

There's only one Living God

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. Thanks so much for joining us. Do keep that passage open. In that passage which Dave just read, there's a really curious phrase in verse 11, a curious incident. Paul has just healed a paralyzed man, but the local pagans see it and they think the gods have come down to us in human form. The priests of Zeus from the local priest temple, in verse 13, they see it and they try and offer sacrifices to Paul. It's curious because their Zeus religion doesn't seem too far from basic Christianity. You see, the gospel is about God coming to earth in human form. Jesus does teach about priests and a temple. Paul does say to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice. All these priests of Zeus needed to do was point to Jesus instead of Paul and we'd be calling them all Christians.

So at the end of the day, were they really that far off the mark? And people in Melbourne will read this and say, see, all religions are mainly the same. There's revelation from God, temples, priests, sacrifices, all that sort of stuff. Any diversity is just a minor detail. Let's just all agree we're all on different paths up the same mountain and then we'll finally have religious peace. And the apostles, they travel around from city to city, places just like ours. They're diverse in religion and culture, ethnicity. They're tolerant of all ideas.

So long as you agree that all religions are mainly the same and that any difference is just a minor detail. Of course, the apostles, they won't toe that line because the gospel insists in only Jesus.

Now, you can get a taste of the apostles teaching in verse 15. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God.

And of course, people will react badly if you say that their worldviews are worthless things, even in tolerant and diverse cities like ours. It is unsafe to sing a song at no other way, at no other name but Jesus. And unsafe is how we find Paul in this story.

[2 : 4 0] In fact, the only reason he keeps moving around from place to place is because he's plotted, mistreated and stoned to death because he won't stop preaching that the only way to know God is through the Lord Jesus. Before we dive in, just a word of, I guess, a health warning.

When it comes to religious disagreements, Christians have a lot to say sorry for. History shows that Christians have committed similar acts of violence to people of other faiths. None of that is very Jesus-like. We're not perfect. None of us have got God completely right. And diversity is good and tolerance is important. But it would be wrong to divert from the plain teaching of Jesus. In the Gospels, he's happy to make exclusive claims about himself.

When it comes to God, he tells people their ideas are wrong and misguided. And in today's passage, his apostle Paul is just doing the same thing. Today, Paul meets people with no connection to Christianity or Judaism. They don't know their Bibles, their Old Testaments or the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And so in many ways, they're just like the people in Melbourne. And as the Gospel makes it to the ends of the earth, it boldly, lovingly challenges every worldview it meets.

And that is not some form of religious bigotry. The point is, there's just only one Jesus. If you're not a Christian here listening this morning, the aim is that you would put your trust in him. That way you can be saved and know the living God. If you have put your trust in Jesus, if you are a Christian, your aim is verse, or our aim is verse 22, that we are strengthened and encouraged to remain true to the faith, despite the many hardships we face. You see, in this passage, what we see is a continuous cycle. The Gospel is preached and then hardship comes. Gospel, then hardships. And each time the Apostles are put to a decision, will they shrink away or will they be strong and courageous? Will they remain true to the faith and boldly, lovingly insist, no, no, no other name but Jesus? So what we'll do is we'll have a look at the cycles and then draw some conclusions at the end. So first cycle, verse 1. At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogues. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and

Greeks believed. And so that is the Gospel, preaching the Gospel, and here comes the hardships. Verse 2. The Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles against the brothers, poisoning their minds. So the Apostles are outnumbered now. Will they shrink away?

[5 : 45] Verse 3. It begins with the word, so. And that's important because that means that verse 3 is a response to verse 2. So opposition comes, verse 2. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord. When things heat up, they stay longer in the hot spot. Rather than keep quiet, they keep speaking dangerous but effective words. The Apostles are strong and courageous.

Speaking the Gospel brings hardships. You need to be strong and courageous. That is the cycle. Let's see it again. Verse 3. Verse 3. The Gospel continues. It's confirmed by signs and wonders.

And so here comes the opposition. Verse 5. There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. Notice that the temperature has risen to murder very, very quickly. Surely now is the time to cut their losses. But after taking reasonable safety measures, verse 6 and verse 7, they continue to preach the Gospel. That is, they keep doing what lands them in hot water in the first place. It is an endless cycle. You'll need to be strong and courageous if you're going to live out your faith, if you're going to speak about Jesus.

Let's see what happens the third cycle. Verse 8. In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, stand up on your feet. At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. His legs coming to life is an outward sign of his soul coming to life when he listened to Paul as he was speaking. You see, verse 3 tells us that all the signs and wonders, all they do is confirm the message. Verse 11. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, the gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

The apostles, they're given a superhero welcome. They're even given superhero names. If they really want to win friends and influence people, maybe they should stop preaching and just keep healing people. And maybe that would have won them a better hearing, you know, to pretend that they were mini gods to go along with the charade. But instead, verse 14, they tore their clothes. That's a sign of horror and protest. They rushed out to 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. In ancient Greece, in the Zeus religion, they thought that Zeus was the sky, that Zeus was the thunder, Zeus was the world. You see, these Zeus worshippers are confused between the creator and the created. That's probably why they tried to worship Paul, just another created being. Their city got God wrong, just as our city has him wrong as well. And what Paul does is give them a mini sermon to show them what God is like. He says, it is God and not Zeus, who's the maker of the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. He says, God is a living God.

[9 : 52] That's why the men's legs come back to life. He's patient and forbearing. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. He's loving and kind, giving people rain from heaven. He's ordered and controlled. The earth has its seasons. And it's not our religious performance, but his gracious abundance that he provides you with plenty of food and fills your heart with joy. God is not summed up by a religious system, but by a person, the Lord Jesus. And Jesus is God's testimony to pagans now, just as creation was the testimony to pagans back then. The idea here that Paul wants us to do is hold up a view of what God is really like compared to the pagan worldview out there. Paul says God is living and the creator. He's patient. He's speaking. He's loving. He's kind. He's ordered. He's gracious. He is

Jesus. And we compare that to a silent stone statue, a statue that needs to be woken up through prayers and rituals and performance in order to get blessings. A statue who has his lightning bolt ready to smite you if we step out of line. Ritualistic attendance, Asian ancestral worship, lucky charms, lucky charms, calling down his power like a genie. Paul sees all of that and verse 15 calls it a worthless thing. Through Jesus, we can be free from all the burdens and superstitions of religion when it comes to knowing God. And when Paul says, you know, worthless things, when he first says that, I get a lump in my throat from sort of social awkwardness. It's such a strong statement. But actually, I'm so glad that he clears God up for us. Paul's message to muddled up Melbourne is to get

God right. I'm so glad he speaks so clearly and so plainly. As most of you know, the evangelist Billy Graham, he came to Melbourne in 1959. He packed the MCG like it's never been packed before or since that day.

On that day, Billy Graham said this. He said, who is your master? Who has first place in your life? Is it Christ or is it something else? There is no other way of salvation other than through the cross of Christ.

I wonder what you make of that. No other way. No other name. We sang that just before. Do your social awkwardness nerves tingle? Do you get that nervous lump in the throat? You see, God doesn't want us to be offended by the exclusiveness of it all, but to be relieved. Relieved because amongst all the superstition and religious confusion, there is one clear way of salvation. One person through whom sins are forgiven, through whom we can have eternal life. That lame man, he was proof that the message, sorry, he was proof that the power is in the message of Jesus. Jesus is the way. And yet, no matter how lovingly it is presented, no matter how boldly we speak, no matter how positively it is received, of course, there's going to be kickback. In a PC culture like ours, who wants to be the one to say Jesus and only way in the same sentence? Who wants to be the one to risk winning friends and influencing people? Because, you know, once the gospel is spoken, opposition can come. And it's not that Christians are looking for a fight. It's not that Paul is looking for a fight where to live peaceably amongst everyone. We're happy to say that Islam has good things to teach, perhaps, about remaining true to your faith. Perhaps Buddhism might say something about peace that might be useful.

[14 : 17] But the point is here, there's only one Jesus. Here comes the hardship, verse 19. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. Just for the record, I actually think they killed Paul here, killed Paul. Because if you're stoned to death and they think you're dead, it's pretty hard to get up and be out and about the next day. I think he actually died, which is surely now enough to stop him.

That is proper opposition. But look at his courage. Verse 20. After the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

He went back into the city that just killed him. There was a harvest to be reaped there. Verse 22 says, disciples were made in that place. It just needed someone strong and courageous to speak, to live out their faith. Speaking the gospel, it leads to hardships. So be strong and courageous.

In fact, Paul's near-death experience, it only made him stronger. Verse 20. The next day, he and Barnabas left Fort Derby. There they preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.

In the remaining verses, instead of going home, Paul and Barnabas risk life and limb to return to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. These are all the cities where they were persecuted and driven out from.

[15 : 59] They do this for the sake of the baby disciples who call that city home. Verse 22. They strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. And hardships is a good description of Paul in our story today. But be encouraged.

This is the environment where Christianity flourishes, where churches are planted, where cities are changed and baby disciples are grown. In Melbourne, many paths, one mountain.

That is the status quo out there. Our city has God wrong, insisting that there's no other name but Jesus that might land us in hot water.

And even though they won't stone us to death in Melbourne, remain true to Jesus might cost you friends. It might strain relationships with your family.

[17 : 01] It might cost you your career or your reputation. You'll need to be strong and courageous. One of the things that stands out in this story is the vast range of responses that the gospel receives.

Firstly, lots of people believe Christianity flourishes in hostile environments. Verse 23. Paul appoints elders in churches because those places are going to grow.

It's so encouraging. Sometimes we get a really positive response from people. They want to come to our church. We get lots of people in our pews.

It's so encouraging. But also, we get the other response. What people don't want to hear. Paul was driven out from every city he went in.

This week, one minute, the Listerans, they're praising him, worshipping him like a god. The next minute, they are stoning him to death. Just a few verses later. Christian friends who stand alongside you once before might have deviated from the gospel to something out there.

[18 : 10] Up and down. Up and down. I read the Bible with a young fellow every other Friday. We read the Bible. We pray together. But we've done this for years and years.

But lately, he seems further away from God than when we started. A few weeks ago, I was saying to my wife, just wondering whether it's all still worth it to keep reading.

I just wanted to give up. We'll need encouragements to deal with the roller coaster of responses that we get from preaching the gospel and living out our faith.

In this passage, one of the things that I was so struck by was when you see Paul in full flight. He's so intimidating.

I could never be as good as Paul. He actually healed a lame man. But be encouraged that the power to save is in the word.

[19 : 08] You can lead your family and friends from death to life with gospel words and your prayers about Jesus.

And that is much, much better for them than having any sort of healing in their bodies. And so as we finish the question, who are you a disciple of?

Is it Jesus or is God just one of many to you? Many hardships. That is a good description of the Christian life. COVID has shown that to be the case.

But here is a word of grace about God. In Jesus, he has freed us from religious entanglements, foggy superstitions and having to perform our way to him.

God is good to us daily. He gives us eternal life. If you've come to know God through Jesus, why not tell other people in Melbourne about what God has done in your life?

[20 : 10] Tell them what a difference knowing Jesus has made to you. Perhaps you can only pray at the moment. Why not pray that our church would keep proclaiming the freedom of God we have in Jesus?

Pray that this church keeps preaching how amazing forgiveness of sins and peace with God is. If you're not a Christian, let me boldly, lovingly challenge you to turn from your worthless things to the living God.

So let me pray as we finish. Father God, we declare that you are the only living God.

Everything else is something of stone and wood. Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus who shows us what you are really like. And Father, as we live out our faith, as we speak about Jesus, please, Father, help us to be strong and courageous amidst the many hardships that the Christian life involves.

Please, would we not be intimidated or frightened or shrink away, but keep living for Jesus. Please, please, strengthen and encourage us to remain true to the faith in a city like ours.

[21 : 29] We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.