

## “Turn from These Vain Things to a Living God” (Acts 14)

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*Acts 14:1-7 (ESV)*

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, <sup>6</sup> they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, <sup>7</sup> and there they continued to preach the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

People become Christians by hearing the good news—the gospel—of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Unless people hear the truth about Jesus, they won’t become Christians. That’s why I talk often about how all of us need to tell others about Jesus. If that gets a bit repetitive, well, I have news for you: I’m not going to stop talking about it.

But we all need to know this: When we tell others about Jesus, we’re going to get different reactions. First, there will be people who understand what we’re saying. Of the people who understand what we’re saying, there will be people who believe. They may be very much in the minority. And there will be people who understand exactly what we’re saying and don’t believe. Some of these unbelievers may understand the claims about Jesus—that he is the one true God, the only Savior, and the one who will judge everyone who has every lived—and because they don’t believe, they will be hostile to us.

Second, there are people who won’t understand what we’re saying. We can divide that group of people in to three subgroups. One, some people might simply not understand the message at first, which means we need to tell them more, or explain the gospel better. These people might be curious and want to hear more. Two, there are people who are apathetic. They don’t get how important Jesus is. We might call these people apatheists. They’re not atheists; they don’t actively believe there’s no God. They just don’t see the need for God and aren’t

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Learning about Jesus is a necessary but not sufficient condition for becoming a Christian. It’s not sufficient because people who hear the message of Jesus need the Holy Spirit to work inside of them to believe the message. Still, people need to hear about Jesus.

particularly concerned about who God is and why we need to have a special relationship with him. Three, there are people who think they know what we're talking about but misinterpret the message of Jesus. They may think we're talking about the same God they believe in, even though we actually believe very different things about God. They may hear what they want to hear and say, "Oh, yeah, I believe that" when they really believe in something completely different.

Today, as we continue to study the book of Acts, we're going to see different responses to the gospel. Some people believe the message that Paul proclaims. Others will reject it in a hostile fashion. And still others will misinterpret Paul. If Paul received these different reactions, we can expect that we will, too.

So let's look carefully at the first seven verses of Acts 14. I'll read them again:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, <sup>6</sup> they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, <sup>7</sup> and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Paul is on his first missionary journey with Barnabas, in a part of the Roman Empire that is now known as Turkey. At this time, this region was known as Galatia. In Acts 13, they were in a city known as Psidian Antioch. Now, they come to another city called Iconium, which is about 90 miles southeast of Antioch. And while they are there, they go to a synagogue, which is what Paul always does when a city has a worshiped the God of Israel but they hadn't fully converted to Judaism. Many people come to faith because of Paul's preaching. But there are some unbelieving Jews there and they cause trouble. They "poison the minds" of the Gentiles. But Paul and Barnabas don't flee the city just yet. Because there is opposition, they stay in Iconium for some time. They stay to strengthen the believers. Not only do they proclaim the gospel, they also work miracles that validate their message.

Their continued presence in the city probably created an even greater degree of hostility, to the point that some of the people who are opposed to the gospel try to kill them by throwing stones at them. So Paul and Barnabas flee to Lystra, a city about 18 miles away to the south.

This passage shows that there is a time to stand in the face of hostility to the gospel, and there's a time to run. Paul and Barnabas probably stayed long enough to confirm the new believers in their faith. Paul wasn't afraid of danger, but I'm sure he knew that God wanted him to bring the gospel to other places before he died for the faith. So he headed to another city.

While in Lystra, three significant things happen: Paul works a miracle, which confirms the message he is preaching; some people in Lystra misinterpret Paul; and, once again, Paul is met with opposition and he is nearly killed. Let's first read about the miracle in verses 8-10:

<sup>8</sup> Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. <sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, <sup>10</sup> said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking.

This is very similar to what Peter does in Acts 3. I suppose Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to see how similar Peter's and Paul's ministries were. Perhaps this is an important validation of Paul's status as an apostle; after all, unlike Peter, he wasn't a follower of Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. More importantly, the miracle shows that Paul is walking in the footsteps not only of Peter, but also Jesus. This miracle is similar to the ones Jesus performed.

When Paul is preaching, he sees a disabled man who believes what Paul is saying. To believe is to trust. This man trusted that Jesus could heal him, and he was healed. As I've said before, the physical healing is a picture of a greater healing: healing from the separation we have from God because of our broken relationship with him. In other words, this man's physical healing is a picture of how God heals people of sin. Not all Christians will experience miraculous physical healings in this life. But all Christians are healed of their sin; they are forgiven and reconciled to God. And all Christians will have resurrected bodies some day in the future, when Jesus returns and makes all things new.

The people in Lystra can't help but notice this miracle. They see that Paul has a special power. But instead of believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, they draw the wrong conclusions. Let's read verses 11-13:

<sup>11</sup> 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!"  
<sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.  
<sup>13</sup> 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 don't understand that Jesus was the one who healed this man. Instead, they cry out in their own local language that a couple of Greek gods have visited them. They think that Barnabas is Zeus, the father or chief of all gods. Perhaps that's because Barnabas was older than Paul. They assume that Paul is Hermes, perhaps because Paul is younger but probably also because Paul was the main speaker, and Hermes was the messenger of the gods. There's probably another reason why they think these two men were Greek gods. There was a legend that Jupiter and Mercury, the Roman equivalents of Zeus and Hermes, visited Phrygia, the neighboring region, and many people didn't recognize them and turned them away. This legend is captured by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC – 17/18 AD) in his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid says, "To a thousand homes they came, seeking a place for rest; a thousand homes were barred against them." But one older couple received the gods and fed them. Because the people of this region rejected these gods, the whole region would be flooded in judgment. However, the old couple that received the gods were spared this judgment. Their home was turned into a temple and they became the temple's keepers.

So now Paul has performed a miracle and the people assume that this must be a visit from the gods again. They don't want to be judged by these gods, so they rush to bring offerings to them. We're told that the people say "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" in their local language. They spoke Greek, but they also spoke Lycaonian. Apparently Paul and Barnabas didn't speak this language, so at first they don't understand what is happening. But when they see that these people are ready to offer them sacrifices, they understand what is happening and they protest. Let's read about their reaction in verses 14-18:

<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, <sup>15</sup> "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. <sup>16</sup> In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

Paul and Barnabas rip their clothes—this is a sign of lamenting blasphemy (cf. Mark 14:63). They realize what's happening: The people think that Paul and Barnabas are gods and they are ready to worship them. Nothing could have grieved someone like Paul more than this. He knew

that there is only one true God, and he alone should be worshiped. So Paul gives a short sermon. Even though his response is short, it's very important for us to see what he says, because here and in Acts 17, when Paul is in Athens, are the only two places where Paul addresses pagan audiences. In other words, these are the only times when Paul speaks to groups of people who were not familiar with the Old Testament. And we find ourselves in a similar position today, as we try to tell people who don't know the Bible about Jesus.

Paul makes a few major points to his audience. First, he says that he and Barnabas aren't gods; they're just men. In Greek mythology, there were all kinds of demigods, the children of gods or goddesses and human beings. In Greek mythology, the gods could appear as humans or could produce semi-divine children, such as Achilles and Hercules. Also, the emperors, the Caesars, claimed to be divine. So these people in Lystra had a worldview that allowed for the existence of god-men. But Paul says, "No, we're just men." Paul seems to imply that there is a sharp distinction between God and people. Of course, there is a God-man, Jesus, but he is not a demigod, or a semi-divine person. He is God in the flesh. But these people didn't know that yet.

Second, Paul says he has good news, but this good news requires a turn from false or worthless gods to the one true God. The cities of Rome were full of temples to false gods. There were statues of these gods and altars to them. Yet these gods aren't real. They aren't gods. In fact, the Bible says false gods are actually demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:20). These gods can't save. They didn't create the earth. They don't sustain their worshipers' lives. They can't do anything but lead their worshipers away from the true God.

Third, Paul says they should turn to the living God. The true God, the God of the Bible, is the only living God—the God who gives life in the first place, the God who created the universe and all that is in it, and the God who can redeem his people and give them eternal life. The other gods don't give life, but the true one does.

Fourth, Paul says that in that past, God let the nations go their own way. God didn't reveal himself to all the nations the way that he revealed himself to Israel. But now things are different. Now, the nations are being called to turn from their sins and their idols and turn to the one true God.

Fifth, even though God didn't give them special revelation in the past, he didn't leave the nations without a witness. They should have known there was one true Creator God because God

gave them rains and seasons so that their crops would grow, and they would eat and be satisfied. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,

<sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20).

In other words, since we all live in God's world, we should know there's a God, even if we don't know a lot of specifics about him. As Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God."

The fact that God controls the seasons and harvests is significant, because it was often thought that other deities controlled those things. Apparently some thought that Zeus was the "god of vegetation who controls the weather."<sup>3</sup> Paul says, "No, it was the one true God all along who gave you those good things."

It seems that Paul gets cut off. He isn't able to finish his sermon because the people are still trying to offer sacrifices to him, as verse 18 tells us. If he kept going, he surely would have said that this God sent his Son, who died on the cross for sins and rose from the grave, and that one day this Son of God would return to judge all who have ever lived.

It's important to see that Paul had to correct misunderstandings and had to demonstrate that there is one true God who is the Creator before he could get to Jesus. I think that's what a lot of us are going to have to do if we are going to tell others about Jesus. We can't assume people know the Bible. In almost all cases, they won't. If they have heard something about the Bible or about Jesus, it's probably false. We can't even assume that when we talk about "God" people are on the same page as us.

Let me tell you a recent story that illustrates this point. Last weekend, we were in Texas. On Monday, we flew from Dallas to Boston. On the plane, I was in the middle seat. Kathy was on my left, on the aisle, and a young man was on my right, in the window seat. I was planning to spend my time reading. Before the plane took off, I read two pages of a book. At that point, the young man asked, "May I ask what book you're reading?" I turned the cover over to show him. I was reading a book called *Culture and the Death of God* by Terry Eagleton.<sup>4</sup> The young man took a good look at the cover and asked what the premise of the book was. I told him it was

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<sup>3</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

about how people tried to live life without a belief in God. He said, “Interesting. May I ask why you’re reading that book?” I said, “Actually, I’m a pastor. My other book here is the Bible. I do a lot of thinking about ultimate issues like the meaning of life and death.” I then proceeded to have a four-hour conversation with this young man, named Mike. Our conversation was wide-ranging because he kept asking new questions. It was hard to stay on any one subject for a while, but we talked about what I believed and what he believed. To make a long story short, he’s an entrepreneurial young man who has been reading a number of self-help books that draw on New Age spirituality. He asked me if I had read the book, *The Secret*, and he kept referring to the law of attraction, which basically states that whatever we think will become a reality, as long as it’s something that’s physically possible.

I was trying to show him that this law of attraction isn’t real. I said, “I know people don’t like labels, but it seems you’re into New Age stuff.” He admitted that. I said, “Like Dr. Wayne Dyer.” He said, “Yes.” I said that I once saw part of a Wayne Dyer special on PBS. He was telling the story of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt. As I watched this, I thought, “Where is he going with this?” Then he got to the part of the story where God reveals himself to Moses and says, “I am.” And then Dyer went on to say that we are God. He defines God as our “highest self.”<sup>5</sup> He said, “‘I am God’ is not blasphemy; it’s your identity.”<sup>6</sup> When I first saw that, I almost tore my garments.

Anyway, I told Mike that I thought all of this was completely wrong. He said, “So you don’t believe you’re God?” And I said, “No!” Then I had to explain that Christianity teaches that there is a strong distinction between God, who created everything, and everything else, which is created. Creator and creation are not the same and shouldn’t be confused. I said, “There’s a thick, black line between God and the universe. The universe isn’t God.” I then had to describe what God is like. Later, as we continued to talk, Mike said, “I think we agree. For you, it’s Jesus. For me, it’s ‘the Universe.’” Again, I had to say no.

Throughout our conversation, I tried to point out the folly of believing that we can control what happens with our thoughts. I did this in a joking way, but I was serious. I pointed out that Wayne Dyer died last year. Apparently he didn’t say “I am alive” enough. If the law of attraction was real, people would be curing cancer and ending poverty just by thinking about these things. I

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Dyer, “The Power of I Am,” <http://www.drwaynedyer.com/blog/the-power-of-i-am> (accessed May 28, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> “Dr. Wayne Dyer: I Am – Part 2,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl25agjTOb4> (accessed May 28, 2016).

said that we could think all the positive thoughts that we want, but the plane could crash that day. It's foolish to think that people who can't control their own lives would think that they are God.

I'm not sure if Mike was really paying attention to all that I said. But I really enjoyed talking to him and I was glad that he had many questions to ask me. Still, it was clear that we were coming from very different places. I had to say that there is one true God who created the universe. And we were made to worship this God. But we fail to do that. And if we die without a relationship with him, hell awaits us. I told him that it's not enough to believe in a generic God. Mike's conception of God was basically an impersonal force. But the real God is personal. He can be known and described. And he is most clearly known in the person of Jesus. Having a relationship with Jesus is our only hope in this life in the next. And if we have a relationship with Jesus, we'll be able to describe what he's like and what he expects of us. We'll realize that he is Lord and we're not. He is the King of kings and we're his humble servants.

So my point is that even though no one may assume we're gods, people might think very different things about God. And we'll have to explain what the Bible says about God, and what the Bible says about the human condition, and what the Bible says about God's solution to our problem, which is Jesus and his perfect life and his sacrificial death. We'll have to explain what it looks like to put our trust in Jesus and what it looks like to follow him. And this probably won't all be communicated even in one four-hour conversation. We have our work cut out for us.

Paul certainly had work to do. But before he could explain more about God, he was interrupted by unbelieving Jews who came from Antioch and Iconium. We'll read about that in verses 19-23:

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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.

Paul has a habit of nearly getting killed by people who were hostile to him. In this case, unbelieving Jews from Antioch and Iconium travel a number of miles in order to try to kill Paul. That's how much they want to silence him. And they think they did that. It looks as if Paul is



dead, so they drag his body outside the city. But we're told some of his disciples gather about him and he eventually gets up. We're not told if this was a miraculous healing, or if they protected him from further attacks until he could regain consciousness. What's important to see is that Paul gets up and goes once again into the city! That's how driven Paul was. He wasn't going to be stopped by such opposition. He was like a prize fighter who gets knocked down and gets up in order to keep fighting.

On the next day, Paul goes with Barnabas to a city called Derbe, about 60 miles to the east. We're not told much, but we are told that he preaches the gospel there and that he makes a number of disciples.

At that point, Paul could keep going east in order to return to Antioch in Syria. That would be the easiest thing to do. But that's not what Paul does. Instead, he returns to the cities where people tried to kill him. He goes back to Lystra and Iconium, as well as Pisidian Antioch. He does this so he could "strengthen the souls of the disciples" and "encourage them to continue in the faith." These people had just become Christians. Paul wants to make sure they grow in the faith. That shows us that it's not enough to make a decision for Christ. When we come to faith in Jesus, we need to keep growing and learning. We need to be in a local church. That's why Paul appoints elders in each church. He also tells them that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Paul knew that firsthand. Christians will face difficulties in this life, particularly from people who are hostile to the faith.

As a bit of aside, I'll note that Paul and Barnabas appointed multiple elders in each church. That's the pattern of leadership in New Testament churches. There are multiple elders—another name is overseers, and another name is shepherds or pastors—in each church. Each church needs godly men, able to teach, able to lead, able to protect the church from false teaching, and able to serve as role models.

When Paul and Barnabas travel back to Syrian Antioch, they are able to report what God had done through them. Let's read verses 24-28:

<sup>24</sup> Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. <sup>25</sup> And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, <sup>26</sup> and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And they remained no little time with the disciples.

They say that God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” This prepares us for what we’ll see next week in chapter 15.

I should point out that the churches in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were probably the people to whom Paul wrote the book of Galatians. He probably wrote that letter when he came back to Antioch in Syria, before he went to Jerusalem in Acts 15.

So, what do we learn from this passage? How does it apply to us?

Well, we live in a very different cultural setting than the Roman Empire. Not many people believe in Greek gods today. But there are many things that remain the same. We are surrounded by many people who look at the world in a very different way. We need to be able to explain what we believe and why it’s true. We need to persuade people to stake their lives on Jesus. That will take some explaining. It will take time. It will require patience. We’ll need to ask questions about what other people believe. We will need to love them enough to tell them the truth.

And when we tell people about Jesus, we can expect to receive different reactions. The gospel always provokes some kind of reaction. Paul said that the same message could make him smell like life or like death, depending on who heard it. This is what he says in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16:

<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

Some people will embrace us because we are spreading “the fragrance of the knowledge” of Jesus. Others will think we stink. So be it. We’re trying to reach the people who will recognize that the gospel is a life-giving message.

When we’re met with opposition, we shouldn’t be discouraged. We should expect that opposition will come. We need to be like Paul and keep telling people about Jesus. There may be times when we’ll have to end a conversation. Sometimes, that will be very clear. I doubt that people will try to kill us—at least not now. But there may be people who get angry at us, and there may be a time simply to walk away from a conversation and pray that whoever is angry with us will later come to faith.

I think one thing we definitely need to do is tell people that unless they are putting their trust and hope in Jesus, they are worshiping empty, vain, worthless idols. We don't have to be obnoxious when we do that. We can simply point out how whatever people tend to put their hopes in won't fix their biggest problem, which is death and separation from God. No amount of money will help a person escape death. No amount of fame will satisfy the soul. No amount of sex or entertainment will give a person's life enduring meaning.

Earlier, I talked about this young man named Mike. He's currently selling some exercise and health products. He says he's helping people get healthier, and he's also helping other people sell these products. I told him that it's not a bad thing to make money, and I believe in exercise and fitness. But when you come to the end of your life, what does it all add up to? What if the whole point of our existence is to know and worship God by having a relationship with Jesus? If you're a Christian, you can make money and help people get healthier. That's fine. But if you've spent your life chasing wealth and helping people get healthier—people who will still die—and you don't know Jesus, you will spend eternity apart from God and anything good. You'll have wasted your life.

We need to tell people this in loving ways. And when we do, there will be some who will turn from idols to serve the living and true God. These are people who will understand that our message isn't manmade. They'll recognize it for what it is: the word of God.

I want to leave us with the words that Paul wrote to another church, a church in modern-day Greece, in a city called Thessalonica. Paul was thankful that these people turned from false gods to the true God. This is 1 Thessalonians 1:2–10:

<sup>2</sup> We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, <sup>3</sup> remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup> because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup> For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. <sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.