

Acts 17:16-34

Aim of lesson

To show the power and courage with which Paul preached the gospel wherever he went.

Background study

Study the background of ancient Greece at that time, and find a suitable map, and pictures of the Areopagus and its buildings.

Suggested outline of lesson

The background to Paul's teaching in Athens

In order to make this chapter live for the scholars, it will be necessary to "paint in" the background before bringing out the vitally important lesson of Paul's teaching.

Not discouraged by the happenings at Philippi, or by the persecution that followed him to Thessalonica and Berea, Paul, with the help of the Berean brethren, had reached Athens. While he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, he had time to look around.

Build up for the children a word picture of this busy city: the market-place with its merchants, masters and slaves, soldiers, athletes, and students from the university; the beautiful buildings, sculptures and statues, and the altars and shrines where people stopped to place offerings and to pray to their gods. Athens was overlooked by the Acropolis, crowned by the magnificent building of the Parthenon with its enormous statue of Athena, the "goddess" of wisdom. It was to seek wisdom that students came from many countries to this city, and Paul must have seen and heard them discussing and debating with the philosophers. Among these were the Stoics who believed that by their own efforts of rigid self-discipline they could attain wisdom and perfection, and the Epicureans who believed that the pursuit of pleasure would bring them the happiness and satisfaction they sought.

Paul taught in the market place

No wonder Paul's spirit was stirred up within him. Knowing that there is only one God, the source of all wisdom, he felt compelled to speak to as many people as possible, to teach them the truth about God and his purpose. He went to the synagogue, as was his practice in all cities, and to the market-place, where he spoke to anyone who would listen. Among those who heard him speaking were the Stoics and Epicureans who, intrigued by what he was saying, invited him to address them on Mars Hill (Areopagus) - the ancient court of Athens where debating and discussion took place.

Paul, the scholar, addressed the Athenian scholars

Speak to the children about the courage it must have needed for Paul to stand up in a foreign city, in front of people who were known throughout the world for their wisdom, and tell them how little they really knew. Paul himself was a scholar and would have been able to address them in their own language. He must also have had some knowledge of their literature since he quoted from their poets. Paul always had the ability to get through to his audience by speaking in terms they could understand. In this instance he gained the attention of the Athenians by speaking of the idols they worshipped, especially one altar that he had seen, inscribed to an “unknown god”. Here was his opening to preach the gospel. “I will tell you,” he said, “about the God you call unknown.” No doubt Paul’s hearers listened with interest to what he had to say.

Many heard, a few believed

Paraphrase Paul’s speech in words the children will understand, and show how he reached a climax in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. Up to this point he had held their attention, but at the mention of someone being raised from the dead some of his hearers scoffed; others wanted to hear more at some future time. It seems that Paul did not stay long in Athens, but his preaching did have some effect because a few people were converted to Christianity and we even know the names of two of them.

Relevance to the children’s lives

God is the Creator of the world and everything in it. He provides us with everything we need. Isn’t it right, then, that we should love him, trust him and do as he asks? How can we do this?

Worksheets

The solution to the code is ‘For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed’.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we worship you, our Creator, and thank you for speaking to us through the Bible. Help us to obey you so that we may please you and find wisdom and happiness. Amen.

Memory verse

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man” (Acts 17:24).