

# Acts

## Acts 17:16-34 - The differences between God and gods

In Acts 17 Part 1 it's the tale of two cities comparing the difference in response to the gospel, and how that difference is based on: 1) Who is willing to accept Scripture as his or her guide, and be corrected by it if shown to be wrong or having missed something, and 2) Who is willing to do his or her homework and check whoever claims to be a teacher of Scripture to see "if what he's saying is true," **Acts 17:11**. Because these two responses in Acts 17 are key to how the Holy Spirit builds a bridgehead in a city or country to advance the gospel, and defend it against counterattacks.

The devil's expected counterattack in Berea came from the disgruntled Jews back in Thessalonica, so Paul was ushered out of Berea and dropped off in Athens in the south western part of Greece, another three day journey on foot. He would then wait in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him (verses 13-15), and together they'd head off to Corinth where the real action was, both commercially and politically. Corinth would be a great prize if the gospel caught on there, because Corinth being the commercial capital would likely spread the gospel rapidly to the surrounding regions.

But for now Paul found himself in Athens, the jewel of Greece in knowledge and culture. Its university was still the best in the world, and the greatest philosophers had walked its streets - Socrates, Aristotle and Plato - whose ideas and thoughts would have massive influence on learning for centuries to come. So Paul did what any visitor would do in an amazing city like Athens, with its brightly shining red, green and blue Parthenon crowning the commanding heights of the Acropolis - he went sightseeing.

But he ended up being "greatly distressed" at the huge number of statues representing the gods the Athenians worshiped. This was horrible, because it meant these beauty loving, bright minded people really did believe another dimension existed, but they'd reduced it to chunks of carved rock. How could these people with their marvellous capacity to think and reason come up with what amounted to no more than a cardboard cutout of the power and imagination that created the staggering beauty of creation and the God-created potential of us humans made in his very own image? How could they do that? But here were these ridiculous cutouts all over the city that people were addicted to worshiping instead.

Well, Paul couldn't hold himself back. Off he shot to the local synagogue in **verse 17** to let loose on the one group of people he knew believed in a living God, not lifeless statues. But he even had to "reason" with them too, and get into their Scriptures to help them realize **what the living God had opened up to them through Jesus and his resurrection from the dead**, just as Paul had done in Thessalonica and Berea.

He also found a favourite spot in the local market place where people gathered to lecture and discuss, and every day Paul went there to join in with them. And he was beginning to get an audience too, because in **verse 18** a group of "philosophers began to dispute with him." And that stirred things up a bit because these philosophers represented two very different schools of thought.

The "Epicureans" among them thought much like many people today do, that religion is a lot of empty nonsense that suffocates the life out of people with all its required rituals and silly customs. Life, in an Epicurean mind, was all about living every day to the full, squeezing out every bit of pleasure available, because there wasn't anything else to live for. To them God didn't exist, so nor did life after death. Life for Epicureans, therefore, came down to: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

The "Stoics" in the group had a completely different view of life. To them life was nothing to get excited about. You take life as it comes and see it through as best you can. You "grin and bear it," which sounded very noble, because if something bad happens, like the wheels falling off your chariot, you just say, "Well, that's life, eh?" - and you carry on. No emotion, just resignation to whatever you get hit with next.

Both views, of course, were in total opposition to the wonderful new life Paul was talking about in **verse 18** that Jesus in his resurrected state had opened up to humanity. But on that point both groups of philosophers agreed, that Paul was just a waffling "babbler" ("seed pecker" in the Greek), a delusional simpleton offering rubbishy bits and pieces from his own fringe religion - which is much the view of people to Christians today too.

On the other hand, both these groups couldn't resist what Paul was saying, because as Luke points out in **verse 21**, the Athenians were addicted to "spending their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas," much like the internet and the endless talk shows on TV today. But what Paul was saying sounded so strange, even to their ears (verse 20), that it merited an analysis by the "Areopagus" court of judges in verse 19.

Paul starts off his explanation to the judges very nicely in **verses 22-23** with, “As I roamed the streets of your fair city I couldn’t help noticing that you have a real interest in religion,” which no one could deny because in Athens there were about 30,000 statues of gods. But, he continued, “I noticed an altar to an unknown god too. Well, this is the God I do know, so let me tell you what he’s like.”

It’s a nice start, no insulting them for worshiping chunks of carved rock that they’d made themselves, but Paul then gets right into **making the difference between his God and their gods very clear**. “THE God (my God) who made the world and everything in it,” **verse 24**, “is the Lord of heaven and earth.” This entire universe you see, Paul is saying, only exists because it was created by - and it’s being sustained by - a LIVING God.

Well, just that in itself was totally new to these intellectually brilliant Athenians, who thought **they** could make something into a god and give life to it, just like they had to the huge (nearly 40 feet high) gold and ivory statue of Athena in the Parthenon. But it’s not us who give life to a god, Paul is saying, it’s God who gives life to us.

Which immediately leads Paul to a second major difference between God and their gods, because if humans cannot give god-like life to anything, then that would have to include the temples the Athenians had built for their gods to live in too. And Paul states that very clearly in **verse 24** when he says, God “does not live in temples built by human hands” - so that’s statues of the gods having no life in them, and now the temples housing them too. In fact, Paul continues in **verse 25**, God doesn’t need anything made by human hands, because it’s he who “gives all men life and breath and everything else.” We don’t give life and breath to anything in this world, only he does.

And that includes our planet home, because God built that for us too. That’s where his interest lies, in the home he built for us, not the buildings we dedicate to him, which Paul now zeroes in on in **verse 26**. This entire planet, Paul says, was designed by God to be our home, starting with one man that would lead to nations of people whom God would take a deep interest in throughout their history, with **one aim in mind**, that we humans wherever we are “reach out for him and find him,” **verse 27**, and any nation or individual that did that would soon discover “he’s not far from each one of us.”

And how different that must have sounded to those unfortunate Athenians, whose gods, they believed, hid themselves away on Mount Olympus, remote and aloof and very hard to reach out to and find.

Which brings us to **verse 28**, and the one huge eye-opening difference between the Athenian gods and the living God, when Paul says, “For in him we live and move and have our being,” because - and here’s the bombshell news for those Athenians - **“We are (the living God’s) offspring.”** We are literally God’s children.

No wonder, then, our Father God loves it when we reach out for him, because he created us for just that purpose. This would explain why evil exists and bad things happen, so that one day it dawns on us there is nothing “made by human design and skill,” **verse 29**, that can stop us going mad in a world beyond our control, so in desperation we reach out to God - as many say they have during the madness of the pandemic. So even in the ugliness of life, it fits in with God’s purpose.

So does judgment, which brings us to one more difference in Acts 17 between God and the Greek gods. The Athenians believed their gods would punish them for eternity in Tartarus, the deepest realm of Hades, for what they’d done wrong in this life now. But Paul says his God had “set a day when he will **judge the world with justice by the MAN he has appointed,**” **verse 31**. So, there is still a judgment, yes, but by a “man,” not by gods, and it’s all about justice, not punishment.

Being a “man” is supremely important too, because it means he totally understands what we’re going through as humans and what we’re up against, and why we jump the tracks. So we can expect him to deal out justice with that understanding, and with the aim of it being restorative too, **because we are God’s children**. He understands that the Father doesn’t want to lose any of his children, and he’s been appointed by him to make sure he doesn’t.

And the proof that such a man exists for his children, is the man’s resurrection from the dead. And that’s supremely important too, because it means this man already has the power given him by the living God to get that plan of his in action, restoring us broken, helpless humans back into relationship with him as his children, as he intended from the beginning.

And that means there is no need for other gods. And all our living, loving God wants from us is to believe it and turn to him. Which some of those Athenians did. Only “a few,” **verse 34**, but “among them was Dionysius, an (actual) member of the Areopagus Council.” He got Paul’s message, that there’s a real purpose to this life, with a real history to back it up, with a real destiny in the hands of a real, living judge, that was so different to the empty gods of the Athenians that offered none of those things, just like the gods of our world today have nothing to offer either.