

There's only one Living God

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Date: 15 November 2020

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[0 : 00] Thank you so much for joining us. Do keep that passage open. In verse 11 of the passage which Grace just read for us, there's a really curious incident in verse 11.

Paul has just healed a paralyzed man and the local pagans see it and they shout out, the gods have come down to us in human form. The priests of Zeus from the Zeus temple, they rush to the scene.

And verse 13, they try to offer sacrifices to Paul. And it's curious because their Zeus religion isn't too far from basic Christianity.

You see, the gospel is about God coming to earth in human form. Jesus does talk about priests and a temple. Paul does teach to offer ourselves 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?

[1 : 10] And people in Melbourne would hear this and say, see, all the religions of the world are mainly the same. There's a revelation from God, temple priests, sacrifices.

Any difference between religions is just minor details. Let's just agree that we're all on different paths up the same mountain.

That way we can all finally have religious peace. And the apostles travel around cities like ours. They're diverse in religion, ethnicity, culture.

They're tolerant of any idea, so long as you agree that all religions are mainly the same and that any difference is just a minor detail.

But of course, Paul won't toe that line because he insists in only Jesus. You can get a taste of Paul's teaching in verse 15.

[2 : 12] He says, 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 call all of their worldviews a worthless thing.

It's unsafe, even in diverse and tolerant cities, to insist in only one way. And unsafe is how we find Paul in this story.

In fact, the only reason he keeps moving around is because of persecution. He's plotted against, mistreated and stoned to death because he just won't stop preaching the gospel that the only way to know God is in Jesus.

And before we dive in, just a short word that when it comes to religious disagreements, Christians probably have a lot to say sorry for.

History will show that we, Christians, have inflicted similar violence on people of other religions. None of that is very Jesus-like.

[3 : 20] We're not better than anyone else. We've got God wrong just as much as anyone. And diversity is a good thing. Tolerance is important.

But it would be wrong to divert from the plain teaching of Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus is happy to make exclusive claims about himself.

When it comes to views about God, he's happy to tell people that they are misguided and wrong. And in today's passage, his apostle Paul is just doing the same thing.

See, today, Paul at the Apostles, they meet people with no connection to Christianity or Judaism. People have no idea about the Old Testament or the Scriptures or the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And so they're just like people in Melbourne today. And as the Gospel makes it here to one end of the earth, it boldly, it lovingly challenges every worldview it encounters.

[4 : 26] And that's not some form of religious bigotry. The point is, there's only one Jesus. If you're not a Christian here today, the aim is that you would put your trust in him.

That way you can know the living God. And if you already have, the aim for you, if you are a Christian, is verse 22. That we are strengthened, excuse me, 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 cycle is this. The Gospel is preached and then hardship comes.

Gospel, then hardship. 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 in only Jesus? And so we'll see the cycles as we go through.

[5 : 35] So verse 1. At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

So he's preaching the Gospel, but here comes the hardship. Verse 22. Sorry, verse 2. The Jews refused to believe, stirred up the Gentiles against the brothers, poisoning their minds.

So the Apostles are outnumbered. Will they shrink away? Verse 3. It begins with the word, so. That means, verse 3, is a response to verse 2.

The opposition comes, verse 2. So, verse 3, Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord.

When things heat up, when things heat up, they only stay longer in the hot spot. Rather than keep quiet, they speak boldly for the Lord.

[6 : 35] Dangerous, but effective words. The Apostles are strong and courageous. Here is the cycle. Speaking in the Gospel, living out the Gospel, brings hardships.

The response, be strong and courageous. Here is the cycle. Repeat it again. Verse 3. You can see that the Gospel continues. It is confirmed by signs and wonders, but here comes the hardships.

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 quickly.

Surely now is the time for the Apostles to cut their losses. But after taking reasonable safety measures, verse 7, they continue to preach the Gospel.

They just keep doing what lands them in hot water in the first place. It is an endless cycle. Gospel leads to hardships.

[7 : 38] You'll need to be strong and courageous if you are to remain true to the faith. Let's see the third cycle, verse 8. In Lystra, there sat a man who was lame.

He'd 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 a demonstration of his soul coming to life when he listened to Paul as he was speaking.

You see, verse 3 tells us that signs and wonders merely confirm the message of God's grace. The power is in the Word. Verse 11, when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in Lyconian language, the gods had come down to us in human form.

Barnabas they called Zeus, 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.

[8 : 54] See, the apostles are given a superhero welcome. They're even given superhero names. If they really want to win friends and influence people, maybe they should just keep quiet and have a healing ministry instead.

And maybe that would have won them a better hearing, you know, just to pretend that they're all mini-gods. But instead, verse 14, the apostles tore their clothes.

That's a sign of horror and protest. They 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. Back in ancient Greece, they thought that Zeus was the sky.

Zeus was the thunder. Zeus was the world. There's a picture of Zeus on your screen. There he is now. You see, their city got God wrong, just as our city got God wrong as well.

[10:07] They confused the Creator with created things. It's probably why they were so keen to offer praise and worship to Paul and Barnabas, just other created things.

And so what Paul does is he gives them a short sermon so they get God right. He says that it's God and not Zeus who is the maker of the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. He is a living God. That's why the lame man's legs come back to life. He's patient and forbearing. In the past, he let all nations go their way.

He's not a silent statue carved out of stone. But verse 17, he's not left himself without testimony. Paul says he's loving and kind.

He gives people rain from heaven. He's ordered and controlled. The earth has its season. He's not, it's not our religious performance but his gracious abundance that provides you with plenty of food and fills your heart with joy.

[11:15] He's not summed up by a religious system but by a person, the Lord Jesus. And Jesus is God's testimony now just as the creation was the testimony back then.

And what we do is we hold up this view of what God really is like compared to how the pagans in the world view him.

Loving, kind, creator, ordered and controlled, gracious, joyful Jesus. And we compare all of that to a silent stone statue.

Someone you have to wake up with the right chairs or prayers or performance who will smart you with his thunderbolt if you step out of line. You see, Paul sees all of that and verse 15 he calls it worthless things.

Through Jesus we can be free from religious superstition, the burdens of having to perform and come to know the living God for ourselves.

[12:30] And when Paul, he says worthless things, my social awkwardness reflexes start tingling. It's such an exclusive thing to say. But I'm actually so glad that he clears God up.

Paul's message to a muddled up Melbourne is to get God right. Look to Jesus. As most of you know, the great evangelist Billy Graham, he came to Melbourne in 1959.

I think some of you were actually even there that day. Billy Graham filled the MCG like it's never been filled before or since then. And on that day, he said these words.

He said, who is your master? Who has first place in your life? Is it Christ or is it something else? He said, there is no other way of salvation other than through the cross of Christ.

I wonder what you make of that. No other way. Do your social awkwardness reflexes tingle like mine? God doesn't want us to be offended by the exclusiveness of the claim.

[13:42] He wants us to be relieved actually that amongst all the confusion, all the superstition, there's one clear way. Only one person through whom sins are forgiven and eternal life is offered.

The lame man that was healed, he's just proof that the message of Jesus is the answer. And yet no matter how positively it is expressed, no matter how lovingly it is said, 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 risk winning friends and influencing people?

Because you know that once the gospel is spoken, that's when opposition comes. And it's not that Christians are looking for a fight, it's not that Paul was looking for a fight.

We're happy to say that Islam would have helpful things to teach about family life. Maybe Buddhism might have something to say about peace, but the point is there's only one Jesus.

[14:58] But 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 of the city thinking he was dead.

Just for the record, I think Paul was actually killed here. If you are stoned to the point where they think you're dead, it's pretty hard to be up and about the next day.

So I think Paul had died, which is surely enough to stop him. That is proper opposition. But just look at his courage. Verse 20, after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

There was a harvest to be reaped in that city. Verse 22 tells us that baby Christians were made there. It just needed someone strong and courageous enough to speak.

Speaking the gospel leads to hardships. We need to be strong and courageous. That is the cycle. In fact, Paul's near-death experience had only made him stronger.

[16:10] In verse 20, the next day he and Barnabas left for Derby, they preached the gospel in that city too and won a large number of disciples. In the remaining verses, instead of going home, Paul returns via Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.

These are the cities where he was just persecuted. He risks life and limb for the sake of the baby disciples who call this city home.

Verse 22, strengthening and encouraging them to remain true to the faith, he said, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. And hardships is a good description of Paul's experience today.

But be encouraged, encouraged, be encouraged that this is the environment where Christianity flourishes, where churches are planted, where cities are changed and baby disciples are made.

Verse 23, Paul appoints elders in those churches because he knows to expect the growth. They will need to be strong and courageous.

[17:22] And of course, we will need to be as well if we are to remain true to the faith because one mountain, many paths, that is the status quo in our city.

Our city has got God wrong by insisting that we are all just on similar paths, that God is just one of many.

Only Jesus will land you in hot water. Sometimes we might get a positive response, sometimes people will be respectful and we will convert a few and that will be great.

But generally speaking, our city is not a neutral space and maybe they won't stone us in Melbourne but remaining true to Jesus might cost you friends.

It might strain family relationships, maybe your career, maybe your reputation. You'll need to be strong and courageous. In our story, one of the things that stood out was all the mixed responses that Paul got.

[18:25] Last week, the whole city gathered to hear the word but then a few of them expelled Paul from their region. This week, one minute the Lystrans are worshipping Paul, offering sacrifices to him, the next minute they're bouncing rocks off his head.

Christian friends you love, they might deviate from the faith over the years. they might deviate from the gospel to something that's on offer out there.

I read the Bible with a young fellow every other Friday. We've been doing it for years now, but lately he seems to be further away from God, more confused about God than when we started.

And just a few weeks ago, I was just wondering if it's all still worth it. We'll need to be strong and courageous for the emotional rollercoaster of mixed responses that living for Jesus will bring.

In this passage, Paul, he's in full flight and it's so intimidating, isn't it? I could never be Paul, which is correct, because he is an apostle, but be encouraged that the power to save is in the word.

[19:42] Sure, Paul healed a lame man, but you can lead your friends from death to life with gospel words, with your prayers, and that is much, much better than having their legs healed.

And so as we finish, who are you a disciple of? Is it God? Is it a God who's just one of many, or is it only Jesus?

many hardships, that is a good description of the Christian life. The way we're doing church these days, that is just one hardship that we face. But here is a word of grace about God.

In Jesus, he has freed us from religious entanglements, foggy superstitions, having to perform our way to him. God is good to us daily.

He gives us eternal life. He is gracious and kind and loving. If you have come to know him through Jesus, why not talk to your friends in Melbourne about what God has done in your life?

[20:55] Tell them what a difference knowing Jesus has made to you. Maybe all you can do at the moment is pray. Why not pray that our church would continue a ministry of teaching people what God is like?

Pray that we would continue preaching how amazing forgiveness of sins and peace with God is. If you're not a Christian, let me boldly, lovingly say, will you turn from all other worthless things to the living God?

Let's pray as we finish. Father God, we thank you that you want us to get you right and we declare that you are the only God.

There is only one way to you. It is through the Lord Jesus. We thank you that you are gracious and kind and loving and abundant and speaking. And thank you that in Jesus we can know you fully.

And Father, please help us in a city like ours that is confused to speak for Jesus, to live for him, to show people what you are really like.

[22 : 10] As hardships come, Father, please would we be bold and strong and courageous. Help us remain true to the faith. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.