

The False Promises of the Idols of Our Hearts

In this series of articles from Galatians 4:8-11, Paul is reminding these Galatian Christians, and us, of the false promises that come from the idols of our own hearts. Let me begin this article with a couple of questions. “What do you fear? What is that thing, or event, or possession, or person that you want so much—coupled with a crippling fear that you may not be able to have it, or keep it—that would make you turn away from trusting God?” Scripture everywhere affirms that it’s only in Christ and doing things God’s way that true freedom can be found. In my previous article, we followed Paul and Barnabas as they ministered in Lystra on their first missionary journey. When they arrived at Lystra, and as the people were listening to him preach, Paul healed a man who had been crippled from birth and the people in the city hailed Paul and Barnabas as gods (Acts 14:8ff.). Let’s take a brief, historical look *behind-the-scenes*, as it were, at the possible reasons why the people of Lystra treated Paul and Barnabas as idols, or gods, to worship.

Historians tell us that the Roman poet Ovid authored a work entitled *Metamorphoses* which was written in Latin in 8 A.D. This was approximately forty years prior to the time that Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra. A portion of Ovid’s *magnum opus* was set in the same geographical region, and it told of two Greek gods, Zeus, and Hermes. According to Ovid’s poem, when these Greek gods, disguised as mortal men, first arrive in this region, they naturally look for a home in which to lodge. And yet, as the story unfolds, they were turned away from a thousand homes. After a time of searching, they were finally received by an older couple who took them in and made them feel welcome in their home. Because of this, these gods turned the shabby little house of this elderly couple into a temple and destroyed all the homes of the people who had turned them away. The couple were granted their wish to become priests in the temple to serve the gods. Along with what’s recorded in the book of Acts, there have been some recent archeological discoveries in that region of Asia Minor that confirm that these, and other, Greek gods were worshiped by the people in that area in the first century.

As we come back to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14, it seems that the people in Lystra who saw Paul heal the crippled man were not going to make the same mistake that their ancestors had, supposedly, made. They not only threw out the welcome mat to Paul and Barnabas we’re told in verse 13 that: “[T]he priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.” Of course, Paul and Barnabas were unwilling to agree to any of this. They told the people that they were not gods at all and that they were just men, and then Paul preached the gospel. “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.” (Acts 14:15)

As we come back to our text in verse 8 of Galatians 4, we now have a clearer picture of some of what these South Galatian Christians had, almost certainly, “formerly” believed when

they “did not know God.” Look with me now in verse 9: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God...” Paul is making it very clear that these South Galatian Christians have not somehow discovered God in and of themselves, but rather, by grace, they’ve *come to be known by God*. This intimate and personal relationship with God has come about *because God initiated* it and has done everything that’s needed for this relationship to come to fruition! It didn’t happen by their keeping the law or doing *anything*, in and of themselves, to contribute to their salvation. When we believe that we’ve done anything to contribute to our right relationship with God, in a very real sense, rather than worshipping God, *we worship ourselves*, e.g., “look how smart *I am*, look at the wise choice *I’ve* made.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) Paul wants to make it very clear that it’s God in Whom we should place our trust, not in the idols of our hearts. An idol has been defined as: “Anything, *apart from God*, that we rely on as the *source* of our happiness, fulfillment, and security.” If we place our *ultimate* trust in *anything or anyone* but God, we’re destined to be hurt and disappointed, or possibly far worse. Unlike the false promises of the idols of our hearts that we can sometimes wrongly place our trust in, God always keeps his promises!

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.