

Turning to the Goodness of the Living God

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Date: 09 December 2007

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[0 : 01] Let's pray together, friends. Lord our God, we thank you for your goodness to us, shown every day and every blessing we enjoy. And we thank you most of all for your blessing of the Lord Jesus, in whom is every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.

So make him precious to us today, we ask in his name. Amen. Have a seat, friends. Well, we come to our last sermon on the Book of Acts for this series this year.

I'm not sure when we'll get back to it. It's an awkward day to end on the Book of Acts because this is an awkward event in Acts 14. It's a mess. It's a bad day for the Apostle.

It's one of those days which we all have and Apostles had in which you wish you didn't get out of bed. The Apostles had really bad days. Today's event in Acts chapter 14 is in effect an opening skirmish in a massive intellectual war that was about to take place between the Roman pagan worldview and the Christian monotheistic worldview.

This is the first time this battle has really taken place because the Jews, although the Jews were monotheistic, under the Roman Empire they kind of had an intellectual truce going on where they kind of agreed to disagree.

[1 : 20] Every nation other than the Jews that the Romans conquered were made to worship the Roman imperial cult. You had to adopt the Roman emperor worship into your own religion if you were part of the Roman Empire or else they would kill you.

Normally that worked okay because the kind of countries that they took over were pagan nations anyway and they had multiple gods and it wasn't that hard to adopt another Roman god into your pagan religion.

The Jews were monotheistic, had no idols, and they had an exemption from this principle in the Roman Empire under the condition that they remained docile and submissive and didn't try and preach this message of one god which was much ridiculed by the pagans.

But Christianity, when it hit the scene, would not be domesticated. And so Christianity would not be shackled. And so the gospel of one creator god, one saviour lord, one way of salvation is going to just crash against the pagan religion of Rome.

And so friends, today what we're going to do is actually look at how that played out in Acts 14 and think about how it plays out in pagan Australia today.

[2 : 41] And so I'm not going to work carefully through the story, but in a nutshell what happens today is that Paul and Barnabas last week got persecuted, run out of town by Jews. They go to the area of Lystra and Derbe.

They heal a crippled man. The local pagans think that is pretty impressive and start to worship Paul and Barnabas as being the pagan gods Hermes and Zeus.

Apparently there was a local myth at the time that Hermes and Zeus, the pagan gods, did have a secret visit to this area of the first century and no one received them and so they judged the whole place except for one family that fed them.

And so the people there are particularly superstitious about this kind of thing and they try and kill a cow to worship Paul for the healing he's done. And then what, it's kind of comical really, what will happen next is that the Jews from the previous town from last week will come over, they will win the crowds over from worshipping Paul to wanting to kill him and they will do a pretty decent job at an assassination attempt.

They'll stone him thinking he's dead, but he's not dead and Paul will remain in the city to plant a church. And he'll say, quite the understatement, he'll say, we must go through many persecutions to enter the kingdom of God, which is an understatement when you've just been stoned, literally.

[4 : 07] And in the middle of all that, friends, it's so fascinating, I think Paul preaches his worst sermon ever. I'm not saying it's a bad sermon, I half am.

It's his worst sermon ever. Now let's, before we get into all of that, I need to ask you a question about your own life. Do you think that you are a gullible person?

Are you a gullible person? My biblical theology of gullibility works like this. The more that you turn your back on the living God, the more gullible you become.

The more godless you are, the more gullible you become. Let me give you some examples. Firstly, these people in Acts 14, they are worshipping Paul and Barnabas.

They've seen a person healed, but they are so pagan and therefore so gullible, they begin to want to worship Paul for something God has done. To want to kill a cow, to worship a man for something the living God has done is a very gullible and superstitious thing.

[5 : 11] The whole Roman Empire was extremely superstitious and gullible. They practiced infanticide, the superstitious killing of some of their children for their pagan gods.

They practiced polygamy, all kinds of bizarre ceremonies where blood of animals will be poured all over you to sort of cleanse you. They were a debaucherous and a violent society.

Now when the Christian gospel came to Rome, although this is just a skirmish, eventually over a couple hundred years, the Roman Empire was transformed out of that level of superstitiousness by the gospel.

Let me give you another example of gullibility. In the medieval Roman Catholic Empire, so to speak, so not the pagan Roman Empire, but the Roman Catholic quasi-Christian Empire of the Middle Ages, people were extremely insecure, fearful, superstitious and gullible until the time of the Protestant Reformation where the centrality of faith in the living God through Jesus Christ by grace, until that was restored, that's when the dark ages, so to speak, ended.

And I commend to you the book that argues this more well than I can. It's called The Essence of the Reformation by Kirsten Burkett. And it's an Australian book. It's a really light read. It's a good read to read in advance of the Pope's visit to Australia or to Sydney next year.

[6 : 48] And basically her argument is that the medieval world was extremely superstitious and almost pagan rites had been incorporated into the Roman Catholic religion and it was only when the gospel of the Reformation came when that ended.

So unlike many secular historians who argue that it was at the time of the Enlightenment in the 18th century when science became really prominent, people say that's when superstition ended, but that's not true.

Superstition ended in Europe 100 or 200 years earlier at the time of the Reformation. So when the gospel comes, superstition ends.

But where people turn their back on the living God, they are gullible. Some people like to argue, you see, that the more knowledge you have, the less gullible you'll become. You know, you just need education to get rid of gullibility.

But that's not true. And there are so many counter examples, not least first century Rome, because they were extremely well educated in the first century Rome. Some of our best philosophers came out of that era, Plato, Aristotle.

[8 : 01] They were very, very intellectual and yet gullible and superstitious. Also medieval Europe, many people had great classical educations, very learned, and yet rarely did any rise above the superstitions of the age.

In Australia today, friends, think about ourselves. We are very educated and yet we are very, very gullible. I think we are a gullible country because we've turned our back on God.

I'm thinking of our increased levels of relationship breakdown, our failure to get relationships right, to get marriages right.

We are spawning generation after generation of broken people, and yet people don't realise it's because they're turning their back on God's standards of marriage and sex.

We are a country that's facing increased levels of financial entrapment and financial slavery, foolish levels of debt Australia has today.

[9 : 03] And it may yet be our downfall in terms of our kind of economy. It's just a reflection, I think, of our secular God of greed. Think of the way that people work and work and work and neglect their families and then wonder why their families don't want them or families break down.

The point is, I think, Australians are very gullible. They give away their bodies or their time or their money far too easily and cheaply. And so into this kind of gullible context like we have today, Paul brings his gospel.

And this is his summary in verse 15. They're trying to worship him. He says, Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you. We bring you good news, the gospel, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God.

That's Paul's gospel to pagans, that we can turn from worthless things, from our secular idols, from our things that enslave us, from our sinful habits, from our gullibility, to turn to the living and true God.

We can turn from slavery to self-gratification in the area of sexuality. We can turn from slavery to financial gullibility and foolishness that destroy us.

[10 : 26] Paul says, Turn from your worthless idols, from their painful consequences, and turn to the living God. That's good news. Now we need to ask, What are the secular idols in your life, in your home, in your family, or your wider family's life, that people are enslaved to?

You may already know. You may know that there are things that you live for that are not the living God. And God is saying to you, Live for me. Turn from worshipping those things and live for me.

You may have worthless addictions or dark habits that actually aren't worshipping the true and living God. They're worshipping something else. You need to turn from them to the living God in repentance.

Others here may have no idea. I mean, secular idols so take over a culture, it's hard to see them. You may need to take your Bible and beg God and say, God, show me what my idols are.

Show me what I need to turn from and worship you truly with. Now a big mistake Christians make at this point, friends. Paul doesn't make it, but we make it.

[11 : 38] We think being a Christian is just saying no. We think being a Christian is just turning from worthless things, getting clearing out the idols in our life or the sins, and that's all you have to do.

As if you could just empty your life and not fill it, but actually, friends, that doesn't work. Jesus told a parable that if you cast out a demon and leave the house empty, they come back sevenfold and you're in a worse condition than before.

You see, if you empty your week of your gods, an hour of church is not going to fill the gap, is it? You actually need to fill your life with the living God.

You need to fill your life with the worship of the true and living God. Now who is this God? He's speaking to pagans. He says, This is the God who made heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Our God is the God who created a beautiful world that we enjoy every day. Consider, friends, have you ever been bushwalking and just thought, just been breathtakingly taken back by the wonder of going to the bush?

[12 : 53] I remember Helen took us camping at Wilson's Prom. I'd never been overnight camping before and it was just so beautiful to do that. And I remember just praising God, walking around Wilson's Prom, thinking, Our God is a great God to make such a beautiful place.

Or have you ever noticed, and I can demonstrate this one for you after the service, the infectious beauty of a giggling baby?

That is the glory of God reflected in his image bearers. I can demonstrate it for you with Charlie Kate. You just smile at her. She'll do it for you. Whenever you feel these things in creation, God is saying to you, I did that.

That is my work. Come and worship and thank and praise me. Who here does not love the sea? Who doesn't love going to the beach?

I can confess I don't like being on the sea. My stomach doesn't handle it. But I love being at the sea. The feeling, the beauty of the power of the waves crash in and thinking, Our God is a great and majestic and powerful God.

[14 : 02] The ocean is just a drop in the ocean of God's greatness. Paul goes on, God has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.

Who is God? God is the one who feeds you. Australian drought notwithstanding, everyone in Australia is fed by God. Are you going home today to enjoy a Sunday roast or something nice for lunch?

Well, that's God's gift to you. That's God's gift of kindness to you. Did you wake up this morning and enjoy a hot cup of tea? That was God's gift to you. That was God's gift of kindness to you.

On a hot day, if you've worked hard, do you like to have a cold beer on the couch or on the veranda? That's God's gift of kindness to you. Everything we enjoy, friends, is from God, the living God who fills our hearts with joy and fills our bellies.

Just think now, even right now, God is blessing you. That is, we are all breathing. Anyone here not breathing? That's God's gift of life to you.

[15 : 14] God gives you your life. Who protects you when you're out? Who looks after you when you're sick and gives you such great hospitals? Who keeps the wheels of our economy turning and the cogs turning so that our super grows and we can enjoy an income and we have children and grandchildren and pensions and all these things?

Who keeps the earth spinning around the sun? Everything is a gift of God's kindness to us. Isn't he a good God? Do you see that every day there are millions of ways in which God is physically blessing you?

Even, friends, I'd say even if you are caught up in the most serious and joyless depression in your own life, if you're experiencing anguish or anxiety or sadness and there is no joy, if you are hungry, you will still eat, I hope.

If you are thirsty, you will take water. And so God is still showing you his kindness through those things. This is the gospel to pagans.

Turn away from worthless things, from your idols, and turn to the living God who made heaven and earth, who blesses you in every way. Now somebody might protest.

[16 : 30] And some people claim this. I'll say, surely, Wayne, you're not arguing that God wants me to thank him for every little one of these? Is God so petty to want me to say, thank you, God, for A, B, C, D, E, up to a million?

Well, friends, the answer to that is in verse 17 when Paul says, God has not left himself without a witness in doing good. That word for witness or testimony is a Greek word for a legal court witness.

It is not just a good gift from God. It is a message from God, a witness from God saying, worship me, come to me, thank me.

Every second of every day, God is bombarding every one of your senses, your hearing, your taste, your smell, your touch, your visual senses.

God is saying, look at this world and worship me and come to me. I am the living God. God is calling out to you every second as you breathe, blessing you and calling on you to worship.

[17 : 36] So these things that we enjoy are not just a gift. They are a command to worship. You might come back and say, well, why should I start thanking God now? You know, I've gone my whole life pretty much taking these things for granted.

Why should I start worshipping God for them? The answer to that is in verse 16 where Paul says, in past generations he allowed the nations to go and follow their own ways.

The implication being that the time of thanklessness has now ended, implicitly by the coming of Jesus Christ. Because the Lord Jesus has arrived, the time for ignorance has now ended.

The time of using God, using his gifts and yet not worshipping him has stopped. Because now that Jesus is Lord, he will judge as Lord. A day of judgment is coming.

You see, friends, even if you own your property, even if you've paid off your mortgage, you are still a tenant or a renter in God's world. It is his world. And so every time you enjoy his gifts without thanking him or worshipping him, it is thankless.

[18 : 52] It is like a spoilt child who lacks gratitude. Sometimes we are so self-absorbed, I think, we say, I put this food on the table. I worked for this.

Or this is my weekend. This is my free time. And yet it's not. It's actually all God's. It's God's gift to us. So God says the time for ignorance and ingratitude to God is over with the coming of Jesus.

A day of judgment is coming. Stop taking God for granted. And we know, friends, of course, when he says turn from worthless things to the living God, you don't do that just by saying a grace at dinner.

You do it by a whole life turned over to the worship and a life of thanksgiving to God. Now, what makes this sermon Paul's worst?

Have you picked it up yet? What makes this sermon Paul's worst? It's not because he got stoned or killed or whatever. That happens all the time to Paul. What makes it his worst sermon?

[19 : 52] The reason is because something big is missing from it. Someone big is missing from it. Paul does not mention Jesus in this sermon. It's the only place in the book of Acts where there's a sermon that doesn't mention Jesus.

That makes it a bad sermon. In my books, if it was at my Bible college where I trained and you preached a sermon without mentioning Jesus, you would fail. The reason why? Because they interrupt.

But you think, friends, what a loss. That because of their pagan gullibility, they go to worship him and then try and kill him. They actually miss out on hearing about the gift of Jesus.

They miss out on God's greatest gift, the Lord Jesus. That is a tragic and sad thing. See, I look at Paul's epistles and they are saturated with love for Christ.

You read Paul's letters, Paul must have been so angry to not get to Jesus with these people.

[21 : 00] Just think of where he would have gone. I think of passages like Ephesians 1, that God doesn't just offer us physical blessing, but he offers us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm in Christ.

Or in Ephesians 3, Paul prays that they would know the depth and the length and the height and the depth of the love of Christ and that God would give them immeasurably more than they can imagine.

Paul's heart is filled with joy in Christ. He sees Jesus as the greatest treasure above every other blessing. In Colossians 2, he says, he prays that they might know the mystery of God.

What's the mystery of God? Christ, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I think Paul's joy in Christ is something that far exceeds ours.

When Paul talks about Jesus, he doesn't just talk about a dutiful relationship with God, going to church, that kind of thing. He talks about unimaginable treasure, unsearchable riches.

[22 : 07] That is Paul's attitude to Christ. So I wonder, what does Paul have that we don't have? I want to challenge you today, friends, and this is my big challenge, that maybe, just maybe, there is more to the Christian life than you are experiencing.

That there is more to Jesus than you know about. That there is more joy to be had in mature and faithful Christian living than you have obtained.

In fact, I even want to argue that you and myself have no clue as to the joys that can be had in Christ. I say this because, if we can't even thank God for the physical blessings, how can we even presume to have a handle on the spiritual blessings we have in Christ?

Our spiritual thermometers are so shot, our spiritual compasses are so cracked, that we don't even realise the millions of ways God blesses us physically. How can we even pretend we've got a handle on what's available in the Christian life, in the worship of Christ?

We are, by nature, friends, addicts of worthless things. That's who we are. We are, by nature, gullible addicts of worthless things.

[23 : 28] And so I think we have no ability to even measure the worth of Christ. We have no ability. We are so gullible. We settle for shortcuts. We settle for self-gratification, short-term security.

We have no idea how Jesus Christ can overwhelmingly increase our joy through relationship in him. Paul says it this way, and this should make you hungry.

No eye has seen, nor ear has heard. No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, for those who have turned from worthless things and turned to the living God.

So, friends, I'd encourage you to push and strive harder after Christ. I have no technique. I've got no tricks.

All we have is a Bible, and we have each other, and we need to pursue Christ and joy in him. I have a glimpse of the joy that I've had in Jesus, but it's just a glimpse, and I'm hungry for more of that joy.

[24 : 34] I'd rather be a hungry for Christ Christian than a gullible Christian groping for joys in the slavery to secular idols.

I think if we are honest, friends, many of us will say, we're missing something in our Christian life, that we know there's a joy to be had that maybe we see others having that we don't have.

You know, we read that psalm that says, you know, as the deer pants after water, so my soul longs after you. And we think, I don't feel that. Well, friends, let's go after Christ until we do feel that.

Let's seek the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's seek joy in God, not just in the physical blessings, but in the spiritual blessings of Christ.

Let it not be said of us that it's said of the people in Lystra and Derby that we missed out on Christ because we were so spiritually gullible. So why don't we bow our heads and ask God to work that in our lives.

[25 : 37] Lord God, we come before you in repentance for the idols that still encroach in our life, maybe some that we are secretly nurturing. Lord God, help us to repent and turn from these worthless things and turn to you, the living God.

Dear God, we see in the Apostle Paul, in his writings, a love and joy in Christ that we don't have. And so, Father, we want to be honest with you and we want to pray that you would give us that same joy in Jesus, in his gospel.

Dear God, what we have glimpsed, we have tasted and seen a little bit that you are good. So help us to go on and enjoy the full feast of every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Father, I pray that you would enlighten the eyes of our heart and show us the fullness of the inheritance to which you've called us in Jesus. And we ask in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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