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Paul in Athens , The Unknown God

Scripture: Acts 17:16-34

Theme: We can share Jesus with people who don't know Him yet

High School (Ages 15-18)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

This Sunday school lesson explores Paul's bold yet nuanced ministry in Athens, where he encounters a culture deeply rooted in idolatry and philosophical inquiry. While Athens is famous for its temples and statues, including the famous "Unknown God" altar, Paul refuses to be silenced by their religious practices. Instead, he engages their intellectual curiosity by identifying the true God as the One they worshipped indirectly (Acts 17:29), revealing that their worship was actually directed toward Him but misguided. The passage challenges students to recognize how even in secular or skeptical societies, God is still at work, and their job is to point others to Him, not by force, but by truth and love. The lesson connects Paul's method to modern evangelism, asking teens to consider how they can Optional reflection: children can draw a picture of Jesus helping their friends, then share one way they can help someone else this week. This extra activity supports the lesson's theme and gives teachers a simple, lowprep option for extending the discussion.

Bible Story

Paul and Silas had spent three months in Thessalonica, preaching the gospel with such power that the city was filled with wonder and conviction. But when they left, their impact was not fully understood, some of the Jews and God-fearing Greeks followed them, while others stirred up hostility. As they traveled to Berea, the new community of believers welcomed Paul warmly, and he found a more open hearted audience than in Thessalonica. Yet even here, the jealousy of some Jewish leaders would soon turn to violent opposition, testing Paul's resolve to remain faithful to God's mission despite persecution. (Acts 17:1-9)

In Athens, Paul found himself in a city that was both intellectually vibrant and spiritually restless. The Athenians were renowned for their philosophy, their temples, and their idols, most notably, the grand Altars of Unknown Gods, a symbol of their uncertainty about the divine. Though he had arrived in a city where he should have expected

resistance, Paul instead found an audience eager to hear about the One he proclaimed. His speech began not with forceful accusations but with an invitation: 'I want you to know that I am not preaching another god, but the true God, who has been worshipped by humanity from the beginning, Creator of the universe, life, and meaning.' (Acts 17:15, 21)

As Paul stood among the Athenians, he paused to observe their devotion to the Unknown God, a common prayer in their temples. He noted the irony: they worshipped an unknown God, yet they were searching for something eternal. 'You worship something,' he said, 'that you do not even know. This God, whom I now address, is the one you have been worshipping in ignorance.' His words struck a chord because they spoke directly to their longing, something many of them already felt, even if they did not yet understand it fully. The crowd listened, some with curiosity, others with skepticism, but none could dismiss the claim outright. (Acts 17:22, 23)

Paul's message was not just about salvation but about identity. He declared, 'We are ambassadors for Christ, declaring that God made the world and everything in it. Though they do not acknowledge Him, He still invites all people to turn to Him.' His words were bold, yet they were not confrontational. Instead, they were an invitation to encounter the One who had created them, the One who had made them. Some in the crowd were intrigued; others scoffed, dismissing his claim as foolish. But Paul did not waver. He knew that some would reject him, but his mission was not to convert everyone at once. (Acts 17:24, 28)

One man in the crowd, a Greek named Dionysius, was convinced. Though he had not yet believed, he listened attentively to Paul's teaching. Others, like a woman named Damaris, who was a devout follower of the Greek gods, also found their faith challenged by Paul's words. They left their idols behind and began to explore the truth of Christ. Their response was not an easy one, it required a surrender of their cultural and religious assumptions. Paul knew that some would follow, while others would resist, but he trusted that God would use these moments to draw people to Himself. (Acts 17:29, 34)

The day ended with a gathering at Dionysius' home, where Paul and Silas preached the gospel to a growing circle of believers. The city of Athens had been a place of uncertainty, but now, as the first fruits of their ministry began to take root, Paul knew that his work was not over. He had seen that some, like Dionysius and Damaris, were ready to receive the truth, but others would need time and continued preaching to come to faith. As he left, he carried the hope that even in a city filled with idols, God was still drawing people to Himself. His mission was not just to Thessalonica or Berea, but to the entire world, wherever the gospel would find a heart open to hearing it. (Acts 17:35, 38)

Key Verse

Acts 17:23 , 'For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship , and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.'

The key verse (Acts 17:23 , 'For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship , and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.') calls us to respond to God's truth.

>> Missions Spotlight

In secular Western Europe and North America, many people have 'unknown gods' , they believe in something but don't know who God really is. Paul's approach in Athens gives us a model for sharing Jesus in post-Christian cultures.

-> To the Cross

Paul found an altar to 'an unknown god' and used it as a bridge to share the Gospel. He told the Athenians that the God they didn't know was the God who made everything , and that He proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. The cross was his climax.