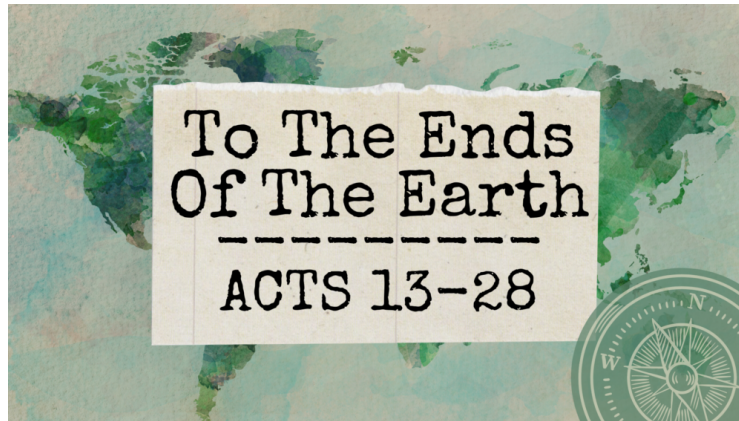


Gospel Context



Acts 14:1-18

If you ever travel with me to Nicaragua and we're on a bus and happen to go by Volcano Messiah, you better believe I'm going to jump up as soon as we see the volcano and as soon as we see the statue and I'm going to begin telling you a story. Every translator on the bus is going to roll his or her eyes because they've heard me tell this story many, many times, but I love the story. I don't know if it's all true, but I think it's most true so I still like to tell the story. I begin to talk about this saint. I don't ever remember his name, so I just talk about the statue of 'Saint Guy' and I talk about the volcano. Here is what happened centuries before we ever got to Nicaragua. The people believed this volcano erupted because they had done something wrong. To appease the gods, they would take a virgin girl every year and throw her into the volcano, and that would appease the gods and it wouldn't erupt. So this saint, who became a hero, decided that was actually the wrong story. That's not how this thing works. That's not how eruptions take place. Yes, it was true they probably felt some guilt and

shame for some things they were doing, but in order to eradicate those, you don't throw somebody into a volcano. So with a cross on his back, he marched all the way up to the top of the volcano and erected this rather large cross and he began to tell a better story, a true story. See, they had a story; things are broken and we need to throw someone in the volcano to make it right. He had a better and truer story; yes, things were broken, but there is a cross and an empty tomb that says God has made all things right. He told them a better story that was actually true, actually worked, and they found freedom through this story. So you better believe if we're on a bus in Nicaragua and we get close to that, I'm going to jump up and tell you that story because I think it's a pretty good story.

Stories of a Culture

See, in cultures, we live under stories. This early people had a story. It made sense to them. We're going to see Paul and Barnabas enter into a culture and the people are going to do rather strange things. They will start sacrificing bulls to Paul and Barnabas. We don't understand why they would do that, but the reason is because they live under a certain story. It made sense to them, and it always made sense to them. Paul and Barnabas are going to start with that story, critique it, and then show them there is actually a better story. There is a true story that actually declares reality.

What we will learn this morning, hopefully, is how to contextualize our story, that gospel story. We have a message, we have content, but sometimes it needs context. How do we proclaim the gospel to a culture that maybe no longer believes the Bible, or no longer goes to church? How do we proclaim the gospel in that type of culture? It is going to take some context. Hopefully, we will see that not only did the Nicaraguans live under that volcano story, but we, as a culture, live under stories too. The way you behave is the stories you believe. We had better know the stories that our culture tells, and we had better evaluate whether they are right stories or wrong stories, because the stories we listen to, the stories we believe, will determine, ultimately, how we behave.

Let's look at what Paul and Barnabas do as they confront the stories of culture with the stories of the gospel. Let us be those people who are able

to enter a story to tell the true story. Verse 15 of Acts 14 will be our key verse. This is what Paul said after the people do some rather strange things.

Scripture

“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.”

We are in Paul's first missionary journey. He's been going to synagogue after synagogue, basically preaching the gospel. He showed them through the Law and the covenants that it was all actually about Jesus. Now, Paul is in a place called Lystra. He isn't going to open the Bible. He's not going to go to the covenants or the Law; he is going to preach the gospel on the streets. We are going to see that he's going to have a different starting point. We find that a lot of times when we share the gospel with coworkers, friends, or family, they have a different starting point than us. They didn't do a devotion that morning, but they have some things they are believing, some things they're longing after, and we can go into that story for the starting point to tell them the gospel story.

We are going to skip over verses 1–8 of chapter 14 because we will hit them next week, but the synopsis is Paul goes into the synagogue and shares the gospel and it ends up getting him thrown out. People are trying to kill him so he has to flee to Lystra. Lystra is a place you've probably never heard of because neither had they. It's a Podunk town. It's off the grid, off the map. Most of the people there would be illiterate. This is not a big place doing big things, which tells me that God even sees these “unimportant” places as important because He is going to send Paul and Barnabas there to proclaim the good news of Jesus. At Lystra, we will see a miracle happen that causes some mayhem. In the mayhem, we will see

Paul and Barnabas bring a message of the gospel that confronts a story that these people believe.

The Miracle

Verses 8–10 say, “Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking.” So Paul comes into Lystra, a place off the beaten path, he's running for his life, he is not in the synagogue, he is on the street, and he is talking. We can pretty much think that Paul is probably talking about Jesus. He sees this man who couldn't use his legs. In fact, he had never used his legs because he was lame from birth. This man had never walked.

Just imagine you are that guy. You are on the street, you are probably begging, probably an outcast. You are down on your luck and you see this guy talking. It says the man listened intently to him. I don't know exactly what Paul said because Luke doesn't record it, but I can use my imagination that Paul is sharing the gospel. The reason I can say that is because if you look in your text it says Paul knew that the man had faith to believe. How would he have faith without the gospel? So Paul is probably walking through the gospel story. The story of creation; God made all things good. There was a fall; the fall led to brokenness. Perhaps at that point the guy looks down at his legs and realizes this isn't creation, this is fall. This is not how God made me; this is how the curse affected me. Maybe at that point Paul began to share Jesus that Christ came to take away the curse. The guy is looking at his legs and hearing the name Jesus, and then Paul begins to talk about a new creation where there will be no more curse, no more brokenness. The man looks at his legs and thinks about Jesus and somehow Jesus is going to fix him, make him whole, and undo the curse that has touched him. Now the guy is looking intently at Paul, and Paul says he could tell the guy was wanting to believe. The guy had faith to be made well, so Paul says *hey, how about you get up. Stand up*. This guy has never stood up in his whole life, and here, exercising faith, this man stands up. This is kind of like chapter 3. We see Peter

preach the gospel and you have a lame man leaping. Now you have a lame man springing forth. You have God's Word that is preached; it's doing God's work. It's causing things to happen. It's bringing new creation, it's bringing wholeness.

The People's Reaction

- **Strange Things Happen**

So, things are happening; this guy is walking. A miracle happened on the streets of Lystra and people are watching, noticing. And then, we see a little bit of mayhem happen. Strange things happen next. Verses 11–13 say, "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!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 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." What? That is a strange thing to do. Here in the middle of the town a guy tells another guy about a message, he believes and he stands up and walks, and the crowd's response is that the gods have come among us in the likeness of men....*Honey, go get the bull. Go get my knife. Go tell the priest we're about to have a sacrifice.* The whole town comes out and starts chanting at Barnabas, *this is Zeus*, starts chanting at Paul, *this is Hermes...these are the gods, let us sacrifice to them!* To our ears, that sounds very strange.

Cultural Stories

- **Stories Affect Behavior**

What we have to understand in this culture is there are stories we believe that affect how we behave. So we have to dig a little bit on this. I resourced some commentaries this week, especially John Stott, and he did some archaeological digging and he found there was actually a story under the story. There was a poet named Ovid. Ovid told this story about fifty years earlier. The story says Zeus and his son, Hermes, came to earth disguised as men. They wanted to find lodging at a house so they knocked on doors, and everyone rejected them because they looked like unimportant men. They looked poor; they looked in poverty. They knocked

on a thousand doors and everyone rejected them, everyone except for one. There was one elderly couple, a poor couple who didn't have anything, and they let these two men in. They practiced hospitality. They gave them a place to stay and food to eat. The next morning, these two men revealed themselves as Zeus and Hermes, and they blessed this elderly couple and they wiped everyone else out with flood and pestilence.

That is the story the people of Lystra heard growing up. That's the story they told each other...*Remember a long time ago when the gods visited us. If the gods visit again, you better bless rather than curse.* So now, in the back of their minds, probably subconsciously, all of a sudden a guy makes a lame guy they have known their whole lives get up and start walking. They see the miracle, they see the power, and they automatically go to? The story they tell defines how they react. They understand what's going on. This has happened before. They're like...*We've heard about this! This has to be the gods among us, so we're not going to be like the thousand who disregarded the gods and are in the land of curse. We're going to be like that couple the gods blessed so that we can be in the land of the blessing.* So here, a culture is bringing Paul and Barnabas sacrifices and calling them gods. It seems strange to us, but it makes perfect sense to them. They're not just doing some weird act; they are trying to be on the side of blessing rather than the side of cursing. They lived in a culture that said to bless the gods when they come, and it sure looked like the gods had just come.

The first thing we see is the stories we tell. Here's a culture that tells certain stories. We also live in a culture that tells stories. If we don't know the stories, we will soon behave the stories without even knowing the stories. As a people, we have to understand the stories and know how to interact with them to bring the better and true story.

Yesterday morning, I was working on my sermon notes and I was watching some pregame football. A commercial came on that caught my eye. It's a giant x-ray machine up on a stage. Behind the x-ray machine are two skeletons. There is a crowd watching this x-ray machine and the two skeletons begin to kiss, which I thought was kind of strange. Why would you have two skeletons on a stage kissing? Then the two skeletons start

walking to the side and poke their heads out the side from the side of the x-ray machine. As soon as they do, the whole crowd gasps because you saw the two skeletons were two females. After the gasps, there was an applause. Then the commercial said, "Love has no gender." That is not a commercial; that is a story. That is a cultural story saying this is how the world is, or this is how the world should be. This is what's good. This is what's right. This is what's true, and if you're in the crowd, you better have the right reaction. You can gasp a little bit, but you better quickly applaud because if not we are going to be the side of cursing. You're not going to be the side of blessing.

This was the same thing happening in that culture where Paul and Barnabas were. They saw something happen and the story told them they had better be on the side of pagan idolatry, the side of that pagan worship because that was the side of blessing. If they weren't, then they were on the side of cursing. We think what they did was a strange act, but they were just following the story; following what the culture had prescribed them to believe and think was good, right, and true. Now they are acting it out, probably not even knowing exactly why they're doing it. We've got to understand that the stories we tell affect how we behave. The stories we tell often define how people interact. We have to acknowledge that there are stories all over. Netflix is not neutral. There are stories being told on every show we watch, every commercial we see, the social media feed we scroll. There are constant stories being told to us, and we have to understand stories affect behavior. That is why a culture is sacrificing bulls to two dudes who show up to town. They are just believing the story. They're just living out what they already knew was true.

Paul and Barnabas's Response

- **Broken Over Their Brokenness**

The question is what do Paul and Barnabas do in light of these people living out the story they know? Here is where Paul and Barnabas are going to contextualize the gospel. They are going to bring the true and better story into a cultural story. The first thing we see is that Paul and Barnabas are broken over their brokenness. When they see this happening, the first thing they do is they are broken over it. Notice what it says in verse 14,

"But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd..." Their first response is not anger, not mocking or laughing; they are broken. They are lamenting and tearing their clothes. They are broken over the brokenness they see. As believers, when we look at the cultural stories that are told our reaction can't be anger. It can't be bigotry. It can't be harshness. It can't be cruelty. It can't be laughing. It can't be mocking. Our first reaction is brokenness. Why? Because every person on the planet is an image bearer of God, whom He loves, whom Christ died for. So, when we see brokenness, we don't mock at it, we break in the brokenness. We empathize for those who are living under a story that we know is wrong, but they do not. Paul and Barnabas are tearing their clothes. They are broken to the core over a people who are worshipping, which is something they were designed to do, but they are worshipping the wrong thing. They're not worshipping the one true God; they are worshipping two dudes that just walked into town. They're broken over this.

- **Points Out Their Brokenness**

After they are broken over the brokenness, they are going to point out the broken story. They point out their brokenness. We, also, when we look at the stories around us, after we break with those who are broken we have to point out the brokenness. This is the absolute hardest part. This is awkward. Paul and Barnabas were just run out of town and almost killed, and now these people think they're gods. That's a pretty good pay increase. That could sound pretty good to Paul and Barnabas. Why not just stay there...they were suddenly rock stars! They were the most important people, they were influencers; they are building statues after these guys! So, it is really hard to point out wrong thinking in someone. It's really hard to point out that someone's story is actually broken. People want to live in it, stay in it, and we don't want them to be mad.

But Paul knew that he had to point out their brokenness. Notice what it says in verse 15, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you..." Paul points out, in the story, the broken part. In the story, you have worship, which is a good thing. We should worship the one true God. There is one part of the story that is actually good, but their

worship is broken. Paul is pointing out that the broken part of their story... *You are worshipping me and my buddy, and trust me, if you walk around with us for a little bit, you're going to see we're not gods. You think he's Zeus? Have him pick up something. He's not that strong. I've arm wrestled him. He's not a great guy. I'm not anybody big. We're not gods!* Paul is pointing out their futility in worshipping them. It's broken. *You're bringing me a sacrifice, but I can do nothing for you. I'm just a guy just like you.* Paul points out the story they were living under is broken. It's not working.

We have to be able to look at a culture and say here are the stories you are telling, the stories you are believing, but it is actually not working. I get the point of that commercial; I get the x-ray machine. It's supposed to say that gender doesn't matter. Just love who you love. We know that's the story, but the commercial doesn't quite work. The point of the commercial is when they reveal their faces, the crowd gasped. Why did they gasp? It is because there is clearly gender. They clearly know there is gender. So the story doesn't quite work because in one respect we're saying gender doesn't matter, there is no such thing as gender, but the gasp says there is gender and gender really does matter. In one sense, there is no such thing, and in one sense, it matters, mostly. Even the x-ray machine is a little bit broken because the point might be that gender is just skin deep; it's just cultural things. If you bring in a scientist to look at the two skeletons in the x-ray machine and ask if it is a male or female, they could look at the bone structure and tell you whether it is male or female. You could bury those skeletons, dig them up two hundred years later, and know just by doing a little test if they were male or female. It's an illusion. It's supposed to tell a story that gender doesn't matter. That's the story we tell, the story we live under, but even the very story we use to tell that is an illusion and it's broken. The story falls apart on itself. We have to be the ones who are able to point to a story, and with convictional kindness, compassion, grace, and mercy say listen to the story you're telling because it's not working. Paul is telling at these people... *You are bringing me a sacrifice and it's not going to work because I'm not a god. The very act you are doing, the story you are living under is broken. It's in grace that I'm telling you this, that there is salvation in these stories we tell.*

Culture says that if everyone would just agree that everything is right, we will be saved as a society and everything will be perfect. We know that is actually not true. Salvation through those means is not going to actually come true. You have to be willing to tell people that, and confront people with that very lovingly and gently so that they would see a better story. That is what Paul does next.

- **Tells Them a Better Story**

First, Paul is broken with their brokenness, then he points out their brokenness, and lastly he tells them a better and truer story. That's what we have to do. We have to tell a better and truer story. Notice what Paul says is the next part of verse 15, "...and we bring you good news [This is the gospel, contextualized to this people], that you should turn from these vain things to a living God..." Now he is telling them a better and truer story. The true story is you have to turn from these vain things. They are bringing sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, thinking that by doing that they will be in the land of the blessing rather than the land of the cursing. Paul is saying this is not going to work... *You can bring us all the blood you want, but we've got nothing for you. We're just dudes. What you need is a real story, a true story, and the true story is there is a living God, and you need to turn from vain things to the living God.*

"Vain things" is a phrase that stuck out at me this week. That is what they are after, vain things. They're making sacrifices to men who aren't gods, thinking they're gods. That's a vain act, an empty act, a futile act. They are doing a vain thing, and Paul is telling them to turn from a vain thing to the living God. Do you know the problem with vain things? Vain things often appear as valuable things. To them, this was not vain this was value... *We have a story. We have reality. This is how the world is. If we sacrifice to you, we get blessed! It makes perfect sense. This is value!* But Paul is saying what they think is value is actually vain.

We live in a culture that also has many, many vain things that we interpret as valuable things, and we chase after valuable things and miss the living God. I did a little survey with some of our Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, and staff. I asked them what they thought were the main things in our culture that we can give our lives to and miss God. They gave

me a list. Now, these things aren't all bad, but they can easily become vain if we make them ultimate.

- Work
- Power
- Pleasure
- Prestige
- Projects
- Passion
- Knowledge
- Treasure
- Social standing
- Approval
- Admiration
- Possessions
- Body type
- Health
- Self-preservation
- Personal identity
- Financial security
- Success
- Sports
- Money
- Politics
- Comfort
- Entertainment

Those are not bad things, but when they become ultimate things, they become vain things. They are no longer valuable if we put all of our stock in those things; they become vain things. As people, we need to turn from vain things to a living God, a living God who can sustain us and actually satisfy our souls. Here was a culture chasing after vain things, and we are also a culture that can often chase after vain things and never turn to the living God. We've got to be the people who turn to the living God, stay with the living God, and invite a culture around us to turn to the living God. Even though those vain things seem like valuable things, they are vain and they will not satisfy our souls.

The Gospel Story

Paul is trying to warn them and give them a better story. Notice in this better story, he is going to talk to them about the gospel. So what is the gospel? It starts with God, the last part of verse 15 says, "who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." They would have been a culture that believed a lot of gods made all the things you see. Paul is saying no, one God made everything and you. Notice, when he brings the gospel to the street, he doesn't start with *God as Father, He has given us covenants, and there is a Law, and you need to obey it. And remember Abraham and Moses.* They know none of those people. So, what does he bring to these people? *There is a creator, and he made you.*

Then the second part of Paul's gospel message is man has rebelled. Verse 16 says, "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways." That's not a sign of grace; that's a sign of judgment. God let's sinful man do whatever he wants to do and get farther and farther away from the Lord and become more and more broken so that eventually he will see he needs God. Notice man's rebellion...they go their own ways. First, we have vain things, now we have own ways. The problem with own ways are that own ways feel like right ways. Have you ever noticed that? Your own way feels like the right way. It just does because it's what you decided. What you don't realize is you're living under a story that is telling you this is right, this is good; so own ways feel like right ways. We live under the stories we tell that tell us vain things have value and own ways are right ways. We have to understand the stories that we listen to, the ads that we watch. That's how advertisement works. They tell you a story. The story goes something like this...*Hey, you're not having a good day, and I know why. Because you have an iPhone 11. That's why you're sad. That's why your movies aren't getting hits on Instagram. Do you know what you need? There is salvation. There is an iPhone 13, you can be like Hollywood, and your Instagram videos are going to blow up! Just buy this and you'll be saved! You'll be happy! Everything will go well!* See, that is a story. That is how ads work. Your life is not great, but buy this and it will be. Vain things are valuable things, own ways are right ways, and we live out the stories we believe.

Here is a people living out the stories they believe but it's a wrong story. We live in a culture that lives out stories all over the place, but often they

are wrong stories that won't lead to life they will lead to death. Paul is trying to get these people to see their own ways are not right ways; they are wrong ways.

Paul not only tells them that God is creator and they have rebelled, he also tells them God is also good and He is a giver. Verse 17 says, "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." Paul is saying God created you, and you rebelled, but He was still good. He still sent you rain. He still sent you food. He still put gladness in your heart. He brought you satisfaction. God is a giver; He gives good gifts to you. Paul didn't quite there, but I can imagine if he had enough time with these people he would tell them the ultimate thing God gave. What was the ultimate thing that God gave in His goodness? He gave us His Son on a cross who died in our place for our sins so that we, even in our brokenness, even in our bad stories, could have a true story, a better story. There is a Creator that we've rebelled against, thinking vain things are valuable, thinking own ways are right ways, but now we can turn. We can turn from those things back to a living God who has always loved us and who has given us great things, especially His own Son Jesus. See, we get to go into a culture that has all sorts of stories and we get to tell them a better story, a truer story, the gospel story.

Then, look what happens in verse 18, "Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them." They are bringing bulls to Paul's feet. They are sacrificing bulls in front of Paul, and Paul said what are you doing? Paul said this is futile, this is vain and empty, this is not right, but even with those words they can scarcely restrain the people. Why? Because stories are hard to shake. Yes, Paul is telling them that, but they, like us, have a story, I have a belief, the way I think the world works, and my story trumps reality. So we don't believe reality, we believe the story. I can see even in that commercial. What they are saying, "love has no gender," falls flat on itself in that thirty second commercial when I break it down. Yeah but, it has to be true...it has to be true that gender doesn't matter. It has to be true that we can do whatever we want; our heart can get whatever it desires. That has to be true even though reality would say

different because stories are so hard to shake. Even when reality is given, stories often trump. We hold to the story and we deny the evidence.

So, in the midst of those stories, what do we do? We try to point out where God is. Even in a commercial like "love has no gender," why do we even care about love? What exactly is love? It's hard to define that from a secular perspective. You can't. Why do we want love? You know the answer. It's because God is love, and we were made by Him and for Him. We were made as creatures with the capacity to love. We were made in His image, and He has made us not for our own ways but for His ways. We all desire love because God is love, and we all desire a perfect love. Guess what? Love has been shown perfectly in God's Son at the cross where He demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son to chase after our own ways and our vain things, to die in our place for our sins so that He could rise again and say this is love. We can see that even in these stories that we want to hang on to, even in the midst of reality, even when they don't make sense, we can point to things that are true in those stories and bridge the gospel to the truer and better story.

We can go back to that Nicaragua example and think how strange. How strange that people think that throwing someone in a volcano would stop the volcano from erupting because the gods are actually angry. That seems so strange. We can go to Paul's culture and think how strange. Why would anyone bring a bull to sacrifice to a guy who made another guy get up from being lame? That seems so strange. It wasn't strange to them because they had stories that defined reality. If we took those people in Nicaragua who used to believe that throwing someone in a volcano would save them, and we took the people in this story, brought them to our modern culture, and told them to watch TV for a little while, do you know what they probably come up with? They would think we have some strange things in our culture. We don't see that. We don't believe that because we live under the stories. Why do we just keep buying and never satisfying just thinking the next thing will make us happy? We just do it because it's the story we live under. It's just who we are. It's what we swim in. What we have to be is the type of people who understand that we behave the

stories we believe. So we better know the right stories. We better listen to the right stories. We better know the gospel story.

If you haven't come to Christ, I implore you to turn from vain things to the living God. All the vain things and own ways are not going to make you fulfilled or happy because the story you're living under is broken. You need the God who loves you, who made you, and who redeemed you. Repent and believe in the gospel. For those of us who know the gospel, we have to be like Paul and Barnabas as we go into a culture with coworkers, friends, neighbors, and loved ones who live out different behaviors because they live a different story. We have to know how to interpret their story, show its brokenness, and show a better and truer story, a story that actually says this is what reality is like and this is how you can live and come to the living God. We've got to be able to look at the stories of our culture, the stories of our family, the stories we believe, and we have to be able to point people to the story, the gospel story.