

Making the Unknown God Known

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 17 verses 16 through 34.

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Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

[1 : 37] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods in the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

I've enjoyed being an assistant coach for my son Jack's baseball teams, and just as his dad teaching him how to play baseball, and you guys know I kind of like baseball.

[3 : 02] When Jack first started showing interest in baseball, I started teaching him the very basics of the game. This is a baseball. This is a bat.

This is a glove. Then I taught him how to throw, and then how to catch, and then how to hit. When it came to hitting, we started with a ball and a tee, and me standing behind him and wrapping my arms around him and swinging the bat for him to hit the ball.

Once he got the tee ball, we built on that knowledge by teaching him that once you hit the ball, you have to run to the base. And then we had to teach them what bases to run to.

This is first base. This is second base. This is third base. This is home plate. Run there first, there second, there third, and here last. Then we progressed to coach pitch, and I still had to teach him how to swing the bat, how to time the pitch so that he could make connection with the ball.

Then I had to teach him how to not swing at everything, and to know the strike zone, and to discern whether or not a pitch is hittable or if it isn't.

[4 : 13] Once he got into kid pitch, then it was time to teach him how to pitch and how to throw different kinds of pitches. Then we added to that basic knowledge by adding knowledge about bunting and stealing and getting signals from your third base coach to tell you when to bunt or when to steal.

And as he continued to play, as he continued to learn things about the game of baseball, we continued to build knowledge off of just the basic instruction. All this to say that when he was four years old and wanted to play baseball, I didn't start with the more advanced aspects of the game,

but the very basics.

This is a baseball. This is a bat. This is a glove. When Paul entered the Jewish synagogues, his audience knew the basics about God. There is one God.

This God is holy, and all of mankind has sinned. Atonement is necessary to be forgiven for our sins committed against our holy God. In the Old Testament scriptures, they knew the basics, that this is God's word, which communicates all these truths.

And so when Paul would enter a Jewish synagogue, he would start from the scriptures, from these basic truths about God found in his word and that the Jews believed.

[5 : 37] And then he would build onto them and explain from them, as we've seen, using them to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and why it was necessary for him as the Son of God to die on the cross and then rise again.

In Acts 17, verse 16, Paul is in Athens, and as was his custom, he sought out the Jewish synagogue, and he began to reason with them from the scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, and then show them why it was necessary from scriptures for him to suffer and to rise again.

But Paul is so provoked by what he sees in Athens by the Holy Spirit that he starts preaching in the marketplace and draws the attention of the philosophers.

Some of them think he's just a babbler, but others are interested in knowing more about this new teaching they hadn't heard before. So they brought him to one of their meetings of the smart people, the enlightened people, for him to share this teaching that they hadn't heard before.

What we see Paul doing on Mars Hill is taking a different approach as he shares biblical truth. He starts with the very basics.

[6 : 49] These men didn't know the Old Testament scriptures, and thus they wouldn't believe that they were inspired by God. They didn't know what these scriptures taught about God, about creation, about the fall of humanity, about the need for forgiveness, about the necessity of atonement, or the prophecies about the Messiah.

So Paul switches his technique here. And to use another baseball illustration, he's kind of like a switch hitter. So if you know anything about baseball, a right-handed batter has an advantage against the left-handed pitcher because they can see the ball better, basically.

And then vice versa. A left-handed hitter has an advantage over the right-handed pitcher because they can see the ball better. And if you've ever faced a curveball, you know why that's important. Because a good one will look like it's going to hit you, and you'll dodge out of the way, and then it'll be in the strike zone, and you'll look like a fool.

So that's why it's advantageous to bat the opposite side of the pitcher. And so Paul is like a switch-hitting evangelist here. He was able to adapt his methods to reach different kinds of people. And he talks about that in 1 Corinthians 9, 19-23. There he says, What's important to note is that while Paul changed his technique and his methods in presenting the gospel to unbelievers, he never changed, altered, or toyed with the message of the gospel.

[8 : 48] That was always consistent. His audience changed. His environment changed. His technique changed. But his message never changed. The account of Paul's visit to Athens is one of the most popular passages in Acts.

And I think the main reason for that is because the unbelievers we encounter in our culture are more like the Athenians than the Jews. Other than Christianity, ancient Greece and Rome have had a huge part in shaping Western culture.

As you and I go out to share the gospel, the chances are more likely that we'll come across a place like the Areopagus than a place like the Jewish synagogue.

All this to say, this text serves as a good example of how we can better share the gospel with people in our culture. So the main idea for our study tonight is that Paul's evangelism in Athens offers key lessons for sharing the gospel with unbelievers today.

At this point again, when Paul arrives in Athens, the city's glory days are behind it.

[10 : 05] Corinth had emerged as the center of commerce and politics in Greece, but Athens was still a very significant city. It was the place between 480 and 400 BC where democracy was first developed.

It was the home of famous people like Hippocrates, the Greek physician, regarded as the father of modern medicine. Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath, goes back to this man.

Athens was also the home of Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, who taught Plato, who then taught Aristotle. Athens was also the home of famous artists and architects who transformed the city into one of the most beautiful places in the world.

Athens was named after the goddess Athena, who was the god of wisdom, courage, inspiration, art, civilization, law, and justice. The Athenians erected a large statue of Athena in a temple called the Parthenon, which the remnants of are still in Greece today.

In every ancient Greek city, the highest point of elevation in the city, they put a temple on top of that to some god or some goddess who was thought to be the protector or the guardian of the city.

[11 : 21] About 50 yards from the Parthenon was a little hill about 50 feet high and 150 yards long, which maybe is a little bit bigger than a little hill, but not as large as the hill that the Parthenon was on.

But on it was a temple built to Ares, who, according to Greek mythology, is the god of war, who corresponded to the Roman god Mars.

And so the name Areopagus means Mars Hill. There's been a couple of churches I've known who have taken the name Mars Hill. Bad things have happened at each church.

If you're going to put a name of something or someone on a church, let's use Jesus' name instead of Mars, the Roman god of war. Anyhow, Paul's speech in verses 22 through 31 took place on that platform.

Athens' glory days may have been behind it, but it was still considered the center of culture and enlightenment in the Roman Empire. Paul had just been swiftly escorted out of Berea by the Christians there due to the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica, who had traveled to Berea to continue the persecution of Paul and his associates.

[12 : 34] So Paul is in Athens alone. He's in this impressive city, and he's provoked, not by its splendor, not by the beautiful architecture or its rich history, but by its utter lostness.

He's provoked by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel, and in so doing, we see in this text three key lessons for sharing the gospel with unbelievers today. The first lesson is that Paul saw.

Paul saw. Remember when Paul was converted to Christianity in Acts chapter 9? Paul was a Jew. He was a Pharisee. He was a man who believed in the existence of God, who trusted in the Old Testament as God's word, though he didn't truly understand its real meaning, and believed that he was doing the right thing in trying to put an end to the church.

He was finding Christians or trying to seek them out, to arrest them, and to bring them back to Jerusalem to face penalty, which was more likely than not to be death.

Jesus intercepts Paul on his road to doing that, on the road to Damascus. He appears to him in a brilliant light, which blinds Paul. Later, Jesus sends Ananias to Paul to restore his sight and for him to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 54] My conversion story and your conversion story are probably not like Paul's, in the sense that the resurrected Jesus stood before you, but in a deeper sense, Paul's conversion story is just like your and my conversion story, in the sense that we were blind.

But the light of Christ, the reality of who he is and what he's done, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit have given us the light of Christ, which causes us to see things differently and to see them in a new light.

As Christians, we still enjoy many of the same things that those who don't know Jesus enjoy. Like baseball. But we see them in a different way. We see art differently. We listen to music differently. We think about our sports teams differently than the world. We see our work differently. We see children differently. We see marriage differently. We see the roles of men and women differently. We see money differently.

We see death differently. We see the world differently because we filter everything through the lens of Scripture. We see the world from the perspective of God, and ultimately we see everything in the light of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 01] We have a different view of the world than the rest of the world, who don't often share the same view of the world themselves. Luke mentions two unbelieving groups of people in Athens who had different views of the world, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

This is a good reminder to us that our unbelieving neighbors and coworkers and family members don't see things the same way. They have different political views, different religious views, different social views which inform their view of the world.

As Paul entered Athens, he saw that the city was full of idols. One historian said of Athens, it was easier to find a God in Athens than a person.

The streets were full of idols, full of all of these different idols representing all of these different gods who represented all sorts and kinds of different things.

In America, you don't see as many idols as you would in a place like India. But make no doubt about it, America worships at the altar of a lot of different idols.

[16:09] Fame, fame, fortune, beauty, power. Americans make idols of celebrities, they make idols of careers, they make idols of cars, and all other kinds of status symbols.

People in our culture have the same problem, it's just manifested in a different way. Paul sees all of these idols in the sight of so many people who have exchanged the truth of God and the glory of God, their creator, to bow down to statues made by human hands which took the form of humans. And this provoked him. He wasn't in awe of what the Athenians had accomplished, he was heartbroken by how lost they were, and they're seeking to find in these idols what only Jesus could provide.

An idol really is anything to which we turn to when we need something that only Jesus can provide. I've heard someone say that the best way to locate our idols is through our dreams, or our daydreams, and our nightmares.

They didn't mean that literally, but metaphorically. What we daydream about, what we think of, if I only had that thing, it would make my life better. Chances are, that's an idol.

[17:21] Also in our nightmares, it's that thing that we fear losing, and we think that losing it would make our life worse or not worth living. Whatever that thing is, it may be an idol for you.

Idols can take the form of approval from peers, success in our jobs, desire for pleasure, food, or fanatical support of a sports team.

I'm from the beautiful, wonderful state of Kansas. Many great things come from Kansas, including KU Jayhawk basketball.

And I had been to a few games before at Allen Fieldhouse, and when we were living in Leavenworth, one of our church members said, hey, I have a couple KU basketball tickets. Would you like them? And I said, yes, I would. And I took Danny, my wife, who had never been to a KU basketball game, and it's an experience. And I'm sure it's like that maybe for some things the Sooners do.

[18:25] But anyhow, they play a video. So the creator of basketball, James Naismith, was the first coach of Kansas basketball.

They have the rules that he wrote up for the game of basketball in Allen Fieldhouse. You can see them. And then you see all the trophies and all the championships. We've won a lot. So they play this video, and it shows Naismith, and it shows Fogg Allen.

That's who Allen Fieldhouse is named after. And it shows KU and all the championships that they've won. It just goes through all these great players, and they play this music, and the lights turn off, and then they turn back on.

And then when they announce the opposing team, the student section takes out newspapers, and they act like they're reading the newspapers, like they don't care. We don't care who this other team is. And as soon as they get done announcing the other team, and they start announcing KU's team, the starting five, they tear up those pieces of paper in little...

It's amazing how quickly they do this. In little tiny pieces of paper like confetti, and they throw it up in the air. And then you go through the whole introduction of the team, and then the cheerleaders come out, and we wave the wheat, and we do the rock, chalk, jayhawk, real slow, faster, faster, faster, faster.

[19:39] And I look down at Danny, and watching all these things, you know, I'm getting goosebumps on my skin, and she's looking at everything like, this is crazy. And afterward, I told her, I was like, you know what?

It's their religion. You know? We do this, and then we do this, and then we do this. And so for a lot of people, sports can be their idol.

Idols can't satisfy what our hearts most long for, and they deceive us. They blind us to the truth we most need to hear and believe. When a person is saved, they not only see differently, but they also feel differently about what it is that they see.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus seeing things that affect the way that He feels. John 11, 33-35, for example, says that Jesus was deeply moved at the scene surrounding His friend Lazarus' death. Jesus also felt anger with what He saw taking place in the temple, where the money changers had set up in a place intended for the worship of God. In verse 16, Paul saw things that caused Him to feel things.

[20 : 46] The ESV says these things provoked Him. Other translations say that He was deeply distressed. The Greek word is *paroxino*, from which we get our English word *paroxysm*.

Anybody ever heard of that word before? Okay, I haven't either. But that word describes seizures, or a spasm, or an outburst.

The best way to understand this verb is to look at it in the Old Testament. This term appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe how God feels about idolatry. When the Israelites worshipped idols, they provoked the Lord to righteous anger, but this anger also was mingled with His love for His people.

It's Deuteronomy 9, 7, and Isaiah 65, 1-7. Why is it that God wanted His people to worship Him only? Well, the answer is, in part, because He loved them.

And so I think Paul felt a mixture of righteous indignation over the sins of the Athenians, but he was also brokenhearted over just how lost they were. And unlike Jonah, who hated the Ninevites so much that he disobeyed God's command to go to them for fear that God would save them, Paul desired that the good news of Jesus Christ would penetrate this dark place.

[22 : 02] He was motivated by his love for God and his love for his neighbors. Verse 17 says that Paul, instead of being angry with these people and smashing their idols, He reasoned with them.

Tony Morita said of Christians, if your life doesn't reflect both sweetness and thunder, you will either be a coward or obnoxious when it comes to sharing your faith.

Jesus demonstrated this, didn't He? At times He showed compassion. At times He rebuked people boldly. And so we need to have the same demeanor when we share our faith.

With compassion, a desire that the lost would be saved, and boldness, not being afraid to tell people that they're sinners and telling them about the consequences of their sin. Paul saw lost people.

He felt zealous for God's glory. He felt compassion for the lostness he saw in Athens. And he was compassionate to share the good news of who Jesus is with them.

[23 : 01] And so second, Paul searched. He saw, and now Paul searched. Luke records Paul searching lost people in three different places. The synagogue, the marketplace, and the Areopagus.

He intentionally goes to those first two places and he's taken to the third. He meets with the Jews, with Gentiles, with common people, and with intellectuals. No matter who these people were or where they were, Paul was eager and ready to share the gospel with them.

There's a lot of spiritual diversity in our country, which was similar to what we see in Athens. We live in the Bible Belt. There are a lot of Christians here.

There are also a lot of unbelievers here who think that they are Christians. In places in the Northeast and in the West, there are a lot of people who aren't Christians and who honestly at this point haven't heard the gospel.

We have a sort of synagogue ministry here in Oklahoma. A church planter in Providence or in Boston or in Portland has more of an Areopagus style of ministry, surrounded by the Ivy League schools and people who are the enlightened ones, or think that they are.

[24 : 13] Verse 17 says, so he reasoned with the Jews and the devout persons. Again, Paul reasoned with the Jews from Scripture, explaining and proving from them that Jesus is the Messiah. Again, this is a good reminder to us that there are a lot of people in our community who know something about Christianity.

They've gone to a VBS when they were a kid. They went to Falls Creek maybe when they were a teenager. They've gone to church on Christmas and Easter. They know Christian terms. They know Christian phrases.

But none of that means that they're truly saved. And so we have to continually and consistently present the gospel in our church and in our community. If someone says they are a Christian and you aren't sure, I think one thing you can do is just say, what does the gospel mean?

Tell me what the gospel means. And you'll probably find out pretty quickly. The rest of verse 17 says, and in the marketplace every day with those who happen to be there. The marketplace was the hub of Athenian culture.

It was a place to buy, sell, and trade. It was like an ancient Walmart. The marketplace had everything. You know, and that's Walmart's goal, is one-stop shopping. We've got groceries.

[25 : 20] We've got tires. We've got toys. We've got toothpaste. We've got clothes. And so the marketplace was this place where everybody went to buy, sell, and trade.

It was also a place where town officials deliberated, where artists created, and where philosophers philosophized. The marketplace was the public place for everything. And so Paul went into this marketplace every day, searching for divine appointments, sharing the gospel with whoever happened to be there.

How did Paul share the gospel? Well, this text tells us, at times he was preaching, at times he was having conversations with people. According to verse 18, he did both, conversing and preaching. And Paul practiced what he read in God's Word. Proverbs 1.20 says, Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the markets, she raises her voice. And so like Paul, we should also take our faith public by the way we live and by the way we talk.

Paul didn't aim to start a riot. He wanted to have conversations. I know the thought of sharing your faith with a stranger can be really uncomfortable for you, for me to think about, let alone even do.

[26 : 33] But what I've found to be helpful are to know that people are a lot more willing to talk about what they believe than we think. Sometimes just going to a coffee shop or some other place to eat with other believers, pulling out our Bibles, reading scriptures, praying and talking about the things of our faith creates opportunities to share the gospel.

In verse 18, Luke goes on to mention others whom Paul conversed with in the city. It says, There are some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, What does this babbling wish to say?

Others said he seems to be preaching of foreign deities because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. So some of these philosophers called Paul a babbling. This word in the Greek means seed picker.

It was used to describe seed eating or scavenging birds. So these philosophers were comparing Paul to a bird who in their minds just seemed to be picking up little pieces of different kinds of things and digesting them.

This wasn't the case. What was the case is that this was an example of the gospel falling on hard ground which Satan comes and snatches away. There were two major schools of thought or types of philosophers in Athens.

[27 : 51] There was the Epicureans and there was the Stoics. Epicureanism was a Greek philosophy started by Epicurus.

And he lived from 341 to 270 BC. Epicureanism taught that the highest state a person could attain was something called *ataraxia*, absolute peace, and *aponia*, complete absence of mental, emotional, and physical distress or need.

Epicureanism has gotten a bad rap in modern times because of misunderstanding of its basic tenets. People today tend to think it represents ultimate, decadent, luxury, and indulgence. It's usually contrasted with Stoicism, which is thought to be the absolute absence of desire.

But there are extreme definitions that don't quite hit the mark. Epicurus's goal was to teach people to relax and enjoy life without worrying so much about life.

His first step was to remove the idea of the gods from the psyche of his followers. To Epicurus, the gods did exist, but they lived so far away from the affairs of man in a permanent state of peace that they didn't interfere with humanity.

[29 : 08] In fact, they weren't even aware of humanity is what he taught. With the removal of fear of the gods came two advantages for the Epicureans. First, there is no judgment after death.

Therefore, death shouldn't be feared. Everything is material. So whatever your soul desires, you should have. Second, there is no judgment during this life, they believed.

There is no way to appease a god who doesn't know that you even exist and doesn't care about your life. Therefore, you are free to find fulfillment in life outside of religious rules and expectations. That's what Epicureans believed. Stoicism, or Stoics, believed they were rational and logical. It was first taught by Zeno around 300 B.C.

in the Agora in Athens. The philosophy is comprised of three disciplines. The first, the philosophical base of Stoicism, is physics or the natural world. Stoicism teaches materialism, that all of creation is made of material stuff, including the god or the logos in human souls, which they said are made of fire.

[30 : 17] When our five senses interact with other material objects, their reality is impelled upon us, but we can only accurately interpret those sensations through logos, which defines how the world works.

All of our assessments, whether concerning the temperature of a beverage or the feeling of an imminent doom, are only accurate insofar as we are in tune with the logos, they say.

Ethics, the way we should act, is based on logos. The closer we are to the logos, the more ethical we will naturally act, according to Stoicism. Stoicism says that the enlightenment of one's perception of the logos is a journey.

Someone who is completely immature in the ways of the logos acts impulsively and with passion. Their reactions to external forces are so uninformed by reason that they actually limit their ability to make choices in the future, like the man who gets angry and kills and is in prison.

It is this detachment and preference for reason-based decisions that give the Stoic his reputation as a repressor of feelings. With maturity into the logos, one realizes that everything is external to him, money, home, companionship, and sometimes even life are neutral.

[31 : 35] There are varying degrees of something they call orkion. Life in general, they say, is preferable to death, but if life were to be contrary to logos, death would be preferable. So there you have some of it.

Here's what it is basically. The Epicureans would basically say if it feels good, do it. If you desire it, do it. While the Stoics would say, you know, life is hard, just grit your teeth and bear it.

Suck it out and deal with it. Both views were hopeless, though. People in our culture don't say they are Epicureans or Stoics, though that is on the rise.

Stoicism is on the rise amongst young men in our country for some reason. But a lot of them are influenced by their views. We have people like that, don't we? Especially a lot of the Epicurean types.

Hey, if it feels good, then do it. If you want to be whatever it is you want to be, then if it feels good, do it. Do whatever you want. Live life to the fullest. The other group is the skeptical intellectuals who don't think we can truly know anything for sure.

[32 : 39] Both groups need us to share the truth of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done to save sinners, and that's what Paul does. And so third, we see Paul spoke. He saw, he searched, he spoke.

Paul had already spoken a lot by this point, but in these verses we get more details about the things for which Paul spoke. Verses 19 through 21 said, And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, Mars Hill, saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting, for you bring some strange things to our ears.

We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Like people in our day, the Athenians loved new things, and they loved to debate things. The gospel was new to them, and there was a genuine interest to understand it and to hear more about it.

And so Paul begins his discourse in verse 22. I actually did a lot of research on this passage for my dissertation. I argued for the importance of persuasion in preaching and the preaching and defenses of the gospel by Paul in Acts was my proof or my support to demonstrate that persuasion has a place in preaching.

[33 : 59] In this proclamation of the gospel, Paul adapts his style of preaching by incorporating elements of Greek rhetorical speech. He begins his presentation with something in Greek rhetoric called the exordium, a classical rhetorical device in which a speaker seeks to establish credibility with his audience and also to introduce the main point of his discourse.

He also used something called a narratio in Greek rhetoric, a story or a narrative at the beginning of the speech that establishes the theme of the speech and the point that is going to be made.

Unlike in the synagogue, Paul doesn't begin with reading the scriptures and explaining the scriptures for the reasons that I've already mentioned. But he does communicate truth from scripture in the hopes that the people hearing him will soon trust in God's word.

And so in verse 22, there it says he was standing in the midst of the Areopagus and he said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. Notice how Paul addresses his audience.

He doesn't say, You evil, pagan, wicked Athenians. Boy, do I have something to tell you. He didn't start that way and they probably wouldn't have wanted to hear what he had to say if he started that way.

[35 : 20] Paul established a connection with them before stating his point of conflict with them. Paul further establishes a connection with the Athenians in verse 23. For as I passed along through and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God.

So Paul is building credibility with his audience by demonstrating that as an outsider he's taken time to walk through their city and familiarize himself with their religious beliefs.

The Greeks and the Romans believed in a lot of gods because there were so many gods that they believed in they feared that they might have forgotten a god or some god may have gotten left out. And so in their minds they thought, you know, maybe there's a god out there somewhere that we don't know about who hasn't revealed himself to us and if he or she sees that we don't have an altar for them set up here they might get angry and do bad things to us.

So let's cover ourselves just in case and we'll set up this idol to an unknown god so that whoever this god may be doesn't smite us. And so Paul was touring the city in between the time when he was preaching and conversing and he saw this altar and he used it as a link to the truth that he sought to share and persuade the Athenians of.

[36 : 41] Paul's objective was to turn their ignorance about God into knowledge of who he truly is. And so in verse 23, the rest of verse 23, Paul says, what therefore you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you.

Paul's established connection with his audience now comes to a point of conflict. But can you see how Paul's method here would have drawn their interest? The people hearing Paul would be thinking, I would think, I know the altar he's talking about.

And I've wondered who this unknown God might be. This man says that he knows who it is. And so I can see them kind of leaning into what Paul's about to share with them.

They wanted to hear more. And Paul shares more with them in verses 24 through 25 as he tells them that the God who they don't know has revealed himself, that he is knowable.

He says, the God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

[37 : 48] Again, remember who Paul's audience is. It's primarily Epicureans and Stoics. And in this one sentence about God and his creating the world, Paul tells the Stoics that contrary to what they believed, God is distinct from his creation.

As for the Epicureans, Paul states that contrary to what they believed, God is not aloof to what happens in his creation but is involved with it.

Paul makes the point that the true God doesn't need people but they need him. Though Paul isn't directly quoting from Scripture, he is stating truths from Scripture.

As he continues in verse 26, speaking of God, and he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

So he's saying to them, God is the giver, he's the sustainer of human life, he is sovereign over all things he's created, all humanity can trace their origin to one man. In verse 27, Paul says of mankind that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him, yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

[38 : 58] Again, in contrast and in conflict with what the Epicureans believe, that the gods are detached and uninvolved in daily affairs of humanity, Paul teaches that God's purpose in creating people was that they might seek him.

God desires that people know him as their creator. Paul's language also hints at the problem of sin. James Montgomery Boyce said, the word used here for reach out or feel is the word the Greek poet Homer used in the well-known story of the Cyclops, the one-eyed giant captured by Odysseus and his men, but Odysseus got the Cyclops drunk and blinded him with a sharp stake.

Though Odysseus wanted to get out of the cave and find his men, doing so was difficult because the Cyclops was groping around to find and kill the hero. In using this word, then, it's as if Paul is saying, in our sin we are as unseeing as the blinded Cyclops.

We instinctively know God is there, but because of sin's blinding effects, we need divine grace to give us the new spiritual eyes to find him. Ultimately, this grace comes from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has fully revealed the Father to us.

In verse 28, Paul quotes two pagan poets who, by the common grace of God, had caught a glimpse of the reality of the relationship of God to man.

[40 : 24] In verse 28, he's not quoting Scripture, he's quoting their own poets. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring.

The first quote is from Epimenides of Crete, who wrote of the nearness and sustaining power of God. The second quote is from a Stoic author, Erratus, who wrote of man's creation in the image of God.

Paul quotes these men to describe the biblical truth about human nature to his audience. We humans are like our creator in many ways. He not only sustains us, but his resemblance is reflected in us.

Though we bear similarities to God, we are not God. These writers caught a glimpse of the fact that humans are invaded by the revelation of the one true God.

We are made in God's image and we were made to know God and to worship Him. In verse 29, Paul continues, being God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

[41 : 29] Here Paul makes the point that since we are made in God's image, it would be utterly foolish to worship something made by our own hands. While the Epicureans and the Stoics may have realized this, they failed to see that their own mental conceptions of God were also idols.

They were products of their own sinful minds and hearts and their own inventions. Paul's approach here is a good reminder of how we should share the gospel with unbelievers, establish common ground.

What is the one thing that all of us have in common? Believers and unbelievers alike, what is the one thing we all have in common? There's multiple things, but there's one thing we all have in common. We're sinners.

We're human beings, but we're sinners. And most people agree, no matter what they believe, that the world isn't the way that it should be. I think if you would talk to an unbeliever, they may have a completely different view of the world than you, but I think that they would probably agree with you, at least on that, that the world is not the way that it should be.

So we start with them in the beginning. We talk about God's original design, unaffected by sin. Then we build on that by talking about why the world isn't the way that it should be because of sin and the curse of sin.

[42 : 47] Then we build on that by explaining what God has done for us to solve our sin problem by sending Jesus, His Son, to do what we could not do and achieve what we could not achieve to redeem us and restore to us what was lost as a result of our sin by becoming a curse for us on the cross, dying in our place for our sins.

God has done to do what we for us to understand the necessity of giving the bad news so that people are hopefully able to comprehend just how good the good news of Jesus Christ is.

And that's what Paul does in verses 30 through 31. He's established common ground. He's used their own poets to communicate the truth God has written in every human heart. Now comes the convicting truth.

Verse 30 through 31. The time of ignorance got overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

And so here Paul warns his audience of judgment, of God's judgment, and he's very bold in doing that. Think about it. Telling these men who prided themselves on their intellect and on their knowledge that they were actually ignorant of the most important truth took a lot of guts for Paul to say that.

[44 : 17] Paul tells his audience that God will judge them, and while we all come from one man, Adam, we are all in need of the God-man, the second Adam, who lived the life we fallen human beings could never live, who died the death we deserved, and who rose again on our behalf, having conquered the enemies that we could never defeat.

And we must turn to this one man, Jesus Christ, repenting of our sins, because he is judge, he's also Savior. In verses 32 through 34, we see the results.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some of the men joined him and believed.

Among them were Dionysius, the Areopagite, this was a man who was on the court of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. What we see here is what we've been seeing the past few weeks that we've been going through Acts.

The reality of Jesus' parable about the sower is on display here again. Paul is scattering seed, some falls on the rocky soil, falls on rocky soil, and the men who say, who is this babbler?

[45 : 32] What's he even talking about? Or even in those who in the Areopagus hear what he's had to say and they're not interested. Some seed falls on the soil with like the weeds.

There's some men in the Areopagus who say, huh, this sounds kind of interesting. We would like to hear you again sometime. Maybe they were being polite. Maybe they really were interested.

I hope that they were. But then we see that seed falls on the good soil. We see people who they've heard Paul. God has been gracious to open their eyes to see their need for salvation.

And when they see Paul leave, they say, that man knows the truth and I want to know more about it. So how do we adjust according to what we've heard? Share the gospel with compassion and boldness.

Share the gospel with compassion and boldness. I know for me, I would much rather talk to somebody who I feel like cares about me than somebody who I think doesn't care about me at all.

[46 : 35] And as Christians, if we're able to show that we care about unbelievers and we genuinely, truly care about them and the fact that the soul is eternal, they're either going to spend their eternity in heaven or in hell.

And if we truly care about them, then we're going to seek to establish some kind of common ground with them. There's this one story that I think is helpful. I heard a preacher sharing one time about how he was asked to speak at this event and there was a group of lesbians protesting outside of it. One of the other guys at the event went over there and he was trying to share the gospel with them. And what this man saw from his van as he was getting ready to go to his hotel was the shouting match that wasn't really going anywhere.

And so he went over to the group and just kind of asked what's going on. And they basically said, you guys think that we are going to hell and we're not saved and all these different things. And the man said, well, yes, but let's just talk about a problem that we both share, which is the problem of our sin.

And so he just started at that level. You notice that you do things that you wish you didn't do. You've said things that you regret. You feel that guilt and you feel that shame. You feel that sin and you know that things aren't the way that they should be.

[47 : 46] And at the very least, it quieted down to the point where he was able to get them to Jesus and the cross and his resurrection. And so just finding things that we have in common with people.

They're not too far gone for the Lord to be gracious to save them. Let's pray and then we'll be dismissed. Lord, thank you for our time together. God, thank you for just the joy it is to be in fellowship, to open your word and talk about these important things and to learn from the examples of men like the Apostle Paul, God, who was just so diligent to be obedient to your call on his life. And so, Father, we know that though a lot of things have changed, a lot of things haven't changed. That though Athens was this encounter that Paul had with him, this was centuries ago in a place across the world from us.

But God, we live in a culture that is just as lost and has many different idols that they worship. And so, God, help us like Paul, as you've commanded us to share the gospel, to do so with compassion, but also to do so with boldness that people would know from us the bad news before they hear the good news.

And we pray, God, that as we share that people would hear and that you would save them. Lord, thank you for saving us. Thank you for the hope that you have revealed to us through your son, Jesus Christ.

[49 : 17] And we're just so thankful to know him and to know you. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.