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Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
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## Acts 14:8-18 “The True, Living God”

Intro. There are few people in America who profess to be atheists, though that number has risen over a generation to about 10%. The vast majority of people believe in some sort of a divine being. In today’s message you will see why you should believe in God.

Yet even though many people believe in a god, there is a wide difference of opinion as to who He is or what He is like. But has God left us merely to speculate about who He is and what He wants of us? Are we left with no more than human opinions on the subject? No, as v.17 says, “He has not left Himself without witness.” He has revealed Himself to us in many ways. One of the best ways He revealed Himself was through the incarnation of Jesus. For thousands of years men have thought, “Oh, if God would only become one of us and tell us what He is like, we could know Him.” In our text, that longing is found in the people of Lystra, a city of Galatia. When God performed a miracle through Paul, the people wanted to believe that the gods had visited them in human form.

But the problem is that these people believed in gods like Zeus and Hermes, who were thought up by men. After Paul and Barnabas were used of God to perform a great miracle, they even thought they were Zeus and Hermes, who appeared among them in human form. So Paul points them away from himself and to the true, living God. He is there. He has spoken. He has made Himself known. Paul sought to witness to people who had many misconceptions about God. And if you talk to enough people about your faith, you will find many people with many misconceptions about God.

In my text I hope to contrast what *men* say about God, with what God has revealed about Himself. I hope you will learn what I have to say, and become a better witness for Jesus Christ and the one true God. So first, we see from our text that we should:

### I. REJECT THE GODS CREATED BY MEN

Topping the list of the 10 commandments are 2 commandments dealing with the problem false gods. 1) “You shall have no other gods before me.” Our exclusive worship should be given to the one true God. 2) “You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...” (Ex. 20:3-5). So we are not to worship other gods. We are not to invent our own gods. Few in America make idols in the traditional sense of the word, but many create their own gods in other ways. Now I want to note, first of all:

A. The Examples of False Gods - There are different types of gods that people can create and worship:

1. Polytheism - That is the worship of many gods. In the biblical era, polytheism was commonly practiced. Our text gives an example of such belief. After the true God did a confirming miracle through Paul and Barnabas, notice what the people said in the last of v.11 in response, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men! And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (vv.11b-12). Barnabas may have

been identified with Zeus (Greek for Latin “Jupiter”) because of an older, taller, and thus more dignified in appearance; Paul, the more animated of the two, was called Hermes (Greek form of Mercury) “because he was the chief speaker.” These were just two of the *many* gods the Greeks worshipped, though Zeus was the most widely worshipped god in Galatia.

There was an old traditional story<sup>1</sup> that had been around for many years. On one occasion, the two gods, Zeus and Hermes, came to that region in disguise. They asked for some hospitality—a place to stay and something to eat. But everybody refused them except for two people: an old man named Philemon and his wife. They took in the gods not knowing they were anything but strangers, and fed them. The result was that the whole town of Lystra was wiped out by those two gods but they turned the home of Philemon and his wife into a splendid temple outside the city, and made them guardians. So when the great miracle of healing took place through Paul and Barnabas, the people immediately thought that Zeus and Hermes were back!

Then, in v.13, we see an example of such pagan worship, “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.” Animal sacrifice to the gods was a common form of pagan worship. The people who had witnessed the healing were determined not to make the same mistake and ignore the gods again. They planned to sacrifice animals to turn away any wrath the gods may have, and to make the gods favorable toward them. Their worship sought to manipulate the gods for their own selfish purposes. The worshippers also benefited because they enjoyed eating the sacrifice!

Now polytheism is not a common problem in America because of the strong influence of Christianity and Judaism. Yet many of the immigrants from India are Hindu, and they worship many gods. But the vast majority of Americans are not polytheists. So for the sake of relevance, I want to point out other types of false gods:

2. New Age Movement - New age philosophy teaches that there is a cosmic energy force and we are a part of it. They might say, “May the Force be with you.” This philosophy is pantheistic. Since the divine energy is in everything, then in one sense *we* are gods. Those who are enlightened can make use of this divine energy. They teach that if you believe in yourself and your own powers, then you can do amazing things by manipulating the spirit world for your own advantage. But the God of the Bible is a person, not just a universal force.

So notice the attitude of Paul and Barnabas (vv.14-15). When the people of Lystra tried to worship them as gods, they refused. Though we are sons of God, we are not God. We are not to be worshiped as gods. What a contrast this is to some in the ancient world. Many of the Roman emperors claimed to be divine, and demanded to be worshiped as gods. In Acts 12:22-23 Herod gladly received recognition as a god, and he was thus smitten by an angel of the Lord. Even the angels refuse worship (Rev. 22:8-9). I want to say in passing that when Thomas fell down and worshiped Jesus Christ, he was not rebuked by Christ. That is because Christ is fully God.

Now I believe that the most serious form of idolatry that is practiced here in America is:

3. Idols of the Mind - We are not to create graven images and make our own gods. But the sin of idolatry begins in the mind. Many people do not worship the God revealed in the Bible. Instead, they create in their own mind the kind of God they want. And the bad thing is they will call their god Jesus, or Jehovah, or some other biblical name for God! Sometimes someone will say, “I don’t believe in a god that would send someone to hell. The God that *I* worship loves and forgives, and He wouldn’t do that.” Such a person has created their own god in their mind. For the God revealed in the Bible is love, and He does forgive those who trust in

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<sup>1</sup> Legend retold by Ovid (43 B.C.-AD. 17) in his *Metamorphosis*.

His Son Jesus. But those who don't will suffer divine wrath against their sin. Now which God are you going to believe in? The one you create in your own mind, or the One that has been clearly revealed in the Bible, and confirmed by many miracles?

I'm afraid that in the pursuit of church growth, some people are compromising the Gospel, and preaching a different Jesus, and a different god (cf. Gal. 1:6-8). They leave out the bad news of God's holy wrath against sin. They leave out anything about hell. Some even leave out the cross because it offends some people (1 Cor. 1:18). Well my friend, if you do that, you are creating your own god!

I hope you will God's Word and reject all forms of idolatry, and reject all false gods.

B. The Command Concerning False Gods - It was very common for the ancient peoples of the world to worship many gods. But here in our text Paul says in v.16 that God "in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways." Likewise, he said in 17:30 that "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked." So often men walk in "their own ways." And God allowed them to do so in the sense that He did not wipe them out with judgment. And He was tolerant because they did not possess the truth as the Jews had it. So instead of destroying the pagans, He was patient toward them.

But now that Christ has come, a new day has arrived in God's dealings with man. The time of tolerance is over. So Paul told the people in v.15 "that you should turn from these useless things to the living God..." Now God clearly commands people to repent of idolatry. Why should we do so? It is because Paul calls these false gods "useless." They are empty, powerless, and non-existent. You can believe in a god that won't send anyone to hell regardless of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. But when judgment day comes, and you call on that god to save you, you will find that such a god was vain, a figment of your imagination! You can believe that you can lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, and cuss like a sailor, and yet *your* god will not hold you responsible. But when *my* God calls on you to give an account of your life, then go ahead and see if your god will save you from a devil's hell. You can call out to your god all the way to hell, but he won't respond because he is not there. You made up your own god! (Psa. 115:4-7 explains the vanity of idols).

Many of you remember the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:21-40). He challenged the prophets of Baal. He and they would prepare sacrificial altars, and the God who answers by fire is the true God. The 450 prophets of Baal went first. They called on their god, and nothing happened. Then, they leaped up on the altar, calling out to their god. Still, no answer, no fire. Elijah then began to mock them, "Cry out louder... either he is talking...or on a journey, or perhaps, he is sleeping and must be awakened." Then they began to cut themselves 'till blood flowed, a desperate attempt to get their god's attention. But still there was no fire, for Baal was not a true, living god. Only the God of Elijah, the true and living God, answered with fire.

Now Paul was trying to get these pagans to turn from their idolatry. So this leads up to my next main point. We must not only turn from false gods. We must:

## II. BELIEVE IN THE LIVING GOD

Paul says in v.15 that they preached "that you should turn from these useless things to the living God..." There is a contrast between the vain, lifeless, non-existent gods that people create, and the Living God. Our God is real; He is alive! He is source of life. I'm quite sure of it.

Well how do we know that the God of Israel, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is the true, living God? After all, Paul was speaking to a pagan audience that knew little of the God of Israel. So he had to begin at the beginning by explaining who God, and how we know He is the true God. In v.17 Paul said, “Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness....” In fact, there are many witnesses to testify to man concerning the living God. He has indeed revealed Himself. He has spoken to man.

We are living in an increasingly secular society. There will be times when we will need to follow Paul approach and start off with the basics about God. First, there is:

A. God Is Known through Creation – I’m referring to the fact that God has revealed Himself in the natural world. Even the person in the remotest part of the world can know at least a little bit about the true God. For example, He has revealed Himself through creation. In v.15 Paul says that God “made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.” Psa. 19:1-6 tells us that the heavens declare the glory of God. “Glory” is a synonym for praiseworthy characteristics or attributes. In the creation the great knowledge and power of God are displayed (Rom. 1:19-20). For example, consider the vastness of God’s Creation. Our Milky Way Galaxy is about 100,000 light years across. The distance from our galaxy to the next nearest one is nearly 1,500,000 light years. That 186,000 times the number of seconds in a year (31,536,000) times 1.5 million! This distance is so great that if every man, woman and child in the United States had a library of 65,000 volumes, and we collect every book in all these libraries, and then started on this journey of 1,500,000 light years, and decided to place one letter from one of the books on each mile, before we complete the journey, we will use up every letter in every book of every one of the libraries! Our God is a big God to have created such a big universe! Every effect must have a greater cause. Furthermore, there are billions and billions of stars, each containing more energy that we can imagine. What power we see! Surely so great an effect points to the omnipotence of God. Consider also the intricate detail of God’s creation. Paul said that God made “all things.” Have you ever studied the human eye? It is fairly small, but it is truly amazing. In most ways it is better and more capable than the most expensive video camera. And yet some supposedly smart men believe that the human eye just evolved by chance! No. And how did the spider evolve to be able to create a spiderweb that is five times as strong as the same weight of steel? I believe that creation also reveals the wisdom and infinite intelligence of God. We also can see the beauty of God’s creation. Surely our God must be of beautiful character. In light of this, is evolution even possible? How could such intelligent design have evolved by mere chance?

Furthermore, we see from nature that there must be a God who is the Sustainer of all. Paul said in v.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.” Not only did God create the universe, but He also sustains the universe. He gives rain from heaven. Aren’t you glad for the rain we have received lately? Overall I would rather have too much rain than a drought. By this we can learn of the goodness of God. As Jesus said, God sends rain on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45). He gives us more than we deserve. Notice that He not only provides us with food for life, but He fills “our hearts with ... gladness” as well. There is a connection between food and gladness. A whole lot of the food He created really tastes good! So God must be good and joyful. Yet how many millions go about their daily lives each day without one thought of God manifesting Himself in allowing them life and the necessities to maintain it.

Because God is so good to us, we should be thankful to Him every day! We certainly should thank Him at every meal! Food is one of the pleasures of life most all of us can enjoy.

Because of our sinful human nature, the natural revelation of creation alone does not lead us to the true God. We need more than that. For example, sinful man with the bias of a sin nature can look at creation and somehow believe that the complex universe just created itself! And natural revelation is inadequate to show us how to be saved from our sin. So we also see from our text and elsewhere that:

B. God Is Known Through His Son - As we can see from v.11, the people thought that the gods had come down in human form. Well, according to John 1, God did in fact come and dwell among us. He not only took on the *appearance* of a human, but He actually became a human. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...." John 1:18 says, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten of God has revealed Him to us" (loose translation). In John 14:8 Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." But Jesus said in v.9, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father...." I believe the incarnation satisfies the longing of the human heart. God is transcendent and seems far away but He drew near in the person of Jesus Christ. And Jesus not only revealed God to us by His incarnation, but also by His death on the cross. The cross reveals both the love of God and the righteousness of God. Jesus proved that God loves us, for only great love meeting the demands of righteousness can explain the voluntary sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

C. God Is Known Through His Servants – In this text we see that Paul and Barnabas were there to preach the Gospel in Derbe and Lystra (vv.6-7). And Paul and other servants of God were inspired to write down their revelations from God, and so we have the Bible, a trustworthy record of God's Word to man. We do not have to speculate what God is like, and what His will for our lives is. We can know the way of salvation from sin, sorrow, and death. It is right here in the Bible.

D. God Is Known Through Special Signs – We see examples of this kind of revelation in this chapter. In v.3 we see that Paul and Barnabas were "speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands." That was in Iconium. Then in Lystra, we read in vv.8-10 that a man who was lame from his mother's womb was in the audience. When Paul saw "that he had faith to be healed," he called out to him, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked! What a miracle! Here we see the fact that Paul did not just preach. But God proved that his preaching was from God by means of these miracles. You see, this audience seemed to have been purely pagan. They did not have the advantage of knowing the Old Testament. So Paul needed to have his message supported with a confirming miracle. Likewise, Heb. 2:3-4 says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles...."

### III. BELIEVE IN HIS SAVING WORK

This aspect of the work of God is not emphasized in my text, but v.7 does mention the fact that Paul preached the gospel. We have good news. The true living God loves us, and has

provided a way for us to be saved from our sin. God sent Jesus, not only to reveal God to us, but also to save us by dying for our sins. Now we can truly be forgiven. How can you be saved? As we have seen:

A. You Must Turn from Your Own Way – We have already seen from v.16 the implication that God would no longer allow the nations to go their own way. Now He calls upon us to repent of our sin. The word picture found in v.15 is to turn. We've got to stop going our own way. God has revealed enough and done enough to insist that we go His way!

B. You Must Trust in Jesus Christ – Recall the fact that the lame man, according to v.9, was observed to have “faith to be healed.” Faith is emphasized as a condition of receiving physical salvation. The word “healed” in v.9 is literally “saved.” This man needed physical salvation as well as spiritual salvation. He was helpless, just as all sinners are helpless in their bondage to sin. He evidently had faith for both types of salvation. As Rom. 10:17 says, faith comes by hearing. As this man heard about the true God, he believed He could do something about his condition. He believed, and instantaneously he was healed.

What was done for that man physically was just a picture of what down through the centuries the Lord has been doing for people spiritually. Millions of people have been unable to take one step toward God, one step toward heaven, until the gospel came and they believed it. When they believed they were instantly saved just as this man was instantly healed. This is one of the evidences that Christianity is real. It proves itself by what it does for the people who believe it.

Conclusion: So I call upon you to turn away from every vain substitute for the true God. Instead, turn to the true God and believe in Him and His Son, who was sent to be our Savior. Learn from the Bible what God is truly like, and what He wants you to do. Finally, be a witness to the true God (v.17a).

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Qualities of a Great Missionary: Study Notes on Acts 13:1-13, 14:1-28 and Matthew 10:5-23* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Maclaren read, but not used.

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