

Wow God, Thanks

Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–28; Rom 1:18–22

Turn to Acts 14 please. Here is the title of a Christian book: 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 true 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 – Acts 14:14–17

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 that had come to visit them. The people in Lystra 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.

God has not left himself without testimony. Every year God has been speaking a message of kindness to all people, the righteous and the wicked alike, in sun and rain and crops and harvest. Everywhere in the world, when a crop has been harvested and safely stored, people celebrate.

God gives all of us that food and that gladness. God wants all people to enjoy both. In that process, he is testifying about himself. He's telling everyone who eats, "You are in my care, you are enjoying my kindness. I am speaking to you, are you listening? I am showing myself to you, are you watching?"

According to this little speech, what separates God's people from the ungodly? The godly are those who hear what God is saying, those who thank 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 message of kindness that goes out every year.

[Gwynne Dyer had an essay in the Winnipeg Free Press in July of this year, and in it he said that the world still produces enough food every year for everyone on it. Some don't get enough, because we have various distribution problems. God never intended to give each one enough for themselves. That's not God's plan. God gives some more than they need specifically so they will give some away, and others he does not give enough. God's economy has always worked that way. But God still provides food for all.]

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? They stopped thanking him.

They Did Not Glorify Him or Give Thanks –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, 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, so that people are without excuse. 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.

People suppress the truth, hold it away, push it down. God made the truth about him entirely plain, and he made people so we could see it and understand it. Visible material creation makes the invisible God clear, his power and his nature. God speaks about himself, plainly and openly, by what we see. God keeps testifying about his kindness. 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 could 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. 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. 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.

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 know 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 foolish dark 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 – Acts 17:22–28

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. 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. 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.

V25 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 every one 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.

V26 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. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

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 and reach out for him, to find him. God shows kindness to people, so we will seek him and reach for him. "Reach out" pictures a person reaching out with their arm to touch someone. But he's not far from any human. He's close enough that if you reached out, you'd touch him. He's right there. People don't seek him or reach out to touch him, but if they did, they'd find him, he's that close.

"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 if 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.

V28 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.

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 reach out for 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. They still breathe because God gives them breath.

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. God told us, and we believed him, and now we know it. Because we know, we praise him and thank him.

PRAYER: O God, these things are still 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 patient care. You've been utterly faithful and reliable. Thank you for your patience with our ungratefulness. By your Holy Spirit, O God, rescue us from our foolishness. Lead us often into thankfulness. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.