



Small group questions

The Unknown God – Acts 17

Leaders – if the questions make no sense or you don't know the answer – please contact the preacher!

Have you ever told someone about Jesus and it seemed they just didn't understand you?

Read Acts 17:16-21

2. What are the Athenians like? What groups does Paul encounter?
3. What do Epicureans and Stoics believe with regard to god/s? (Google is your friend!)
4. Why do you think some considered Paul a 'babbling'?
5. How important do you think it is for preachers to understand their audience?

Read Acts 17:22-31

6. How does Paul show that he has done his homework on this audience?
7. How is this presentation of the gospel different to some others in Acts (ie, what is included vs what is left out)?
8. In what ways has God made it possible to know him? (see also Eccl 3:11; Rom 1:19-20)
9. How might Paul's speech have resonated with those who believed in distant, unknowable god/s?
10. Jesus only gets mentioned in the last bit of Paul's speech. How does he fit in to what Paul is saying?

Read Acts 17:32-34

11. What are the three responses to Paul's message?
12. Why should we bother getting to know our audience and our message?

Pray that God might grant us opportunities to share our faith with others! Pray that God will help us to know the right approaches to take.

The Unknown God – Acts 17

Opener: Youth hostel fire alarm...

Ever tell someone the gospel and you feel like they just can't understand you?

Big Q'n: How do we tell the Gospel to people who have no background knowledge?

Big Answer: Take a leaf out of Paul's book: know yr audience; know your message

Context: P and friends go fr place to place, skipping along if harm seemed likely.

Paul has ended up in Athens, waiting for the others to join him. Athens is an important city and almost completely pagan. As Paul goes around the city, he has that same feeling: here are people who need to know about Jesus, but they have no background at all! What do you do?

Paul could get through to them because he knew his audience and he knew his message. That's the same things we need to know if we want to tell people re Jesus

Part One: v16-21 - Paul knew his audience – so what were they like?

16While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. **17**So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. **18**A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. **19**Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20**You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." **21**(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Many idols:

(Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Demeter, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Hephaestus, Hermes, and either Hestia or Dionysus)

Paul, as usual, starts with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, but extends to the completely pagan. You may have heard the expression, 'the marketplace of ideas', this is where it comes from! Look at v21...

Who's there?

Epicureans: gods exist, but have better things to do that be involved in human affairs: they are distant

Stoics: a virtuous wisdom; indifferent to pleasure and pain. "you get what you get and you don't get upset." There is a god of sorts, but impersonal, so just accept your fate and get on with it.

They start disputing with Paul: Babbling – like sb at a dinner party who knows a few facts but you figure they don't really get what they are talking about.

Why do they think he's a babbling?

Advocating new gods/ strange ideas

Actually, he's been preaching that Jesus rose from the dead – v18.

And so they take him to the Areopagus: part city council, part courthouse, part debating club.

V20 – read

That's Paul's audience, and as you will see, he's done his homework to know how to speak to them...

Illustration: The Bishop who ordained me often said: when you are preparing your sermons, you need to read two texts: one is the Bible; the other is your congregation. Without one, you'll have nothing good to say; without the other, you won't be able to say it.

Application: It's true for all of us, if we want to tell people about Jesus, and I pray that all of you will have that desire, to make our Lord known.

- Know the people you are talking to. If they have a Christian background, great! That's a lot of hard work done for you. If not, you will have to be more creative, like P in v22-31...
- De-jargonise: sin, grace, God, faith...

Part two: v22-31 – Paul knew his message

22Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

24"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. **25**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. **26**From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. **27**God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. **28**'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'
29"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill. **30**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Notice how Paul brilliantly looks for a way in: v22-23

The fact that there was an altar means that someone was worshipping! And while they probably did not have any concept of the Christian God, P seizes the opportunity...

So what do they need to know about this UNKNOWN GOD?

1. He made everything – v24
2. (therefore) he is Lord of *heaven and earth*
3. Does not live in temples made by human hands – v24
4. Not served by human hands (as if he needed anything!) v25
5. WHY NOT? Because he is the SOURCE of everything we could possibly offer to him! Our very lives! Every breath! Everything!
6. Made every nation of mankind from one man – v26
7. Governs over where they live and over every minute that they live – v26

WHY did God do this?

V27, because he wanted people to know him: that they might seek/reach out/ find him

And if that sounds vague and airy-fairy, look at the end of v27 – God is not far from each one of us. Just as he made each one of us and wants us to know him, he has given us plenty of clues for knowing how to find him. People are born with a sense that they came from somewhere/ that they have a purpose/ that they have a reason for being

Ecc 3:11 - He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart

Rom 1: 19-20 - what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. **20**For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

So – worshipping idols is WRONG! An insult to God!
So, the crunch: v30-31 - read

Illustration: Stan Dale – missionary to Irian Jaya, martyred in 1968 – had proclaimed Christ, starting with Ecc 3:11 – persuaded them to burn their idols. Many were converted AFTER he was killed by their arrows...

Application: The gospel message is grounded in creation: God made us and deserves to rule our lives

The gospel is grounded in the person and work of Jesus. Son of God/ human Life/ death/ res'n/ ascension/ coming back to judge. The resurrection is the linchpin, the proof God has given us that the rest is true. THEREFORE – REPENT!

Not philosophical argument, but community, virtuous life, authentic

Conclusion: v32-34 – Three possible responses

32When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." **33**At that, Paul left the Council. **34**A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Three possible responses

Some sneered – v32

Some wanted to know more – v32

Some believed...- v33

Proclaim the message,

Because it is right!

Because some will believe!

Illustration: Look around. Everyone here who trusts in Jesus as Saviour and Lord heard it from somebody...

Application: BE that somebody for somebody else. Because it is right

Because some will believe!

Extreme Missionary

IRIAN JAYA: STANLEY ALBERT DALE

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men. Ecclesiastes 3:11

One by one the arrows struck his flesh, and one by one Stanley Albert Dale pulled them out and broke the cane shafts over his knee. The blood flowed from his many wounds and onto the riverbank. The screaming Yali warriors feared that the white man, or duong, was immortal.

Already, the Yali in another village had tried to kill Dale. They were frightened by his message, for his followers had burned their traditional idols and places of spirit worship. They had also shot Dale, but the duong had walked away and completely healed.

Dale had come to the mountains of Irian Jaya (today's Indonesia) in the 1960s to share Christ's love. Now facing hundreds of screaming warriors, he pulled arrows out of his body as fast as they pierced his skin. These Yali had been warned that the Spirit inside him was very powerful. Finally, Dale and the other missionary fell. More than sixty broken arrows were piled at Dale's feet. The warriors then dismembered his body parts for fear that they would rise again.



The Yali thought that would be the end of the gospel message in their valley, but it was not. Other Christians came, and many of the same warriors who had fired arrows into Dale's body became believers. The duong who would not die now celebrates Jesus alongside his own converted murderers.

Although the Yali thought Dale's earthly body was immortal, it was actually his soul that would not die. The missionaries who followed in Dale's wake helped the Yali understand eternity. They shared God with the Yali. Think for a moment about what events, people, and things took the bulk of your time this past week. Certainly, the practicalities of life call us to deal with things that are hardly eternal issues: dirty diapers, ringing phones, dry cleaning, and soccer practice. However, Dale's story reminds us to prioritize things that matter for eternity. What part of your daily life does have eternal significance? If you don't make time for it, who will?