# **Acts 17:16-34 Bible Study**

1. Do we see many idols around us in 21st Century Australia? NB In Acts 17, Paul describes idols as “objects of worship”.

*Just canvas different ideas. An ‘object of worship’ is something that takes the place of a god, and people make sacrifices to it in the hope that it will provide safety and security. Many things fit this description, eg career, family, sport, ‘stuff’, relationships etc*

1. **Read Acts 17:16-34.** Why was Paul “distressed” at seeing idols – surely he had seen idols before?

*The phrase “full of idols” means something like a “forest of idols” – Paul was distressed for God’s glory – that the Athenians could be so completely given over to the worship of created things and rob God of his due.*

1. What can we learn from Paul’s response to seeing a city “full of idols”? cf Col 4:4-6; 1 Pet 3:15

*v.17 is Paul’s response. Luke writes, “So…”. Paul was distressed,* ***so*** *he told people the truth about God. And notice that he “reasoned” – he was not rude or bullish even though he was distressed (lit, “provoked”).*

1. Compare vv19-20 with 16:29-30. How are they different? How do these differences affect the way Paul responds? What does this teach us about responding to people with the gospel?

*The gaoler was genuinely wanting to know the truth so he could respond to it. The philosophers just wanted more “knowledge”, so they can add it to their ‘catalogue’. They were not looking to be changed by what they heard. Paul told both the gospel, and explained to both how to respond. But the gaoler was expecting to hear about a response, he needed no persuading, the philosophers needed to hear and be convinced. But Paul spoke with respect, as we ought to, whether we’re talking to someone eager to know more, or someone only playing with ideas.*

1. In the Old Testament (and first century Judaism), God’s people had a temple, altar and sacrifices. Is Paul pretending that’s not the case? What’s the difference between those things in Israel and those things in Athens? Read 1 Kings 8:27-30; Isa 66:1-2; Ps 50:9-13.

*God was never “served” by the temple and sacrifices. They were for the people’s sake, to point them back to God who gives them everything, so they’d rely on him and trust him to, one day, deal fully with their sin through a perfect sacrifice that he would provide. The Athenians thought they contained and controlled their gods with their worship.*

1. Greeks thought there were many gods, each belonging to a different place, being worshipped by different people. What does Paul tell the Athenians? What does v.27 imply??

*There is only one God, wherever you go, and all people were to reach out for him instead of forming their own localised idols and versions of God. v.27 implies that no one actually does reach out for God.*

1. Is ignorance of God an acceptable excuse for unbelief or even idolatry?

*v.30 No! God has been patient. But people have had time, and enough things to provoke them “to seek him and perhaps reach out for him”. But their ignorance only led to rebellion, not searching. All people need to repent. Ignorance is no excuse. The sneering, or even ‘not yet’ responses in v.32 show that the ignorance is still rebellion, they don't accept the truth when they hear it.'*

1. What difference do vv 30-31 make to how we consider our unbelieving friends?

*It’s easy to forget that they are under God’s command to repent – and we might be the ones to tell them! Repentance is what we are called to do, and we are in a position to persuade our friends (cf 2 Cor 5:11, 20). We can’t force someone to repent, they must choose, but it is not simply a matter of ‘preference’ with no consequences.*

1. Do you find the result of Paul's ministry in Athens, described in vv.32-34, discouraging or encouraging? Explain.

*NB Unless God calls, people won't believe, even if an evangelist like the apostle Paul preaches the gospel to them! Keep praying for God to change the hearts of those you know who don't yet know Jesus.*

1. Are there any things from Paul’s example (his behaviour and his speech) that you find particularly helpful or encouraging in your own relationships with unbelieving friends or family?

*This could include things like; • Paul took the time to look closely at what the Athenians believed and worshiped. • He was careful to start there, moving from where they were ‘at’ towards the gospel. • He spoke about things that they would agree on before speaking about what they were likely to disagree on. • He does not insult them or make a straight out attack on their idolatry – which much have been difficult considering how he himself was distressed by it. • He made sure he spoke about Jesus. • He didn’t try to fit in every single thing he knew about the gospel! If this was a ‘first date’, he spoke in such a way that there might be a ‘second date’!*

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