

“From Vain Things” | Rev. Tim Frickenschmidt | July 25, 2021

Genesis 22: 1-2, 6-13 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Acts 14:8-18 ⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And

Intro Question In a time when the belief in the supernatural is deemed to be useless and “unrealistic,” why do people turn to stories of fantasy or legend, contrary to that secular belief in the here and now? If there is no real substance to the fantasies and legends, why do they persist in our culture? What is the alternative? What can we learn from Paul’s first encounter with that kind of culture that wishes for something immediately that feels good?

Background In Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul are teaching in Lystra, a place with no knowledge of God, the Bible in the form of the Old Testament (the Torah) or the words of the gospel. In response to the fervent belief of a man crippled from birth that the man’s faith could heal him, Paul commanded the man to stand up and walk. The man did and the crowd went wild, believing Barnabas and Paul to be the gods Zeus and Hermes, returned to earth in line with a legend written by the Roman poet Ovid about a past visit to those two gods. The people and a local priest at the temple dedicated to Zeus and Hermes wanted to sacrifice to “Zeus and Hermes” standing there before them. Paul and Barnabas went among the crowd, tearing their garments and telling them they were wrong, that they were just mortal men bringing good news that God had provided all. They proclaimed that God was the worthy point of their worship, not things that pass away. Even with that display of torn garments and supplication, the people almost went ahead with the sacrifices. The people did not get it.

Discuss:

1.) **Vain Things.** The crowd’s behavior presented a challenge to Paul, who could not explain about God based on knowledge of God and all he was as revealed in the Bible. The people didn’t know any of that. So, the two of them laid out the history that God had permitted people to give in to the desires for things from various gods that had no lasting value. The fleeting “vapor” of those wishes for success in battle or business, or sports, love, romance, influence, whatever the immediate desire might be, was not lasting and could not be relied upon. The people looked for a specialist god to answer a want, not necessarily a basic need. Paul went on to point out that lasting things – the heavens and earth, fruitful seasons, the true satisfaction of hearts with food and gladness – were not ephemeral. They are ongoing and not empty. He pointed out that sacrifices for these immediately desired

Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well,¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking.¹¹ 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!"¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.¹³ 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.¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,¹⁵ "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.¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

Mark 8:31-37³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁵ For whoever would save his life^a will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?

things get us no reward aside from disappointment and realization of the true emptiness of chasing after wisps that easily disappear. Yet, today, we still imitate the immediate wants of the ancients, who lived in continual anxiety that they would not succeed with a particular god. So, they ran from one to another of the gods and their ceremonies and feasts. That has a strong resemblance of the "busyness" of modern life – running from fund raiser to conference, to non-profit meeting to a function where one is to be seen or a high-profile sports event. We bow down to that cycle of living. Paul points out that, in the end, such vain things, while not necessarily bad in themselves, are bad masters. They hurt, not help, taking more than they give if they are not connected to God.

2.) **Christian Sacrifice.** In verse 17, Paul talks about giving and satisfying. In the past, God said to his people to have at it, see what can be done on their own with the false specialty gods. Now, he has come for us, having provided those things that have lasting value as a witness to himself. That way, we can begin to understand just who it is that we should be turning to. All religions and belief involve sacrifice. Life is sacrificial. Love involves sacrifice. To love, per C.S. Lewis, is to be vulnerable, open. Hiding from those turns love hard and useless. To love someone is to give up for their benefit. God did that for us. Paul doesn't speak against sacrifice, but he is anti-vain sacrifice. To love God is to open up and sacrifice of ourselves. What do we offer each Sunday? Our praise and worship, the results of our labors and efforts: wine not grapes, bread not wheat, money that in our monetized system represents the sum total of what we have done of productive effort.

Conclusion/Application Does God receive us? Yes, if we offer ourselves, in all our imperfections, in Jesus. Doing that means that we offer ourself acknowledging that Jesus' ultimate sacrifice means that our offer with and through him means we will be forgiven. Instead of offering sacrifices to some short-lived would-be provider of immediate gratification of some passing dream, we offer everything and God does the same in return. Our non-vain sacrifice bears fruit from God. According to J.R.R. Tolkien, all fantasy offers four things: escape from time and place, communication with non-human beings, healing of all hurts and good always triumphing over evil. These are common and sought by people in fantasy and legends because they are what we call out for in God. Offer to him with belief in Jesus and see them.

How will you offer yourself?

Prayer Lord, accept me and all that I offer in true gratitude and praise for what you have done and will receive from my true belief in Jesus my true savior.