

## **Acts 17:16-34: Paul in Athens**

Paul went to Athens by himself. He waited for Silas and Timothy. He allowed time for the Holy Spirit to guide him while he was waiting. He followed his mission strategy and went to the synagogue and reasoned with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. No converts are mentioned. He met some philosophers in the marketplace, and they invited him to speak at Mars Hill.

### A City Full of Idols

**Athens was a city full of idols.** 17:16: *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.* GR word *kateidolos* means given over to idols. The city was dedicated to and completely in the possession of demonic powers. There was a saying about Athens: *It's easier to find a god in Athens than a human being.* Some streets were so full of idols that pedestrians had difficulty walking through.

Athens had many festivals dedicated to their gods:

- ❖ The Festival of Athena (Minerva in Latin): Athens was dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war. Athena was not born as a baby; she emerged from the head of her father Zeus as an adult clothed with armor. \* Athena is on the Seal of the Great State of California. \* Athena is in the Parthenon in Nashville!
- ❖ The Festival to Apollo: the spirit of male beauty, of what is epitomized today in the bodybuilding industry.
- ❖ The Festival of Demeter: this is Mother Earth, a spirit of fertility and feminism. This demonic spirit is alive and well in modern environmentalism. (I believe in protecting the environment, but when the pseudoscience of global warming says we are destroying Mother Earth by living on it and burning fossil fuels, that's a lie from Satan.)
- ❖ The Festival of Poseidon (Neptune in Latin): spirit of the sea and earthquakes.

- ❖ The Festival of the Dead called Anthesterion: this honored the spirits of the dead with flowers and gifts. This demonic spirit seems to be alive and well in Asia - burning money for dead ancestors.
- ❖ The Festival of Dionysus: this was a drunken orgy dedicated to the spirit of the wine harvest.
- ❖ The Festival of Zeus (Jupiter in Latin): he is the highest god.

Athenian families practiced idolatry. Each family had an altar to Zeus in the yard to protect the home; a pillar dedicated to Apollo to protect family members; and a nonpoisonous snake in the pantry, representing Zeus, which ate the food offered to it each day. At every meal the family offered food to Hestia, the spirit of the hearth, and they had a household altar on which they offered wine to Agathos Daimon, the "good demon."

Paul observed all of this idolatry and it provoked or greatly irritated his spirit; that is, the Holy Spirit within his spirit. There was also another characteristic of Athens that certainly provoked the HS in his spirit - sexual immorality. (Although not specifically mentioned, I derive this from the description of sinful humanity in Paul's epistles.)

**Athens was a city full of sexual immorality.** We've all seen naked Greek statues. All manner of homosexuality was practiced, but there was a specific form of homosexuality that became part of the culture called pederasty. (I cannot describe it in a mixed audience. It is male pedophilia, but it wasn't considered a psychiatric disorder.) Men exercising naked in the gymnasium dedicated to Apollo contributed to this. There were also symposium parties that degenerated into orgies.

**Athens was a city full of idol worshipers and idol gossips!** 17:21: *Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.* They always wanted to hear something new. Paul used this to his advantage to share the Gospel. 17:17: *So Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons (God-*

*fearing Gentiles), and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.*

Paul was also a small businessman. He made and repaired tents. So, I imagine Paul set up his tent business in the marketplace and shared the Gospel with customers. That's where he met some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who invited him to speak at the Areopagus - Mars Hill.

**Athens was a city full of Greek philosophers.** 17:18-20: <sup>18</sup> *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 a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."*

Paul tried to reason with Epicurean & Stoic philosophers. Epicureans advocated a moderate hedonism. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." Stoics advocated self-control and self-denial. Stoic definition: indifferent to and unaffected by joy, grief, pleasure or pain. Stoics were fatalistic. Whatever happens to you is the unavoidable result of natural order or divine will (if you believe in the gods).

Paul observed all of this idolatry and it provoked or greatly irritated his spirit; that is, the Holy Spirit within his spirit.

Here are 3 reasons for the HS to provoke Paul's spirit:

**Invisible spirits were behind the visible idols.** Paul wrote that an idol is nothing but the material it is made of (1 Cor. 8:4), but demonic spirits use idols as mediums to hold power over people. My friend who served as a missionary in Borneo had people burn their amulets and charms after they believed in Christ. (If there's a Guanyin idol in the house then pray against the demonic power using it to keep people in darkness.) All the sacrifices in the idol festivals were being made to demons. Also, the annual idol festivals were occasions to renew and extend agreements previously made with the

satanic principalities and powers that ruled Athens. Whenever there was a natural disaster or a plague the Athenians would enter into a contract with a demonic power. The Athenians did this with the spirit of psychic healing, Asclepius, in 420 B.C. to stop a plague.

**Powerful strongholds were binding the population of Athens.** Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 10:3-5: <sup>3</sup> *For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.* <sup>4</sup> *For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.* <sup>5</sup> *We destroy arguments and every high opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...* "Arguments" (GR *logizomai*) refers to human ideas or philosophies. The powerful strongholds binding the minds of Athenians were the philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics and other philosophers. Darwin's theory of evolution, which is nothing but pseudoscience, binds the minds of many students.

**The Athenians were serving the creature rather than the Creator.** This takes us to Paul's sermon at the Areopagus-Mars Hill.

The arrogant philosophers asked, "What does this babblers wish to say?" The philosophers referred to Paul with a derogatory euphemism in GR *spermologos* "seed picker." It was used for birds that picked up grain seeds, and then for people who picked up odds and ends shopping in the marketplace, and then for people who sought after second hand information and then passed it on to other worthless people - GOSSIPS! It is like the "gossip rags" you can buy at a convenience store!

Here's what Paul the "seed picker" said to the arrogant Greeks.

#### Paul's Sermon on the Areopagus

*"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around 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.*" This is a brilliant introduction! When Paul saw that altar I imagine the Holy Spirit said to him, "I put this altar here as your touchpoint. God the Father is the unknown God. The Greeks worship Zeus and his daughter Athena. Tell the Greeks about God the Father and His Son."

It is built into the nature of people to be religious, to believe in the supernatural, because people are made in the image of God. My paraphrase of Paul's intro: "Men and women of Athens, I can clearly see that you are interested in gods and goddesses and all the supernatural. You have given names to all your gods and goddesses. I found an altar to a god without a name; he is unknown to you. You don't know his name. I want to tell you the name of this unknown god, the name he revealed to us, and what he has done."

<sup>24</sup> *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,* <sup>25</sup> *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*" Paul proclaimed one God as the Creator of all things. He declared the foolishness of idolatry. He told them divine nature isn't the same as human nature.

<sup>26</sup> *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,* <sup>27</sup> *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,* <sup>28</sup> *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.'* Paul proclaimed God's sovereignty over nations and every ethnic group. God decided beforehand when each nation should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. Paul proclaimed the unity of mankind; there's one human race, one red blood. Paul, as a Jew, could speak to Greeks and Romans from their common humanity.

<sup>29</sup> *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.* <sup>30</sup> *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,* <sup>31</sup> *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."* Paul affirmed again that divine nature cannot be represented by idols of gold, silver, or stone. The first truth in his sermon is REPENT because a fixed day of judgment is coming. The second truth in his sermon is this judgment will be done by a MAN appointed by God (not one of their gods). The third truth is RESURRECTION. This man was raised from the dead. The resurrection of this man proves the day of judgment will come.

When Paul referred to the resurrection of the dead it immediately got a reaction and caused a division. The philosophers sneered, scoffed, laughed and walked away cracking jokes.

Why did the philosophers mock and scoff at the resurrection?

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers had common ideas. Both believed everything is atoms, so whatever "soul" people may have disappears when the body dies. There is no afterlife. Therefore there is no reason to fear the judgment of the gods in the afterlife.

Epicureans believed the gods not only ignored human affairs, they were in such a state of peace and contentment they didn't even realize humans exist. Therefore there is no need to try to appease them on earth.

Stoics didn't believe in a personal God. They didn't believe the Greek gods were real beings. They had a pantheistic concept of God which was the personification of Reason called *Logos*.

Paul had no desire to dialogue or debate. He didn't take an attitude of "tolerance." Paul told them to REPENT of their idolatry and resurrection of the dead implies JUDGEMENT. That was offensive to the philosophers.

Paul's sermon addressed the basic sin of mankind. The basic sin of mankind is making God in mankind's image. Paul did it without referring directly to the 10 Commandments. The first 4 commandments forbid idolatry. Paul revealed to them the God they didn't know.

We make God what we want him to be. We need God to reveal to us who he is and what is his will and purpose. That's why we need the Bible. The Bible is God's history. It's the revelation of who God is and his purpose.

Some stayed and wanted to hear more about this man raised from the dead. I imagine Paul said, "Let's go to a cafe, get some coffee, and I'll tell you more." Paul shared the whole Gospel with them and they believed. Those named are Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

Paul wasn't able to plant a church in Athens. The response was discouraging but this was a higher level of spiritual warfare than casting out a fortune-telling demon. Paul told the Ephesians to put on the armor of God (6:12): *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Application: I believe Paul wrote Romans 1 based on the idolatry he saw in Athens and Rome. Read **Romans 1:18-32**. 21st century America is not much different than first century Athens. Paul's spirit was greatly irritated. Does your spirit get greatly irritated by the evil in our culture? Does your spirit get provoked by the Supreme Court decisions to legalize abortion and same-sex marriage; that is, to murder unborn children and defile marriage? (*Judge Ginsburg just died. Now she knows there is a righteous Judge.*)

Does your spirit get greatly irritated by the Marxist rioters (BLM-ANTIFA) in American cities? America needs Paul's message to Athens, *"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,"*<sup>31</sup> *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.”* The November election will lead to more rioting and possible civil war. Defunding police and voter fraud will be big issues. VOTE!! (I just registered in TN.) Let the HS provoke your spirit to action.

Application: Paul took advantage of the Athenian culture to share the Gospel. Athenians liked to talk about anything new, so Paul told them about a new religion. Take advantage of social media!

Application: What is Jesus doing in Athens today? Refer to the DVD “Jesus in Athens.” Jesus is saving Muslims fleeing from the war-torn Middle East. Over 1 million refugees have fled to Athens. There is human sex trafficking of boys and girls. But Jesus is also there. There are churches of Iranians, Afghans, and Iraqis, growing in the refugee slums of Athens.