

“IS YOUR GOD TOO SMALL?”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Acts 17:16-22 (Phillips)

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious, for when I went about and observed the objects of your worship, I found among other things an altar upon which was the inscription: ‘To An Unknown God.’ That God, whom you do not know, is the God whom I preach to you.”

Whenever I take up this Book and begin to read it with any degree of discernment, I am at first amazed and then thrilled by its timeliness. It seems as if the Bible never loses its peculiar relevance to life. Our text is a case in point. As one reads these words, it is almost as if Paul were speaking to the citizens of our century --

Men of Chicago, New York, Moscow, Rome, men of the twentieth century, I perceive that you are very religious, for walking through your streets I observed the objects of your worship.

I saw a statue of the god of power. He was equipped with shining helmet and clanking sword, and there were many who bowed before him saying, “might makes right.”

I saw a gleaming altar to the god of stuff, and legion are those who did obeisance before his shrine heaped high with things crying, “More! More! More!”

I saw a statue to the god called peace of mind and the throng who knelt before him, no man could number.

But, as I watched their worship, I perceived that they were of all men most miserable, for they cried, “Peace, peace, but there was no peace.”

Yes, men of the twentieth century, I perceive that you are very religious for I saw the objects of your worship. But, I also perceived that you are lonely and afraid. Here and there I sensed a wistfulness, a searching, a longing for the God who

can really satisfy. *That* God, whom you do not know, is the God whom I preach to you

How I thank the Holy Spirit for inspiring Paul to write those last words of hope,
“*That* God whom you do not know, is *the* God whom I preach to you.”

How grateful I am that Paul did not stop with just a diagnosis of the human dilemma, but went on to proclaim the cure. For if I know anything about you and your heart-need this morning, it is that in the deepest recesses of your being you are spiritually hungry and thirsty, frustrated and afraid.

That's the way it *will* be for those who do not let go and let God *be* God in their lives. You were made for God, my friend. You were made to know him, to love him, to serve him, and, until you do, you will go on living a stunted, fragmented, fragile life. Until you let God *be God* in your life, you will be like the animals in the zoo whose caged existence is but a fraction of what it might be were they in their natural habitat.

Until you are in *your natural habitat*, until you live and move and have your being in the atmosphere for which you were created, until you have a personal relationship with the God who made you, you will be like a tree which has never reached its intended glory because its roots were set down in soil unsuited to its healthy growth.

The climate for the human soul, *your natural habitat*, is God. You cannot flourish in another atmosphere. As someone has said,

“A man may be a man and not know Greek.

A man may know a man and not know calculus.

But, a man cannot really be a man and not know God!”

Because you sense this to be true, there are some of you here this morning who are asking, “Who

is God?” You may try to slay the question, to put it out of your mind, to brush it aside, because you don’t want to face up to the implications of it. And, some of the time you manage to hold God at bay, reducing him to an abstract noun, remote and unrelated to things as they are.

But you are not always successful in doing so, and you know I speak the truth, for there are other times when you are not “too busy,” times when you are alone with your thoughts, times when you look up at the wide sweep of the sky or down at the sweet countenance of a child, times when God ceases to be an abstract noun and becomes a *Presence* for a moment, vague, but real.

Occasionally, not often perhaps but occasionally, in some flaming hour -- in the impact of death, in the thrill of human love, in the throes of conscience, in the pleading of prayer -- *occasionally* there are times when God becomes *the* living Fact of facts. And then, like the relentless tides of the sea, the question comes surging to the surface of your mind again, and, with a desperate urgency, you are compelled to ask, “Who is God? What is he like? How can I know him?”

You seem to sense that God *is*. Nearly everyone does. According to a recent poll, no less than ninety-six percent of the people said they believe in God. Practical atheism, that is, believing in God, but living *as if* there *were* no God, is dreadfully common. But theoretical atheism, that is, *not* believing in God, is the exception rather than the rule. So your central question is not, “Is there a God?” But who is God? What is he like?

I’m appalled at the infantile answers some people, who ought to know better, give to your question. Their ideas of God are childish and naive. There are some salient exceptions, and for these we can be grateful. There are, for instance, insights like those of Helen Keller who was born deaf, dumb and blind. For the first few frightful years of her life, Helen was trapped in a prison of utter darkness. Then, throughout the incredible dedication and ingenuity of Anne Sullivan, her teacher, the light of understanding came.

After Miss Sullivan had brought Helen Keller as far along as she could, she invited Phillip Brooks,

the noted preacher, to come tell her about God. As he began to explain the wonders of God’s tender love and compassion revealed in Jesus Christ, Helen’s face began to shine with a celestial radiance and she exclaimed,

“Oh, I know him! I know him! I have known him all along. Thank you
for telling me his name.”

Through all the years of her darkness she had known that somewhere, somehow, there was Someone who loved and cared for her.

Such, I am sure is the case with you. Perhaps it is the legacy of your childhood. Often, this knowledge about God is the special gift of little children. The other day I ran across the story of a mother who had just put her little boy to bed when a massive thunder-storm arose. She was sure the lad would be frantic with fear, so she raced upstairs to comfort him. When she got to his room she found her young son looking out the window, his eyes flashing with excitement, and shouting with each thunderclap, “Bang it again God! Bang it again!”

The little fellow knew that with God at the heart of things, he had nothing to fear. And, thank God, this is often the legacy of children. That’s why our Lord made it clear that, unless you become *as* a little child, uncluttered in your thinking and unhesitating in your faith, unless you become *as* a little child you cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven.

That’s not to say all of the thinking of our children about God is accurate. Often it is not child-like, but child-ish. Like the little kid who had gone to sleep upstairs when he was awakened by a bad dream. He was frightened by the dark, by shadows, by all kinds of imaginary goblins who were going to get him. He came running downstairs to his mom. She tried to calm him and said, “Dear, you don’t have to be afraid. God’s up there with you and he’ll protect you.” The little kid started back up the stairs, courage in hand, and just as he got up to the top of the stairs his mother heard him say, “Now, God, if you’re up here, please don’t move, or you’ll scare me half to death!”

According to Pascal, “It is the pathetic fate of God to be everlastingly misunderstood.” Apparently that’s true. As J.B. Phillips points out in his book Your God Is Too Small, many people have ideas of God which are grey and formless, even slanderous at times.

According to Phillips, to some, God is a kind of magnified man who sits on a throne several billions miles off into the sky. And may I say, parenthetically, if we have no *other* reason for interest in our space program, we can at least be grateful that it has helped pull *that* idol down. For far too long people have clung to the false idea of a God is “up-there somewhere.”

But to continue with Phillips’ list of false gods --

To some, God is a kind of tribal being who loves *them* and anyone *like* them, but who hates all others who do not happen to match their particular race, social, political, or I might add, denominational blood-type.

To others, God is a kind of beneficent ghost who hangs around at funerals and weddings. To others, he is a rather poor caricature of Father Christmas, all “sugar and spice and all things nice” who can be trusted to deal leniently with the sinner and his sin.

Still others have reduced him to a kind of lackey, a sort of cosmic bellhop who stands anxiously at the doorstep of heaven, tapping his toes and twiddling his fingers, waiting nervously to leap into action at their slightest command.

But none of these caricatures of God will do. They simply are not adequate to meet our modern needs, and as long as we cling to the little gods who do *not* exist, the Great God who *does* exist cannot come. For some time now, I have had a sermon brewing entitled, “I Too Am An Atheist.”

I may never preach it, but if I do, I am going to say with J. B. Phillips,

“If God is nothing more than a magnified man, or a god of the Chosen Few, or a beneficent ghost, or a kind of cosmic bellhop, or feeble, mushy Father Christmas, or any of the other hot-house gods people have conjured up to satisfy their own selfish purposes, then I, too am an Atheist! I cannot and will not believe in a God so small. “

There was a time when I was terribly impatient with people who rebelled against God and Christ. I was quick to consign them to the pit below. I'm more compassionate now. In talking to scores of such people, I've discovered that most of the time they are not rebelling against God, but against someone's misconception of God, or someone's sad distortion of him.

I have learned that what they're really arching their back against is not Christianity, but churchianity. I think God knows that. In fact, I'm sure he does! My Bible says God does not look on the outward appearance, but upon the heart. So I'm content to leave the destiny of such troubled souls in the hands of my heavenly Father who “knoweth and doeth all things well,” while I spend my time and energy trying to help people who want to know, see, worship and obey God *as he is*.

I am convinced that if the little gods, the inadequate, limiting, stultifying, unsatisfactory little gods go, the great God made plain in Jesus Christ will come. And come he must, if life is to have full meaning. As H.G. Wells said so wisely,

“Till a man has found and been found by God, he begins at no beginning and he works to no end.”

That doesn't mean you will *ever* fully answer the question “Who is God?” When God *does* come, he does not completely lift the veil of mystery from his countenance. Even in those shining moments of holy inspiration when he is so near you can feel his heart beat, your finite mind cannot fully comprehend the character of an infinite God. If you could, he wouldn't be big enough!

As A.W. Tozer explains,

“That why theologians call him inscrutable and ineffable. What they mean by those grand superlative is that what God is can never be fully grasped by the human intellect. He is,” as Tozer points out, “beyond our comprehension. He cannot tell us what he is, he can only tell us what he is *like*. So we have such likenesses as light, and life, and love. We have such similitudes as living water, bright and

morning star, ancient of days. But when we have used all of these we have not even begun to scratch the surface of God's true nature. How can *we*, who are born yesterday and die tomorrow, with minds that cannot see what will happen even one moment from now, how can *we* measure the movements or meaning of a God who is eternal?"

Mac Neil Dixon in his Gifford's Lectures pictures a fly crawling across Rafael's masterpiece in the Vatican. He asks,

"How much does the fly know about the painting? Well, for sure, it knows something. It has a fly's point of view! It can perceive certain irregularities in terrain. It may even sense that some of the area is bright and some of it is dull, that some of it is smooth and some of it is rough. But what the masterpiece *means*, and why it is there, the whole pattern of the painting and the purpose of the painter are outside the scope of the fly's understanding. And, in ten-thousand lifetimes, neither the fly nor his ancestors could begin to grasp even the smallest part of it. Does that mean Rafael was a failure? Of course not. He didn't paint for flies. He painted for people. The fault is not with his masterpiece, but with the limited vision of the insect."

Well, of course, we must not press the illustration too far, because we are not insects crawling across God's canvas. We are men and women made in the image of God. Not a little higher than the ants, but a little lower than the angels. But the perspective is about right. Our human minds, chained as they are by such things as time and space and other human horizons, simply cannot see, let alone comprehend, the full sweep of either the creation or the Creator.

Does that mean God has failed and we can never know him? Not at all. If I leave you with that impression, you may go away from here staggered by a God who is too big to do business on your corner. We must hasten on to say that while God is transcendent, greater than all the greatest things, he is also eminent, closer than all the closest things. God has "a near-end"

through which he literally touches you.

It was Harry Emerson Fosdick who, many years ago, helped me get hold of the concept that God has “a near-end”. And then, last summer while attending a seminar in California, I had a chance to do what I often did as a student in college. For the briefest part of one afternoon I was able to trudge along the sands of the blue Pacific and my! what wonderful memories those rolling waves washed back into my mind.

But the point I want to make is this, I had time to contemplate Fosdick’s suggestion. I was reminded that I do not know *all* of the Pacific Ocean. I do not know even the smallest part of it. It’s huge. I *have* sailed along its coast from Canada to Mexico, but I have never sailed it to the south where it washes the sands of a thousand islands. Nor have I followed it to the north where it plunges beneath the polar ice pack. Nor have I traveled it to the west where it eventually spills into the China Sea. There is so much of that great ocean which is not known to me. But I know the Pacific! It has a near-end, and I have bathed in it, sailed over it, and thrilled to it.

And Fosdick says it that way with God. He is so great that, in his vastness, we can only glimpse a little of his glory and sometimes what we see of him frighten us. But God also has a near-end that touches us and can be touched by us. To Christians that near-end of God is Jesus. When we see God revealed in Jesus we are not frightened by his greatness, we are captivated by his dearness. We are prepared to say, “My Lord and my God, in whom I trust.”

For many people, that experience is enough. They feel no need to press the matter further. They struggle against no compulsion to rub their mind against the harsh and haunting questions which science and the space age put to our faith today. And that’s fine! I thank God for such sweet faith, wherever and whenever I see it.

But there are others, like me and perhaps like you, for whom a subjective experience is not enough. We need to “think it through” as the expression goes. We need a reason for the hope

that is within us. We need to stare our doubts down. To look them squarely in the eye. We need to exercise the best of our intelligence in putting the faith of our fathers in the language of our children. There is no harm in that. Indeed, God himself has said, “Come now, and let us reason together.”

There’s great value in such an endeavor. Honest seekers need to know, in a way that has meaning for them, who God is and what he is like. They desire to understand the significance of the strange footprints they see in the sod. Footprints, which if followed far enough, will lead them to God.

They need to know how the Lord God omnipotent, creator and sustainer of the universe, could “be in Christ,” as the ancient scripture puts it, “reconciling the world unto himself.” And, having found answers to those questions, they need to ask, “So what?” What does this have to do with *me* and *my* life? They seem, intuitively, to understand there are implications to who God is. Implications which can, and should, result in a grown-up faith. A faith in long trousers instead of the knee-length britches of a less sophisticated day.

But, to cover all this will require several hours, and I must not wear you out. God willing, there will be other Sundays, and in the next four weeks I shall do my best to provide satisfying answers to the questions, “Who is God?” And, “So what?” For the moment, let me say this --

If you do not know Him and would like to, you must begin with the simple discovery that God is not lost. You are. The shepherd is not lost, the sheep is!

When the light of that discovery fully dawns, you will be able to share the wonder of what, to some of us, is the most incredible verse in the Bible,

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man will open the door I will come in and sup with him and he with me.”

The sheer restraint of it! The overwhelming, indescribable patience of it! The great God of

creation, who could overwhelm you with his might comes to woo you with his mercy. The great God who could bludgeon you into submission with his power, seeks to win you by his grace saying,

“Behold! Take note, please! I stand at the door and knock. Come, open the door, and let me in.”

Will you open the door this morning? The Lord God omnipotent is waiting . . .