

Acts 17:16-34

December 14, 2025



CONVERSATION STARTERS

What are some highs or lows you experienced this past week?

What Scripture has been shaping you recently?

Where have you seen God moving in your life this week?

What did you hear in today's sermon OR read in today's passage that you would like to discuss?

What did you learn about yourself in today's sermon or passage?

What did you learn about God in today's sermon or passage?

What convicted you as you listened to today's sermon or read in today's passage?

MAIN POINT

Paul's sermon at the Areopagus shows that by observing others' beliefs and thoughtfully adapting our message, we can open doors to share the truth of the risen Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What are some of your takeaways from our study of Acts so far?

What type of opposition had Paul been facing in his journey to this point? What made it worth it to continue facing difficulties?

At the end of our reading last week, Paul was sent away by the brothers and sisters in Berea, and was Athens bound. Our passage today picks up with the beginning of Paul's time in Athens.



UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

 ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 17:16-21.

What did Paul encounter when he reached Athens?

Why was Paul deeply distressed? Does this same type of thing bother you? Why or why not?

How did Paul engage with the people he encountered?

“Them” in verse 16 is Paul’s partners in ministry, Silas and Timothy. Paul had gone on ahead of them to Athens, and when he got there, Luke recorded that he was “deeply distressed” (v.16). Notice what Paul did first—he observed. Paul was the ultimate chameleon in his ministry, adapting his teaching and evangelistic style based on his audience. To do this in a new area, you first must observe. When we’re entering a new friend group or new relationship, we better reach people for Jesus when we observe what they currently believe and can engage with that starting point.

In Athens in Paul’s day, there was much pagan worship (think of the Parthenon). The people also loved to share ideas (intellectual, philosophical, and religious discussion was popular). This thirst for new ideas would later open the door for Paul to share the gospel.

Following his usual custom, Paul started preaching with the Jews and debating local philosophers from two different schools of thought. Epicureans believed gods may exist, but were indifferent to humanity (they promoted living a tranquil life). The Stoics believed in many gods (they promoted emotional detachment).² Both groups would have had robust followings in this day.

The people’s thirst for debate and discussion led them to invite Paul to talk with them at the Areopagus, a hill overlooking the marketplace where orators would stand (also known as Mars Hill—it still exists today). There, Paul would deliver one of the New Testament’s most famous sermons.

 ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 17:22-34.

What stands out from Paul’s sermon?

How did Paul tailor his message to his audience?

Tailoring our message to reach others doesn’t mean compromising the gospel. What does it mean?



This was Paul's third (and last) missionary speech in Acts. Notice how he began by appealing to the local religious culture, calling them "extremely religious in every respect" (v.22). They even, apparently, worshiped "an Unknown God" (v.23), just to cover their bases. Paul told them that they might not know this God, but he did, and he was going to share Him with them.

Paul's sermon introduced God as creator of everything and superior to the idols they worshiped. God doesn't live in manmade temples (v.24) and doesn't need any offerings from us (v.25). He is sovereign over everyone and everything. God is so much bigger than the little "gods" they were making out of "gold or silver or stone" (v.29). Idolatry is foolish and sinful in light of the truth about God.

The ridicule Luke mentioned in verse 32 came because neither the Epicureans nor the Stoics believed in resurrection. The Stoics believed one's spirit would continue to live on after they died, but bodily resurrection was dismissed by both groups.

Some people, though, were curious and open. Paul's call for repentance turned the hearts of some people, like "Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris" (v.34) and others with them. Despite the mixed response, Paul shared the message without hesitation.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

When have you tried to have a conversation about Jesus with someone who believed something very different from you? What happened?

What can we learn about reaching people who believe differently than us from Paul's example?

Why is it important we seek to reach others with the gospel in a way they might best understand it?

PRAYER

Close your time together by sharing prayer requests, praying for each other, and the group.

Thank God for giving us the ability to observe and thoughtfully build relationships with the people He has placed in our lives. Ask for His help as you consider how to reach people for Him in your community.



LOOKING AHEAD

Encourage your group to look ahead as we discuss Luke 2 and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

December 21, 2025 --- Luke 2:1-20

COMMENTARY

Acts 17:16-34

17:16 While waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive from Berea, Paul observed Athens closely. He saw that it was full of idols. Athens was a beautiful city with many magnificent buildings and other monuments, many of them related to pagan worship (e.g., the Parthenon). The city was also a center of intellectual, philosophical, and religious discussion. All of this deeply distressed Paul as a person who knew the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ.

17:17 Paul followed his custom and reasoned in the synagogue, but also expanded his audience even before the onset of trouble from the Jews, by taking the gospel to the marketplace and engaging whoever was there, likely including philosophers, rhetoricians, and teachers.

17:18 Epicurean and Stoic philosophers comprised two of the best-known philosophical schools of thought. Epicureans taught that one ought to lead a tranquil and contemplative life, free of passions and destructive emotions. They didn't deny the existence of gods but believed they were indifferent to humanity. Stoics were pantheists and believed the divine principle was found everywhere. Humans ought to live by reason, the divine principle within them, so as to achieve a virtuous life. Epicureans and Stoics attracted many followers who gathered in various parts of the city to discuss the leading issues of the day. In their arrogance, some of them depicted Paul as an ignorant show-off. This was actually a slang term that meant "seed-picker."

17:19–21 The Areopagus was a rocky hill in Athens overlooking the marketplace. The word Aeropagus was also used to refer to the council that originally met on the hill. During Hellenistic times, the council probably met in the agora—or marketplace. The Greek text here is ambiguous. So it could be that Paul gave an address on the hilltop or that he appeared before this Athenian council elsewhere. The term Areopagus means "hill of Ares." Ares, the Greek god of war, was equivalent to the Roman god, Mars. So the hilltop was also known as Mars Hill.

17:22–31 This is Paul's third and final missionary speech in the book of Acts. He appealed to the Athenians' religious inclinations, drew upon observable data from nature to discuss the attributes of God, marshaled insights from pagan poets, and identified God and the need for humans to repent in preparation for the day in which



God will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus Christ, whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead.

17:22–23 As an example of Athenian superstition, Paul noted the altar erected “To an Unknown God”. No such inscription has been found, but it is no surprise that such an altar existed. Doubtless it was erected to ensure that no gods were overlooked (and thus angered) in the people’s devotion.

17:24–29 Paul’s argument from nature included a basic natural theology: God is Creator of all things; God is beyond the human realm (transcendent); God is not obligated to any human; God is sovereign over all peoples; God as Creator is quantitatively different from his creation.

17:27 Paul did not believe a person could achieve salvation through his own search for God (v. 30), but he did believe God is near to each person and that people through their own reasoning and observation of nature can achieve rudimentary knowledge of who God is. Special revelation from God is necessary for fuller understanding and salvation (see Romans 10:14–15).

17:28 Paul quoted (For we are also his offspring) someone whom these philosophers would have recognized—a Greek poet named Aratus who lived about 315–240 BC.

17:30–31 Paul built upon his argument from natural theology by introducing an eschatological dimension. God had overlooked the times of ignorance, but now commands humanity to acknowledge its evil ways and turn from them (repent). He has established a day of judgment on which the world will be held accountable to the righteous standard set by Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

17:32–33 Neither Stoics nor Epicureans believed in the possibility of bodily resurrection, though the Stoics did believe the human spirit continued to exist after bodily death. In any event, Paul’s talk about bodily resurrection earned him ridicule but also a measure of curiosity.

17:34 Paul’s missionary efforts in Athens were not as successful as they were elsewhere since he founded no church there. But there were a number of converts. These included a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius, a man of distinction because of this prestigious membership. Damaris may also have been a woman of distinction since Luke bothered to name her (vv. 4–5)

