

# Acts The Gospel on the Move

## Study 13

### Paul Preaches at the Areopagus

#### Acts 17

#### A. Missionary Journey in Thessalonica

##### **Acts 17:1-9 (NIV)**

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

- 1. Comprehension Question. In both verses 4 and verses 17, Paul and his companions preached to the people, including God-fearing Greeks. According to the video lecture, who are these God-fearing Greeks?**

Gentiles who recognize God but are not fully committed to Judaism. This can be seen in both verses where the Greeks are present in the Jewish synagogue when Paul is preaching.

## B. Paul preaching at the Areopagus

### **Acts 17:16-23 (NIV)**

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 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. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler 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. 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? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

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.

2. a) **Comprehension Question. What strategy did Paul use when preaching in the synagogues and addressing the people of Athens in Acts 17? How does this reflect on his approach to evangelism?**

Paul used Scripture to reason with the Jews in the synagogues, demonstrating how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies (verse 3). In Athens, he adapted his message to engage with the philosophers' understanding, referring to their altar to an unknown god (verse 23). This approach reflects how Paul is able to meet people where they are and bridge the Gospel to the current culture, allowing for effective communication of the message.

- b) **Epicureans believe that the main purpose in life is to enjoy the good things of the world and at the same time, modify our expectations and desires accordingly to maximize our enjoyment in life and to disregard the concerns regarding God, death, or pain. Discussion Question. What are the main weaknesses of the Epicurean beliefs?**

The Epicurean belief that life's purpose is to modify our desires in order to maximize personal enjoyment can lead to an empty and self-centered existence, as it fails to provide a higher purpose beyond individual pleasure. In contrast, the Bible teaches that true fulfillment comes from living for God's glory and serving others (Matthew 22:37-39), not simply seeking personal gratification.

Additionally, the Epicurean teaching to modify expectations during times of pain and suffering suggests that evil and hardship should be passively accepted as part of life. Christianity, however, teaches that pain and suffering are the consequences of a fallen world due to sin (Romans 5:12), but they are not without purpose. The Bible assures believers that suffering is temporary and that, through Christ, we have hope beyond this life (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Furthermore, Romans 8:28 tells us that God can bring good even out of suffering for those who love Him.

Finally, the disregarding of any relationship with the divine fails to address man's spiritual hunger for meaning, redemption, and relationship with a Creator.

**c) The Stoics believe that man's fate, destiny, and life are predetermined, accepting everything in life that occurred as part of the divine will, including pain and suffering, and man should respond by changing his inner attitude.**  
**Discussion Question. What are the main weaknesses of the Stoic beliefs?**

The main weakness of the Stoic belief is its fatalistic view of life, where everything is predetermined and beyond human influence. This mindset can lead to a passive acceptance of suffering without seeking God's intervention or comfort.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that while God is sovereign, we are called to respond to His will, and our actions have a meaningful purpose within God's plan (Philippians 2:12-13). Though pain and suffering may be part of our journey in this fallen world, the Christian faith offers hope through God's redemptive work in Christ (Romans 8:28). Suffering is not a final, inevitable condition but something that God can use to fulfill His purposes and ultimately bring us to eternal glory with Him.

Additionally, the Stoic focus on suppressing emotions and changing one's inner attitude to endure suffering may lead to emotional detachment. Christianity offers a more compassionate approach by acknowledging the reality of pain and suffering while also providing hope through Christ. Jesus wept (John 11:35) and showed deep compassion, teaching us that emotions are part of being human and that we can bring them to God for comfort and healing.

Finally, Stoicism fails to offer a relational understanding of God. While the Stoics believed in a divine force, they didn't see God as personal or relational. In contrast, Christianity teaches that God desires a personal relationship with us (James 4:8), providing comfort, purpose, and hope through Jesus Christ.

**d) Fill in the Blanks. The following table presents the different forms of presentation of the Gospel to different audiences. According to the video lecture, who is the intended audience for the presentation of the following gospel message?**

| <b>Audience</b>            | <b>Jews</b>  | <b>Gentiles / Pagans</b>   |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Introduction to God</b> | <b>There is One God</b>  | <b>There is an unknown God whom you worship</b>  |
| <b>Message</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● God chose Israel</li> <li>● Davidic King</li> <li>● Messiah fulfillment of prophecy</li> <li>● Death for our sins and resurrection</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A life-giving God</li> <li>● Creator</li> <li>● Lord of heaven and earth</li> </ul> |

**e) Reflection Question. When sharing the Gospel with colleagues, friends, or relatives, do we try to connect the message with their limited understanding or beliefs about God? Or do we simply present the Gospel in the way we were taught, without considering their perspective?**

### C. God and the Greek's Worldview

#### **Acts 17:24-34 (NIV)**

“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 human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 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. 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. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“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. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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.”

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.” At that, Paul left the Council. 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.

#### **3. a) Fill in the Blanks. According to the video lecture, how did Paul use the altar of the unknown God to introduce Christ to the Greek philosophers?**

| <b>The “Unknown God” according to the Greeks</b>                      | <b>The Living God as shared by Paul</b>   |
|---|---|
| The gods reside in temples  | God does not live in <b>temples built by human hands</b> (Acts 17:24)   |
| The gods need service from man  | God does not need <b>anything from man</b> (Acts 17:25)   |
| The gods are distant from man / are an impersonal force within nature | God created man so that man will <b>seek, reach out to, and find Him,</b> desiring a <b>relationship</b> (Acts 17:27) |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| The gods are found in images or idols or precious stones like gold or silver      | God cannot be made by <b>human hands, design, or skill</b> (Acts 17:29)  |
| Worshipping multiple gods and having an altar to the unknown God covers our bases | God has overlooked man's <b>ignorance</b> , but now commands all people everywhere to <b>repent</b> (Acts 17:30)               |
| The gods are not relevant to us after death                                       | God has fixed a day to <b>judge the world</b> by Jesus, whom He has appointed by <b>raising Him from the dead</b> (Acts 17:31) |

**b) Discussion Question. Is it true that sharing the Gospel faithfully guarantees that the audience will respond positively by coming to faith and accepting Christ?**

No, faithfully sharing the Gospel does not guarantee a favorable response. In Acts 17:32-34, when Paul preached in Athens, some people mocked him (antagonistic), others were curious and wanted to hear more (open), while a few believed and accepted the message (faith). The range of responses is not due to the Gospel lacking power or because we are not charismatic or skilled in sharing it. Instead, it reflects the hardness of the human heart. Ultimately, it is God who works in people's hearts to bring them to faith (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

**c) Fill in the Blanks. According to the video lecture, what are lessons we can learn from Paul's presentation of the Gospel to the Greeks?**

- 1) Find common ground
- 2) Establish the contrast with Greek/foreign gods
- 3) A personal but huge God cannot be worshipped by idols.
- 4) Obligations to this God (e.g. to repent)

#### Takeaway

**It is essential to connect the Gospel message through the lens of non-believers. While the core message of Christ remains unchanged, we should strive to engage others thoughtfully in their spiritual journeys.**

## Case Study

### Case 1 – Life and Wealth

You have a colleague named Sio Pee who is driven by the desire to be rich and enjoy the finer things in life.

During a lunch conversation, Sio Pee expresses her belief that success and wealth are the ultimate goals in life. She frequently discusses the latest sales and promotions available in online marketplaces and her plans to travel to exotic destinations. When you mention the importance of finding purpose beyond material wealth, Sio Pee dismisses it, insisting that happiness comes from spending wealth on material items and indulging in life's pleasures.

1. a) Discussion question. Are there any issues with Sio Pee's life purpose?

b) Discussion question. How would you respond as Sio Pee's colleague?

### Case 2 – Engaging with Muslims

During a church Life Group session, a group of believers discusses the importance of evangelism and methods of sharing the Gospel effectively in Malaysia.

One of the members, Ollie Way, argues that there's no need to invest time in understanding the beliefs of Muslims before sharing the Gospel. He insists that they should stick to the "standard script" when witnessing to them, as he believes the core message of salvation through Christ is all that matters. Other members of the group express concern about this approach, emphasizing the importance of building relationships and understanding the cultural and religious context of their audience.

2. a) Discussion question. What are the potential shortcomings of Ollie's approach to evangelism?

**b) Reflection Question. How can we ensure that we remain true to the core message of the Gospel while also being respectful and understanding of different faiths?**

**c) Discussion Question. In Acts 17, Paul engaged with the Greek philosophers by establishing common ground and contrasting their gods with the true God. How could we apply this strategy in the Malaysian context when engaging with those of different faiths?**