

ACTS

GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 6

CONVERSATION STARTER

If you could instantly become an expert in any one field of study or topic, what would you choose and why?

PAUL BEFORE THE GODS OF ATHENS

This week, Paul finds himself on a rocky outcropping overlooking the imposing Parthenon in Athens, a temple to the goddess Athena. Athens was the center of wisdom and knowledge in the Greco-Roman world, where new ideas and philosophies were discussed ad nauseam and with gusto. In particular, two schools of thought reigned supreme. The Epicureans thought of divine beings as being far away and uninterested in human life; the gods were ultimately unknowable. So, they erected an altar to the “unknown god,” just in case a deity existed who deserved worship that they didn’t yet know about. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed in a divine force that existed apart from any god. This force, or *logos* as it was sometimes called, was a universal source of wisdom humans could turn to as a guide for how to live.

Which school of thought do you find yourself drawn to? Do you believe in a God that is distant, uninvolved, or unknowable? Or do you view rational thought as the governing principle of the universe—turning to science and logic for answers, as if they are their own form of religion? Spend a moment talking about these two ideas with your group.

Paul paints a different picture. He speaks of a God who created the universe, who isn’t far off but actively involved in the world. He speaks of a divine force that gives life to everything with breath. He shares about a God who isn’t contained by stone buildings and doesn’t need humans to serve Him. He talks of God as a being that is not unknowable but is acutely making Himself known through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In a city filled with false idols, Paul implores the Athenians to repent. His words echo through the generations to us today. While we don't worship gods like Athena, Zeus, or Apollo, we still worship the ideas these gods and others stood for—knowledge, power, war, money, sex, you name it. Paul warns us these empty idols will never be able to save us, they will always leave us wanting. Because there is only one God, and He is neither far off nor unknowable, but the very one who sustains our life each and every day.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. Re-read Acts 16:16-40. Why do you think Paul and Silas didn't seize the opportunity to escape from prison? Are there circumstances you're facing that you'd like to escape? Is it possible God might use your trials for his glory?
3. Great people are usually heroized only in history. Most great leaders of change are received by their peers with mixed reviews; the Apostle Paul is no exception. How would you describe the reception to Paul so far in Acts? Why have some received him with eagerness and others, ready to kill him?
4. This week, we see a group of people whose wealth is threatened by Paul's work (Acts 16:19). Have you ever had a time where your personal wealth and your personal faithfulness were in conflict with each other? Where following Jesus meant you had to give up money or re-consider how you are earning money? What do you do when being faithful to Jesus threatens your financial security?
5. There is a serious culture clash happening in this section, and the Romans seem to feel legitimately threatened by the Gospel and what it had to say about their religion, economy, and government. Should our faith be more disruptive today? Are there ways that you see American Christianity assimilating to culture, instead of remaining distinct?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Paul challenges the Greco-Roman world at multiple points in this week's reading. He calls out idolatry in Athens and the upside-down culture in Thessalonica. In fact, everywhere he goes, Paul seems to stir up controversy both inside and outside the church, in the religious tradition and the socio-economic culture of his day. Just like Paul, we too, are called to be agents of change when it comes to the upside-down parts of our world. We too are called to abstain from the worship of idols—including sex, money, power, war, etc. This is not possible without a thorough examination of what's going on in our own hearts.

A tool used by millions around the world to go about this very task is St. Ignatius's Prayer of Examen. For hundreds of years, this way of praying has been used to invite God into our lives. We invite you to find a quiet, peaceful place wherever you are and follow the steps of the Prayer of Examen below.

1. Invite God to be with you where you are: Pray, *“God, would you meet me in this place. Thank you for ____.”* List at least five things. Be specific and detailed in the things you are thankful for.
2. Ask, *“God, how are you moving in my life?”*
3. Think through your day. If it is morning, think about the previous day. Ask, *“God, where am I falling into the trap of worshiping the idols or created things of this world instead of the One who created the world?”*
4. Reflect on whatever things God brings to mind, and ask, *“God, help me to see whether I was drawing closer to you or further away at these times.”*
5. As you look toward tomorrow or the day ahead, pray, *“God, show me the specific ways I can partner with you and your plan for my life in this day. Show me how you’re calling me to live differently than the rest of the world, help me to reveal your truth even as I go about the mundane, ordinary moments of life.”*