

Setting Aside Superstition

Acts 17:22-24

Introducing . . . God, Part 5

A few years ago, the Pew Research Center surveyed 4,000 U.S. adults to identify the ‘supernatural experiences’ many people claim to have experienced in life.

Of those surveyed:

- 29% said they had been in touch with the dead;
- 18% said they had seen or been with a ghost;¹

That’s 47%. An Associated Press poll found that 4 out of 10 Americans who didn’t attend church still believed in angels.

A Gallup poll found that that 3 out of 4 Americans believed in something paranormal. There are other-worldly creatures out there!

One Sunday school in British Columbia tried to set the record straight. When some of her kids raised the subject of fairies being real, she assured the young class that fairies are not real, but only make-believe. One little boy wasn’t too happy about it and he argued back. She stood firm and repeated that fairies were not real. Finally he blurted out, “Fairies are too real! My daddy rides a ferry to Port McNeil every day.” Okay, those ferries are real.

One Gallup poll revealed that 4 out of 10 people believed that houses could be haunted.

That’s a popular belief held by many – that houses can be haunted by the spirits of the deceased – and remember 47% of people think they’ve been in contact with one of them.

Marsha and I moved to Cary 29 years ago and into our rental home with our twin sons. After we lived there for a couple of years, neighbors told us about the former couple who lived there. Evidently the husband murdered his wife, right there in that

very house. They didn’t know exactly what room it was, but they informed us that he killed her in the house . . . that was so nice of them to tell us.

And that little revelation produced, at least for a while, a rather creepy feeling. And it didn’t help that we had already noticed that at times you could hear what clearly sounded like footsteps coming down the hall.

Obviously, the solution for us was the simple truth of scripture that the spirits of unbelievers upon death go to Hades to await the judgment (***Luke 16:23***) and the spirits of believers immediately go to heaven – ***2 Corinthians 5:8 – to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.***

When you die your spirit isn’t gonna linger on earth scaring people. There might be some people you’d really *like* to scare – that could be fun – but you won’t be given the chance.

If Marsha and I had not been believers we would never have lived in that house for 5 years – we would have immediately moved out, claiming it was haunted.

In a New York Times article, entitled, ironically, *Conjuring Up Our Own Gods*, a journalist wrote that more than 90 percent of those who do not belong to any church or religion at all say that they pray [to some divine being] and 39 percent of them pray often, if not weekly. But note this – they are also prone to believe in ghosts and Bigfoot. The article ended by declaring – and I quote – “Americans are *obsessed* with the supernatural.”ⁱⁱ

It’s not a new phenomenon, of course. In the middle ages, the flickering lights of marsh gas were considered the ghosts of departed people or even goblins; the popular view about fireflies was that

they were the souls of deceased, unbaptized infants. Many thought ghosts manipulated human lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

On ancient maps, back before the world had been fully discovered, cartographers – map makers – would put down what they knew, but at the edges of the map, beyond which they had no knowledge or understanding, they would often write the words – quote – “Beyond here, there be dragons.”^{iv}

Frankly, superstition is the bad side of a good thing. It’s the world’s futile attempt to explain the supernatural . . . the truths that every person has stamped on their heart about the realities of a Creator and immortality (*Romans 1 & 2*).

It is up to us as believers to counteract the darkness with the light of the gospel. Paul tells Timothy in *2 Timothy 1:10* that they were effectively to preach and teach the truth about Jesus Christ, who brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

And this is the mission of the Apostle Paul as he enters the very superstitious city of Athens.

In our last study, I pointed out two observations from what Luke tells us in *Acts chapter 17* – which is where I want us to return;

- 1. First of all, Athens was intuitively religious.**
- 2. Secondly, Athens was intellectually curious.**

Today, you can still see the remnants of Athens obsession with the speculations and curiosities of the unseen world.

One author living in the days of Paul said that there were more than 70,000 statues to the gods in Athens; they line the streets, they filled the parks and adorned the temples dedicated to their glory.

There were temples everywhere:

- To Nike – the god of victory;
- To Athena – the goddess of wisdom and strength;
- To Ares – the god of war
- To Hephaistos – the god of craftsmen and sculpture
- To Aphrodite – the goddess of love and beauty
- To Eros – the god of sexual desire (the Romans by the way had their counterpart to Eros – they named him Cupid – and like Eros, they both went around had their bows

and arrows, shooting people to cast on them their spell.

By the way, in Paul’s day all the working classes and trades belonged to guilds – or unions – where they paid dues to their patron god or goddess.

They would have annual feasts where they would offer drink offerings to their patron god for his blessing.

So you can imagine the difficulty of a believer in Athens having to decide whether or not to offend his business partners by not attending the feast in honor of their patron god; the same god who supposedly blessed their business fortune.

I have little doubt that many a believer was kicked out of the guild and deprived of employment because of their lack of political correctness.

As Paul toured this city, he would have been struck by the Acropolis, an ancient citadel built on a rock formation where several prominent buildings were seen from every direction.

The most famous buildings on the Acropolis would have been the Parthenon – the temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, after whom Athens was named.

To this day, the Parthenon is considered the enduring symbol of ancient Greece, to this day. It was a massive building, nearly the length of a football field and five stories high.

Paul would have seen The Odeon of Herod, a famous theatre in full swing when Paul arrived; the theatre was wildly popular – it was also the place for musical concerts and poetry festivals as well as plays.

Paul would have no doubt stopped and studied another temple built with incredible skill and beauty with sculptured columns that formed the porch of a temple dedicated to Athena and Poseidon.

And then – for our primary consideration today – there was the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was a natural stone outcropping nearly 500 feet in the air which served as the outdoor court room for the Supreme Court of Athens.

Today, the names of all but one of these Supreme Court justices have been forgotten. The only one that is remembered is the justice who believed the gospel and was saved – his name, Dionysius, will appear later on in the text.

Just imagine this scene as Paul is taken up a stone stairway to the top of the Areopagus where the council has convened.

It will be up these stairs and on top of this windswept chamber where Paul will have a panoramic view of Athens as he introduces to them, the living God.

He is about to introduce God, and several of His attributes, to a city that was intuitively religious and intellectually curious.

Let me provide a third observation:

1. Athens was inwardly anxious.

With all that it believed, and all that it had done with temples and statues and rituals and religious investments, Athens was still inwardly anxious and insecure.

Let me show you where. Let's pick the narrative back up at *verse 22*. ***And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects .***

By the way, don't overlook this gracious and tactful introduction. ***I observe that you are very religious.*** Paul doesn't say, *I observe that you are very ridiculous* – I observe that you are really superstitious.

No, ***I observe that you are very religious in all respects . . .*** and listen, the Council would have taken that as a really nice compliment.

The Greek phrase can be literally translated, "I observe that you are *fearing the gods* . . . Paul is effectively starting out by saying, *I can see how religiously devoted you are*"

And these men would have probably sat their nodding their heads thinking, "This guy understands us . . . he gets us . . ."

Notice further; ***for while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, "To AN UNKNOWN GOD."***

Athens had discovered so many truths – they were the birthplace of democracy, the home of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle with all their sage advice; but the most important truth of all, had not been discovered.

They fit the description of **2 Timothy 3:7** where Paul describes people as ***always learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.***

The Athenians know there is an unseen world; there is immortality of some shape or form; there is some form of deity out there . . . but since they're not sure who it is, we wanna make sure we don't miss anybody.

They lived in a world of inward anxiety . . . confusion . . . uncertainty.

Travel the word and you will see the same uncertainty played out in every culture.

I recently read of the Hindu practice of Kumari, the belief that the supreme goddess of the cosmos inhabits a young girl's body for a period of time. This Hindu belief, shared by many Buddhists as well, holds that just as the supreme goddess Taleju birthed the cosmos from her womb, she can indwell a carefully selected young girl for a period of time. The young girl becomes a living goddess, worthy of being worshipped as deity.

But the goddess a few years ago caused quite a stir. Evidently, the rules are that under no circumstances is the goddess ever allowed to leave Nepal. She is carefully watched and cared for – typically living in a central palace. But a few years ago, Nepalese authorities were outraged when they discovered that she had been taken, at her approval, to the United States to participate in a documentary that was being filmed about the Kumari tradition.

When she returned home, she received notification that she was now terminated from "her goddess status". In other words, she was no longer worthy of being worshipped as deity.

However, after pressure from the public and her own remorse, the government backed down and agreed that she can stay a goddess if she goes through an intense cleansing process that washes her of the sins of the countries she visited while traveling abroad.^{vi}

Imagine such confusion and insecurity. Listen, if even your goddess has to be cleansed from sin, and can lose her deity, how can any Hindu ever hope to have his own sins cleansed and know they're following the right god?

Here in Athens, with all their spiritual curiosity and religious piety, Paul finds them in the same state of spiritual anxiety.

Notice the end of **verse 23**. ***What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.***

In other words, the god who's name you don't know – whom you worship without knowledge of who He is – I am going to proclaim to you . . . I'm here to tell you who He is.

Now what Paul does here is set the legal stage for his introduction of God.

And one of the things we miss in our speed reading – and speed preaching – is the fact that Paul is engaged in a legal trial. He's not standing up here

before this Supreme Court because he thought it would be a great place to do some evangelism.

Athenian law required that any new religious system and the following of any new god, had to be allowed by the Council.

Josephus, the first century historian, wrote that it was forbidden by Athenian law – and I quote – “and the penalty decreed for any who introduced a foreign god was death.” – end quote.^{vii}

The most famous example of this in Athens was 500 years before Paul arrived in Athens. Socrates had been roaming the streets of Athens teaching his growing band of followers that the gods of Greece were not who everyone believed them to be. And the gods were not all powerful.

He rejected the polytheistic worship of many gods . . . while he didn't follow the truth of one creator God, he didn't follow the superstitions of his culture either – so he was effectively teaching a new religion.

Socrates was brought up on charges of corrupting the young people of Athens and brought to trial on this very hill where the Supreme Court sentenced him to death, by drinking poisonous Hemlock, which he did.

Now watch this; here we are, 500 years later, and Paul references a nearby temple or pedestal, dedicated to the Unknown God and informs them that he is not introducing a new God; he is merely introducing the name and nature of the God they've always wondered about – this Unknown God.

This was absolutely brilliant strategy by Paul. He's claiming to provide a stunning answer to centuries of uncertainty. Now where did these pedestals and altars and temples to the Unknown God come from?

History records for us that 600 years before Paul's historic visit, the city of Athens had been besieged by a terrible plague

People were dying every day and the city was desperate for an answer from the gods. But no answer came – and no cure either.

A famous poet and quasi spiritual guru from the Island of Crete, named Epimenides, came up with solution that there were angry gods – and they were angry because the citizens of Athens had been overlooking them. He didn't exactly know which gods, but that whoever they were – or it was – he was the cause behind the plague.

So Epimenides took a flock of sheep to the top of the hill where Paul was now standing – the Areopagus – Mars Hill – and let the sheep loose.

He instructed the Athenians that whenever any sheep lay down, they were to be sacrificed in the name of the god whose temple was nearest that sheep – it was believed that the sheep would reveal the gods who pouting because of a lack of attention.

So when the sheep were let loose, many of them roamed, grazed and rested in near some temple. The Athenians immediately built an altar and sacrificed it to that god or goddess.

The problem was, one or more of the sheep decided to lay down and take a nap and there wasn't any temple nearby.

The people didn't know what to do – and Epimenides told them to build an altar to the unknown God and sacrifice the sheep upon it.^{viii}

The Athenians would later build a temple and scatter numerous altars around Athens, dedicated to The Unknown God.

And now, if you can imagine it – 600 years later, Paul arrives on the scene and stands on that same Hill says, “I know the name of the unknown God . . . I know who He is . . . and I want to introduce you to Him.”

And Paul will begin to introduce His God at the same point where you have to begin with a pre-Christian world – like Athens and Nepal and America.

You begin with introducing God as the creator of all that is. You begin with Genesis chapter 1 and verse 1. And so Paul begins his declaration of who God is by telling these Athenians the next rather shocking declaration . . . that this Unknown God actually created the universe.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/21/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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i Anne Carey and Veronica Salazar, "What Supernatural Experiences We've Had," *USA Today* (2-8-10)

ii Rodney Stark, *America's Blessings* (Templeton Press, 2013), pp. 28-29; T. M. Luhrmann, "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods," *The New York Times* (10-17-13)

iii "Faith in the Middle Ages," *Christian History*, no. 49.

iv Ed Rowell, in his sermon "Mary—A Song of Trust," *PreachingToday.com*

v Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 729.

vi Binaj Gurubacharya, "Nepal likving goddess' status revoked," <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/august/3082007.html>

vii *Ibid.*, p. 727

viii Wikipedia.com/Unknown God