

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens

Acts 17:1-34

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 17 shows Paul preaching in three cities and reveals much about Scripture, the gospel, the nature of God, idolatry, and judgment. What is doctrinally at stake includes the authority of Scripture and the call to test all teaching by it, the necessity of Christ's suffering and resurrection, the nature of the one true God over against idols, faithful engagement with a skeptical culture, and the universal call to repent in light of the coming judgment by the risen Christ.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on the climax of Paul's Areopagus sermon: God commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day to judge the world by the man He appointed, and He has given assurance by raising Him from the dead (vv. 30-31). Teach the universal call to repentance, the certainty of judgment, Christ as the appointed judge, and the resurrection as God's proof. Teach also the nature of the true God against idolatry and the noble Berean model of testing all things by Scripture.

Yet aim at the heart. This chapter calls students to be noble Bereans who search the Scriptures, to let the gospel turn their world upside down, to tear down their modern idols, to engage their skeptical culture wisely and winsomely, and to live ready for the judgment of the risen Christ. Help them become discerning, surrendered, ready disciples.

Question 1

Student Question:

The Bereans were commended as more noble because they received the word with eagerness yet examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (v. 11). What does this teach about the authority of Scripture and about how we should test the teaching we receive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke holds up the Bereans as a model, calling them more noble than the Thessalonians. Their nobility lay in a beautiful combination: they received the word with eagerness, with open and willing hearts, and yet they examined the Scriptures daily to verify what they were taught. Eager but not gullible, open but not undiscerning.

This teaches the supreme authority of Scripture. The Bereans tested even the preaching of an apostle against the written word of God. Scripture is the standard by which all teaching is to be

measured. Even good teachers can err, but the word of God is true, and it is the final court of appeal for every claim about God and salvation.

It also teaches how we should receive teaching: neither with blind acceptance nor with cynical suspicion, but with eager hearts and open Bibles. We are to test everything and hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21), to be discerning, examining what we hear against the Scriptures. This guards us from error and grounds our faith in God's word rather than in human authority.

Help students embrace the Berean model. In an age of countless voices, teachers, and claims, the safest and most noble path is to receive truth eagerly while testing all of it by Scripture. This requires that we actually know the Scriptures, searching them ourselves rather than simply trusting whatever we are told. The open, searching, Scripture-anchored heart is protected from deception and rooted in truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The supreme authority of Scripture as the standard for all teaching
- Eager reception combined with careful examination (v. 11)
- Testing everything and holding fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21)
- Scripture as the final court of appeal, above human teachers
- Knowing the Scriptures ourselves as protection from error

Discussion Prompts

- What made the Bereans more noble than the Thessalonians?
- Why must we test all teaching against Scripture?
- How can we receive truth eagerly while still examining it carefully?

Question 2

Student Question:

The Bereans searched the Scriptures themselves rather than simply accepting what they were told (v. 11). Do you examine the teaching you receive against God's word, or tend to accept things uncritically? How could you become more like the Bereans in your own study of Scripture?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Berean example presses a personal question. Do I search the Scriptures for myself, or do I simply accept whatever I am taught, whether from a preacher, a book, a podcast, or the culture around me? Many believers hold beliefs they have never tested against the word.

Invite honest reflection. How do I handle the teaching I receive? Am I discerning, checking it against Scripture, or do I accept things uncritically because they sound good, come from someone I like, or fit what I already think? Undiscerning acceptance leaves us vulnerable to error.

Becoming more like the Bereans requires actually knowing and searching the Scriptures. We cannot test teaching against a word we do not know. This means regular, personal study of the Bible, growing familiar enough with God's word that we can recognize what aligns with it and what does not.

Encourage one concrete step toward Berean discernment. Perhaps it is to begin a regular plan of Bible reading, to look up and verify what we are taught, to study a key doctrine for ourselves, or to ask of every claim, what does the Scripture actually say? The noble path is an eager heart joined to a searching, Scripture-saturated mind.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal searching of the Scriptures
- The danger of uncritical acceptance of teaching
- Knowing the word as the basis for discernment
- Regular personal study as the path to Berean nobility

Discussion Prompts

- Do you examine teaching against God's word or accept it uncritically?
- What beliefs have you never really tested against Scripture?
- How could you become more like the Bereans in your study?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Thessalonica Paul reasoned from the Scriptures, proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead (vv. 2-3). Why was it necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise, and how does this show the gospel is grounded in the Scriptures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's method in Thessalonica was to reason from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that this Jesus is the Christ. The gospel he preached was not a novelty but the fulfillment of what the Scriptures had foretold.

Why was it necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise? Because this was God's plan, foretold throughout the Old Testament. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the pierced one of Psalm 22, the holy one who would not see corruption in Psalm 16, all pointed to a Messiah who would suffer and rise. Jesus Himself taught that the Christ had to suffer these things and enter into His glory (Luke 24:26, 46). The cross and resurrection were not accidents but necessities in God's saving plan.

This shows that the gospel is grounded in the Scriptures. Paul did not ask people to believe on his own authority; he opened the Scriptures and demonstrated that Jesus fulfilled them. The gospel rests on the solid foundation of God's revealed word and God's foretold plan, accomplished in history.

Help students see the importance of this grounding. Our faith is not a leap in the dark or a private feeling; it rests on God's word and God's acts in history, the foretold and accomplished suffering and resurrection of the Christ. The cross and resurrection are the necessary heart of the gospel, planned by God and proved from the Scriptures.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The necessity of Christ's suffering and resurrection in God's plan (Luke 24:26, 46)
- The cross and resurrection foretold throughout the Old Testament
- The gospel grounded in the Scriptures, not human authority
- Faith resting on God's word and acts in history

Discussion Prompts

- Why was it necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise?
- How does Paul ground the gospel in the Scriptures?
- Why does it matter that our faith rests on God's revealed plan?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul's opponents complained that the Christians had turned the world upside down (v. 6). Has the gospel turned your world upside down, reordering your priorities, values, and loyalties? In what area is it still calling you to be turned?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The accusation was meant as a complaint, but it was unintentional praise. The gospel really does turn the world upside down, overturning old loyalties, reordering values, and challenging the way things have always been. Where it takes root, it changes everything.

This raises a personal question. Has the gospel turned my world upside down, or have I tamed it into something that fits comfortably alongside my existing priorities and loyalties? A gospel that changes nothing has not really been received. True faith reorders our values, allegiances, use of time and money, relationships, and ambitions around Christ.

Invite honest reflection. In what ways has the gospel genuinely reordered my life, and in what ways have I kept it from doing so? Are there areas where my priorities, values, or loyalties still look just like the world's, untouched by the upside-down kingdom of Christ?

Encourage students to identify an area still awaiting the gospel's overturning. Perhaps it is how they handle money, status, or success; how they treat enemies; what they live for; where they find security. The gospel is still calling, turning our world right-side up by turning it upside down, reordering everything around the crucified and risen Lord. Where does it still need to do its overturning work in you?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel overturning old loyalties and reordering values
- A gospel that changes nothing as a gospel not truly received
- True faith reordering priorities and allegiances around Christ
- The ongoing, overturning work of the gospel in the believer

Discussion Prompts

- Has the gospel turned your world upside down?
- Where do your priorities or loyalties still look like the world's?
- In what area is the gospel still calling you to be turned?

Question 5

Student Question:

In Athens Paul proclaimed the true God, the Creator who does not live in temples, needs nothing, gives life to all, and in whom we live and move and have our being (vv. 24-28). What does Paul teach about the nature of the true God, and how does this expose the emptiness of idols?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Faced with a city full of idols, Paul proclaimed the one true God in rich terms. He is the Creator who made the world and everything in it; the Lord of heaven and earth who does not live in temples made by man; the self-sufficient God who needs nothing, since He gives to all life and breath and everything; the sovereign who made every nation and determines their times and places; and the One who is near, in whom we live and move and have our being, and whose offspring we are.

This portrait exposes the emptiness of idolatry. If God is the Creator, He cannot be contained in temples or represented by images of gold, silver, or stone shaped by human craft (v. 29). If He needs nothing, He cannot be served as though He depended on our offerings. If He gives life to all and is near to all, then idols, which are dead, made things, are absurd substitutes for the living God. Idolatry shrinks the infinite Creator down to something we can manage and manipulate.

Paul's teaching corrects every distorted view of God. The true God is transcendent (above and beyond creation, not contained by it) and yet immanent (near to us, sustaining our very breath).

He is the self-existent Creator and the present sustainer of all. To worship anything less, or anything made, is to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images and lies (Romans 1:22-23).

Help students grasp the greatness of God. The God of the gospel is not a tribal deity, a force, or an idol we can control, but the Creator and sustainer of all, near to each of us yet infinitely above us. To know this God rightly is to abandon all idols and to worship Him alone in reverence and trust.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as Creator and Lord of heaven and earth (v. 24)
- God as self-sufficient, needing nothing, giving life to all (v. 25)
- God as sovereign over the nations (v. 26)
- God as near, sustaining our very life (vv. 27-28)
- Idolatry exposed as shrinking the Creator to a made thing (v. 29; Romans 1:22-23)
- God as both transcendent and immanent

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul teach about the nature of the true God?
- How does this expose the emptiness of idols?
- How does knowing God rightly free us from idolatry?

Question 6

Student Question:

The Athenians filled their city with idols, substitutes for the living God (vv. 16, 23). What are the idols in your own life, the things you treat as ultimate, look to for security, or serve in God's place? How is God calling you to tear them down?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's spirit was provoked by the idols of Athens, but idolatry is not confined to ancient statues. An idol is anything we put in God's place, anything we treat as ultimate, look to for security and meaning, or serve as though it were god. Modern idols are usually invisible but no less real.

Invite honest reflection. What are the idols in my life? They may be money, success, career, comfort, approval, relationships, control, reputation, pleasure, or even good things turned into ultimate things. We can detect our idols by asking what we most fear losing, what we look to for security and identity, and what we sacrifice most for.

Idolatry is subtle and serious. It is the human heart's default, exchanging the Creator for created things (Romans 1:25). Our idols always disappoint, because they cannot bear the weight of our

worship, and they slowly enslave us. The first commandment, to have no other gods, addresses the deepest issue of the heart.

Encourage students to name and tear down an idol. This is the work of repentance, turning from the false gods we have served back to the living God who alone deserves our worship and can satisfy our hearts. What is the idol God is calling you to dethrone, so that He may have His rightful place as the one true God of your life?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry as putting anything in God's place
- Modern idols of money, approval, control, and good things made ultimate
- Exchanging the Creator for created things (Romans 1:25)
- Idols disappointing and enslaving the heart
- Repentance as turning from idols to the living God

Discussion Prompts

- What are the idols in your own life?
- What do you most fear losing or look to for security?
- How is God calling you to tear down an idol and give Him His rightful place?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul engaged the Athenian thinkers thoughtfully, starting with their altar and their poets, yet he did not compromise the gospel of the resurrection and judgment (vv. 22-31). What can we learn from how Paul engaged a skeptical, idol-filled culture with the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's approach at the Areopagus is a masterclass in engaging a skeptical culture. He took the Athenians seriously, observing their religiosity, noting their altar to an unknown god, even quoting their own poets. He found points of contact and started where they were, building a bridge to the gospel.

Yet he did not compromise the message. Having built the bridge, he walked straight across it to the hard truths: the folly of idolatry, the command to repent, the coming judgment, and the resurrection of Christ, the very things his audience found most offensive. He was winsome in approach but uncompromising in content.

This models faithful cultural engagement. We are to understand the people we speak to, find genuine points of connection, speak with respect and intelligence, and meet people where they are, as Paul did. But we are not to water down the gospel to make it palatable. The bridge of

understanding leads to the unchanging message of Christ crucified, risen, and coming in judgment.

Help students hold both. Some Christians are uncompromising but harsh, alienating people needlessly; others are winsome but compromising, surrendering the offensive truths of the gospel. Paul shows a better way: be thoughtful, respectful, and culturally aware, and be utterly faithful to the message. Engage the skeptic with wisdom and love, and tell them the truth, even the parts they will resist.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Engaging the culture thoughtfully, finding genuine points of contact (vv. 22-28)
- Meeting people where they are while building a bridge to the gospel
- Refusing to compromise the offensive truths of the gospel (vv. 30-31)
- Winsome in approach, uncompromising in content
- Faithful witness combining wisdom, respect, and truth

Discussion Prompts

- How did Paul engage the Athenian culture wisely?
- How did he avoid compromising the gospel?
- What can we learn for engaging skeptics today?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul spoke the truth of the gospel to skeptics and idolaters with both wisdom and boldness (vv. 22-31). How do you engage the unbelievers and the skeptical culture around you? Where do you need more wisdom, more boldness, or both?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's example invites us to examine our own engagement with unbelievers and the skeptical culture around us. We live among people who do not share our faith and a culture often indifferent or hostile to the gospel, and how we engage them matters.

Invite honest reflection. How do I engage unbelievers? Do I withdraw and avoid them, keeping the gospel to myself? Do I engage but harshly, winning arguments and losing people? Do I engage but timidly, never quite getting to the truth? Or do I, like Paul, combine wisdom and boldness, meeting people thoughtfully while speaking the truth?

Most of us lean one way or the other. Some need more boldness, having grown silent or fearful, never speaking the truth that could save. Others need more wisdom, being blunt or argumentative in ways that push people away. Paul models the union of both: bold enough to preach repentance and resurrection, wise enough to do it with respect and skill.

Encourage students toward growth in their weaker area. Where do I need more boldness to actually speak, and where do I need more wisdom to speak well? Ask God for both. The skeptical world around us needs Christians who will engage it, neither hiding nor alienating, but speaking the truth in love with the wisdom and boldness Paul displayed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Engaging unbelievers rather than withdrawing or alienating
- The union of wisdom and boldness in witness
- Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)
- Growth in one's weaker area, whether boldness or wisdom

Discussion Prompts

- How do you engage the unbelievers and skeptics around you?
- Do you tend to withdraw, alienate, or stay timid?
- Where do you need more wisdom, more boldness, or both?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul declared that God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day to judge the world by the man He appointed, and He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead (vv. 30-31). What does this teach about the universal call to repent, the coming judgment, and the role of the resurrection?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, the climax of Paul's sermon and a compact statement of truths every person must reckon with. Three great realities stand out: the universal call to repent, the certainty of judgment, and the resurrection as God's proof.

First, the universal call to repent. God now commands all people everywhere to repent. This is not a suggestion or an invitation only; it is a command from the Creator to every human being without exception. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now, in the light of the gospel, He calls all people to turn from their sins and their idols to Him. No one is exempt; repentance is required of all.

Second, the certainty of judgment. The reason for the command is that God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness. Judgment is not a vague possibility but a fixed appointment. There is a day set on God's calendar when every person will give account, and the judgment will be righteous, perfectly just, missing nothing, showing no partiality. This sobering certainty underlies the urgency of the call to repent.

Third, the judge and the proof. God will judge the world by a man whom He has appointed, the Lord Jesus Christ. The One who was judged unjustly at the cross will Himself be the judge of all (John 5:22-27). And God has given assurance, proof, to everyone by raising Him from the dead. The resurrection is God's public guarantee that Jesus is who He claimed to be, that His words are true, and that He will indeed return to judge. The empty tomb is the evidence on which the certainty of judgment rests.

Hold these together for students. Because God is the holy Creator, because a day of righteous judgment is fixed, because the risen Christ is the appointed judge, and because the resurrection proves it all, the only fitting response is repentance, turning from sin and idols to the living God through His Son. This is the message for all people everywhere, including us. We do not merely admire the resurrection; we let it summon us to repentance and ready us for the judgment to come.

Pastorally, this is both sobering and gracious. Sobering, because judgment is certain and universal; none of us can ignore it. Gracious, because God commands repentance precisely so that we may be ready, and because the same risen Christ who will judge is the Savior who died to save. The fixed day of judgment is a reason not for despair but for repentance, while there is still time. Help students live in the light of that day, repentant, ready, and resting in the risen Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal command to all people everywhere to repent (v. 30)
- A fixed day of righteous judgment for the world (v. 31)
- Christ as the appointed judge of all (John 5:22-27)
- The resurrection as God's proof and assurance of coming judgment (v. 31)
- Repentance as the fitting response to judgment and the risen Christ
- Judgment certain and universal, repentance urgent and gracious

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God commands all people everywhere to repent?
- How does the resurrection give assurance of the coming judgment?
- How should the certainty of judgment shape the way you live now?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole chapter, the noble Bereans, the upside-down gospel, the true God against idols, and the call to repent before the coming judgment, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to respond, in searching the Scriptures, tearing down an idol, witnessing wisely, or living ready, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 17 calls us to be noble Bereans who search the Scriptures, to let the gospel turn our world upside down, to tear down our idols and worship the true God, to engage our culture wisely and boldly, and to live ready for the judgment of the risen Christ.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to begin searching the Scriptures more diligently, to let the gospel reorder a priority, to tear down a specific idol, to engage an unbeliever with wisdom and boldness, or to live more soberly in light of the coming judgment.

Keep the focus on the risen Christ at the center. Every theme in this chapter, the Scriptures fulfilled, the true God, the call to repent, the judgment to come, points to Him, crucified, risen, and returning. Transformation comes through responding rightly to Him.

Close by reminding students that the same gospel that turned the ancient world upside down, that confronted the idols of Athens, and that calls all people to repent is at work in them, reordering their lives, dethroning their idols, and readying them for the day of the risen Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to the Scriptures, the true God, and the call to repent
- Letting the gospel reorder priorities and dethrone idols
- Wise and bold witness in a skeptical culture
- Living ready for the judgment of the risen Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this chapter?
- What specific step toward searching Scripture, tearing down an idol, witnessing, or living ready will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?