

# DISCOVERY GUIDE

5 LESSONS FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS

# CULTURES IN CONFLICT

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Paul Proclaims Jesus As Lord - Part 2



THAT THE  
WORLD  
MAY KNOW.

EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE IN  
HISTORICAL CONTEXT™

Ray Vander Laan  
With Stephen & Amanda Sorenson

# CULTURES IN CONFLICT

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**DISCOVERY GUIDE**

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———— 5 LESSONS ON ————

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**Ray Vander Laan**

With Stephen and Amanda Sorenson





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*Cultures in Conflict Discovery Guide*

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# CONTENTS

Introduction / 7

Partners in the Mission of God / 12

The Apostle Paul: A Timeline for His Life and Ministry / 20

## Session 1

Engaging the Mind: Paul in the Stoa of Athens / 23

## Session 2

Engaging the Heart: Paul Before the Areopagus / 73

## Session 3

Turning Weakness into Strength / 123

## Session 4

The Lord's Supper: Discerning the Body / 179

## Session 5

Transforming the Chaos / 235

Notes / 286

Acknowledgments / 295

Bibliography / 298



# INTRODUCTION

As a Bible teacher and study tour leader, I have had the privilege of hiking with thousands of Jesus followers in the lands of the Bible where Abraham, Ruth, David, Jesus, and Paul lived. It has been thrilling to watch group after group experience the pilgrim excitement of walking in the same places where Bible characters walked and to realize that their stories were set in real times and places. Many have returned home from places like the wilderness of the Negev desert, the ancient streets of Jerusalem, the springs of En Gedi, and the villages of Galilee with a greater hunger to know and obey God's Word.

Seeing firsthand the context in which God revealed his redemptive plan has led them to a deeper faith and understanding of God's story. It has helped them to gain an understanding of the social, geographic, and political environments of the people to whom the Text was written so they can better comprehend what the writers intended their readers to understand. It has helped them to guard against reading their own values and perceptions into the Scriptures as they seek to apply God's Word to their lives. Often they have said, "I will never read the Bible the same way again." I know their experience, for that has been my journey too.

Unfortunately, I made an assumption about understanding the Bible that turned out to be completely wrong. I knew it was helpful to study and understand the Hebrew Bible and the life of Jesus in the context of where and when particular events occurred, but I assumed that Paul, the great teacher who traveled throughout the Roman Empire, was more like a philosopher who spoke in the abstract with little awareness of the context of his audience. Then I visited the world that he was so passionate about—Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, and Rome. And I discovered that the

same experience of context that is helpful for understanding the Hebrew Bible applied to Paul's part of God's story too.

Although God's revelation is timeless and relevant to people throughout history, that revelation takes place in a cultural context—the unique circumstances and conditions—in which his people lived. Abraham cut up animals to seal a blood covenant much as the ancient Hittites did. The design of the temple of the Lord built by Solomon in Jerusalem was familiar to the neighboring cultures surrounding God's people. In Corinth where people displayed clay and marble body parts as votive offerings to the pagan god of healing, Paul described the community of faith as a body made up of many parts.<sup>1</sup>

God had a unique purpose for communicating his message through these culturally familiar concepts and practices that made the point of his message strikingly clear and relevant. Thus the cultural setting in which he placed his revelation is useful for not merely knowing what words mean but for understanding the message and application of the Text, much like the study of the language of ancient culture provides for the interpreter.<sup>2</sup> By learning how to think and approach life as the people of the Bible did, modern Christians will deepen their appreciation of God's Word.

Like the biblical writers before him, Paul communicated through the context of his world—its metaphors, manner of communication, historic events, and cultural practices—to address its problems and issues. The power and depth of his message, which was deeply rooted in the inspired Text of the Hebrew Scriptures in which he was trained, is clearly conveyed in the cultural context of the Greco-Roman world to which God's Spirit led him. His message fits that context in the same way the inspired writers of the Hebrew Text communicated God's message in the metaphors and practices of their culture. Hence, the more we know about his world, the more clearly his teaching and letters speak to us in our cultural setting. For that reason we continue our journey

with Paul on his second teaching journey in the Roman province of Achaia, where he visited the great Greek cities of Athens and Corinth.

## **Paul's Second Teaching Tour: The Province of Achaia**

Although Christians traditionally have referred to Paul's travels as "missionary" journeys, the Bible does not use that language. Paul is Jewish, so it is more likely he viewed himself as a teacher (rabbi) making disciples rather than a missionary making "converts" in the sense that Christians use the word. His mission was to present Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to invite people to believe in him and accept God's reign in their lives. Hence, to retain a Jewish flavor and communicate more clearly to a contemporary audience, I prefer to say that this study follows Paul on his second teaching journey,<sup>3</sup> which took him to the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia that we know as Greece.

There, the gospel of Jesus confronted Hellenism, the worldview of Greek culture. These vastly different perspectives have been in conflict from the moment Satan took the form of a serpent and enticed our human ancestors with the forbidden fruit of Hellenism. At its heart, Hellenism represents the choice to "do what seems good to you" rather than to obey the commands of God our Creator, Savior, and Lord. Paul would discover that the fruit of that encounter continued to entice people in the Roman provinces of ancient Greece.

In addition, particularly in the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica, the "good news" of Imperial Rome declared the emperor to be lord and god, the one who brought peace through Roman victory. How, then, would Paul's declaration that Jesus was Messiah, Lord, and Savior sound to "Roman" ears? He was not simply presenting another god to add to the deities of the Roman pantheon. Roman emperors claimed to be divine and were referred

to as “son of god,” “deified one,” “savior of the world,” and were addressed as “lord.” Roman authors and poets declared this. Inscriptions on coins, altars, statues, and temples declared this. Everywhere the results of “divine” Caesar were seen in paved roads, running water, theaters, arenas, and temples. Paul’s declaration that Jesus had come as Savior, Lord, and King would imply that the ubiquitous gospel of the emperor could not be true. While he rarely confronted the kingdom of this world politically, the implications of Paul’s message were clear. The conflict between the gospel of Rome and the gospel of Jesus would surface immediately.

As I walked down the *Via Egnatia*, the ancient trade route on which Paul had walked, I could imagine him, directed by the vision he had while still in Asia, walking on the same paved stones. Accompanied by a few friends,<sup>4</sup> he brought the good news of a different kingdom. He brought peace—*shalom* he would have called it—accomplished by the authority and sacrifice of Messiah Jesus, Lord and Savior of the world. This peace did not come by victory in war, but by *grace* through the victory of the sacrificial death of Jesus who had been executed by Imperial Rome.<sup>5</sup> It was not defined by economic prosperity or class status but by honoring God and serving the best interests of others. It did not come through the endless pursuit of sexual pleasure but by a restored friendship with God and others. For me, the walk on the *Via Egnatia* made a significant impression on my faith walk. It brought into focus the confrontation of worldviews that had such a great impact on that part of the world and Paul’s ministry to its people.

Ardently committed to the truth that Jesus was Messiah for both Jews and Gentiles, Paul displayed superhuman energy in proclaiming and demonstrating the good news throughout the Roman world. Convinced that the time for proclaiming the good

news was short, he spent several months in the province of Macedonia—the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. In each city, many people believed, but the political implications of his message led to life-threatening confrontation. For his safety, believers sent him on to Athens where the confrontation would be quite different.

Athens was a beautiful and sophisticated city, known for its magnificent Parthenon, recognized as the birthplace of Hellenism, and highly esteemed as the intellectual center of the Roman Empire. Its people thrived on their reputation for culture and learning, and devoted themselves to intellectual debate regarding any theological or philosophical topic. Here, Paul engaged in vigorous discussion with the Jews of the city as well as the philosophical elite. In a brilliant address to the Areopagus, he confronted the Hellenistic worldview with a presentation of the God of the Torah as the Creator and God of the universe. Although a few believed his message, most seemed bored or disinterested.

Discouraged, Paul moved on to Corinth—perhaps the most unlikely place in the Roman Empire for the message of God’s story of redemption to take root. Corinth was one of the great seaports and commercial centers of the Roman world known for its lavish prosperity and extravagant self-indulgence, its reputation for drunkenness and prostitution. Sexual immorality, encouraged by worship rituals for the goddess Aphrodite, was practiced on a grand scale. The lifestyle and culture of Corinth clearly posed a significant challenge to the new believers who responded to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel of Jesus.

But if followers of Jesus, transformed by the Spirit, would learn to obey God’s commands for holy living, if they would live out their faith by learning to “walk as Jesus walked” in such a decadent and dark place as Corinth, they would shine as a bright light to the entire Roman Empire. They would be living

*(continues on page 14)*



## PARTNERS IN THE MISSION OF GOD: ISRAEL, JESUS, AND JESUS' DISCIPLES<sup>6</sup>

	God Chooses Israel to Carry Out His Mission	Jesus Embodies Israel's Mission	Jesus' Disciples (and All Who Follow Him) Continue the Mission
<b>Bearers of God's Image</b>	By his grace, God created human "partners" in his own image to reflect his nature and authority. God chose Israel to be his holy people who, through their words and actions, would make him known to the pagan nations around them. To know Israel, then, was to see a glimpse of God's person and character. (Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6)	Jesus portrayed God in all his fullness in his divine nature and as the sinless image of God in his humanity. (Jn. 14:7–11; 2 Cor. 4:4–6; Col. 1:13–20)	All followers of Jesus are called to be <i>tselem</i> —the physical image bearers or representation of Jesus. We are called to be living witnesses who faithfully imitate Jesus in every life situation so that people who do not know him will glimpse the one whose image we bear. (Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:7–11; 1 Jn. 2:6)
<b>Partners in Redemption</b>	Commissioned to be God's "partners" in liberating creation from sin and its affects and restoring <i>shalom</i> (order, perfect harmony) to his fallen creation; to bring and be God's redemptive message so spiritually lost people outside of God's family will come to experience him as their true Lord and King. (Gen. 12:1–3; 18:18–19; 1 Chron. 17:20–24)	God's redemptive plan is founded on the sacrificial and atoning death and resurrection of Jesus—his Son, our Messiah—whose life embodied and fulfilled the mission God gave Israel. He paid the price to redeem humankind from bondage to sin. All who believe in him as Lord and Savior are redeemed and restored to relationship with God. Jesus recalled Israel to submit to God and extend his reign. (Lk. 1:68–70; 19:9–10; Jn. 3:16; 14:1–6; Rom. 3:23–26; Gal. 3:13–14; Col. 1:13–15; 1 Peter 1:18–20)	We are called to faithfully "partner" with God as his witnesses, making known by Spirit-empowered words and actions God's plan to redeem and restore our broken world. We are to seek the lost and proclaim Jesus' forgiveness of sins as the first step to being freed from bondage to sin, reconciled with God, and joining his community of redeemed people. (Mt. 10:18; Acts 1:8; 26:15–18; 1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Jn. 1:9)
<b>Represent God's Kingdom</b>	Israel was called to reject the kingdom of the Evil One—evident in the chaos that reigns on earth—and to extend the reign of God's kingdom—the <i>shalom</i> of life lived as God intended—by their faithful obedience to his commands. (Ex. 19:2–6)	As the Son of God, Messiah, and King, Jesus embodied the kingdom of heaven on earth. Jesus acknowledged, taught, and fought against the kingdom of the Evil One—the kingdom of this world. In his battles against Satan's kingdom, Jesus bound the "strong man" so that Satan's possessions (people bound to him) could be taken away. (Mt. 9:35–36; 12:25–29; Lk. 4:43; 11:14–22; Jn. 18:36–37)	Jesus brought the good news of God's kingdom to earth and commissioned his disciples to extend God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." Proclaiming the news of God's kingdom was a key theme of John the Baptist and the disciples' message. By submitting to the will of God, followers of Jesus extend the <i>shalom</i> of God's kingdom on earth. (Mt. 3:1–3; 6:10; 9:37–38; 10:7–8; Lk. 9:1–2; Acts 8:12; 19:8)

## PARTNERS IN THE MISSION OF GOD *(CONTINUED)*

	<b>God Chooses Israel to Carry Out His Mission</b>	<b>Jesus Embodies Israel's Mission</b>	<b>Jesus' Disciples (and All Who Follow Him) Continue the Mission</b>
<b>Kingdom of Priests</b>	At Mt. Sinai, God commissioned Israel to be his holy, "set apart" people—his kingdom of priests. They stood between God and all nations, displaying who God is by resisting evil and being living examples in word and deed of what God is like "in flesh." (Gen. 22:18; Ex. 7:1–2; 19:2–6; Dt. 28:9–10; 1 Chron. 16:8; Is. 2:1–4)	Jesus, high priest of a greater order than Levitical priests, was God in flesh—a living witness and a true priest who faithfully represented and displayed his Father in ways that led many in spiritual darkness to praise God. (Mt. 9:1–8; 15:29–31; Heb. 7:17–28; 9:11–15)	Jesus did not describe his followers as God's kingdom of priests in the same way as the Hebrews at Sinai, but he described their mission in the same way. Based on Jesus' instruction, Peter described followers of Jesus as a royal priesthood—God's holy co-workers who mediate his presence in the world, imitate Jesus, and live out the Word in flesh so that others will experience and praise God. (Mt. 5:16; 6:10; 1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Peter 2:4–6, 9–15; Rev. 1:4–6)
<b>Hallow God's Name</b>	Names in the ancient world described a person's reputation and character. To know a person's name was to know who that person really was. To "hallow" a name was to increase the reputation of the person. So Israel's mission was to increase God's "name" (reputation, honor, glory, and character) and never profane it by their unholy words or actions. By honoring God's name, God's reputation would become known among people who did not know him so that they might believe. (Ex. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; 1 Chron. 16:8; Ps. 105:1; Is. 12:4; Ezek. 36:20–24; 39:7; Dan. 2:47; 3:28–29; 6:19–27)	Jesus always hallowed God's name. He did nothing to profane God's name, lessen his reputation, or demean his character. Jesus lived and taught to make God's name known and draw people to the Father, which is how Jesus' disciples came to know God's very character and nature. (Mt. 6:9–10; Jn. 17:1–12, 24–26)	Jesus taught his disciples to hallow God's name by speaking and living in such a way that God would be honored and praised by others. Living unfaithfully presents a flawed picture of God and thus profanes his name. As we obediently submit to God's will and reign over all aspects of life, we make his character and reputation known so others will honor and praise God too. (Mt. 6:9–10; Acts 4:12; Rom. 15:7–10; Phil. 2:9–10; 1 Tim. 6:1)
<b>A Light to the World</b>	Israel's life and words were to be God's "light to the nations." They were called to fill the earth with the light and knowledge of the one true God so that those who lived in spiritual darkness might recognize his truth and be drawn to him. (1 Chron. 16:8; Is. 40:9–14; 42:5–12; 49:5–6; 60:1–3)	Jesus—"the light of the world"—brought God's true message of life and light to Israel and to the Gentiles. Fully human and fully God, he made God known, promising that those who follow him will never walk in darkness. (Lk. 2:25–32; Jn. 1:1–5; 8:12; 9:1–5; Acts 26:22–23)	Jesus taught his followers to be God's light by living righteous lives worthy of the gospel of Christ and demonstrating the good works of compassion for those who suffer so that God will be praised. This continued God's command through Isaiah that Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. (Mt. 5:14–16; Acts 13:47–49; Eph. 5:8–11; Phil. 2:14–16)

**PARTNERS IN THE MISSION OF GOD (CONTINUED)**

	<b>God Chooses Israel to Carry Out His Mission</b>	<b>Jesus Embodies Israel’s Mission</b>	<b>Jesus’ Disciples (and All Who Follow Him) Continue the Mission</b>
<b>Bearers of God’s Presence</b>	God’s plan of redemption involved a partnership in which his people were the “bearers of his presence.” God promised to live among Israel if they prepared a sanctuary—a place for his glory to dwell—first in the tabernacle and later the temple. He commanded his people to live righteously so that all nations would experience the reality and results of his presence and be drawn to him. (Ex. 25:8; Lev. 9:22–24; 2 Chron. 7:1–3)	Jesus—Immanuel (Hebrew, “God with us”)—displayed God’s presence far beyond the role possible for Israel. As the Son of God, Jesus brought God’s presence into every interaction he had with people. Even Gentiles recognized that God was present in Jesus. (Mt. 1:23; Mk. 15:37–39; Jn. 14:6–11; 17:1–6)	Followers of Jesus are God’s human “temples” in which his Spirit resides. Empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, we are to live and be faithful and obedient witnesses who display God’s presence and the <i>shalom</i> of his kingdom to our broken world. (Mt. 5:14–16; Acts 2:1–12, 17–18; 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:19–22)
<b>God’s Faithful Witnesses</b>	Israel was redeemed and chosen to be God’s witnesses to pagan nations so that all the world would know that he is God. (Is. 43:10–12)	In everything he did and everything he said, Jesus was the faithful witness of God’s character and redemption. He called Israel back to God and their mission as a community of witnesses to all people so that they might know God too. (Rev. 1:5)	Just as Israel was called to be God’s witnesses, Jesus called his followers to continue the mission as God’s partners in his story of redemption. He taught them to be witnesses of all he had taught and done. (Mt. 10:18; 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; Rev. 1:4–7)

examples, putting on display the *shalom* of God’s kingdom. So Paul did something he had not done before. He stayed in Corinth for many months, proclaiming the message of God’s kingdom and teaching and training believers in the house churches to live as God’s partners in redemption—one body, united in the mission of displaying God in a broken world.

**The Mission of God: His Great Plan of Redemption**

Paul’s visit to Athens and Corinth in the Roman province of Achaia was one more step in God’s plan to redeem his sin-broken world. That story began long, long ago when God’s Spirit addressed the formless, empty, meaningless darkness of chaos and created a beautiful world where everything functioned as it

should—*shalom* in Hebrew. As part of his creation, God made humankind in his image. He made a covenant partnership with his people to care for his creation and on his behalf to shape it toward greater fruitfulness.

But when those humans rebelled, choosing the word of the Evil One who loves chaos over the Word of their Creator, and preferring their desires over God's commands, the *shalom* of God's creation was shattered. Chaos returned, resulting in disease, broken relationships, and evil of every kind. Worse, all of humanity became separated from God, expelled from Eden where they had lived in harmony with him.

Motivated by his everlasting love for his creation, God made a plan to restore *shalom* to his fallen creation, including as his partners the very humans who had sinned against him. God would send his Son to live, die, and rise again so that sinners who have faith in him could be forgiven and restored to relationship with their Creator. Make no mistake: God's plan to restore *shalom* to the chaos of sin is founded squarely on the redemptive work of his Son, our Messiah Jesus. Nothing must diminish the foundational work of Jesus in God's story. We must also recognize that God's redemptive work not only offers eternal life to those who believe but is the basis for restoring all of God's creation to *shalom*. God chooses to use his human partners to make his plan of redemption known in the world.

For more than a millennium God had worked in partnership with people such as Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Hebrews, Rahab, Ruth, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others he had called to be his witness and display the good news of his mercy to the world around them. He had entrusted his partners with his revelation and his presence. He had entrusted them with the Promised Land in order to provide for their daily bread and to give them a platform on the *Via Maris*—another trade route that served as the crossroads of the ancient world—from which to display him so that people would come to know him and accept his reign in their lives.

Wherever God reigned in the hearts and lives of his people, his kingdom would come and *shalom* would replace the chaos

brought into the world through sin. Yet chaos still reigned in the world. Had God's plan failed? Was Paul's message a new way to come to know God and to participate in his peace?

The answer is no. Although God's people experienced many failures in carrying out their mission, they were not failures. God used them to prepare for the next step in his great plan to redeem and restore his broken world: the coming of Jesus, God's Son. Jesus came to fulfill a mission he alone could accomplish. His atoning death and resurrection are the only source of restored relationship with our Creator. God entrusted to his Son the very mission he had given Israel: to be the light of the world and make God's name known.<sup>7</sup> He revealed perfectly in word and action that God was creator of all, owner of all, and ruler of all.

Before his ascension and enthronement at God's right hand, Jesus entrusted the same mission God had given Israel—the same mission he came to fulfill—to his followers. Like Israel, followers of Jesus were to be his kingdom of priests who would put God on display and demonstrate his true nature, his great love, and his desire for all people to join his kingdom. They, too, would extend God's reign by doing his will so that his kingdom would come on earth as it already existed in heaven. They would be the light of the world, hallow his name, and make disciples by teaching others to imitate them as they imitated him.<sup>8</sup> They would become God's "word in flesh," demonstrating by their lives as well as their message the nature of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

So Paul and his friends walked into the Hellenistic cities of Achaia—Athens and Corinth—with the good news that God's reign was expanding and that his presence would live among those who believed the message. We will immerse ourselves in the history and culture of the Roman world in Greece as we seek to experience the story of Paul's visit. We will see how God's people—both Jew and Gentile—became living witnesses of the kingdom of heaven who put God on display in a very pagan, broken culture.

At every point those of us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus will be challenged to take our place, like those who have gone before us, as God's partners in that same mission. God has called and empowered us to make known by our words and

actions the good news of the redeeming power of Jesus. We must join the mission. Never has there been a greater opportunity to be God's coworkers<sup>10</sup> who mediate his presence as a kingdom of priests and make him known to a world in darkness.

I hope the example of Paul in the Roman world of Achaia will encourage us to engage our culture as a minority,<sup>11</sup> seeking the welfare of the culture in which God places us. We do not have to be powerful or a majority! The early church in the world of Imperial Rome had a dramatic effect by being a faithful minority committed to carrying out God's mission to a broken world. So we must be as well.<sup>12</sup>

## **Paul: Rabbi to the Gentiles**

I have heard Paul described as the first "rabbi to the Gentiles," and I like that title. It captures his commitment to the Torah as well as his God-given mission to take the good news of Messiah to people who were not Jews: the very mission God gave to Israel. In the same way God had prepared Moses before him, God uniquely prepared Paul for exactly the task he called him to accomplish—being the Jewish messenger to the Gentiles who would the message of the kingdom of heaven to the Roman world.

Paul was born about the same time as Jesus in the city of Tarsus (near the border of Turkey and Syria today), a wealthy commercial hub also known for a university equal to those in Athens and Alexandria. So for a time Paul's family lived in the social context of the wealth and philosophy—to say nothing of the morality—of the Roman world. His family experienced the rare privilege of being Roman citizens, but they were also Jews who belonged to the movement most devoted to living a righteous life in obedience to Torah—the Pharisees.<sup>13</sup>

When he was quite young, the family moved to Jerusalem where he experienced life in the Torah world of Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> There he studied with Gamaliel, a highly respected expert on the Torah who became known as the greatest of all Jewish sages. His influence greatly shaped Paul's teaching. In fact, tradition records that

Gamaliel taught Greek wisdom so that his disciples could interpret and apply the Torah to critique the philosophy and morality of the pagan, Hellenistic worldview that dominated Roman culture. So Paul was born in the Greek world of Tarsus and brought up in the Yeshiva of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Plus, he was a Jew and a freeborn Roman. That combination doesn't happen by accident! Like Moses, Paul grew up without any idea of how God would use him in his plan, yet he was completely prepared in every way. The stories of Paul and Moses give great encouragement to those who become God's partners in mission.

In his own walk of faith, Paul was intensely passionate about the Torah and its application. He vehemently opposed those who interpreted it differently from the tradition he believed. That zeal—whether triggered by a particular teaching of the early followers of Jesus that he strongly objected to or the idea of opening the kingdom of God to Gentiles who had not converted to Judaism—likely played a part in Paul's persecution of the early church. But then, when Paul was on his way to Damascus in about 34 AD, Saul met Jesus.

Whatever else changed as a result of that encounter—his view of God's kingdom, his view of the nature of Messiah, his understanding of Jesus, his view of the Gentiles—Paul's life mission changed. He discovered that the long-awaited Messiah had come, and the mission of being God's kingdom of priests—displaying God in words and actions—was to extend to all nations and all people. In a sense Paul became the “Moses” to the Gentiles—a rabbi through whom God spoke in action and in word to lead people out of their bondage to the pagan worldview of Imperial Rome and into the gospel of Jesus and the *shalom* of the kingdom of God.

No longer would Paul's sole focus be on seeking to influence the Jewish people to faithfully live out the mission God had given them at Mount Sinai. God would use Paul, a brilliant scholar of Torah, a man who had been trained in Greek thought and who knew every biblical reason to keep the unclean Gentiles out of God's kingdom, to bring the message of God's redemption to the Gentiles! No longer would Paul fight for God's kingdom by



exerting the power of this world. He devoted himself to follow the example of Jesus, the suffering servant, who sacrificed himself for the benefit of all who would believe.

When Paul met Jesus, he did not renounce his Jewish faith or allegiance to the Hebrew Bible. In fact, he takes pride in being Jewish—circumcised on the eighth day, fluent in Hebrew, and a Pharisee of Pharisees.<sup>15</sup> But his understanding of God's plan of redemption changed. It was the same Bible, the same mission to the nations, the same kingdom of priests and kingdom of heaven. But the *way* God's kingdom would come had changed radically in his thinking. He realized that Jesus was the Messiah, the kingdom of God was at hand, and it came not by military conquest or deliverance but as a result of the redemptive suffering of Jesus.

Paul's journey through the great Roman cities of ancient Greece shows his commitment to God's calling on his life as a continuation of the mission God gave to Israel. Through his story we will see the Hellenistic world of the first century and the Imperial theology of a Roman colony. We will discover the exhilarating power of the kingdom of heaven in the midst of great conflict. We will thrill with God's continued desire to restore *shalom* to all things and be amazed by how he continues to use the small and the weak to bring about his great plan of redemption.

As we join Paul in his context, we should find great hope for ourselves as we continue to partner with God in the same mission his people have always had. The increasing Hellenism of our own culture will not defeat us no matter how pervasive and powerful it appears to be. Rather, as Paul wrote from a Roman prison, I pray that we will "become more confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."<sup>16</sup> As citizens of heaven, may we live "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."<sup>17</sup> Our mission, like Paul's, is not simply to proclaim the great commission but to step into our role as partners in God's great plan of redemption for his people from Genesis to Revelation.

Note: For additional background on Paul's life and person, see *That the World May Know*, Volume 15, *A Clash of Kingdoms*.



# THE APOSTLE PAUL: A TIMELINE FOR HIS LIFE AND MINISTRY<sup>1</sup>

## Birth and Rabbinic Training

- 6 BC* Birth of Jesus (Luke 2).
- 5–6 BC* Saul born in Tarsus in Cilicia to Jewish parents of the Pharisee tradition who were Roman citizens.<sup>2</sup>
- 4 BC* Family moves to Jerusalem where he was brought up (Acts 22:3).
- 6–30 AD* Studies “at the feet of” Gamaliel, one of the great Jewish sages (Acts 22:3).<sup>3</sup>
- 24 AD* Jesus begins teaching (Luke 3:23).
- 27–28 AD* Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (Luke 22–24).

## Damascus Road

- 30–34 AD* Saul persecutes followers of Jesus (Acts 5–7, 9).
- 34 AD* Meets Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9; Galatians 1).
- 35–38 AD* Further preparation and training in Damascus, Arabia, Syria, Cilicia, and Jerusalem (Acts 9, 26; Galatians 1).
- 38–45 AD* In Tarsus.
- 43 AD* Peter is arrested, James is executed.
- 44–45 AD* Is discipled by Barnabas (Acts 9, 11).

## First Teaching Journey

- 46–48 AD* First teaching journey begins in Cyprus. Changes name to Paul. Goes to Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (Acts 13–14).
- 49 AD* Emperor Claudius expels Jews from Rome.
- 49 AD* Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Probably writes Galatians.

## Second Teaching Journey

- 50 AD* Travels from Tarsus to Galatia, but Spirit would not let him go to Asia, Mysia, Bithynia. In Troas receives vision of man from Macedonia (Acts 16).

- 50 AD* Goes to Macedonia: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens (Acts 16–17).
- 51–52 AD* In Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla for eighteen months (Acts 18).
- 52 AD* Returns to Jerusalem; visits Ephesus, Antioch, Galatia (Acts 18). Probably writes 1–2 Thessalonians.

## Third Teaching Journey

- 54–57 AD* In Ephesus (Acts 19). Probably writes 1–2 Corinthians, Romans.
- 57 AD* In Troas, Macedonia, Achaia for three months (Acts 20). Then in Corinth for the winter. Heads back to Jerusalem for Pentecost, traveling through Macedonia—Thessalonica, Philippi—and on to Troas and Miletus where he meets with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20).

## Arrest in Jerusalem

- 57 AD* Arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21–23).
- 57–59 AD* Imprisoned in Caesarea; has audiences with Herod Agrippa, Festus, Felix (Acts 23–26).

## “Fourth” Teaching Journey

- 59–61 AD* Travels toward Rome; is shipwrecked and spends winter on Malta. A prisoner in Rome for two years but continued writing and teaching (Acts 27–28). Probably writes Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians.
- 62–64 AD* Apparently released from prison and may have traveled to Crete, Colossae, Ephesus, Philippi, Spain, Corinth, Miletus,<sup>4</sup> and probably writes 1 Timothy and Titus.

## Martyrdom

- 65–68 AD* Arrested, possibly in Asia Minor, and returned to Rome. This is based on church tradition with no biblical references. Probably writes 2 Timothy. Martyred during Nero’s persecution, traditionally by beheading, which was the penalty for a Roman citizen.



## ENGAGING THE MIND: PAUL IN THE STOA OF ATHENS

I remember my first visit to the legendary city of Athens like it was yesterday. I arrived at night, and my first view of the Acropolis and the beautiful temple of Athena—the Parthenon—was unforgettable. Floodlights illuminated that magnificent structure against the night sky. The beauty and power of the Parthenon standing high above the city was overwhelming. But the impact of that scene went far beyond the beauty and mystique of the Acropolis and its famous Parthenon.

For me, a seminary student at the time, Athens represented the Greek worldview of Hellenism and the self-serving political, cultural, philosophical, and religious beliefs I had been taught to recognize and resist. As the military genius Alexander the Great launched from the ports of Greece and conquered the known world, the human-centered philosophy and values born in Athens also conquered the ancient world through trade, music, language, theater, and lifestyle. Long after the military power of the Greek Empire had been dissolved by the Romans, the power of the Hellenistic worldview lived on, conquering the minds and hearts of people throughout the Roman Empire.

Being in the city that had molded the culture and people of the nations mentioned in the New Testament was a powerful experience. For the first time I realized how risky it was for the early followers of Jesus to recognize that the Greek way was not compatible with God's way, and then to make the bold choice to

live a life that honored God in the midst of a Hellenistic culture. Their God-given mission—an extension of the mission of Israel and Jesus that preceded them—was to live in such a way that their every word and action would make God known to those who did not know him.

I stood at the foot of the Acropolis amazed by how the early followers of Jesus, especially those who came from the family-and-faith-focused villages of Galilee on the fringe of the Roman Empire, had any influence on the minds and hearts of people who were sold out to such a powerful and dominant culture. I was humbled by their passion, dedication, and conviction in proclaiming that God's way—not the sophisticated, wealthy, self-serving, powerful culture of the Greco-Roman world—was the way to find true peace and fulfillment in this life (*shalom*, the Jews called it). I admired Paul's *chutzpah* to stand in the heart of Athens, at the foot of the Acropolis, in the shadow of the Parthenon, and present the good news of his God—the gospel of Jesus, Messiah and King—to the intellectual and religious elite of the Greco-Roman world.

Paul's message, the good news that Jesus is Lord, had already led to upheaval in Philippi and Thessalonica because people of influence recognized it as a challenge to the emperor's claim to be Lord and God. They feared that the good news of God's kingdom would threaten the economic security of their lifestyle and their cities. But how would Paul's message be received in Athens where the intellectual elite influenced the culture of the known world? What would happen when the message of God's kingdom challenged the foundations of the Hellenistic philosophical system?

## Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

### The Very Words of God

*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.*

**Acts 17:16–17**

## **Think About It**

When you are in a place or situation you have never experienced before—perhaps as a tourist, a new student, a new resident, or a new employee—the people, environment, and lifestyle are likely to be quite different from what you are used to.

When you find yourself in a new and different situation or environment, how do you go about discovering the “story” of that culture and its people—what is important to their survival and well-being, how they think, what they value, and how they act and function together?

What do you do, observe, and seek out in order to discover how to relate to others and function well in that new environment?

## **Video Notes (31 minutes)**

**Temples in the ancient world—meeting point of human and divine**

**What Paul observes about Athens**

**Paul presents a radical message in the Stoa**

**Paul receives an invitation****The Parthenon—**

**The dominant influence over Athens**

**A truly magnificent structure**

**A shrine to the myths of Hellenism**

**Video Discussion (6 minutes)**

1. Many of the world's ancient temples are a marvel to us, even today. As you watched this video, what did you learn

about the important role temples played in the lives of people in the ancient world of the Bible?

In what ways does that realization impact your understanding of what the Bible teaches about God wanting to live among his people? About his desire to build his people into a temple that displays who he is to the world?

In what ways did the video help you to better understand the impact that Athens, a city of temples and monuments to a multitude of gods, had on Paul?

2. In ancient Greek and Roman cities, the *agora* (*forum* to the Romans) was the place where goods and ideas were exchanged. The Athenians were known for their interest in and discussion of ideas old and new. What kind of an opportunity did this present for Paul?



In what ways do you think the exchange of ideas in the agora of Athens may have been like or unlike the ways in which we exchange ideas in our culture?

In terms of providing opportunities to share and exchange ideas, what might be our equivalent to the agora in Athens, and what leads you to that conclusion?



**HAVING STOOD ABOVE THE CITY OF ATHENS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS THE PARTHENON, ILLUMINATED AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY IN THIS VIEW, REMAINS AN AWE-INSPIRING SIGHT.**

3. What impressed you most about the Parthenon, and in what ways did it inform your understanding of the thinking, values, and lifestyle of the Athenians?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. The people of Athens devoted tremendous resources of intellect, labor, time, and money to building their temples and honoring their gods. In what ways do people today do the same?

What do the “temples” our culture builds as monuments to our values look like?

What message do those “temples” convey?

## Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (15 minutes)

### Paul Continues the Mission in Athens

Known by some as the “Rabbi to the Gentiles,” Paul took seriously his God-given mission of living and bringing the good news of God’s kingdom to people who did not know God. He was totally committed to going wherever God led and sacrificing whatever was needed in order to fulfill his mission. There’s no question that the path Paul walked in Greece had not been easy. In Philippi, his first stop in Macedonia, he had been thrown into jail. In Thessalonica, he had to flee the city by night in order to save his life. In Berea, where his message was carefully considered, detractors from Thessalonica soon stirred up trouble against him. For his safety, believers in Berea sent Paul to Athens.<sup>1</sup>

Would Paul’s experience in sharing the gospel message of Jesus Christ be any different in the great city of Athens? Would the sophisticated, intellectual, idea-loving Athenians be open to hearing and accepting the good news of God’s kingdom?

Paul would find Athens to be unlike any city he had visited before. It was no longer the political center of a worldwide empire, but its reputation as the intellectual and philosophical heart of the Roman world had not diminished. Amidst hundreds of monuments to Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and other gods, intellectuals and scholars from around the world gathered in Athens to display their intellectual prowess and to persuade others of the superiority of their philosophical system. Let’s see what Paul discovered about Athens and its people as he prepared to share God’s message with them.

1. Paul visited Athens while on his second teaching journey (Acts 15:36–18:22). He began this journey in 50 AD after the church in Jerusalem met to resolve a troublesome dispute regarding which of the Jewish lifestyle requirements Gentiles who had turned from idolatry to worship

the God of the Jews needed to follow. Accompanied by Barnabas, Silas, and other leaders, Paul delivered the official letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to the believers in the synagogue in Antioch. After teaching the believers in Antioch for some time, Paul and Silas revisited the places where Paul had taught on his first teaching journey (Acts 13–14). Then, when Paul was certain of the direction God was leading, they crossed the Aegean Sea and began sharing the good news of Jesus in Greece.

Retrace their journey on the map of Paul's second teaching journey and refresh your memory of what Paul experienced in those cities.<sup>2</sup>



**PAUL'S SECOND TEACHING JOURNEY**

2. Throughout his ministry, Paul was no stranger to danger and risk. Read how he defends the authenticity of his calling and commitment in 2 Corinthians 11:22–29. Take note of the challenges he faced prior to coming to Athens. Which of these trials would he likely face or avoid in Athens, and which new risks might he encounter when he presented the gospel to the most educated Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world?
  
3. Paul visited Athens under unusual circumstances, without his usual planning or the company of Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:13–15). While he was waiting for his companions to catch up with him, Paul began exploring the city on his own. What did he discover about Athens, and what impact did that discovery have on him? (See Acts 17:16.)
  
4. In order to better understand what Paul learned and how he responded, we must consider what Luke, the writer of Acts, meant by his description of Athens as a “city full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Paul was no stranger to pagan cities, but no other city came close to the idolatry in Athens. The Parthenon and the Erechtheion, which comprised the temples of Athena, Poseidon, and Erechthius, were the most striking temples on the Acropolis. Also standing more than fifty feet tall on the Acropolis was a gleaming

statue of Athena that could be seen far out to sea. In addition, temples, idols, and altars to hundreds of gods were scattered throughout the city.

In the agora were temples to Hephaestus, Apollo, Zeus, Ares, and Nike, to name a few. Temples for the worship of the imperial family, statues declaring the deity of emperors, and no less than thirteen altars dedicated to “divine” Caesar Augustus occupied the city center. In addition, every culture the Greeks encountered wanted their gods to be represented in the city too. So wherever a person looked in Athens, statues, altars, and temples to all manner of gods were in view, leading one scholar to translate Luke’s description of the city as “a veritable forest of idols.”<sup>3</sup>

- a. In what ways does this picture of the spiritual environment Paul discovered in Athens differ from how you previously may have understood it?

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

From the perspective of first-century Jewish people, idolatry was more than a religious issue. Idolatry was considered the root of evil because wherever the Lord’s kingship is not recognized and another deity is honored, every kind of immorality and depravity reigns. When God’s kingship is denied, there are social, political, and economic implications because idolatry, oppression of the weak, and bloodshed (especially of the innocent) all go together.

- b. We know that Paul was 100 percent “sold out” to honoring God with all his heart, mind, and strength. He lived out a sacrificial commitment to display God with every fiber of his being, his every thought and action, and all of his strength so that people would come to know God. Now that we have a clearer picture of the magnitude of idolatry in Athens, where people honored every god but the God of Israel, what do you think contributed to Paul’s great distress and anger (Acts 17:16)?

Considering Paul’s Jewish background, rabbinic training, and his God-given mission to bring the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world, which specific characteristics of Athens might have been particularly troubling to him?

What impact do you imagine the idolatry of Athens had on Paul’s view of his mission, and what impact would such an environment have had on you?

**THINK ABOUT IT****The Extreme Idolatry of Athens Provoked Paul**

English translations of Acts 17:16 use terminology such as “greatly distressed,” “provoked to anger,” “greatly angered,” “troubled,” or “provoked” to describe how deeply the idolatry of Athens affected Paul. We better understand the depth of Paul’s distress when we realize that the Greek word Luke used to describe Paul’s response, *paroxuneto*, is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to describe God’s anger with Israel when they worshipped idols:

Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD’s sight and so arousing his anger. I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you.<sup>4</sup>

That is a powerful anger! How might Paul’s natural response to the idolatry he observed affect how he carried out his mission in Athens?

5. Most of us are unaware of the nature of idolatry and its spiritual and social impact, but Paul was a brilliant Torah scholar and rabbi who understood that idolatry goes hand in hand with immorality of all sorts. His observations of the idolatry in Athens likely reminded him of portions of the Hebrew Bible that gave him insight into the underlying attitudes, priorities, and lifestyle of the people of Athens. Read, for example, what the Text says about idolatry in Psalms 106:14, 28–29, 34–39; Ezekiel 22:1–3; 33:25–29; and Hosea 4:1–2.
  - a. What kinds of evil and wickedness does the Text associate with idolatry?



- b. If you, like Paul, were intent on making God known in a place where idolatry and the wickedness that accompanies it were as dominant in the culture as was true in Athens, what might make fulfilling your mission more challenging and what might make it easier?

### Faith Lesson (4 minutes)

Although many years have passed since I first witnessed the magnificent beauty and power of ancient Athens, my first impressions of that city and my admiration for Paul's efforts to share the good news of Jesus Christ with its people have not faded. In fact, the more I have studied to understand and experience the physical glory, intellectual sophistication, and Hellenistic lifestyle that was Athens, the more Paul's commitment to share the gospel and extend the reign of God's kingdom in that stronghold of idolatry amazes me.

My study also has convinced me that the culture I live in is built on the same philosophy of Hellenism (we often call it *humanism*) on which life in Athens was built. That philosophy—first declared by the serpent in the garden of Eden<sup>5</sup> who boldly challenged the sovereign authority of God's Word and declared that the human mind could be like God's—values the wisdom of the human mind above that of the Creator and the pursuit of human pleasure above all else. I have to admit that the Hellenistic worldview of Athens has influenced my lifestyle and values just as it shaped the lifestyle and values of the people Paul addressed in that great city.

Yet God calls all of his people—just as he called Israel and Paul—to be restored to his family and to take our place as partners in his great story of redemption. United into one family of

God through Jesus our Savior and Redeemer, it is our privilege to live in a broken world as examples of what God's kingdom looks like in everyday life. Our calling is to put God on display so that everyone who sees us will see what God is like and want to know him.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

### What Is a Kingdom of Priests?

The Bible uses the concept of a *priesthood* to describe the mission God has given to his people (Exodus 19:3–6). In ancient times, priests would mediate between the gods and the people. This means a priest represented and acted on behalf of the god so that, by observing the priest, a person could get to know what the god was like.

At Mount Sinai, God gave his people the mission of being his “priests” to the entire world. The nature of that mission is for God's people to serve him and humanity by demonstrating God's will and character through their words and actions. God's people are not only to *bring* the message but to *be* the message in everything they think, do, and say.

In what we know as the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:18–20), Jesus extended the mission God gave to the Hebrews at Mount Sinai to all of his followers. Thus the apostle Peter reminds followers of Jesus to this day that they are “a royal priesthood,” called and commissioned to make God known to the whole earth and to live good lives that are worthy of their calling (1 Peter 2:9, 12).

So I must ask, *Do I share Paul's conviction that Jesus alone can save us from the chaos of sin? Am I passionately committed to the message that Jesus is not only Savior but Messiah, Lord, and King? Am I willing to stand up and challenge the worldview of the broken culture I live in not just by what I say but by how I live every moment of life?* I invite you to hear, experience, and learn from Paul's example as we continue this study. I invite you to commit to being a living example of God's kingdom in your family, community, and world. Are you willing?

1. How deep is your commitment to stand out in your society as a temple of the living God, a person who by word and deed faithfully puts God on display so that others will want to know him?
  
2. To what extent are you willing to reject the predominant worldview of Western culture with its emphasis on wealth and power, pleasure and leisure, accumulation and consumption? For example:

In what ways do you choose to give of yourself and demonstrate compassion for the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed rather than living for yourself at the expense of others?

Which personal sacrifices do you make to help protect innocent life and uphold the value of every human being as an image bearer of God regardless of their ethnic background, lifestyle choices, or status in life?

## Closing (1 minute)

Read 1 Peter 2:12 aloud together: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Then pray, thanking God that he made himself known to you. Ask him for the conviction, courage, and commitment to live out the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in your world. Pray for a heart that seeks out and loves God’s lost children the way he does. Seek his wisdom in sharing the good news in ways that people who do not yet know him will understand. Pray always that you will work to reclaim God’s kingdom in his way by displaying how life works when God reigns. Give thanks and rejoice for every person, every inch of territory that God’s kingdom reclaims from the Evil One.

## Memorize

*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

**1 Peter 2:12**

# Making God Known in a Broken World

*In-Depth Personal Study Sessions*

## Study 1 | Honoring God in a Culture of Idolatry

### The Very Words of God

*“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.*

*I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “that I am God.”*

*Isaiah 43:10–12*

### Bible Discovery

#### *Paul’s Mission Encounters Idolatry*

We live in a culture that at its core is much like the Hellenistic culture of Athens that Paul encountered there nearly two thousand years ago. Whether we realize it or not, we are to some extent willing participants in the self-serving and idolatrous ways of Hellenism. Often we put ourselves first, our wants and needs above those of others. We chase after false gods that promise to bestow honor, fame, and fortune upon us. Often we are much more concerned about the honor due *us* and how *we* can receive greater honor than we are about honoring people around us or honoring God. So it may take some effort for us to understand

what it means to live in a way that brings honor to God, which is the foundation of our mission as God's witnesses to the world.

Paul, on the other hand, considered no greater responsibility, privilege, or motivation in life than to honor God so completely by his every action and word that he was an effective witness to all people that the Lord is God. When he encountered the extreme, consuming idolatry of Athens, it nearly was more than he could bear. Athens was full of witnesses to other gods. Everywhere he turned he saw honor that should have been directed toward the God of the Hebrews—the Creator of the universe—being given to idols made by human hands. In the idolatry of Athens, Paul saw clearly the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Evil One who does everything in his power to steal away the honor and worship that belongs to God and God alone.<sup>6</sup> Paul was greatly offended and angered by what he saw. The offense of idolatry in Athens caused his passion for the mission to make God known burn stronger than ever. Let's take a closer look at Paul's response to the idolatry he encountered and consider how we can become more effective witnesses who bring honor to God in the midst of our own idolatrous culture.

1. In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul clearly states that an idol is an image, not a god: "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There is no God but one.'" Even though Paul declares that an idol is in itself worthless and powerless, what warnings does he reiterate from Israel's experience about the *worship* of idols? (See 1 Corinthians 10:14, 18–22; also Deuteronomy 32:15–18.)

What is at the root of all idol worship, and what does it imply about the worshiper's life and relationship with God as Creator and Lord?

Is it possible to be a witness who honors God and puts his character on display in every area of life and at the same time participate in the worship of demons? Why or why not?

### **THINK ABOUT IT**

#### **Are the Gods Pagans Worship Real?**

The worship of idols has been a part of human experience for thousands of years. It is prevalent in so many cultures even to this day that we are compelled to ask, "Why?" "Why is idolatry so commonplace?" "Are the 'other gods' people worship real, or are they just a creation of our sin-distorted minds?" How do we account for the "other gods" people worship?

Although the Bible is clear that human-made images or idols in the likeness of created beings have no life or power in themselves, it also appears to refer to "other gods" as if they really do exist. What does this mean?

The Bible acknowledges that there is a power present in the worship of idols. That power, of course, cannot compare with the Lord God and, in fact, competes for recognition and honor that belongs to God and God alone. The Bible identifies the spiritual power behind idolatry as being connected

with Satan—the Evil One—who enticed the first humans to rebel against God and thereby introduced chaos into God's perfect creation. Although the Bible does not frequently mention the connection between demonic powers and idols, it certainly is present and clearly influenced Jewish thinking on idolatry, including Paul's perspective.<sup>8</sup>

2. Idol worship was a significant element of everyday life in many places Paul visited during his journeys to share the good news of Jesus Christ. In his letters to the new communities of Jesus followers he left behind, Paul often warned against idolatry and encouraged believers to serve the living God and no other. What impact did Paul recognize that idol worship, and the destructive immorality that accompanied it, had on people individually and as a society? (See Romans 1:18–32; 1 Thessalonians 1:7–9.)
  
3. Paul was fully committed and faithful to the mission God had entrusted to his people, Israel. This is the same mission that Jesus carried out through his life on earth and entrusted to his followers to continue. That mission is about God's people living in such a way that they honor him and display his true character through their every word and action. By living righteous, God-honoring lives, God's people become his messengers and instruments of redemption who give people who do not know God the opportunity to experience him and help to restore *shalom* to the chaos of this broken world. Consider how the Text describes that mission and, in contrast, how idol worship dishonors God and violates the mission of his people.



- a. What role did God intend for people, as the physical representation of his nature and character, to have in his creation? (See Genesis 1:26–28.)

What happens to the revelation of God's character and authority when his people do not represent him well, such as when they ignore their God-given responsibilities or choose to honor and worship other gods?

- b. After sin introduced chaos into God's creation, God chose the Hebrew people to be his partners in his plan of redemption and restoration of his kingdom. God's *kingdom* can be described as any circumstance in which God's will is done—any situation that demonstrates that God is reigning. God's kingdom comes as the words and actions of his people in the circumstances of everyday life bring honor to his name and display his character to the world.

At Mount Sinai, God gave his people the mission of bearing God's presence in the world so that through their witness people who did not know God would experience what he is like and accept his reign in their lives. What had God done for the Hebrew people, and what did he ask of them that would make

them his “treasured possession,” his “kingdom of priests,” and his “holy nation?” (See Exodus 19:3–6.)

Why was the worship of idols by God’s people such a great offense to him?

- c. In the wilderness, where God trained the Hebrews how to live as his partners in redemption, God gave them specific instructions on how to make a place for his glorious presence to dwell among them. What did the Hebrews build, and how great was God’s glory? (See Exodus 25:8; 40:33–38.)

Whose glory was on display in Athens, and, given Paul’s knowledge of the Hebrew Text and God’s relationship with his people, how would you expect that false representation of divine glory to affect him?

In Athens, people expended great resources to build magnificent temples and statues to display the glory of their gods. In contrast, what kind of commitment and expenditure does God ask his people to make in order to display his glory?

- d. Paul, as a Jewish rabbi, was committed to obeying all of God's commands and fulfilling the mission of extending God's kingdom in the world. So God's commands would have been in Paul's mind at all times. Read Exodus 20:1–17, which summarizes God's commands, then take a fresh look at Athens from the perspective Paul would have seen it.

What would the idolatry of Athens—not just the number of temples and worship of idols but the very foundation of Hellenism—have revealed to Paul about whose kingdom was thriving there, and why would it have troubled him?

What contrasts between God's kingdom and the kingdom of this world (the kingdom of the Evil One) would Paul have seen, and what hope would each kingdom provide for its worshipers?

In what ways does this help you to better understand why Paul, who was all about the mission, became angry about the situation in Athens, and what was the object of his anger—the idolaters or the power behind the idolatry? Why?

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

#### **Paul Comes to Athens with a Mission and a Message**

At Mount Sinai, God commissioned the Hebrew people to be his partners in advancing his great plan of redemption by making him known to the Gentile world. Centuries later, as part of his plan to continue gathering Gentiles into the kingdom of heaven, God chose Paul to be his herald of the good news that the long-awaited Messiah had come. After meeting the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul eagerly accepted the same commission God gave to Paul's ancestors at Mount Sinai, the same commission Jesus gave to his disciples—to display him accurately to the world so that people of all nations would come to know him.

In fulfillment of this mission, Paul traveled throughout the Roman world preaching the gospel of Jesus and demonstrating God's love to both Jew and Gentile. He lived out the message of *kiddush ha shem* (literally to “hallow the name” by seeking to honor God and increase his reputation by everything he did) with a level of dedication and fervor rarely seen. Everywhere he went—Jerusalem, Damascus, Ephesus, Athens, Rome, or the far reaches of the Roman Empire—he proclaimed Jesus as God's anointed, the Savior and Lord of the world that the ancient Hebrew Text said he would be.

Paul's teaching was clear: the redemptive work of Messiah Jesus opened the door for all people, calling them to reject the false gods of the kingdom of this world, submit to his reign, and experience “the obedience that

comes from faith.”<sup>9</sup> He instructed all those who believed to live holy lives that would affirm the gospel and bear fruit in the hearts of a watching world.<sup>10</sup> His goal was not simply to provide a different religious experience, but to present Jesus—the Jewish Messiah—as the one true Savior, Lord, and King who dispelled chaos and brought the peace of the kingdom of heaven—*shalom*—to all who followed him.

4. Clearly Athens would be a battleground between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. How would Paul respond? Would he stand in the agora and condemn the people of Athens? Would he throw up his hands and move on to the next city, writing off “those people” who were so immersed in the sin of idolatry? Not at all. Paul knew his calling and mission, and he would be faithful to obey God. What does Acts 17:17 say he did next, and is it what you expected? Why or why not?
  
5. Paul’s visit to the synagogue in Athens was typical of how he began sharing the gospel in other cities he visited. As followers of Jesus today, we often lack an appreciation for Israel’s role as God’s witnesses and bearers of his presence in the world. But 1 Chronicles 16:8–14, 23–31 gives us a picture of Israel’s understanding of their mission to make God known in their world. What do you realize from this psalm of praise about how faithful Jews understood their role as God’s partners in the mission of extending his kingdom and restoring *shalom* to all people?

## Reflection

In his wonderful treatment of idolatry in relationship to the mission of God, Christopher Wright identifies what drives people to create gods—idols for themselves—whether they be statues of wood or stone as in ancient times or the self-serving pursuits that people today choose in place of the living God.<sup>11</sup> The Bible identifies the gods of the nations as beings that were believed to provide what people desired or to protect them from what they feared.<sup>12</sup> So pagans worshiped gods that promoted sexuality and promised fertility because people found those things to be enticing and necessary. They also worshiped gods that promised protection from plague, enemies, storms, disease, and death.

The idols of our own experience, while more subtle, do the same. We devote ourselves to the pursuit of satisfying our basic human needs by serving the gods of gluttony or promiscuity, or we prostitute ourselves in lustful pursuit of the gods of power, pleasure, leisure, and wealth. Whether our idols are statues and images or simply the things we pursue above all else, they deny that God alone provides for our every need and satisfies our deepest longings. Idolatry robs God of the honor that is due him as our Creator who faithfully loves and provides for us.

Yet God longs for each of his children to know him and receive his gift of *shalom*. He wants every one of his children to know that, as James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father. . . .” In God’s unfailing effort to restore *shalom* to his children who do not know him, he raised up a people to be his partners in redemption. Read Isaiah 42:6–8 and notice the compassion and love God wants to extend through the witness of those who accept the mission and follow him faithfully:

I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.

This is the heart of the mission for Paul and every follower of Jesus. Idolatry of any sort opposes the mission of God. Will we accept God's invitation to be partners in his great story of restoring *shalom* to a world in chaos? Will we be faithful to our God-given mission, or will we serve idols of our own making that steal away the honor that rightfully belongs to God?

If we want to be faithful witnesses of the gospel—faithful representatives of God's character—then we must ask ourselves some hard questions.

What are the idols in our own lives that claim honor and credit that rightfully belong to God? For example, in what ways does the way we think and talk about ourselves betray a subtle idolatry, such as when we say “I” got a job, “I” survived cancer, “I” developed a successful business when the truth is God is the one who provides, heals, and blesses?

How willing are we to release our idolatry of self and give to God all the honor and praise he deserves?

In what subtle ways do we attempt to satisfy our needs and desires rather than trusting in God to provide?

What are the consequences to ourselves and the fulfillment of our God-given mission when we limit our knowledge and experience of God by living as if we are in charge, as if we are the gods who do it all?

How willing are we to take what we consider to be a risk and trust God to provide and bless us to his glory in order to demonstrate that he alone is God?

## Study 2 | Built to Impress: The Temples of Athens

### The Very Words of God

*As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

**1 Peter 2:4–5, 9**



## Bible Discovery

### *God Is Building a Temple Too*

The magnificent temples of Athens were an awe-inspiring display of honor for the gods who were worshiped there. Impressively beautiful temples, idols, statues, and altars located throughout the city sent a clear message of what the Athenians believed to be most important and worthy of value. Yet Paul knew that even the crown jewel of temples, the Parthenon, was a shrine to a broken world. How could he communicate that another God, a living god, also was building his temple in Athens? How could his message be heard over the influence of the temples already there?

Angered by the idol worship of the Athenians, Paul sought out the people he knew God had put in place to be his witnesses. He went to the Jewish synagogue. In that community he expected to find people whose life and words put the living God on display to a world in chaos, people who showed what life looks like when God's kingdom reigns. Among God's people Paul likely hoped to offer and receive encouragement for their mission as God's partners in redemption.

In every pagan city Paul visited previously in Greece, he discovered that God had witnesses in place who prepared the way for the good news that Jesus the Messiah had come. In every synagogue he entered he met faithful, God-honoring Jews as well as Gentiles who had been attracted to the God of Israel and had turned away from idols to serve him. God was indeed building a "temple" of his people who put him on display for all the world to see. Would that be true in Athens, the famous center of idolatry and godless human wisdom?

**FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING:****The Temple of Hephaestus**

Situated on the northwest side of the agora of ancient Athens, this Doric style temple built in the fifth century BC honored Hephaestus, god of metalworkers, and Athena, goddess of craftsmen. Built of marble, it is the most well preserved of all the temples that existed when Paul visited Athens. Although it is significantly smaller than the Parthenon nearby, it has the same style and design and follows the same geometric principals. Hence, it gives a glimpse of the glory of the Parthenon when it was intact. Its beauty and grace helps modern visitors understand the strong reaction Paul had to the overwhelming dominance of idolatry he encountered when he visited Athens.

1. The challenge Paul faced in Athens was overwhelming, but he knew his calling and that of his ancestral people. What hope and mission did he share in common with the Jewish community in Athens? (See Exodus 19:5–6; Isaiah 43:10–12; Acts 26:4–7; Romans 3:1–2.)

How might their shared identity and purpose have encouraged Paul as well as the Jewish congregation in Athens?

2. Paul also knew the Text. He was well-versed in the knowledge of God's people who were faithful to their mission and, like a temple, had put God on display to the pagan world around them. As you read each of the following passages, what do you discover about the different ways people came to know God through the faithful witness of his people? (See Exodus 18:7–12; Joshua 2:1–14; Ruth 1:15–18; 2 Kings 5:6–15; Daniel 6:3–5, 11–23, 25–27.)

What can be the impact of God's *shalom* when people come to know him?

In what ways might these examples have encouraged Paul as well as the Jewish congregation in Athens? In what ways do they encourage you?

**DID YOU KNOW?****God Prepared the Way for the Gospel Message**

As idolatrous as the Roman Empire was, God had been at work in many ways preparing its people to receive the good news of Messiah's coming. Some of these preparations had been in place for centuries. Consider, for example, the presence of Jewish communities in nearly every major city of the empire. Some of these communities were established between 740–722 BC as a result of the dispersion of captives by the Assyrians following their conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Other communities resulted from Babylon's conquest of Judah in 586–587 BC. Still other communities were established by refugees from these conflicts and Jewish merchants who traded in cities throughout the Mediterranean world.

These communities of Jews were—in effect—God's temple, a light to the nations that displayed the Lord alone as God. In an idolatrous and class-oriented society, the Jewish communities became known for their devotion to the Text and righteous living in obedience to God's laws. By the first century, a number of Gentiles, especially women, had been drawn to the Jewish faith communities where they worshiped the God of the Hebrews and learned the teachings of the Torah. The worship practices of the Jewish synagogues ensured a biblically literate audience—of both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles—that would understand the message of the long-awaited Messiah. Furthermore, the Jewish faith was a legal religion in the eyes of Rome. This allowed early followers of Jesus, who were considered by Rome to be a part of the Jewish community, to receive the protective coverage of legal status throughout the Roman Empire.

3. Even in Athens, where idolatry played a dominant role in every part of life, God had been at work preparing the Roman world for the “good news” that Jesus the Messiah had come. What had the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire, including Athens, been doing that

helped to make God and his kingdom known? (See Acts 15:21.)

4. Whenever Paul visited a new city, he typically went to the Jewish synagogue first. What response to the gospel message did Paul find in each of the synagogues he had visited in Greece? For each community of religious Jews, take note of the size of the community, the influence of the synagogue congregation in the community, who else worshiped God with the Jewish congregation, and their response to the good news of Jesus that Paul brought. What does this indicate about the faithfulness of God’s people to their mission and the “temple” God was building in Greece?

Greek City	Philippi	Thessalonica	Berea
The Text	Acts 16:13–15	Acts 17:1–4	Acts 17:10–12
Size of Jewish Community			
Influence of Jewish Community			
Who Else Worshiped in Synagogue			
Response to the Good News			

## DATA FILE

### Who Are the God-Fearers?

Many accounts of Paul teaching the gospel in the book of Acts mention God-fearers, God-fearing Gentiles, God-worshipers, or God-fearing Greeks. These people were Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish God and participated in the worship and life of their local Jewish synagogue community. Although there was disagreement within the Jewish (and, later, the early Christian) communities as to how much of the Torah God-fearing Gentiles were required to observe—whether or not they must practice circumcision, wear tassels, obey purity rituals, and follow a kosher diet—there is no doubt that they actively participated in the community of God’s people. They knew the Hebrew Bible, had renounced their pagan gods and sinful lifestyle, and became a natural gateway for the gospel into the Gentile world.

Several inscriptions referring to God-fearers among the Jewish community have been found in the ruins of Miletus and Sardis in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). The clearest evidence of their association is found on a *stèle*, a marble pillar, in Aphrodisias. This pillar has legible inscriptions (in Greek) on two of its four faces<sup>13</sup> that relate to a charitable undertaking of the synagogue community.

The lists on the *stèle* are intriguing. Scholars are quite certain that one face of the pillar (left side, left photo) lists individuals who contributed to the construction of a new building, most likely a soup kitchen or food pantry. The other face (right side, left photo) has two lists of people associated with the project. The first group of fifty-five names (some Greek, others Hebrew) are under the heading “Jews.” This list also designates three proselytes or converts, meaning three Gentiles who had fully converted to Judaism (including circumcision). The second group (right photo) is under the heading *theosebés*, which means God-fearers. These apparently were Gentiles who had been attracted to God by the faithful living of the Jewish community and, although they did not completely convert to Judaism, had abandoned their pagan gods and practices to identify with the Jewish community and their God.

The *stèle* is significant because it provides archaeological evidence of



**LEFT PHOTO SHOWS STELE WITH LISTS OF NAMES OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE SYNAGOGUE'S CHARITABLE UNDERTAKING. RIGHT PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS *OSOI THEOSEBIS*.**

communities described in both New Testament and Jewish sources. Even before the Christian message came to the Roman world, God had been building the “temple” of his people and drawing pagan Gentiles to himself! Wherever the early followers of Jesus went, they found people of the Text who eagerly accepted the good news that Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, had come.

To see the pillar at Aphrodisias with its list of God-fearers is to see passionate devotion to God in action. How could any of these witnesses have imagined that their faith in God would speak not only to their world but still speak powerfully today? We can find great encouragement in the fact that if we live faithfully and speak clearly of our love for Jesus, God has and is always preparing an audience that is eager to hear the good news.

5. What did Paul find when he visited the Jewish synagogue in Athens? (See Acts 17:17.)

Given the idolatry Paul had seen in Athens, what does this reveal about the witness of the Jews who lived there?

Would you have expected the temple of God's people to be more or less influential than it appears, and why?

6. Luke's account makes a connection between Paul's distress over the idolatry in Athens and his visit to the synagogue. So, what did Paul do when he visited with those in the synagogue, and what do you think they might have discussed? (See Acts 17:17.)



7. Despite the overshadowing presence of temples and idols to all manner of gods, what action did Paul take to establish a “temple” of God’s presence in Athens? (See Acts 17:17.)

## Reflection

God was building his temple in Athens as well as in the other cities Paul had visited. In the Jewish congregation, Paul found Gentiles who had seen the “temple” of God’s people and been so impressed by the *shalom* they found there that they turned away from the idols they worshiped in order to know and serve the God of the Jews. So even in Athens God was building a temple, however small, that attracted worshipers to him. But the situation in Athens was very troubling to Paul. God’s temple didn’t exactly stand out in that “forest of idols.”

The NIV translation says that Paul “reasoned” with those in the synagogue in Athens (Acts 17:17), but that terminology can be misunderstood. In the context of understanding the Scriptures in the Jewish synagogue, reasoning can include vigorous disagreement. The language of some other translations reflects this stronger meaning. The King James Version translates the verb as “disputed,” and the New Revised Standard Version uses “argued.”

So what was the subject of such intense discussion? The disagreement could have been about Paul’s mission to share the good news that Jesus was the promised Messiah. That had been a point of disagreement in some synagogues. But Luke’s connection between the idolatry of Athens and Paul’s engagement with the synagogue congregation opens another possibility. Perhaps Paul was upset because so few Athenians seem to have known and experienced the true and living God that he challenged the congregation to live out their faith more boldly. Perhaps the

proliferation of idols in Athens had been so overwhelming to God's people that—even though they had made God known to a few Gentiles—they had become complacent or lost hope of making a significant impact. Perhaps they needed strong encouragement that God had prepared the way and that wherever faithful communities of his followers honor him with their lives and put his true character on display, people will notice and be drawn to him.

Although we don't know the specific message Paul brought to the community of God's people in Athens, his faithfulness to his God-given mission in such a powerful and dominant cultural environment can greatly encourage us as we seek to live out the mission in our broken culture. As people who believe that Jesus is Messiah, Savior, and Lord, we are called to imitate the way he lived and put God on display. As God's witnesses, we have been commissioned to bring the message by being the message. As we faithfully live out our calling, our Lord reigns, the "temple" of his people is built, and his kingdom is extended!

Yet the abundance of false gods and idols in our culture indicates that few people have known and experienced the true and living God we claim to serve.

In what ways have we, as God's people who have been called to put him on display to the whole world, allowed the temples and idols of our culture to overshadow our portrayal of God's character and presence?

What do you think Paul might "reason" with us about in regard to fulfilling our mission?

No matter how magnificent and influential the “temples” of our culture appear to be, God has prepared the way for his people to make him known. As God’s temple, the visible representation of his kingdom in our world, perhaps it is time for us to examine our walk with God to see if we are portraying God and his kingdom faithfully.

In what ways do we diminish the influence of God’s presence in our culture by:

- Being hypocritical or unfaithful?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Living selfishly instead of imitating the way Jesus offered himself for the benefit of others?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Behaving immorally or unethically, thus profaning God’s character?

## Study 3 | Clash of Kingdoms: God's Wisdom vs. the Wisdom of the Athenians

### The Very Words of God

*Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.*

1 Corinthians 1:20–21

### Bible Discovery

#### *Paul Exposes the Myth of Human Wisdom*

Paul came to Athens with a particular worldview and a mission to make it known. But the Hellenistic intellectuals of Athens—whether Stoic or Epicurean—were quite satisfied with their own worldview. Although they entertained discussion of new and different ideas, they already esteemed their own views and wisdom above all else. What would happen when Paul presented the truth of God's divine revelation to those who prided themselves on human wisdom?

When Paul spoke of his God, their thoughts went to their own gods represented by the beauty and perfection of Athens' many temples. When he spoke from the Scriptures, they were puzzled because their worldview was based on human logic and reason. Why would they need divine revelation? When he said that Jesus came to restore *shalom*, they wondered why they needed any peace other than the benefits *Pax Romana* had provided. When he shared the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, they would not even consider the possibility. Despite Paul's best efforts, it appears that not much "transformation" would take place in the minds of the Athenian elite. Their passion for the myth of their own wisdom made it difficult for them even to comprehend Paul's message.

So we wonder if Paul had the philosophers of Athens in mind when he warned the Roman believers against being conformed to the thinking patterns of the world, instructed them not to think of themselves more highly than they ought, and encouraged them to be transformed by renewing their minds in accordance with the mind of God.<sup>14</sup> Paul knew that human wisdom was a myth made foolish by the wisdom of God. What could he do to persuade the intellectuals of Athens that true wisdom comes when our minds are transformed by the mind of God?

1. The Athenians were famous for their interest in philosophical and intellectual discussion. They never tired of talking about new ideas. One might say they were philosophy “junkies” in the way we describe people in our culture as information “junkies.” What did Luke observe about the nature of their discussion? (See Acts 17:21.)

Luke’s observation of Athenian intellectual discussion was not exactly a compliment, but what opportunity did it provide for Paul, and how did he use it? (See Acts 17:17.)

## DATA FILE

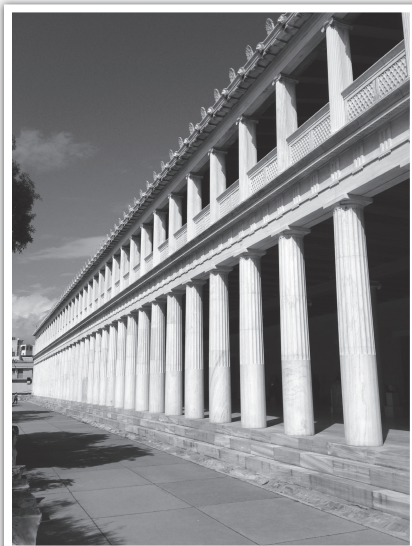
### Why Did Paul Go to the Agora?

As in every other Roman city, the agora in Athens (or in Roman custom, *forum*) was the central gathering place for commercial, social, spiritual, and political activity. Typically, the agora was a large, open rectangular space around which were statues, monuments, altars, and temples. It functioned as the town marketplace offering permanent shops as well as temporary booths for farmers, merchants, and craftsmen to sell their goods. It also functioned as the official place of assembly where announcements were made on behalf of the Roman emperor as well as local authorities.

Often a covered colonnade, called a *stoa*, enclosed one or more sides of the agora. In Athens, the Stoics and Epicureans often gathered in one of the stoas of the agora to discuss and debate the latest ideas. In fact, the Stoics took their name from the fact that they could always be found in the *stoa*.

The reconstructed Stoa of Attalus pictured below was built on the eastern side of the agora in Athens. This two-story marble structure is 380 feet long and 65 feet wide. Each story had 21 rooms lit by doorways on the colonnade side and small windows on the back wall. The upper level had an Ionic colonnade and the lower a Doric. Stairways at each end of the stoa led to the second story.

The original structure was built between 159–138 BC by Attalos II, King of Pergamum. It was his gift of gratitude to the city of Athens for the education he had received there. Although the book of Acts does not tell us the exact location where Paul engaged the intellectuals and philosophers of Athens, the Stoa of Attalus was famous as one of their gathering places.



2. Everywhere he went in Greece, Paul presented the gospel message that Jesus the Messiah had come. He began by sharing his message in the Jewish synagogues, then went into the marketplace—the agora—to share the good news with anyone who would listen. In every city, the good news of God’s kingdom captured the attention of influential people—politicians, philosophers, religious leaders, business owners, and merchants. Without fail, Paul’s radical message hit a nerve that led to conflict and chaos.
  - a. What was the nature of the uproar some Gentiles raised in response to Paul’s message and actions in Philippi? (See Acts 16:16–24.)
  - b. What about Paul’s message upset both Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica? (See Acts 17:1–8.)
  - c. What key issue led to conflict in the Jewish synagogue in Corinth? (See Acts 18:12–17.)

- d. In what ways did the response to Paul's discussion and interaction with Gentiles in Athens differ from that in other cities? (See Acts 17:16–32.)
3. Paul made every effort to explain the good news of Jesus and his resurrection to anyone who would listen. Despite their self-proclaimed openness to discuss and debate Paul's ideas, how did the Athenian intellectuals actually respond to what he shared with them? (See Acts 17:18–20, 32.)

What was the main point of Paul's message that they simply could not understand or accept? (See Acts 17:18, 32.)

Although the Athenians expressed disdain for Paul and his message, what additional opportunity did they give him to explain himself? (See Acts 17:19–20.)



## DATA FILE

### Who Did Paul “Reason” with in the Agora?

In addition to would-be intellectuals who passed their time in the agora of Athens, there were educated philosophers known as the Stoics and Epicureans who prided themselves for having rational, logical, well-thought-out philosophies. The Stoics were the most influential, particularly among the ruling class including Emperor Nero. They belonged to the philosophical school founded by Zeno of Cyprus (340–265 BC).<sup>15</sup> The Epicureans, favored primarily by the upper classes, traced their philosophical system to Epicurus (341–270 BC).<sup>16</sup>

The Stoics took their name from the Stoa Poikile, a colonnade on the northern side of the agora where Zeno had taught. Their guiding life principle was using human reason to find harmony through rational knowledge of the natural law of the universe. They recognized a rational principle of order in all things and believed that the spark of the divine could be found in everything (pantheism). They believed fate controlled natural law and one's destiny, so they highly valued an attitude of harmony and calmness toward whatever fate decreed.

The Epicureans traced their philosophical views to 300 BC when Epicurus came to Athens, established a home, and spent the rest of his life teaching his views. Although he taught that the universe was the work of a creator deity, he believed that deity was no longer involved in the world and, therefore, was not relevant to daily life. Furthermore, he taught that humans are mortal and there is no life to come. For Epicureans, philosophical discussion was valued as the way of “salvation” that led to a fulfilling life. The goal of a good life was to enjoy whatever pleasure can be found while living modestly, gaining knowledge, and seeking freedom from pain, superstition, and anxiety.

4. In a letter to his disciple Timothy, Paul described people who would not accept truth or sound doctrine. In what ways is this a fitting description of the Athenians who Paul reasoned with in the agora? (See 2 Timothy 4:3–4.)

In what ways might this description apply to people we encounter in our world?

What can we, as God's people today, do to make God known in such situations?

## **Reflection**

Culturally, intellectually, and spiritually Athens stood out among the greatest cities of the ancient world. No other city could boast of its philosophical heritage as the home of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. No other city could be home to the magnificent Parthenon, temple of Athena the patron goddess of Athens, set atop an expansive Acropolis three hundred feet above the city. No other city could match the beautiful array of temples found in Athens.

When Paul came to Athens, he naturally was impressed by what he saw. But he also recognized in Athens a culture built on the myth of Hellenism that elevated the human mind as the source of truth and wisdom. He saw a city of proud, self-satisfied intellectuals who did not know the true God. He saw them in constant pursuit of the myth of a logical, rational understanding of life, the myth that human reason could solve life's mysteries, and the myth that human ingenuity could bring *shalom* out of chaos.

In contrast, Paul understood that true wisdom is not based on the supremacy of the human mind but comes from a mind that is submitted to the mind of God and transformed by his revelation. Paul wanted more than anything to share the knowledge of the God he knew and the good news of Jesus with the people of Athens so that they could find *shalom*. So Paul explored Athens to see what people believed so that he could understand them and consider the best way to present the good news God had entrusted to him.

When Paul engaged the intellectuals of Athens, he was not afraid to listen, learn, and dialogue with them—even those with whom he passionately disagreed. As a rabbi, Paul likely would have been familiar with the belief of the Jewish sages that there is wisdom in understanding another person's perspective, especially when one disagrees with it. Luke's accounts of Paul's teaching give evidence that this was his pattern. He reasoned with them until they believed, rejected his ideas, or asked to hear more.

Our culture, like that of Athens, is built on the myth of Hellenism too. It is evident in our pursuit of wealth, leisure, and pleasure. It is evident in the assumption that the effort of the human mind—whether expressed in technology, education, or science—can correct the brokenness of our world and move us toward utopia. If we, followers of Jesus today, are intent on fulfilling the mission God has given to us, we need to take seriously Paul's example. By learning what others think and believe, we can better articulate our beliefs in a way that people who do not know God can understand.

How willing are we to understand and engage with—rather than ignore or shout at—those whose views differ from ours,

especially if they reject a biblical worldview?

Do we consider it important enough to share the gospel with people who don't know God that we will read and listen to opinions of people with whom we disagree, or are we content to arrogantly ignore what is said or written by people whose opinions we dislike? Why?

How well do we know the worldview, beliefs, and lifestyle of our neighbors, including why they may disagree with our own?

In spite of the opposition Paul knew he would face, he was neither ashamed nor afraid to present the message of Jesus that God had entrusted to him. Even when people sneered, called him a babbler, and misrepresented his message, Paul persisted. His willingness to speak and live God's truth—whether it was popular, scorned, or led to great personal risk—is amazing.

How willing are we to be unpopular for making God known to others?

How willing are we to be mocked, rejected, or ignored in order to put God on display in the public square by what we say and how we live?