

Acts 14:8-18: Which God Are You Worshipping and Is It Working?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA July 9, 2017

I. Introduction

Can God help you with your daily needs, with food, rent? What about happiness, can He provide you happiness? Many wish they could just be happy. They look at their career and wish they had a happy one; they wish they could look forward to Monday mornings. They look at their relationship and wish it was happy instead of anger, fighting and yelling. God says He can give it all to you, can He really or must we keep looking elsewhere?

II. Acts 14:8-18: What's the Goodnews God has for You and Does it Really Deliver?

14:8-13, having escaped a plot to kill them in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas go to Lystra. The story breaks in in the midst of Paul's evangelizing. But this time, he's speaking in front of pagan Gentiles; these are not god-fearers or proselytes who believe in the God of Israel. They worship many gods. As he speaks, Paul notices one of these Gentiles, a man who's been a cripple and unable to walk from his mother's womb. He's listening to Paul intently, so Paul looks at him intently and notices his faith, i.e., he believes that Paul can heal him. So Paul says to him, "Stand up straight on your feet!" The man quickly leaps to his feet and begins to walk as if he's always walked. When the people see this, they shout in their own Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" They call Barnabas Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, since he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of the city, brought oxen and wreaths to sacrifice along with the multitudes.

Why did they think Paul and Barnabas were gods? Well, they'd just healed a man who'd never walked before. But there was also a legend that Zeus/Jupiter and Hermes/Mercury had come down disguised as men but no one offered them hospitality except an elderly couple. Because of this inhospitality, the entire population was destroyed, except this elderly couple who became the priest and priestess of Zeus' temple. The crowd, thinking that these two gods have come down again, make plans to worship them with sacrifices. Because Zeus was always pictured as a tall, bearded man and Hermes as short and the chief speaker of the gods, they called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes (due to his stature and being the chief speaker).

14:14-18, Paul and Barnabas didn't realize what was going on because of the language barrier. But when they understood what the crowd was doing, they tore their clothes (a sign of mourning and horror) and ran into their midst shouting, "Why are you doing this?! We're men just like you!"

Then they say something courageous and remarkable about the false gods of this world compared to the true living God of the universe: the gods they're worshipping are *empty, useless, powerless, lacking truth*—one might say they're dead. Therefore, they should turn from them to the *living* God, the One who not only controls but made the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything in them. And this God is not angry or capricious like their gods even though the nations rebelled against Him. In fact, for generations He's allowed them to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless, He was always revealing Himself to them by the rain He kept providing them, by the food He kept putting on their tables, and by the happiness He kept giving their lives.

This barely restrained the crowds from sacrificing to Paul and Barnabas.

We all worship something, which God are you worshipping? What is so remarkable about what Paul and Barnabas say here? What god are the people of Lystra worshipping? There were many. Zeus was thought to be the god of rain and Hermes the god of commerce. But there were others: the god of war, agriculture, romance, love, beauty, art, etc., etc. Why did people turn to these gods? Seems obvious: people want to live happy successful lives without all the misery. If you're a soldier, you want the god of war to give you victory. If a farmer, you want the god of agriculture to give you plentiful crops. A businessman, success in business. And on and on. Did it work to worship these gods? The people thought it did; Zeus sometimes gave them rain. When he didn't, they thought he was angry and so it was time for more appeasing. But in reality, no it didn't work because these gods weren't real. Though there was nothing there, people clung to the hope that someone was there, helping them, delivering them from their misery.

And that's what's courageous and amazing about what Paul and Barnabas say to these people whose lives depend on these gods. They're basically saying, "The gods you think can save you, can't. They don't exist. But there is a God who is living and real. Do you see the heavens? The earth? The sea? And all that is in them? He made it all. The God you never thanked for the rain, food, and happiness, gave it to you anyway. He's not temperamental like the false gods you've been worshipping. Even though you've disobeyed Him for generations, He still kept feeding you. Do you see this man who was healed, God healed him. He put life into his dead legs. If you have faith to believe, to acknowledge the God who made you and me who makes it rain, then you don't have to try to save yourself anymore. You don't have to pray to one god for victory in battle and another for love. The God of heaven and earth will save you from it all."

In one sense the Gospel, the Goodnews Paul gives these people sounds completely different from the one he's been preaching in the synagogues. In the synagogues Paul talked about Jesus and His resurrection. He talked about His salvation, His forgiveness of sins and the justification and freedom that only He can give from all our work in trying to justify ourselves before an angry god. And He talked about getting all this through simple faith (13:23, 26, 38-39). But here Paul talks about the God of creation. Where's the forgiveness, where's the justification, where's the salvation, where's the simple faith? It looks like these are missing, but look closer. What are the people looking for? You might say, "Rain from Zeus and commerce from Hermes." Sure, but what do these things and all the rest represent? Why does the soldier ask for victory in battle, or the romantic the for a spouse, or the farmer for good crops? Because of what they represent: victory over the fears and ills of life. In short, they're looking for a Savior, someone to make their lives right, to stop the misery and bring salvation from everything that's wrong in this world.

And how does Paul answer their cries for a Savior? What does the God of creation give the crippled man? His legs; he's never walked, now he does. What of the crowds who're looking to appease Zeus and Hermes for a better life? He shows them the true God, the living God, who's always been there, forgiving them, providing for them, even happiness. The Savior they've been looking for is here and He's not only all-powerful, He's loving and forgiving. He never required anything from them, yet He gave them His love. Therefore, whatever's wrong in their lives, whether rain, food, or lack of happiness, He will provide it without requirements. All they need do is believe, just look at what He did for the man who couldn't walk, all because he simply believed.

What do you long for, what do you wish was right in your world and how are you trying to get it? People, even Christians, cannot see the God who is right there, who's been there all along, protecting, providing. The One who's been there through their pain, but they just can't see Him. Instead we worship other gods. We first turn to the god of work, success, love, family, etc. And when that god fails us, we turn to another god (comfort food, alcohol, drugs, etc.) to help us cope with our misery. We don't realize that the happiness we're chasing is in God's hands. If we could just stop and open our eyes of faith we would see the God who's always been there.



III. Conclusion

"... and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (pp. 22-23). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.