

Useless Things (Acts 14:8-18)^a

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Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary journey, preached Christ in Antioch of Pisidia (in modern-day Turkey).**
2. **Kicked out of Antioch of Pisidia, traveled to Iconium where Paul preached Christ in the synagogue.**
3. **Persecution arose: opposition attempted to stone them, fled to Lystra and Derbe.**
4. **Preaching the gospel in Lystra.**

Passage (Acts 14:8-18)

[8] And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. [9] [This] man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, [10] said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. [11] Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian [language], "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" [12] And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. [13] Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. [14] But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out [15] and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, 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, [16] who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. [17] 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." [18] And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.¹

Healing a cripple

1. **Listening to the gospel, believing what Paul was saying**
2. **God gave Paul the ability to discern the man's faith to use the occasion as a means of testifying to the authority of Paul as God's messenger.**
3. **An undeniable miracle**
 - A. Born lame, undoubtedly well known by the locals
 - B. Had never walked

C. He “leaped and walked”, a dramatic, complete healing

4. Peter and Paul compared: what Peter did by apostolic authority so did Paul — this authenticates Paul's apostolic authority (2Cor. 11:5, 2Cor. 12:11-12).

- A. Both healed a lame man, Peter (Acts 3:6-7), Paul (Acts 14:8-10).
- B. Both heal through indirect media, Peter via a shadow (Acts 5:15), Paul via handkerchiefs (Acts 19:11-12).
- C. Both impart the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, Peter (Acts 8:14-17), Paul (Acts 19:6).
- D. Both oppose a sorcerer, Peter (Acts 8:20), Paul (Acts 13:6-12).
- E. Both were worshiped, Peter (Acts 10:25), Paul (Acts 14:11-13).
- F. Both miraculously released from prison, Peter (Acts 12:7-11), Paul (Acts 16:26-29).
- G. Both raised the dead, Peter (Acts 9:36-42), Paul (Acts 20:9-12).
- H. Both rendered swift judgment, Peter (Acts 5:4-5, Acts 5:9-10), Paul (Acts 13:11).
- I. Both have one complete sermon recorded by Luke, Peter (Acts 2:14-40), Paul (Acts 13:16-41)
- J. Both entrusted with gospel to people groups, Peter to Jews (Gal. 2:7-8), Paul to Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Gal. 2:7-8).
- K. (There is supernatural design behind the book of Acts.)

5. Paul's amazing statement in his second letter to the Church at Corinth: “ For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles” (2Cor. 11:5).

Misunderstood miracle

1. The purpose of the miraculous

- A. Not to draw attention to the person through whom God works
- B. Attests the authority of the one sent by God, the divine origin of the message being preached: the saving gospel

2. Impressed by the *messenger* rather than the *message*

- A. *Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying . . . "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (Acts 14:11)*

- I. Zeus chief god, Hermes the messenger - equivalent to the Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury
- II. Intending to sacrifice oxen "to" Barnabas and Paul: *they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them* (Acts 14:18)

B. Analogous to using your finger to point out something to a cat or dog

C. Creation is like a finger pointing to God, but people focus on the finger rather than what it points to—they idolize creation and don't look past to the infinitely more wonderful Creator

3. The contextual sensitivity of Paul and Barnabas' response

A. Not speaking to Jews with a knowledge of the OT

B. No effort, initially, to connect to OT themes: the promised Son of David, the Messiah

C. Instead: appealing to universals which are evident from God's general revelation

Misdirected worship

1. Nature - *We are also men with the same nature as you* (Acts 14:15)

A. "Nature" is **ὁμοιοπαθής** [*homoioopathēs*], "pertaining to being of the same quality or kind of desires"²

I. Joins two root meanings: *homo* = "the same", and *pathos* which we associated with "suffering," or "grief", but here conveys the idea of emotions or feelings in general.

II. In relation to humankind: having the same feelings, experiencing similar sufferings, lacking supernatural power

III. Same term used: *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours* (James 5:17)

IV. Ontology: *the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being*

a. Metaphysics: *the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.*

b. "Ontology is the study in philosophy of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations. Traditionally listed as a part of the major branch of philosophy known as metaphysics, ontology often deals with questions concerning what entities exist or may be said to exist and how such entities may be

grouped, related within a hierarchy, and subdivided according to similarities and differences.”³

V. Example ontological categories

- a. *Creator vs. creature*: that which has always existed vs. that which was brought into existence
- b. *Spiritual vs. material*: the angelic realm vs. the physical realm
- c. *Man vs. animals*: made in the image of God or not

B. Paul and Barnabas are saying that these Lycaonians have their ontological categories confused!

- I. Men should never worship other men
- II. In fact, men should worship nothing other than the only One who is alone in an “ontological category”: God
- III. All other worship is misdirected, useless, or both

2. Useless - *You should turn from these useless things (Acts 14:15)*

A. Useless as a focus of worship - the things which are elevated and adored cannot save, absolve from sin, or provide eternal life:w

B. Worse than useless: *idolatrous*

- I. Misdirecting attention or praise, that is due God alone, elsewhere
- II. Seeking assistance from entities or through rituals which cannot provide help
 - a. The Mass
 - b. Crawling the steps of the Holy Staircase, the *Scala Sancta* in Rome, on one’s knees repeating the Our Father on each step: as Martin Luther did in 1510
 - c. Sleeping on a bed of nails
 - d. Self-flagellation and crucifixion, as is practiced on Easter in the Philippines

C. By worshiping or venerating “empty things,” we unwittingly participate in a key goal of Satan - usurping God's glory

- I. *I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; . . . I will be like the Most High. (Isa. 14:13-14)*

II. As Satan said to Jesus during the temptation, *"Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours."* And Jesus answered and said to him, *"Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"* (Luke 4:7-8)

3. Uniqueness - **To the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them (Acts 14:15)**

A. Paul and Barnabas mention two attributes of God by which He is ontologically unique:
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I. living - not just alive, but the *source* of all life

II. creator - the source of all else that exists

B. #1 - Living

I. God alone is living, the source of life, upholding all things

a. The self-existent ONE, as revealed by name to Moses at the burning bush: *I AM WHO I AM* (Ex. 3:14)

II. God alone upholds all things, moment by moment

a. The writer of Hebrews informs us that the 2nd person of the Trinity, Jesus, is presently . . . *upholding all things by the word of His power* . . . (Heb. 1:3)

b. Paul tells the Church at Colossi, *in Him [Jesus], all things consist* (Col. 1:16)

III. All the living remain continuously dependent upon God as the ongoing giver of life

a. In the book of Job, Elihu says, *If [God] should set His heart on it, [If] He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, All flesh would perish together, And man would return to dust.* (Job 34:14-15)

b. Even the godless enemies of God are dependent upon Him, every moment, for their continued existence

IV. Ontologically distinct: the eternal one, giver of all life vs. all the living which depend upon the giver, moment-by-moment, to remain alive

C. #2 - Creator

I. Ontologically distinct:

a. The one-and-only Creator vs. all created things

b. The First Cause vs. all that flows from that Cause

II. Misdirecting the glory due God alone

- a. The first two commandments of the Big Ten, *You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness [of anything] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath, or that [is] in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, [am] a jealous God, . . .* (Ex. 20:3-5)
- b. *I [am] the LORD, that [is] My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images* (Isa. 42:8)

III. All that is created, both in the spiritual and material realm, came forth from God

- a. Paul tells the Colossian church, *[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, All things were created through Him and for Him.* (Col. 1:15-16)
 - i. Visible - material
 - ii. Invisible - spiritual
 - iii. All levels of authority are necessarily subject to Jesus, being lesser by virtue of having come forth from Him

IV. Thus, everything beside God is necessarily of a lesser quality and nature (even prior to corruption at the fall)

D. Holy: emphasizes God's uniqueness, He is ontologically distinct from all else and all others

I. God, speaking through Isaiah, emphasizes His unique nature

- a. *"To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" . . . "To whom then will you liken Me, Or [to whom] shall I be equal?" says the Holy One.* (Isa. 40:18,25)
- b. *To whom will you liken Me, and make [Me] equal And compare Me, that we should be alike? . . . I am God, and [there is] no other; I [am] God, and [there is] none like Me* (Isa. 46:5,9)

II. God is holy: in the OT, the Hebrew word is קדוש [qādōš] - "the most probably derivation is from kādhash, "to be separate," . . . When used of God it signifies: (1) His transcendence, His separateness above all other beings, His aloneness as compared to other gods"⁵

E. When we give undue attention and attention elsewhere: we are failing to recognize God's uniqueness, His transcendence; He alone is self-existent and eternal.

4. Examples - misdirected worship or veneration

A. False gods, an almost endless list. To name just a few mentioned by Scripture: Zeus, Hermes, Diana, Baal, Ashtoreth (Sidonians), Molech, Chemosh (Moabites), Milcom (Ammonites)

B. Other beings

I. Angels

II. Spirits (fallen Angels)

III. The dead

a. Ancestors (American Indians)

b. Saints

c. Mary

d. God's instructions to Isaiah, *And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? [Should they seek] the dead on behalf of the living? (Isa. 8:19)*

C. Religious leaders, now dead

I. The Buddha

II. Confucius

III. Mohammed (Islam)

IV. Krishna (Hinduism)

D. Religious relics and paraphernalia

I. Idols, created with human hands

II. Golden calf

a. At Mt. Sinai, following the Exodus

b. At Dan and Bethel, in the Northern Kingdom

III. Bronze serpent on pole, Nehushtan (Num. 21:8-9; 2K. 18:4)

IV. Gideon's ephod (Jdg. 8:27)

V. Totem poles (false creation myths, ancestors)

VI. Icons

VII. Shrines

VIII. The Crucifix

IX. Rosaries

E. Creation

I. Sun, moon, stars

II. "Mother" earth, the goddess Gaia

III. Nature, the Cosmos - typically via pantheistic heresies

F. Humanism - the achievements of man

I. Science, scientific theories, scientists

a. Darwin (evolution)

b. Einstein (relativity)

c. Stephen Hawking (cosmology)

II. Transhumanism - self-directed evolution

Will we ever learn? When will this uselessness end?

1. How long has this been going on?

A. As long as recorded history.

2. When will it stop?

A. Don't hold your breath . . .

B. A time is on the horizon, when all the world will worship Satan and his man, known as "the Beast" (Rev. [13:4](#)).

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 14:8-18](#), NKJV
 2. [Ref-0617](#), #3926
 3. WP, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology>
 4. These are by no means the only attributes unique to God.
 5. [Ref-0039](#), 1266
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Sources:

- Acts 14:8-18** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0039** James Orr, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, Inc. 1999).
- Ref-0617** James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/47_Acts_14_8-18/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.