passage?

What does the passage say?

1. At what two locations was Paul discussing and debating in Athens? (Acts 17:16-19)
2. With whom were these debates? (Acts 17:17-21)
3. What altar did Paul use to start the conversation about the gospel? (Acts 17:23)
4. How did Paul’s audiences in Athens respond to the message of the gospel? (Acts 17:18-20, 32-34)
5. What did Paul say that God requires of people? (Acts 17:30-31)

What does the passage mean?

1. What did Paul say or do that made the Athenians curious enough to hear him debate at the Areopagus? (Acts 17:17-21)
2. In his discussion with the Athenians, why did Paul zero in on the altar to an “Unknown God”? (Acts 17:22-29; Romans 1:19-20; 1 Corinthians 9:22)
3. How was Paul’s description of the living God different from what the Athenians would have expected? (2 Samuel 7:22; Acts 17:24-31; 1 Corinthians 8:6)
4. Why did Paul say that people should repent? What evidence did he give? (Acts 3:19, 17:26-31; 1 John 1:9)

5. The people of Athens were used to hearing about many different ideas and religions. Why do you think the message of the gospel was so challenging for many of them to understand? (Acts 17:17-32)

Applying the passage

1. Think about and write down two or three world views that compete with the gospel. How would each of these belief systems respond to the good news of the gospel? Write down a few ideas about how to talk about the gospel with people who have these world views. And pray for the opportunity, the boldness, and the words to speak to them. (Acts 17:16-34)

