

## Acts 17:16–34 and God the Father

### Prayer

### Introductory Questions

- If you were to share your faith with someone who had *little to no knowledge of the Bible*, what are *the first truths* you would explain? Why would you begin there?
- How would you explain the concept of *idolatry* to someone who had never heard the term?

### Introduction

Acts 17:16–34 records the apostle Paul’s ministry in Athens. As part of that ministry, he proclaimed truths to non-Christians, with an emphasis on God the Father and how he relates to humanity (vv. 22–31). Paul used different approaches to explaining the Christian faith to *non-Christians*—depending on *whether they were knowledgeable about the Bible or not*.

(1) When Paul spoke to *those who were knowledgeable about the Bible (the Old Testament)*, he could quickly appeal to Israel’s history and cite passages from the Old Testament to point them to Jesus (Acts 13:16–41). Why that approach? *His listeners already understood basic truths* about God, his Word, the nature of sin, and the need for forgiveness. Put simply, they had *a biblical worldview*. But they still needed to know about the person, words, and works of Jesus Christ.

(2) When Paul spoke to *those who lacked a basic knowledge of the Bible*, he began by teaching his listeners about God the Father and how he relates to humanity (Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31; cf. Rom. 1:18–32). Why that approach? Because *if* someone does not understand basic truths about God the Father, *then* truths about sin and judgment, Jesus’s death and resurrection, and turning from sin and trusting in Jesus *will make little sense*. Given our need to understand and embrace the entire “path to God,” we begin where Paul did—with God the Father.

We organize Acts 17:16–34 into three sections: (1) The Setting (vv. 16–21), (2) The Message (vv. 22–31), and (3) The Reactions (vv. 32–34). We conclude this lesson by summarizing central truths about God the Father.

### 1. The Setting: The Apostle Paul’s Faithful Ministry in Athens

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?” Others replied, “He seems to be a

preacher of foreign deities”—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? 20 Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new. (Acts 17:16–21)

While Paul was waiting for his ministry partners Silas and Timothy in Athens, he became “deeply distressed” when he witnessed the idols throughout the city (v. 16). *An idol is anything that substitutes for God and displaces him from his rightful, central place in our lives. It is any person or thing that we love, value, desire, enjoy, trust in, or hope in more than God.* Paul responded to the widespread idolatry by reasoning with others (i.e., trying to convince them) about Jesus, both with the Jews and devout, God-fearing people in the synagogue—and with those in the marketplace (v. 17). He also debated non-Christian philosophers, some of whom called him an “ignorant show-off” (literally in the Greek: someone who picks up seeds; figuratively: someone who picks up little pieces of information with no true knowledge) (v. 18). Because Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus and the resurrection, some thought he was introducing deities that were “foreign” to their gods in Athens. Therefore, they invited him to the Areopagus (the hill of the god Ares), so they could learn more about his teaching (vv. 19–21).

- What are some examples of prominent idols (or false gods) in our society? What makes them so attractive for people to “worship” or “follow” instead of God?
- Pause to consider the idolatry in the lives of others (such as your family members, friends, and neighbors), including how their idols keep them from a relationship with God and control their lives. How do you react *to their idolatry* (in your desires, thoughts, emotions, words, or actions)? Or, if their idolatry doesn’t affect you significantly (as it did with the apostle Paul), why might that be?

## 2. The Message: God the Father is the Creator, Lord, Provider, Lawgiver, and Judge

- “22 Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 23 For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”” (Acts 17:22–23)
- “24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.” (Acts 17:24–25)

- “26 From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. 27 He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:26–27)
- “28 For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ 29 Since, then, we are God’s offspring, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.” (Acts 17:28–29)
- “30 Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30–31)

The apostle Paul connected with his audience by highlighting their altar “To an Unknown God.” But what they worshipped *as unknown*, Paul would proclaim *as known* (vv. 22–23). What did Paul proclaim and explain? God is the Creator of all things, and “he is Lord of heaven and earth.” He does not live in shrines, nor does he need our acts of service (like sacrifices), as if he needed anything from us. Instead, God is the one who gives life and all things (vv. 24–25). From one man (Adam), God made every nationality. He determined where people would live and created them to know him, and he is not far from us (vv. 26–27). Humans exist because of God, so we should not confuse him with man-made images (vv. 28–29). Although God overlooked human ignorance in the past, he now commands all people to turn from their sins. Why? God has determined a day when he will judge the world in righteousness. And he has appointed the man through whom he will judge all people—who we know to be Jesus. God proved this “by raising him from the dead” (vv. 30–31, Schnabel, *Acts*, 721).

- Reread Acts 17:22–31 verse by verse. What do you learn about God the Father?
- About humanity?
- About the way we should relate to God?

### 3. The Reactions: Mockery, Interest, and Belief

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” 33 So Paul left their presence. 34 However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32–34)

Because many of Paul’s listeners did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, some began to mock him, while others showed interest and wanted to hear more (v. 32). Others, however, joined Paul and “believed.” At this point, their faith was probably not a fully developed trust in Jesus Christ, but they believed what Paul had shared (vv. 33–34). When a cargo ship enters

a bay, smaller ships move to the left OR to the right. They don't stay in its way, at least not for long. In a similar way, that is how people react when we clearly explain truths about God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. They will reject the message, accept the message, or need more information before deciding. But when we faithfully explain these truths to others, a strong, definitive decision (whether to trust in God or not) is often coming soon.

- Why did people have such strong reactions to Paul and his message?
- What motivated Paul to evangelize so persistently despite great opposition?

### Sound Doctrine: God the Father

The God of the Bible is the one, true God, and he exists eternally as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Deut. 6:4; John 1:1; Acts 5:3–4). How does the Bible present God the Father?

1. He is the first in the order of persons of the Trinity—first the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; John 5:26; 15:26).
2. He reveals himself by name as “I AM,” the eternal, self-existent, unchanging One (Ex. 3:14–15).
3. He is the Creator (Gen. 1:1), the Lord (Acts 17:24), the Provider (Acts 14:17), the Lawgiver (Isa. 33:22), and the Judge (Acts 17:31) of all humanity.
4. He is all-powerful (Jer. 32:17), all-knowing (1 John 3:20), and perfectly holy (Isa. 6:3).
5. He is the sovereign One—the great Architect of and Governor over all of history, including his plan to send his Son into the world to die on a cross for the sins of his people (Acts 2:23–24; Eph. 1:7–10).
6. He is the Savior (humanity's deliverer *from his own coming judgment*)—which he accomplished by sending Jesus into the world to atone for sins (1 Tim. 1:1; Acts 5:31).
7. At the end of the age, he will receive back his kingdom from his Son, after all of God's enemies have been conquered (1 Cor. 15:24–25; Rev. 19).

For these reasons and countless others, God the Father is worthy of our most profound worship, love, and obedience (Matt. 22:37–38; 1 John 5:3; Rev. 4:11).

- What comments and questions do you have about this lesson?
- What is one thing you can do in response to this lesson?

### Prayer