

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs

Feeding the Hungry: *Presenting the Truth*

Acts 17:16–34

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Imagine yourself preparing to deliver a message to a group of unbelieving college students. They have arrived on campus from a variety of backgrounds—some are eager to learn and expand their minds, others are present simply to “live it up” while they’re young. But you have been given a rare opportunity to share the claims of Scripture with these young minds. How do you prepare? What would you say? What would be your approach to first gain their hearing, then keep their attention to the end?



Whetting Your Appetite: Getting Started

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul found himself facing that kind of rare occasion. Having made his way through Athens, teeming with commerce and awash in idolatry, he most certainly had his work cut out for him. But using the techniques of observation (looking around and making mental notes of what he saw), interpretation (understanding how steeped in idol worship the Athenian people had become), and correlation (comparing the worldview of the Greek culture to the claims of the Old Testament), Paul ascended Mars Hill ready to apply the truth about God to a waiting and curious audience. It doesn't get any better than that!

Using Paul's encounter on Mars Hill as a model, we will learn several helpful principles for *putting everything together*. We'll see how Paul skillfully combined all the necessary ingredients in order to serve a nourishing spiritual meal to the Athenian elite who didn't even realize how starved they were for truth.

Let's allow the story to unfold on its own. Read carefully through Acts 17:16–34, which is printed on the next page for your convenience. Feel free to read this passage in your copy of the Scriptures if you prefer. You might consider reading it in a couple of translations to broaden your perspective.

Quotable

The apostle Paul built verbal bridges to lead his audience from where they were to the place he wanted them to go. You get there with words. Words that are interesting, understandable, reasonable, and logical. Build bridges with your words.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. ¹⁷ He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

¹⁸ He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?” Others said, “He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.”

¹⁹ Then they took him to the high council of the city. “Come and tell us about this new teaching,” they said. ²⁰ “You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” ²¹ (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

²² So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, ²³ for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.

²⁴ “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, ²⁵ and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. ²⁶ From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

²⁷ “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ²⁹ And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

³⁰ “God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. ³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” ³³ That ended Paul’s discussion with them,

³⁴ but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

What are some of your initial observations? Where was Paul? Based on this text, write down how you would describe the setting. Try to use words that employ all the major senses. What would Paul have heard? What aromas may he have encountered? What would he have seen?



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How did it come about that Paul was able to address this audience of philosophers and scholars? Look closely at the text to explain your answer.

This would be a good time to consult a Bible dictionary. Look up the word *Athens*. Read through what is written about first-century Athens and the Greek culture of that time. Next look up *Mars Hill* and also the word *Areopagus*. Also, in a reliable Bible commentary on the book of Acts, find the section on Acts 17. Take a few minutes to read carefully what is written about the context in which Paul delivered this remarkable speech on Mars Hill. What details strike you as particularly interesting? Write down how you might incorporate those details into your lesson.

Who were the *Epicureans* and the *Stoics*? Take some time to do a little study on these two groups of philosophers. Look each one up in a Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia. Or do a Web search, typing into the search box “who were the Epicureans and Stoics on Mars Hill?”

Below, write down what you learn.

What characteristics of Epicurean and Stoic thought are present today?



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How might you begin to build a bridge of understanding from where your audience is to what they will discover in the Scriptures?

Now using Paul's approach, examine five specific strategies he used to build a bridge from where the Athenians were to where he wanted them to go.

1. *Paul started where they were* (Acts 17:22–23). Paul resisted heading straight to the biblical truth about the God he knew personally through his relationship with Jesus Christ. He started where his audience were by recognizing that they were “religious” and surrounded by many gods.
2. *Paul used the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar* (17:23–24). Paul turned his listeners' attention to the “god” they had designated as “unknown” by claiming a personal relationship with their unknown god, thus piquing their interest! This is the principle of building bridges with your words.
3. *Paul developed his theme clearly and logically* (17:24–28). Paul patiently and logically moved his listeners toward a clearer understanding of the fact that the god they had designated as “unknown” was actually the God who was knowable and desired a relationship with them! Notice Paul's logical progression:
 - God as Creator—He cannot be contained. (17:24)
 - God as Originator—He has no inherent needs. (17:25)
 - God is intelligent—He has a definite plan. (17:26–27)
 - God as Sustainer—He is not dependent on anything. (17:28)
4. *Paul held his audience's attention with relevant illustrations* (17:28). Paul drew from Greek literature and culture, even quoting a popular poet in order to illustrate the truths he proclaimed.



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Helpful Hint

When thinking about your audience, it would be helpful to do some personal study on their background and orientation. For instance, if you are preparing to speak to a group of 18- to 25-year-olds, spend some time reviewing the social media posts of college students you may know. Invite some college students from your church to lunch, and probe them with questions. Ask about what concerns them, who their heroes are, and what types of music they enjoy. Make some mental notes or write down your insights. These observations can become the source of valuable illustrations that will ensure your talk remains interesting and relevant.

5. *Paul applied his message personally and effectively* (Acts 17:29–31). Paul put himself in the robes and sandals of his listeners. Once he gained a hearing, he set the proverbial hook and proclaimed the truth of repentance and resurrection!



YOUR TURN IN THE KITCHEN

Feeding the hungry isn't always easy. Paul on Mars Hill made it look pretty easy, didn't he? But your experience may not always line up with all the conditions Paul faced in Athens. Yet, every audience has a unique mind-set worth considering as you prepare to present the Scriptures to them. Now it's your turn to put it all together.

1. Find an opportunity to present a passage of Scripture and its meaning to someone else or a group. We already discussed one possibility: a group of curious but unbelieving college students. Follow the model of *observation*, *interpretation*, *correlation*, and *application* as you make your way through the Scriptures. Remember to find yourself in the story and search out relevant and personal illustrations.
2. Carefully consider your audience, using the example of Paul preaching to the Athenian audience on Mars Hill in Acts 17. Make your way back through the five strategies Paul used and that we discussed in this message.



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- Remember the spiritual maturity level of your listeners. Are they mature believers, new Christians, unbelieving but interested seekers?
- Use the familiar to build a bridge to the unfamiliar. Use everyday examples to connect your listeners to something they have never considered.
- Develop your theme carefully and logically. Keep your progression clear and simple.
- Use personal stories and illustrations to keep your lesson interesting. Tie the truths of God's Word directly to your listeners so they feel the impact on their own lives.
- Apply the message personally and effectively. Call your listeners to action and encourage them to respond.

Don't forget to pray! What you ultimately need and desire is for God to prepare the hearts of your listeners prior to their encounter with His Word and to move them to respond in obedience and surrender once they have heard the message from the Scriptures! Don't forget to offer to the Lord a prayer of thanksgiving for His faithfulness.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for the wonderful privilege of searching the Scriptures and applying what I learn to my life. I ask that You will graciously prepare me to prepare nutritious and life-changing spiritual meals for those You have called me to serve. Glorify Your name through the ministry of Your Word, and draw those who don't yet know and love You to bring their lives willingly and humbly to Your Son, Jesus Christ. In His great name I pray. Amen.

Bon appétit!



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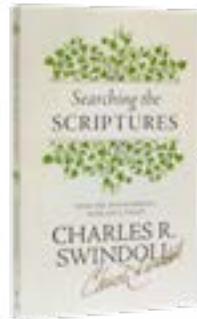
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When the book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* was written, the format for this STS study was developed by Charles R. Swindoll and Rhome van Dyck and published at the end of chapter ten under the title “Your Turn in the Kitchen.” For the 2016 broadcast, this STS study was expanded with additional material by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Charles R. Swindoll based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts.



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