Growing Character Together: Insights for Parents

Week 34 | Courage

Paul on Mars Hill

BIG QUESTION

How will you find the wisdom, power, and courage to make Jesus known?

VIRTUE

COURAGE: God’s power for you to overcome fear

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Acts 17:16-34

When Paul began preaching to the Greeks in Athens, he had an audience peculiarly interested in new ideas. Athens was the birthplace of philosophy. In addition to several established schools there, it was a culturally normative habit for educated men to meet in public spaces to discuss philosophy—hence Luke’s description of the Athenians as “doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21). To the Greek, theology was a part of philosophy, and both philosophical schools of the Epicureans and the Stoics had their own teachings about what they called god or the gods. However, these schools of thought did not teach about the personal qualities of a particular divine being—which Paul did.

The Athenians also had a centuries-old law that no one was allowed to introduce a new god that had not been approved by the city. When the Athenians determined that Paul was “advocating foreign gods” (Acts 17:18), they took him to the council of Athenian elders, the Areopagus (the name refers to both the council and the place they met). They asked Paul to explain this teaching to them so they could determine if this “new god” was going to be accepted into the Athenian pantheon (and if he or she would need a temple and if Paul as the herald of the new god would pay for it). If this council did not admit the new god, then Paul would have to stop preaching or be tried for breaking the law.

Paul’s response to the council quite upsets their expectations. First, he tells them that he is preaching no new god, but rather a god whom they already worship in ignorance (Acts 17:23). Second, he declares that this god, being God, needs no temple from them (Acts 17:24-25). He supports this argument by quoting two different Greek poets, Epimenides Knossos and Aratus of Soli (Acts 17:27-28). In ancient Greece, the poets were considered to be inspired by the gods, so quoting them was comparable to quoting Scripture. However, when Paul mentioned the resurrection as proof of Jesus’ divinity, he came up against resistance from both the council and the philosophers. The Areopagus had been founded on the very premise that there is no resurrection (indicating the need for the council’s judgment before a person dies). Many among the philosophers scorned the body as a corrupted prison for the soul, and so scorned the concept of being returned to it after death. Paul draws a line in the sand that only the “unknown god” could help the Greeks cross.

Scripture: <https://live.bible.is/bible/ENGNIV/ACT/17?audio_type=audio>

Experience It.

Imagine being Paul in Athens. While walking through the city, you note the temples to Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and many other gods. What do you feel, and why?

*Hint: Answers will vary. Paul was greatly distressed by the idolatry in the city. We might be equally distressed, or more curious about what the Greeks worshipped and why. We also can have “itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3).*

Internalize It.

Paul was in Athens waiting for his companions Silas and Timothy. Why did he start preaching to the Athenians before they arrived?

*Hint: Paul was distressed by the idolatry of Athens (Acts 17:16). These were signs that the Athenians had a desire to worship but were worshipping the wrong things. Because he loved people and loved Jesus, he wanted such people to know about the God who was truly worthy of their worship.*

Activate It.

Like the Athenians, many people you know aren’t familiar with the Bible. How can you communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to them anyway?

*Hint: Answers will vary. One option would be to use Paul’s strategy: become familiar with their beliefs and look for points where they’re already in agreement as starting points for discussion. We should also show them Jesus’ love before talking further about our faith.*

CHRIST CONNECTION

Like the Greeks with their altar to an unknown god, many people throughout the world recognize that there is a god out there whom they should honor, but do not know who He is or how He would like to be honored. The Lord of the Bible is that God. He has made Himself known to us through His son Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead and who has been given all authority to judge both the living and the dead (Acts 17:31; Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1). But we do not need to dread this judgment for Jesus has invited us to repent from evil and enjoy Him forever in resurrected life.

FAMILY MEMORY VERSE

“For in him we live and move and have our being.”(Acts 17:28a)

PRAYER

Lord God, who is above all nations and peoples, thank You for Your love. Thank You for Your son, who calls all nations to Him. Help us to be His faithful and courageous witnesses, making Him known to everyone we know. We can do this only through your power, and so we ask for that power in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen. 