

# PAUL

## A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

### STUDY FOURTEEN

## Preaching as Paul Preached

*Acts 17:15–34*

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*Paul spoke what he spoke because he felt as he felt. And he felt as he felt because he saw what he saw. Good preachers see what the majority don't see.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**C**HURCHES must be places where pastors preach God's Word, the lost hear God's call, and God's people are comforted by God's grace and challenged to follow God's Son, our Savior.

Sadly, some pastors preach to entertain rather than to declare the message of Christ. They serve enticing munchies to make people feel good instead of a nutritious banquet that feeds their souls. What's the cost of giving people a diet of spiritual junk food? Underdeveloped church members whose faith is too weak to endure persecution, whose convictions are too flimsy to stand against false teaching, and whose lives are too worldly to shine Christ's light.

Pastors who faithfully proclaim God's Word tell people what they *need* to hear, not always what they *want* to hear. They refuse to hand out trifles to people or what Paul termed "catchy opinions that tickle their fancy" (2 Timothy 4:3 MSG). When Paul arrived in Athens, he encountered a city teeming with philosophical experts dishing up the latest ideas—even religious ideas. "Catchy opinions" were the only items on the menu, until Paul spread before them a feast from God's Word.

This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study traces Paul's steps, observations, and words as he entered the intellectually stimulating, culturally sophisticated, lavish—but spiritually dark—city of ancient Athens. There, he faithfully, creatively, and eloquently taught the Word of God. Unsurprisingly, some turned up their noses to it. Some wanted to hear more. But only a few opened their hearts to the risen Christ, and their lives were changed forever.



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## PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare to study God’s Word, orient your heart toward praise with a portion of Edward Perronet’s hymn, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.”

All hail the pow’r of Jesus’ name!  
Let angels prostrate fall;  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
And crown Him Lord of all. . . .

Let every kindred, every tribe  
On this terrestrial ball,  
To Him all majesty ascribe,  
And crown him Lord of all. . . .

O that with yonder sacred throng  
We at His feet may fall!  
We’ll join the everlasting song,  
And crown Him Lord of all!<sup>1</sup>



## TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

On their second missionary journey, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke traveled city to city proclaiming the good news of the crucified and risen Christ. After establishing churches in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul went on to Athens alone and waited for his teammates to rejoin him (Acts 17:15–16). To review the location of these cities, consult the Bible map, “[Paul’s Missionary Journeys](#)” at [insight.org](http://insight.org).

Athens had been the home of the great ancient philosophers—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The opulence and beauty plus the cultural, architectural, and sculptural sophistication of Athens was unmatched. But no amount of intellectual achievement could satisfy the Athenians’ searching hearts. So, to fill their emptiness, the people gorged themselves on idolatry.

Athens had become a junkyard of idols—tens of thousands of stone, wood, and metal idols cut into public buildings, stationed along streets, and memorialized in shrines and temples. These idols outnumbered the city’s human population!

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Can you fathom how Paul, formerly a devoutly monotheistic Jew, and now a zealous Trinitarian Christian, must have felt? Luke records that Paul was “deeply troubled by all the idols” (Acts 17:16). How do other Bible translations describe Paul’s reaction, according to [Acts 17:16](#)? What do you think was at the heart of Paul’s angst?



## Observation: Paul’s Message to the Athenians

Determined to shine a beacon of truth into this dark city, Paul first went where he knew he could gain a hearing. Use your observation skills to join him.<sup>2</sup>

### Paul in the Synagogue—Acts 17:17

Where did Paul initially go to proclaim the name of Jesus, according to the first part of [Acts 17:17](#)? Why did he start here?

He tried to “reason” with the Jews and God-fearing gentiles. The Greek word is *dialegomai*. Look up this word online in *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* at [studylight.org](http://studylight.org). How would you describe his engagement with this audience?

His heart breaking for the lost outside the synagogue walls, Paul took his message to “the public square,” speaking daily to “all who happened to be there” (17:17).

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## Paul at the Marketplace—Acts 17:17–18

According to [Acts 17:17–18](#), where and with whom did Paul proclaim Jesus and the Scriptures?

In the marketplace, Paul debated the [Epicureans](#) and the [Stoics](#). Read about these groups of philosophers in *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* at [studylight.org](http://studylight.org). In a few words, what did followers of these worldviews believe?

Some of them scoffed at Paul, calling him a “babbling” (Acts 17:18), which, in Greek, literally means “seed-picker”—a derogatory term for people who scavenged here and there for ideas. Paul piqued their curiosity, however. What did they say and where did they invite him to speak, according to [17:19–21](#)?

## Paul’s Message on Mars Hill

The Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill, was where the “high council of the city” (Acts 17:19) met to deal with “ethical, cultural, and religious matters, including supervision of education and controlling the many visiting lecturers” (17:19 NET, footnote b.).

Rushed to the site, Paul preached without notes a powerful sermon. In [Acts 17:22–23](#), how did Paul connect with and affirm his audience?

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In *Acts 17:24–26*, Paul introduced the Athenians to the one true God. What key points did Paul make about God’s nature, authority, and works?

The God whom Paul described was unknown to the Athenians—but He is not unknowable. In *17:27–29*, what did Paul say about how we relate to God?

In *17:30–31*, Paul applied his message to each individual. What did he invite his listeners to do to have a personal relationship with God? What vital point did Paul make about Christ—a point that all the apostles made in almost every message that Luke recorded in Acts (see 4:10; 10:40; 13:30; 23:5; 24:21)?

## The High Council’s Response

As Paul finished speaking, his listeners were deeply divided. According to *Acts 17:32–34*, into what three groups did they fall?

*The same thing happens today. Every good sermon is followed either by sneering and rejection or by those who say, “This is fascinating. I’d like to hear what this is about.” —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

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## Interpretation: Paul's Preaching Tools

Paul preached the sermon of a lifetime before the council on Mars Hill. He employed several tools from his intellectual and spiritual toolbelt to make his sermon impactful.

First, *he started where they were*. They all knew about the altar to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17:22). Second, *he used the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar*—the God they worship without knowing is, in fact, “the God who made the world and everything in it” (17:24). Then, Paul laid out his main points about God. Briefly outline Paul's argument in [17:24–29](#).

Finally, *Paul invited his listeners to respond to the truth*. What made his application points in [17:30–31](#) so effective for this audience? Why was it vital for them to see God not only as creator but also as judge? How did seeing God as judge lead them to Jesus?



## Correlation: Preach the Word . . . Avoid Itching Ears

Paul's sermon on Mars Hill reflected what he wrote in his letters to the churches and their leaders. Paul lasered in on a singular mission: proclaiming the crucified, resurrected, and glorified Christ.

What was Paul's charge to Timothy in [2 Timothy 4:1–2](#)? What motivated his charge?

What did Paul warn Timothy about in [4:3–4](#)?

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Paul addressed the same theme in his first letter to Timothy and to the church at Colossae. Read [1 Timothy 4:13, 15–16](#) and [Colossians 1:28–29](#). What did Paul highlight as the essential facets of proclaiming the Word? What did Paul desire to see in every believer's life?

Paul never spoke to entertain—he preached Christ. He never served spiritual junk food—he always served spiritually nutritious meals.

*In the twenty-first century, sermonettes are being delivered. Sermonettes create Christianettes. They lead to spiritual starvation. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



## **Application: Proclaiming the Word like Paul**

Paul was a preaching master! From his example, we can pick up valuable speaking tips for when we share the truths of Scripture.

1. *Always start where your audience is.* When proclaiming the gospel, you become the bridge—taking others from the familiar to the unfamiliar—from where they are to where they need to be.
2. *Always speak the truth without fear.* We need not be impressed nor intimidated by others. Regardless of one's status, financial worth, or level of interest, your task is to fearlessly speak the truth.
3. *Always stay on the subject, and the subject is the triune God—the Father, Son, and Spirit.* Christ is the theme of Scripture—His nature, His plan, His judgment, His resurrection, and His redemption.
4. *Always surrender the results to God.* Once you've communicated the truth, your responsibility has finished. You may continue to pray and maintain interest, but God will handle the rest.

What facets of Paul's sermon on Mars Hill grip you most? Why? How does that motivate you or shape how you proclaim and share the gospel?

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Epicureans are today’s live-for-today hedonists who don’t believe in God or the afterlife. Stoics are today’s moralists who talk about fate—the “universe”—but don’t believe in a personal God or His Son, Jesus. Is there a worldview or philosophy others practice that you’d like to better understand to help prepare you to more effectively proclaim the gospel?

If Paul were speaking to people who follow today’s philosophies, what would he say? How can you use these same truths in your conversations?

*A man must be willing to face the risk of ridicule, the risk of losing wealth, name, and even life, if necessary, in order to be a worthy spokesman for the Lord Christ. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



## A FINAL PRAYER

*Today, Lord, though the sermon ends, the message continues, and it will follow us. We come before You with gratitude in our hearts, with thankfulness for the way You have worked, even in this simple message about a man on whose life Your hand rested firmly. I pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who loves us and gave Himself for us. Amen.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Edward Perronet, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” in *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (n.p.: Word/Integrity, 1997), hymn 43.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, “*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*”

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll’s messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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