

Wow God, Thanks

Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31; Rom 1:18-22

Turn to Acts 14 please. Here is the title of a Christian book, and I encourage you to remember this title. We're not interested in the book, we're interested in the title: *Wow Thanks Help: the Three Essential Prayers*. [repeat] Ann Lamott published that book in 2012. I have not read it, but that title is marvelous, a fine summary of the basic prayers of the Bible.

This sermon is called "Wow God, Thanks." "Help" comes naturally to us. We will see reasons to say Wow and Thanks to God, and why Wow and Thanks would be first. We will be talking about God's creation, and about things God does for every human on earth.

The Lystra Speech

Let's read from Acts 14:14. Paul healed a lame in Lystra, soon after he got there, and the people who saw this miracle decided that Paul and Barnabas were Greek gods come to visit them, and the people prepared to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods, to offer sacrifices.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with gladness."

These people in Lystra know nothing about the one true God. What should they hear first? The Creator of all creation: *The living God made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them*. That's the first thing people need to know about our God.

What else? That God has been good to them, these idol worshippers: *God has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with gladness*.

God gave them a long leash to ignore him and worship their images. *He let all nations go their own way*. But God the Creator was being good to them, not punishing them for ignoring him, but giving them rain and food, so that they could have regular harvests and eat and be glad.

This is basic information about our God: The living God made everything. Until now he let you ignore him. He kept being good to you, making sure you had rain and harvest and reason to be glad. What would be the right response to this new truth? "Really? Wow, God! Thanks!"

According to this little speech, what separates God’s people from the ungodly? The godly are those who know God and worship him. They say, “Wow, God. Thanks.” And the ungodly are those who ignore God and serve worthless things. Different responses to the same kindness.

Let’s go to Romans 1. Paul writes the same things to the Christians in Rome. It is more severe, but it has the same themes as the Lystra speech. We’re talking about what we can know from creation, and what God does for all people on earth, and how we respond.

How did people end up ignorant of God, and worshipping idols instead?

Romans 1:18-22 *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.

V18 – People suppress the truth, hold it away, push it down.

V19 – God made the truth about him entirely plain, and he made people so we could see it and understand it.

V20 – Visible material creation makes the invisible God clear, his power and his nature. God speaks about himself, plainly and openly, by what we see. We have no reason to ignore him. We are without defense.

V21 is the key verse here. Back in humanity’s early days, we knew all this. We could see that God’s power and divine nature and kindness were plain and obvious in what he had made.

In spite of knowing that, the human race decided not to praise him and not to thank him. We knew we should praise him and thank him. That was clear from the world around us. We decided, no more worship, no more thanksgiving to God. No more “wow God, thanks.”

The result of this refusal, our decision to not praise or thank God any more, was that our minds became blind and dark, our hearts became blind and dark, and we became fools. Because we turned away from God, back there when we still understood what God had made plain in his creation, we no longer understand it.

It is not plain to us anymore. God’s power and kindness are no longer plain to us in material creation. We all lost it. We became blind darkened fools. We think we are wise, but we are fools.

We had the truth and we suppressed it, made a point of ignoring it. Now it's gone. How did we suppress the truth? We stopped glorifying God and thanking him. V21 *Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

I grew up in a typical home. My dad went to work, my mom a homemaker and took care of the five children and the household generally. I knew growing up how completely I depended on my parents for food and clothing and shelter and protection and guidance.

I heard stories about kids running away from home, and that to me was incredibly foolish. I read stories about orphans, people whose parents were gone, no one to care for them, and that sounded horrible.

All humans used to know, just from living in this world, that we were that dependent on God. No one told me I needed my parents. It was obvious from life around me. When humanity began, no one told us we needed God that way. It was obvious from life around us. But we decided to run away from home, and then we lost the ability to see God all around us. We got dark and blind.

Rom 1:18 - People suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.

The natural response to what we saw and experienced in the world was to worship and thank God. It was obvious. But we stopped doing that, and so now we no longer experience the world that way. We need to be told.

In the Lystra speech, in Acts 14, Barnabas and Paul gave the Lystrans a crash course on what used to be plain to us all.

The living God made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. God has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with gladness.

Why does God so often encourage us to praise him and thank him? Because he gets grumpy and cranky if we don't flatter him and make him look good? Not a chance. If that was true, we'd have been exterminated long ago.

God encourages praise and thanks because he does not want his own children to be blind darkened fools. He wants his sons and daughters to know the truth, and live by it. We **do** want to now the truth and live by it.

Not praising him and thanking him for what he has done and still does, for every human, is walking away from the truth and staying with our blind, dark foolishness. God wants better for his sons and daughters. Praising and thanking God moves us away from our dark blinded dream world and back into reality. That's why God wants us to worship and thank him.

Turn to Acts 17. The philosophers in Athens wanted to hear about Paul's new religion. Athens had people who did nothing but talk about something new. Luke does not seem to think much of that, but anyway these people wanted to hear more about Paul's new religion. This is much like the Lystra speech, though more detailed.

The Athens Speech

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

Paul begins with creation. God made the world and everything in it, and he is Lord of heaven and earth. That is, God is not another one of your many gods, he's way above that.

25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

We do not give to God, he gives to us. He does not need us to build him a house, or give him food. *He himself gives everyone of us life and breath and everything else.* This is a remarkable line. A baby in a mother's womb has an umbilical cord, a little hose going from the baby's belly button into the mother. Through that cord, the mother gives the baby life, breath, and everything.

There is at all times such a cord going from our God to every human, from God to everything living thing on earth. He is always giving us life and breath and everything. If you are alive and breathing, it is happening right now.

26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out "the seasons" [Eds translation] and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.

V26 is much debated. What is Paul talking about here? What are the seasons and the boundaries God has put in place? Whatever they are, the normal result would be that people would seek for God, to find him. God was doing good to people.

“Season” is the same word as in the Lystra speech, fruitful *seasons*, and I expect that’s going on here too. God has given all people seasons of harvest, and he has given them a place to live. If we have food, and we have a place to live, we got it from God. God gave it to all people so we would seek him and find him.

What would we do when we found him? Let’s think about it. He gives everyone of us life, and breath, and everything. He gives us seasons of harvest so we have food, and he’s given us a place to live. When we found him, we would worship him, and thank him.

28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Paul quotes two Greek writers here in v28, two lines from ancient Greek literature that Paul found, and he likes these, they are telling the truth about God. *In him we live and move and have our being.* This is that steady channel of life from God to all of us. Being alive and moving depend on God every moment.

We are his offspring. We are all God’s direct descendants, he brought us into existence.

Let me summarize the things in the Athens speech that used to be plain to every human. It did not need to be taught any more than a child needs to be taught that it needs its parents. We used to know all this just from living in this world. This is from the Athens speech.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. God has given all people seasons of harvest, and he has given them a place to live. If we have food, and a place to live, we got these from God. In God we live and move and have our being. We are all his offspring. God gave all this to us so all people would seek him and find him.

This is why we say, “Really? Wow, God. Thanks!” The thing is, all of this is true of God’s enemies, the atheists, all who walk away. All of this is true of every single human on earth.

The atheists and the enemies of God and of Christ are like children who decide to run away from home. But they never left home. They still eat the food God provided, on the table God provided. They live in the house God provided, and sleep in the bed God provided, and in the morning they will put on clothes that God provided.

God gives each of them life and breath and everything else. They also live and move in him and exist in him. Jesus said that God was kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Uses a long leash.

Living on this earth should lead every human being to seek for God and find God, in order to praise him and thank him. This used to be obvious to us, but we lost. Praising and thanking God is moving back toward truth, toward what’s actually going on from God to us every moment.

In these Scriptures today, what separates God's people from others is that God's people know how much God gives everyone, and because we know, we praise him and thank him.

Prayer: God, you made the world and everything in it. You are Lord of heaven and earth. You yourself give everyone life and breath and everything else. You give all people seasons of harvest, and give us all a place to live. If we have food, and a place to live, we got these from you. If we are alive and breathing we are getting it from you. In you we all live and move and exist. We are all your offspring. You gave us all this so we would seek you, and find you.

O God, these things are often *not* plain to us. They should be, but they are not. But you have told us the truth. We praise you for your great kindness, unending kindness to all you have made. Thank you for your patient care. You've been utterly faithful and reliable. Thank you for your patience with our ungratefulness. By your Holy Spirit, O God, lead us often into thankfulness. Amen.