

# “Fear of the Unknown”

Acts 17:16-34

November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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Some time ago, I was talking to my doctor about the results of a lab test. She said, “Your blood tests revealed that you have *Gilbert’s* syndrome but you have nothing to worry about.”

Did you ever notice how thick Physician’s books are? They’re thick because next to every name of every ailment is printed the phrase “. . . but you have nothing to worry about.”<sup>1</sup> So under “Heart Disease” one section is, “Coronary Thrombosis But You Have Nothing To Worry About.”

As soon as she mentioned *Gilbert’s* syndrome, I began to wonder what that was. I thought of Lou Gehrig’s disease and he was a baseball player so I figured Gilbert was a hockey player. So next I thought that I’d be asked if I have a strong urge to play hockey. “No doctor but for some reason I wear ice skates to bed every night” I was going to say if she asked.

In reality, I asked “What is *Gilbert’s* Syndrome?”

She explained that it is a condition resulting from Hyperbilirubinemia. My bilirubin count was high.<sup>2</sup>

“Sounds like hyperactive twin boys named Billy and Ruben” I said, trying to show her I wasn’t afraid of the worst news.

“A close definition,” she said with some laughter in her voice, “but it is where you have a high level of red blood cells that are not being absorbed by an enzyme in the liver, so occasionally the white of your eyes will look a little yellow.” “What happens,” she added, “is that when you get stressed, skip a few meals or have a glass of wine, your eyes get yellow.”

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<sup>1</sup> She could have remembered that “a preposition is something you don’t end a sentence with” and said “about which to worry” but we hire our physicians on diagnostic abilities and not language skills.

<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, and this is actually not that interesting, since that lab report, it never showed again so it was likely a mistaken or incorrect lab value.

“But,” she added, with a measured calmness in her voice, “you have nothing to worry about.” She was obviously reading from her *Physician’s Desk Reference* on her desk.

Being fully convinced that I had nothing about which to be worried, I went to UB’s Medical School Library and looked it up myself. I always believed it is better to be an alive hypochondriac than a dead Stoic.

There is a reference tool they have called *Index Medicus* which is published every month, each edition the size of a phone book. It lists every article written in the standard medical journals.

After four hours of looking through 13 years of this index, I had located 650 articles and their journal references on the general subject of Hyperbilirubinemia. There were 116 articles specifically on *Gilbert’s* Syndrome but only 66 of them were in English.

From my experiences of working in library stacks, I figured that it would take a total of 37 hours to read all these articles, if I ever chose to do it.<sup>3</sup> But knowing that I have nothing about which to worry, it was comforting to know that if I ever do begin to worry, there’s a lot of information available. It was also a good reminder to me that our physicians can not have an exhaustive photographic memory and knowledge on every ailment – so we should take more responsibility for knowledge of our health.



It is the case, I think, that one of the most prominent forms of stress is fear of the unknown. In every part of our lives, our highest point of anxiety is usually about coming experiences in which we have little or no facts to inform us about what is ahead. We usually expect worst than what reality brings because of our fear of the unknown.

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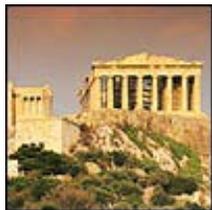
<sup>3</sup> Obviously the Internet would be a better search tool these days. Try reading:  
<http://www.gastro.com/liverpg/gilberts.htm>

For example, before a divorce, which is one of our worst experiences, people project an image of themselves sitting in a courtroom of about 200 people, intently listening to every word about their private lives that is disclosed. They think that in the courtroom, there will be a sinister lawyer with bushy eyebrows, standing behind a mahogany railing, sneering at them, holding a lengthy list of all the terrible things they had done that will now be made public. They picture this monster prosecutor saying, “Now tell the court, illuminate us, . . . as to why you think you are so high and mighty as to not deserve to be divorced from your innocent, law-abiding partner who has clearly demonstrated to have given you their entire life to make you happy?”

In reality, divorce proceedings are never like that. It is fear of the unknown that usually distorts our perception of reality. That’s why it is so crucially important to have friends and competent counsel – to correct and update the map of reality of our lives.<sup>4</sup>



In a way, the fear of the unknown was what Paul was addressing for his Athenian listeners. The people in Athens were operating with an incorrect map or view of religious reality.<sup>5</sup>



Verse 16 says that while Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him there in Athens, he got upset. He had a chance to walk around the city

<sup>4</sup> You obviously have to have competent legal counsel to prepare your pre-trial images to match reality.

<sup>5</sup> From where was Paul coming, prior to this speech? He had been revisiting some of the churches he had started in Asia Minor and had now come over to the Macedonia mainland (called Greece today). In Philippi, he was thrown in jail. This was the time there was an earthquake, his chains were loosened and the jail guard (and his whole family) became Christ followers. Paul went with Silas to Thessalonica, getting into trouble again. When they got to a town called Beroea 60 miles west, Timothy joined them but more controversy forced them to escape out of the city. Paul then went to Athens and instructed Silas and Timothy to meet him there.

and look at the architecture, the art and many sculptures. Despite all that, they didn’t know God.

Athens had become the architectural and philosophical center of the world. For the previous five centuries it had maintained the highest level of culture in all of classical antiquity. Even though the Romans had taken over the Greek empire by this time, the metropolitan leaders had the freedom to carry on with their cultural traditions. So Paul was obviously as impressed with Athens as you or I would be in our first trip to Washington D.C. or Manhattan but he was concerned.

Because the city regularly had open discussion forums and debates, Paul got into discussions about the new Christianity with Jewish rabbis and with Gentiles. Paul was a PhD Rabbi in his own right and it makes sense that he would be welcomed in the Jewish academic lecture halls.

The city of Athens also had a public square as a cultural center and there was a debate hall form in their civic center called the Areopagous. Paul had been invited to speak and debate with the Epicurean and Stoic teachers.

**Epicurean** teachers taught that we should use reason, believe in all the gods and decide whatever seems to be the most reasonable thing to do with our lives. Reason and physical pleasure seemed to be at the heart of their outlook on life. They were debating with Paul.

**Stoic** teachers taught a highly moralistic religion of living according to duty and self-sacrifice for the common good. Stoicism had a proud religious heritage of pious living, humanitarianism and self-sacrifice.

Paul’s talk about a the new God, Jesus the Christ, had gotten their interest and these debaters were open minded – eager to hear of a new trend or world view.



The Areopagus Forum in Athens Greece

Now Paul’s speech at the Areopagous forum was extremely well thought out and crafted. Much in the same debating rhetoric of the

times, he started out complimenting his audience to get their attention. He pointed out that they are very religious.

He mentioned something they had in their common experience – an altar with the inscription “To an Unknown God.” Follow Paul’s logic path here. He was, in effect, saying that they have admitted their lack of knowledge of a particular supernatural Being and now he was there to fill them in on this God Who was not known to them. A brilliant lead-in to get their attention.

Paul identifies his God as the Creator Who can’t be confined to person-made temples. That would be an impressive statement as they were looking right at the spectacular Parthenon temple. And as you’ve heard in the text, Paul articulately laid down Christian theology about the Creator-God Who stands outside of the limits of time and set the limits of all life in the universe. Paul said that God created all there is so people would look to find God but God wasn’t far from them.

Paul said this in the theological letter he wrote to the Roman church. “Ever since God created the world, God’s invisible qualities (both eternal power and divine nature) have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made), so these people have no excuse at all.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul was trying to get them to stand back from the impressiveness of their culture. He was trying to teach them that God was not so small as to be limited to their buildings or even their affluent and intellectually tolerant culture.

If Paul were giving this speech today, he’d be telling us that God doesn’t have to be hanging around the White House or the Pentagon. Because our God made the Grand Canyon, Mt. Everest, the nearest and most distant stars, planets and galaxies, . . . the blue bird in our back yard and the smile on a child’s face.

Next, Paul says that this God has a personality and to illustrate this, he quotes from two of their Greek poets with whom they were familiar. One is Epimendes and the other was

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 1;20

Aratus. Both poets were talking about Zeus being a personality but Paul takes the quotes out of their context to show how the true God is like a parent.

“As someone has said, ‘In him we live and move and exist.’ It is as some of your poets have said, ‘We too are his children.’ ”

Attentive to his line of reasoning, he argues that since we are like God’s children, our responsibility is to the person of God, not to a building or institution.<sup>7</sup>

Paul finishes his line of reasoning, saying that since we all belong to this great God Who made us, we have responsibilities and there is going to be a reckoning. He talks of a judgment by means of Someone chosen by God – conclusively proving this One’s authenticity by raising Him from the dead – Jesus being the One. ‘You can’t argue against Someone being raised from the dead’ Paul concludes.



There were two responses to Paul’s speech. Some mocked him but a few others wanted to hear more. We don’t have any information on the two people he mentioned: Dionysius, the Council Member and a woman named Damaris.

In fact, we read over in one of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, some in that church thought Paul was a rather poor debater and may have been there at that public form in Athens to see how he didn’t hit it off with the crowd at that time.



Today in our lives, we don’t find ourselves participating in public debates. And like the Athenians, you and I have our own collection of fears about the unknowns in our lives. But along with our fears and sometimes profound sense of frailty, we have something that those people gathered in the ancient Areopagous did not yet have. We have the gift of peace.

Something serious will show up in our medical reports for all of us, someday. Despite all of the anxiety and uncertainties of our future, we can still have a peace from the actual presence of God in our lives. We have a sense of peace in

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<sup>7</sup> Verse 29

knowing that our lives have meaning – that our death is just the beginning of so much more to come.

As with Paul, some people today respond to what they discover about God. Some discover that Someone had to put this wonderful universe together. Others hear a direct presentation of one of us talking about the scriptures or our experiences of finding God in our life. Most everyone we meet knows about God. Most everyone will respond like the Athenians listening to Paul – accepting or rejecting God.



Some will ridicule those who have a faith in our personal and yet infinite God and they will finish out their lives disinterested. Others will find themselves open to

receive more. Either way, their willingness to be open and their willingness to believe is not our responsibility. What they do with their lives is their responsibility. In humility, though, we try to share with them, as best we can, something of our faith, our experiences and our sense that Christianity is our most reasonable understanding of life for us. We say that of the world views we've seriously considered for ourselves, it makes the most sense, even though there are elements of life and God we don't understand.



So never be ashamed of your faith. God's presence in your life is what gives you a sense of peace in the core of your being. It is the greatness of Christianity that dares to challenge the injustices of even the most powerful people and establishments in human history. It is God's presence in your life that gives you meaning and no one will ever be able to take that away from you. ☪

