

# SATISFIED HEARTS

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Acts 14:1-18

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*Acts 14:1-28*

People around here have been blessed; maybe many of them they just don't know it. Oh, they may say they're blessed, but how many of them believe in a bless-er? I was privileged to attend the annual Tech Awards in San Jose in 2006, where Bill Gates received the Global Humanitarian Award. In his remarks, he told the crowd of tech luminaries, "We've been blessed."

Jesus sends us, first of all, to the places where we live, work, and study. Might he be sending us to tell the people here what Bill Gates told the crowd at the Tech Awards? Might he be sending us to tell them that they're blessed?

Let's read what Barnabas and Paul told the people in a city called Lystra who worshiped false gods. What they said has the potential today to reorient us toward the men and women and boys and girls of our world. In Acts 14:1-7, Luke, the author of Acts, tells us how it came about that Barnabas and Paul ended up in Lystra.

## 'The gods have come down to us'

**Acts 14:1-13:**

**Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.**

**8 Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, 10 said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. 11 And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.**

The people of Lystra worship pagan gods such as Zeus and Hermes, and their priests have not been able to call on their gods in such a way so as to heal a lame man. This, then, is something new. How to understand it?

Although Paul had been preaching the Gospel, which features a different God from the gods they've been worshiping, the people of Lystra try to fit this new thing into their old worldview: "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men."

Well, no, there's only one God, and he created men and women in his likeness, in his image, and he came down not in the likeness of men but as a man, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is "the exact imprint of his nature," in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Hebrews 1:3, Colossians 2:9). God did not come down in the likeness of Barnabas and Paul, who are messengers of God. The people of Lystra, however, identify Barnabas and Paul with the very gods that Paul and Barnabas are trying to debunk. They lost sight of the message because they were so impressed with the messengers.

## A bridge too far

Some people in our day, just like the people of Lystra, are impressed by something connected to the Gospel: the teaching of Jesus, the love of the people of Jesus, or the change evident in the lives of those who have come to Jesus, for example. To actually believe the Gospel, to actually believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and to give their allegiance to him—for many people, that's a bridge too far, at least for now. They prefer the status quo and therefore close themselves off to the Gospel. Like the people of Lystra, they try to fit what they see into their current worldviews instead of facing the prospect of changing their worldviews.

There are also people today who, desperate for heroes, glorify certain messengers of the Gospel, sometimes even above the Gospel itself. Some of those messengers are not particularly forthcoming with their own weaknesses. In this way, either intentionally or not, such messengers keep themselves on a pedestal and keep their adherents dependent on them. Therefore, their adherents can't see the message for the messengers.

How do Barnabas and Paul respond to being worshiped?

## Just men

**Acts 14:14-15:**

**But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.**

To be identified as a god is heady stuff. Knowing that people want to worship you can make you feel pretty good about yourself. Moreover, if people think you're a god, they will bow down before your desires if you want them to. There's a lot you can get away with if people think you're a god. If “it's good to be the king,”<sup>1</sup> as Mel Brooks' character says in *History of the World, Part 1*, how much better is it to be a god? Not a bad deal, right?

Barnabas and Paul, however, are horrified. They tear their garments, indicating that they've heard blasphemy, and rush out into the crowd, indicating urgency. The crowds lifted up their voices to deify them, but Barnabas and Paul cry out in protest. If the crowds believed that the gods had come down in the “likeness of men,” then Barnabas and Paul proclaim themselves to be “men” just “like” the people who are ready to worship them.

By the way, you may notice that both Paul Taylor and I, who have been among the main preachers at our church for many years now, from time to time share with you some of our weaknesses in part so that no one puts us on a pedestal and thinks, “Those guys have it all together.” We don't have it all together. Instead, we want to tell you about someone who does have it all together—someone who “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). His name, of course, is Jesus. We don't go by honorific titles around here. One of the reasons that we have more than one preacher is so that you don't become attached to any one of us. Of course, God has blessed us in such a way that we're big enough so that we can afford more than one preacher.

Do you know what we are, all of us? We're highway signs. There's nothing flashy about a highway sign. Simple colors and lettering are all that's needed. A highway sign tells you what you need to know: how to reach your destination. We're not billboards. Billboards draw attention to themselves with flashy colors, lettering, and images. How many billboards tell you something you really need to know? Billboards are distracting. Highway signs are functional. We're highway signs pointing the way to Christ.

Barnabas and Paul had been preaching the Gospel, or Good News, to these people (the same verb is translated “preach the gospel” in verse 7 and “bring good news” in verse 15). Barnabas and Paul pick up where they left off, urging the people of Lystra to “turn from these vain things”—that is, pagan gods such as Zeus and Hermes. Those gods are useless, and not worthy of worship, because they are not gods (Galatians 4:8).

By contrast, Barnabas and Paul urge the people to “turn . . . to a living God.” The pagans falsely ascribed certain capabilities to their gods: Zeus supposedly controlled the weather, and Hermes was thought to be the messenger of the gods. However, it wasn't thought that such gods were responsible for creation. The living God, in contrast to dead, or non-existent, pagan gods, created everything. A God who created everything—

now that's a God who can help you; that's a God you should worship. He made "the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them," including Barnabas and Paul, whom the people of Lystra are inclined to worship.

Note that the preaching of the Gospel here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, involves two admonitions: first to repent and second to believe, to "turn from" false gods and to "turn to" the true God. Here Luke does not report Barnabas and Paul as urging people to turn to the living God through faith in Jesus Christ. Their preaching, as reported by Luke in Acts 14:7, likely included words about faith in Christ, so further words about Christ may not be necessary here. Moreover, they may have included further words about Christ and Luke doesn't see the need to include them here.

## **False gods are vain**

Today's western men and women are no less creatures of worship than the men and women of first century Lystra. Our gods just go by different names. Our pantheon doesn't feature Zeus and Hermes and Aphrodite; it features Money and Sex and Power and so on. The Gospel commands men and women, boys and girls, to "turn from" these and other false gods.

Why should people turn from such gods? First, because they are vain. They're useless. In what sense? Sure they may help some of their adherents make their way in this world and give them a few pleasures along the way, but there are two things they can't do: they can't keep you from dying, and they can't help you after you're dead.

Several years ago, I saw a play written by Athol Fugard, who was sixty-nine at the time. The playbill featured an interview with him in which he reflected on his mortality:

*As you live a life, you end up knowing that your life is about keeping appointments with incidents, faces, stories you've heard, things you've seen. I do finally want to fall into my grave really empty. I don't want to . . . you know, stories are no good down there I would like to have gotten them all out. I would like to have kept all those appointments. And I haven't got all that much time left. Unfortunately, I think I am going to have my pen in my hand when I get into that box. O dear me, there will never be enough time.*

Fugard was worried that he would die before he had done all that he wanted to do. Can't you just hear the pain in his voice when he realizes what he is saying and then reflects on it: "O dear me, there will never be enough time"? The gods of our world can't keep you from dying, and they can't help you after you're dead.

## **False gods can't account for creation**

Second, people should turn from false gods because their worldview can't account for creation. Secularists, for example, don't believe in miracles, but there's at least one thing that defies a naturalistic explanation: creation. You can call it nature or something else if you like, but how did it get here?

Really smart people try really hard to explain how something got here in the first place apart from God. I watched a TED talk by Jim Holt, a philosopher, the author of *Why Does the Universe Exist? An Existential Detective Story*.<sup>2</sup> Why does the universe exist? I listened carefully, and he never answered the question. Why not? Because he can't.

The best explanation for why the universe exists is the most obvious one: it began supernaturally. Barnabas and Paul have a very simple explanation for how the stuff got here: God "made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." Whatever can be said for the gods other than the Creator God, it cannot be said that they have the power to create the universe.

Has this God done anything to reveal himself other than creating the universe? Barnabas and Paul have a few comments.

## **He did not leave himself without witness**

### **Acts 14:16-18:**

**In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." 18 Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.**

God “allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways,” worshiping vain things and living contrary to his ways. On the one hand, God made the heaven and the earth and the sea, including “all” that is in them; on the other hand, he allowed “all” the nations—that is, the Gentiles—to do whatever they wanted. The contrast is quite remarkable. The all-powerful God gave humans the power to choose to walk in their ways, not his ways.

But it’s not as if God is going to let the nations thumb their nose at him, destroy each other, destroy themselves, and destroy his creation forever. If God allowed the nations to go their own ways “in past generations,” then the times are changing. Barnabas and Paul don’t say here what has changed. Later, though, Paul will tell the Athenians that the coming of Christ has brought the final day of judgment into focus (Acts 17:30-31). Therefore, God is bearing “witness” to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through “signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3). The offer of salvation in Christ, then, is God’s final offer.

God chose one nation, Israel, to be a light to the rest of the nations. As such, he gave Israel the law and the prophets, special revelation from him. Israel, though, kept the light to itself and even turned its back on the light. Nevertheless, it’s not as if the rest of the nations were completely in the dark. True, they did not receive the law and they had no prophets, but God “did not leave himself without witness.”

What was that witness? It was this: “he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” God revealed himself to the nations by doing “good,” by “giving” to them. What did he give? Food and gladness. What did such gifts do? They satisfied the hearts of the people of Lystra. This again is quite remarkable: the God of Israel, the creator God, blessed the people of Lystra, who worshiped other gods.

Zeus didn’t give the nations rains from heaven and fruitful seasons; the God of Israel did. Hermes didn’t satisfy their hearts with food and gladness; the God of Israel did. With the advent of Christ, God increased his witness by sending his Spirit, empowering men and women to preach the Gospel, and augmenting the preaching of the Gospel with signs and wonders.

## **Christ helps people after they die**

First, the Gospel commands men and women, boys and girls, to “turn from” false gods. Second, it commands them to “turn to” the true God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them but nevertheless allows men and women, boys and girls, to walk in their own ways, not his ways.

Why should people turn to God? First, because the coming of Christ has brought the final day of judgment into focus. The Son of God is God’s final offer. What more can he give? God has not only sent his Son, he has also sent his Spirit to convict the world of sin and demonstrate its need for his Son (John 16:8). Indeed, God saved the best, his Son, for last.

What will Christ do for you? He may not keep you from dying, but he will give you eternal life before you die, and he will help you after you die. The writer of Hebrews says this of Christ: “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:26-28). Jesus will vindicate those who have given their allegiance to him, and they will spend eternity with him in the new creation, the new heaven and the new earth.

Athol Fugard, the playwright, lamented that “stories are no good down there,” in the grave, and that “there will never be enough time.” I want to say to him: Mr. Fugard, give your allegiance to Jesus, and when you die, you won’t stay “down there”; you will rise from the dead, and there will be all the time in the new world to keep your appointments and write your stories and stage your plays for people who are eager to hear and see them.

## **God reaches out to people by blessing them**

Second, people should turn to God because of what he has already done for them. He has not left himself without witness. God is revealing himself to people by doing “good” to them, by “giving” to them, and by “satisfying” their hearts with both food and gladness. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, God wants to win people over with “kindness” (Romans 2:4).

Bill Gates told the crowd at the Tech Awards that they're blessed. Doesn't being blessed imply a bless-er? I don't know how Mr. Gates would answer that question. In any event, Paul would say that God is reaching out to people who have no interest in him by blessing them, even by satisfying their hearts with gladness.

Wait a minute, isn't it true that in order to be truly happy, you have to know Jesus? Isn't it true that people who don't know Jesus and think they're happy are really deceiving themselves? Isn't it true that in order to come to Jesus you have to come to the end of yourself? No, no, and no.

A reporter at a newspaper I worked at in the East Bay seemed to me to be a happy person. She had the crime beat. I had never seen a happy crime reporter. Crime reporters truck in blood, guts, and cynicism. So I took it upon myself to do a little investigative reporting of my own. I asked her one day, "Why are you so happy?" I hoped that she would tell me that she was a follower of Jesus. She answered, "I'm just a happy person." No faith? No relationship with Jesus? No hope for anything after death? No, no, and no. My inclination at the time was to find some chink in her happy armor to prove to myself—and maybe to her—that appearances aside, she was not, in fact, a happy person.

Now, if I had been more steeped in Acts 14, I might have been poised to ask a few follow-up questions, because now I believe that God made her a happy person because he was reaching out to her. Maybe I could have told her that God in his kindness was reaching out to her by satisfying her heart with gladness in the hope that she'd reach back. As it was, I had nothing else to say.

The Gospel commands skeptics, seekers, and unbelievers to turn from false gods and turn to the true god. It commands believers to do the same. Paul, writing to the believers in Ephesus, instructs them to "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Finally, Barnabas and Paul have to leave Lystra.

## Ministry, suffering, and leadership

Acts 14:19-28:

**But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.**

**24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. 27 And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples.**

These verses are valuable not least for what they teach us about ministry, suffering, and church leadership.

First, ministry: Paul says that he and the other apostles are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:10). They not only preach the Gospel, they also embody the Gospel: the message concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They suffer, like Christ, but they endure, like Christ.

This is exactly what happened to Paul in Lystra. He was stoned, and presumed dead (he suffered), but he "rose up" and entered the city (he endured). If we aspire to be ministers of the Gospel (and every follower of Jesus is a minister of the Gospel), then we too, by the power of the Holy Spirit, must embody the Gospel: we suffer and we endure, giving evidence to the reality of the Gospel.

Second, suffering: Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples not only by encouraging them to continue in the faith but also by informing them that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of this world, which is ruled by Satan, rebels against the kingdom of God. To be strengthened in the faith is to understand that believing in Christ will result in suffering of one kind or another. Suffering therefore should not take us by surprise and thereby challenge the validity of faith. On the contrary, suffering is part of faith and, in fact, can deepen faith.

Third, church leadership: Paul and Barnabas appoint elders (plural) in every church (singular). Each church has more than one elder. Note also that the church in Jerusalem had more than one elder (Acts 11:30). Churches should not be dominated by a single leader. Leadership in the church should be shared. By the way, if leadership is shared, then people are less likely to put a single leader on a pedestal.

## Giving thanks

G.K. Chesterton, alluding to the remarks of Dante Rossetti, says “the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank” (Chesterton, p. 88).<sup>3</sup> I talked with a man once who told me the story of his charmed life. Reflecting on his life, he said, “It makes me want to give thanks to . . . the universe or something.” It seemed to me that he wanted to give thanks for his charmed life, but he didn’t know where to turn.

Might a happy person want to give thanks for being happy? Might someone who is blessed want to thank the Bless-er? Might Jesus send us to tell a happy person that they’re blessed by the Bless-er? Yes, yes, and yes.

If you have not yet turned from false gods to the true God, may I say to you: You’re blessed. You’re blessed by God. By blessing you, God is reaching out to you.

Reach back.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Brooks, Mel, director. *The History of the World, Part 1*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1981.
- <sup>2</sup> Holt, Jim. “Why Does the Universe Exist? An Existential Detective Story.” TED Talk. Mar. 201
- <sup>3</sup> Chesterton, G.K.. *St. Francis of Assisi*. Hodder and Stoughton (London). 1923.