

# Paul in Athens

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Athens, the most celebrated city of the ancient world, was the seat of Greek culture, philosophy and education. Athenians were remarkable for their zeal in the worship of the gods. Athens is most famous for its Acropolis, the hill top graced by the grand temple of Athena, and all around it temples and altars to a variety of Greek or Roman gods. A Roman satirist once said, it is "easier to find a god at Athens than a man." This gives one the idea that temples, shrines and altars were to be found all throughout the city of Athens, not just atop the Acropolis.

According to Acts 17:21, the Athenians were fond of talking and discussing new ideas, philosophies, and beliefs. Discourses on these subjects were held at the Areopagus, a rocky marble outcrop below the Acropolis and not far from the Agora (marketplace), where many gathered to discuss and debate their philosophies and hear learned men speak on such subjects. The men of Athens invite Paul to come share his message at the Areopagus among the Epicureans and the Stoics, to whom Paul's speech is directed. It is from this vaunted seat that Paul launches into his discourse relating to "the unknown god" whom Paul would soon make known.



Acts 17:16-34

Our passage begins with Luke's description of Paul's response to what he observes in Athens: "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). What the NIV describes as "distressed" may be better translated from the Greek *paroxyno*, as provoked, or stirred up. Paul was agitated in the spirit at the sight of so many temples and idols. Ancient descriptions describe a market place, or agora, lined up or surrounded by idols. Athens was known the world over for its magnificent art and architecture. The art typically displayed the stories and moments of victory of various gods and goddesses. The most impressive buildings were temples of their gods. This stirring of the spirit led Paul to address the Jews. "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v 17). As was his usual routine, Paul preached on the Sabbath to the Jews, just as he had in Thessalonica and Berea, and every place else he went. We can assume that he said much the same thing to these Jews as he had in the past. Luke makes a point of sharing Paul's speeches when they are different than previous events. But it is still his priority to share the Gospel with the Jews.

During the week he spoke in the agora to who ever happened to be there. The market place would be filled with not only people going about their business, but it was also the center place to meet to learn about new philosophies and ideas, or to debate the merits of popular

philosophies. This was evidently quite a popular pastime of the Athenians. Verse 18 mentions by name the Epicureans and the Stoics. Luke purposely mentions their presence because Paul's speech is directed to them and their belief systems. The Epicureans believed the gods were indifferent to humanity. They did not believe in providence. Humans ought to emulate the gods in living a detached and tranquil life, free from pain, passion and superstitious fears. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed in the divine providence of the gods. They were pantheists – meaning they believed a “divine spark” was found in all nature, including human beings. This spark is called *logos*, and is the cohesive rational principle that bound the universe together. Humans reached their fullest potential by their ability to reason and they were linked to the gods and nature through *logos*. They could discover ultimate truth for themselves, because of this *logos*. Self-sufficiency and reason / intellect were of utmost importance to the Stoics. Paul's teaching about the gospel and the resurrection interested some in the agora enough to invite Paul to speak before the Areopagus, according to verse 19.

The Areopagus, or Hill of Ares, named after the Greek god of war is also known by the Roman name, Mars' hill (Mars being the Roman name for Ares). It was located below the acropolis and above the agora. From ancient times it was a court that met to review civil and criminal cases. Evidently it also had jurisdiction over religious matters. It is believed that Paul was brought informally before the Areopagus. There is no mention of any formal charges, and at the end of the episode there is no evidence of anyone trying to detain or disturb him. He is free to depart. It seems to be a public hearing of a new teacher to satisfy the curiosity of the philosophers who brought him there. Luke frequently portrays Paul speaking before magisterial bodies: magistrates of Philippi, the Proconsul at Corinth, the Roman governors at Caesarea, the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Jewish King Agrippa, and eventually in anticipation of the Roman emperor. It would be appropriate for Paul to address the Athenian court.

We are told “*All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*” (v. 21). Luke's remark is rather ironic. The Athenians accused Paul of being one who picked up bits of philosophy from here and there, not really knowing or understanding what he was talking about, (remember they called him a ‘babbling’ in verse 18). This accusation seems to suit the Athenians' pursuits more accurately as they constantly seek out the latest ideas: always seeking, but never finding truth.

### **Paul's Testimony before at the Areopagus**

This speech is unique in its presentation as it sounds somewhat like Greek philosophy as Paul attempts to reach out and present the Gospel to the Athenian intellectuals. The underlying principles are thoroughly biblical and soundly rooted in Old Testament thought. Verses 23-24 introduce Paul's theme: the ignorance of pagan worship. Paul begins his discourse with a point of contact with his audience. Evidently Paul had seen an altar “to an unknown god”. This was the perfect starting point for his speech. Evidently the Athenians were concerned about

offending a god with which they were not already familiar. It is quite appropriate that Paul would utilize this “unknown god” because the Athenians truly did not know God. Paul says “...*what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*” Focusing on ignorance, Paul is pointing out something that would greatly bother the Athenians. The pursuit of truth through divine reason, or logos, was the greatest virtue they hoped to attain. Here was Paul an uneducated (in Greek opinion) country bumpkin telling them they are ignorant, and he has the answer to their ignorance, the God they do not know or worship. In the next verses Paul presents the object of true worship: The Creator God. This portion of Paul’s speech seeks to draw in the Athenians by illustrating God in terms they recognize, but at the same time changing their perspective of many gods in nature to One Creator God over all. While using terms to explain the one true God that the Athenians would recognize, it is important to realize that Paul does not compromise the truth about who God is. Everything Paul says is rooted in Scriptures. The basic premise of the speech is that God is Creator of the “world” or *kosmos*. To Greeks, gods are *in* all creation, not one God *over* all creation. In other words, the Greeks worshipped the divine essence of everything in nature by worshipping aspects of the natural world around them. They do not see divinity above or separate from nature. This would have been a very new concept to the Athenian audience. They would have understood that divinity does not live or reside in temples, or need to be served by human hands. Greeks commonly held the view that divinity is in itself complete or self-sufficient, an ideal for humans to strive.

Paul goes on to explain the true relationship between the Creator God and human beings. God made humanity for 2 purposes. The first purpose is to inhabit the earth. God made every nation. The mention of every nation being descended from one man is a reference to Adam, but also points to the fact that all humankind, while spread across the world is made to have relationship with the One God of Creation who is sovereign Lord of all humankind. The second purpose is to draw humankind into seeking and finding God. God reveals himself in creation, but human intellect is not enough to discover him there, revelation from God is required. God is not contained in nature, he transcends nature and creation, even though he is not far from us, as verse 27 describes. He is more and beyond what he creates. Humans are created to seek out God. “*For in him we live and move and have our being*” and as Paul points out, some in the crowd already recognize “*we are his offspring*” (v.28). The result of seeking God is recognizing that he is the Sovereign Creator, and the requisite response would be to worship him as a subordinate and come to know him in a personal relationship. While Hebrew scripture would have been meaningless to the Athenians, Paul quotes Greek literature to reveal the true relationship with God. The phrase “*in him we live and move and have our being*” comes from a Greek poem by Epimenides. And the quote “*We are his offspring*” comes from the poet Cleanthes, both referring to Zeus and humanity’s sharing in divine nature. Paul redirects these quotes to illustrate humanity as God’s offspring, his creation and therefore human position in relation to God.

Verse 29 completes the argument of the relationship of humans and God, and provides the platform for the critique of idolatry. If humans are God’s offspring, and therefore created in

his image, then it is not possible for humans to render proper deference to God through a man made idol. If a man makes an image of God out of gold or silver, it is not an accurate representation of God because God is not like gold or silver, or any other material. This concept the Athenians, particularly the among the Stoics, would have been understood and probably would have agreed with. What they didn't understand was the irony of their own belief in *attaining* divinity through their own striving, by nature of their belief that the divine dwelt within human nature. They had transgressed the relationship of creature to Creator. Only a creation can marvel at and worship his Creator seeing what the Creator has created in nature all around him. Mankind cannot duplicate what the Creator has fashioned, he has not that ability. What human ability constructs as an idol is not worthy of worship and awe, it does not transcend human capabilities. They believed their idols worthy of worship because they believed divinity resided within humanity.

Paul returns to the original theme of ignorance, and with revelation from God there is a need for repentance in verses 30-31. He tells them that up until now God has overlooked their ignorance, but now that His true nature has been revealed to them, He is no longer an "unknown God" and they should no longer pursue their false worship and failure to recognize His sovereignty. Their sin would no longer be one of ignorance, but brazen contempt. All that is left to the Athenians, according to Paul, is to repent of their ignorance and their false worship and to turn to the One True God. This would have been a very odd concept to the Athenians, who believed that divinity was already within them. Stranger still is the reference to the resurrection. But Paul's train of thought is very clear: God is the one true God and should be acknowledged as such, and ultimately all mankind will stand before him to give an account for his relationship with God. The one who would stand in judgment is appointed by God, and God clearly demonstrated his approval of this Son of Man through the miracle of the resurrection. Sadly this is where Paul's speech receives such jeering from the assembly that he is unable to continue. To Greek ears the resurrection was utter folly. There was no afterlife other than descent into the underworld, and there was no coming back from it. The idea of a resurrection started the jeering of the crowd and Paul's speech was brought to an end.

Only a few were interested enough to hear more of Paul's teachings including Dionysius, a member of the Aeropagus, and a woman named Damaris as is mentioned in verse 33. There is no mention of a church being established in Athens. It would seem the Athenians were more interested in hearing new things than considering and taking to heart what they have heard.