

- Pastor Keith Madsen
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When a god Falls to Earth Acts 14:8-18

The Scriptural story which I have chosen for my text is not one you hear frequently, but I find it to be a fascinating account. Paul heals a disabled man, and all the people decide that he and his friend Barnabas must be gods come down from heaven. Scholars believe the story is related to a popular local legend where the gods Zeus and Hermes came to earth, and a couple named Philemon and Baucis were the only ones to welcome them, while others treated them rudely. When Paul and Barnabas came healing people, they thought this was a second chance for the community, and they wanted to make sure they were properly revered.

It was also the case that often in ancient times when a meteorite fell from heaven, the locals thought it was a god or a messenger from a god, fallen from heaven, and these were often put in shrines and revered. There is a hint of this experience in a passage from Isaiah often quoted in reference to Satan: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn.”

We wonder at the primitiveness of people who mistake a meteorite for a god, or even mistake two human beings for gods. And yet in 2015 in this one of the most advanced and educated societies of the world, a very similar thing happens all the time. An athlete with amazing skills shows up, and they do things that those of us with average or below average athletic skills see as miraculous. And so we put their picture on magazines, and we give them endorsement deals worth millions, where adults and kids alike will buy products, simply based on their word or their image on the package. And we build shrines to them, shrines with names like Yankee Stadium or Quest field, and we go there to raise our hands in praise to our gods. Instead of burnt offerings we have tailgate barbecues, and instead of garlands, we have “terrible towels” or foam fingers to wave in the air. But in the end, it’s all the same.

And then one day, one of our gods falls to the earth. In ancient Greece, the gods were all associated with Mount Olympus, and significantly many of our athletic gods start out at the Olympics. Marion Jones won five Olympic gold medals in women’s track a number of years ago, and was named Athlete of the Year. And then she lost it all when she admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs. Michael Phelps was seen as super-human when his lifetime total of Olympic gold medals hit 14. He was named Sportsman of the Year for 2008, and signed endorsement deals worth millions. A street in his hometown of Baltimore was even renamed “Michael Phelps Way.” Some called him the greatest athlete of all time. And then he was caught smoking marijuana. As the rock group Queen might have sung, “Another one bites the dust.”

But perhaps no fall has received more press than a man who was at one time the most popular golfer to play the game, Tiger Woods. He was the number one golfer in the world for a record number of weeks, and was the PGA player of the year a record eleven times. He was named “the Athlete of the Decade” by the Associated Press in 2009. Because of his boyish

good looks and tremendous talent, he was one of the best-loved athletes of the modern era. Then his many sexual affairs were revealed, his marriage fell apart, as well as his golf game. Many of his endorsement deals were dropped because of his loss of popularity. A December 2009 study estimated the shareholder loss caused by Woods' affairs to be between \$5 billion and \$12 billion. "How you are fallen from heaven, O Tiger, son of Dawn."

Let me just say that it's not *all* the fault of these stars. People are not meant to be gods, but the sports fans of the world insist on it. When we insist on someone being a god who is not a god, it is just a matter of time before they fall from heaven.

Paul and Barnabas knew that human beings were not made to be gods. Let's look more closely at their story.

When this healing happened the people got excited and started speaking in their native tongue, Lycaonian, rather than in the Greek in which Paul was speaking. Because of this Paul and the others probably didn't understand at first what they were saying. Their initial statement was "the gods have come down to us in human form!" They believed that what their legends had told them had happened before, was now happening again. Barnabas they called Zeus – Barnabas may have been considered the leader of this mission at first. Zeus was the chief of the gods, and Barnabas was the one they saw as being like him. Hermes was the patron god of oratory, and they gave Paul this name because "he was the chief speaker". The reason that Paul and Barnabas didn't react negatively *at first* to being idolized in such a way was that they didn't understand Lycaonian, the language in which the people were saying these things.

In verse 13 we find people coming from the temple of Zeus outside the city and wanting to offer sacrifice. And that is when Paul and Barnabas finally understand what the people are doing and they tear their clothes as a sign of repentance and mourning. They are shocked that people are treating them as gods, and don't want there to be any thought that they encouraged such a practice. They wanted to teach about the true God, and they wanted no part of idolatry, especially if THEY were being made into the idols! They knew not only was this counter to the command of God, but also that being a god is just too much pressure for a human being!

Of course, First Century missionaries and 21st Century athletes are not the only ones to be subjected to this pressure. *Newsweek* magazine, in an article written just a little while before the death of former Beatle John Lennon, reported that he struggled with this experience as well. He felt that Elvis Presley's demise was directly related to the fact that he could never separate the public's idolization of him from who he really was. And so Lennon came to understand that he had to divest himself of the aura of divinity in order to survive. This was his motivation for escaping from the public eye for five years, from 1976-1980, while he spent time with his younger son, became a "house husband" and reconnected with his wife. He was getting back in touch with himself. He sang of this experience later in his songs *Starting Over* and *Watching the Wheels*.

What people like John Lennon found, and what Paul and Barnabas found, was that some people don't want to let you *not* be a god. In his song, *Watching the Wheels*, Lennon sang,

“People say I’m crazy doing what I’m doing
Well they give me all kinds of warnings to save me from ruin
When I say that I’m o.k. well they look at me kind of strange
Surely you’re not happy now you no longer play the game.”

Well, Paul and Barnabas didn’t want to “play the game” right from the start. They didn’t want to play the role of god for people who were missing the true God from their life, and didn’t know where to look. And yet, in spite of their efforts, verse 18 tells us, “Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.”

Why are some people so bent on deifying others? Who knows? Perhaps they just need that badly to have a “god” they can see. Perhaps the true God is just too demanding. Human gods just require that you “buy the product.” Whatever the reason, we will always have gods falling to earth until we are willing to do two things: (1) Let humans be human; and (2) Let God be God.

So, first of all, let humans be human. We may think it as a compliment when we deify a human being, but in reality it’s an unjust pressure we put upon them. There was a popular song out just a little while ago by the group “Vertical Horizon” which included the lyrics, “you’re a god, and I am not.” The words were directed toward the person’s lover. I really don’t know all the rationale behind putting those specific words in this song, but it seems to me that it voices the attitude many young people have toward the romantic interests in their life. Too often they treat that other person like a god they have to please. But no human being can ever be worthy of such adulation, and anyone who puts another person in such a position is setting that person up to crash to the earth. Perhaps it would be well to note here that immediately after this story, it tells how the crowds turned against Paul and stoned him. People can be hard on their gods who fall to earth.

That should be a warning to some politicians as well. Some politicians set themselves up to be treated like gods. “Listen to me, because I have all the answers!” “Don’t question me – do you dare question such a godlike one as I?” But the higher they soar, the harder they fall. Like Paul and Barnabas, responsible political leaders don’t want to be strapped with those kind of godlike expectations. They want to be seen as leaders who are human.

Letting a person be human means not strapping them with the expectation of perfection. That kind of expectation is *terribly* binding! When someone has that kind of expectation of you, you *know* you’re going to fall. It’s just a matter of when. Now that doesn’t mean we should excuse human failure: A-Rod and Marion Jones and Barry Bonds and Roger Clemons – they all used steroids – no big deal, right? A politician I respected lied...or misused funds...or didn’t pay all his taxes – no big deal, right? They’re human. But it *is* a big deal. We have a right to expect honesty from each other, and being human is not an excuse.

But letting people be human means that at one time or another we all need redemption. We all need another chance to do better. We need to give such a chance to ourselves. We need to give such a chance to others. We don’t want to put them back on their little pedestal. We may not want to give them their medals back, or let them have our vote. But we need to let them stand beside us with all of the other human beings.

And then, second of all, we need to let God be God. That was the option Paul and Barnabas urged upon the people of Lystra. They told them, “*We* are mortals just like you...[But] we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is within them.” It is not insignificant that they refer to God’s role as Creator in their appeal to have people make him Lord.

Because who else should we let be in charge of our lives, but the One who designed who we are, the One who knows how we were designed to work? Who else should we have as God but the living one who is always about bringing life to us and our world?

We need to live out what our songs proclaim: “...only Thou art holy; there is none beside thee”; We need to rejoice that we don’t have a god who has to cheat to reach a performance level, or who lies to us when we depend on him. We have a Holy God who lifts us up when we fall, so we don’t have to try to live behind a façade. And as we will soon sing, we have a God who is greater than any human demagogue could even conceive of being. To him we can only sing out – “How great thou art!”