

REFORM
engaging in Spirit-filled advent-ure

weekly discipleship track

reflect, relate, receive, respond

Walking Through the Scripture Together

August 10 - 16, 2008



Text Acts 17:16-34 (TNIV)

In Athens

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 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 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.' ^[a] As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' ^[b]

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.

^[a] From the Cretan philosopher Epimenides

^[b] From the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus

Thought

Luke has shown us how the gospel matches up against two major opponents: the 'zealous' Jews, in synagogues around Turkey and now in northern Greece, and the economic and political forces of the Roman Empire. But there is an entire world of thought — and I mean 'world of thought' — which we haven't yet had on stage. This is the hugely important sphere of the prevailing ancient philosophies. They conditioned how thousands of 'ordinary people' saw the world, what they thought of as reasonable and unreasonable, what they thought about 'the gods,' what they thought human life was for and how best you should live it. Millions who had never studied 'philosophy,' who maybe even couldn't read or write for themselves, were nevertheless deeply influenced by the major currents of thought that were debated in the schools, just as plenty of people today who have never studied philosophy or economics are massively influenced by popular presentations in the media of large and complex ideas.

And now Luke is taking Paul to where he must meet the ancient philosophies head on: Athens. This is a different team. You can't just say what you say in the synagogue, or even what you said in a hurry in Lystra. This demands a different game plan, a different strategy. Luke is building us up for a big set piece, one of the classic scenes in the whole book. Athens is a major showdown between the new young faith and the old, established, tried and tested philosophies of the Western world, which still, in various modern guises, dominate people's thinking. Until we've thought through this confrontation, we are not ready for the global contest.

N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone

Small Group Discussion Guide

Lean In

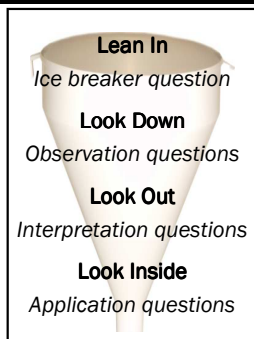
- How well do you handle flight delays or road detours? Why?

Look Down / Look Out

- What was Paul waiting for in Athens? What troubled him while he waited? What did he do about it?
- What was the obsession in Athens? What seemed to be their interest and take on Paul? How accurate does their impression seem to be of his teaching? Where do they take him, and why?
- What truths does Paul emphasize to them in his speech to the minds at Athens? What are his “talking points”? What ends the discussion? Why? What are the verbalized responses to Paul and his message? Who actually listens?
- How do you think Paul walked away from this experience in Athens? Do you think he is upbeat or disappointed? Why?

Look Inside

- What aspects of our culture do you find really “get under your skin”? What specific steps have or can you take to help address these issues in our culture?
- When’s the last time you really felt “on the spot” to explain your faith to a less than sympathetic audience? What happened? What can help increase our confidence at such times?
- How do you respond to seemingly disappointing results from your best efforts? What keeps you going in the face of that?



details, details...

Waiting for them in Athens

In the first century, the population of Athens probably numbered no more than about 10,000. It had reached the zenith of its power politically in the 5th century BC, but continued to exert great influence in both Greek and Roman culture right through the first century AD — essentially functioning as the cultural and intellectual center of Paul’s world.

Paul’s coming to Athens appears to have been intended primarily to escape persecution in Macedonia; preaching in Athens was not part of his original plan. Presumably, when called to Macedonia (16:6-10), he had planned to follow the Via Egnatia all the way to Dyrrhachium, then cross the Adriatic to Italy, and so to Rome. When writing the Christians at Rome some six or seven years later, Paul speaks of having often planned to visit them but being unable to do so (Ro 1:13; 15:22-23). Provincial action in Macedonia appears to have thwarted his plans for a continued mission in Macedonia, and news of Claudius’s expulsion of the Jewish community in Rome (A.D. 49-50; see Acts 18:2) would have caused him to change his plans.

What’s this babbler trying to say?

“Babbler” — the Greek word is “*spermologos*” and literally means “seed collector.” The picture is that of a bird, hopping about, picking up seeds here and there, dropping them, scattering them, and generally making a mess of things. Perhaps “birdbrain” would best catch the sentiment in our culture.

Spend all their time discussing the latest ideas

Athens’ glory was in their past — and in the greatness of their tried and true philosophies. Their interest indicated here doesn’t indicate a taste for fads, but rather that they were always on the lookout for new fangled philosophies and ideas to compare with the tried and true schools of Athenian thought. “New” in the ancient world was about one of the worst sneers one could offer — especially about an idea. As Jesus said about wine, “no one wants the new wine, because they say the old is better.”

Family Discussion Guide

Day One Acts 17:16-17 & Isaiah 40:18-20

If an idol is anything we put before and love more than God, what are some idols you really struggle with? What can help you get over these idols?

Day Two Acts 17:18-21 (1 Peter 3:14-16)

Have you ever had to talk about God with friends or peers at school who think that God is just a joke? What can help us to share and not be afraid of what others might think or say?

Day Three Acts 17:22-26

Is there anything new you learn about God in what Paul is saying to the people in Athens? How much do you usually “see God” all around you each day?

Day Four Acts 17:27-31

From what Paul says here, what does God really want everyone to know about him? Do you usually think of God as mad at everyone or do you see him as really wanting people to know him and his love for them? Why?

Day Five Acts 17:32-34 & 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

How do you feel when people make fun of you or what you say and do? What’s the best thing for us to do when that happens?

Greek Philosophy 101

Epicureans

Paul squared off against two key schools of Athenian thought and philosophy. The first was the Epicurean school of thought — a highly materialistic worldview expressed initially by Epicurus in 307 BC. Essentially, this school believed there is a huge distance between the world and the ‘gods’ thus ruling out interaction with the divine. So for the Epicurean, the goal in life was to seek modest pleasures in order to attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear as well as absence of bodily pain through knowledge of the workings of the world and the limits of our desires.

Stoics

The Stoics on the other hand believed that divinity lay within the present world, and within each person. They believed this divine force within and around us could be discovered and harnessed. A good life then involved getting in touch with and living according to this inner divine “rationality” — developing an inner calm that allowed one to live in accord with nature and not to be tossed about by circumstance or emotions. This philosophy originated with Zeno of Citium in the 4th century. Zeno taught in the *Stoa Poikile* (“the painted porch”) in Athens — and from the word *stoa* came the name *Stoic*.

The Areopagus

The origin of its name is not clear. In Greek *pagos* means big piece of rock. *Areios* could have come from Ares or from the *Erinyes*, as on its foot was erected a temple dedicated to the *Erinyes* where murderers used to find shelter so as not to face the consequences of their actions. Later, the Romans referred to the rocky hill as “Mars Hill,” after Mars, the Roman God of War.

In ancient times, the Areopagus functioned as a homicide court and then as a general council for Athens, but in Paul’s day was probably little more than a philosophical forum.



The Areopagus today, viewed from the Acropolis in Athens