

# The Name Above All Names

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome, everyone. I just want to add my welcome to Ben's. And boys and girls, it's wonderful to have you watching the service with us. Boys and girls, you can stay and listen to this short sermon if you'd like, or you could draw something for us to look at after the service.

Something that maybe is related to what the girls were just talking about, something from the Bible play, or maybe a picture of a door, an open door.

And I'll tell you why. Because Paul, the friend of Jesus, when he talks about telling people about Jesus for the first time, he says it's like opening a door for them.

So maybe you could do that. We would love to see those pictures in the Zoom room afterwards. So we're looking at Acts 14, 1 to 23.

It's a pretty action-packed couple of paragraphs here. So let's walk through it. So Paul, as you know, he's on this road trip, and he's telling people about Jesus. And his first stop, in our little section here, his first stop, is in a place called Iconium.

[ 1 : 11 ] That's verses 1 to 7. So he preaches, and Jews and Gentiles come to faith. So this is a tremendous result. But do you see how long it takes before intense opposition arises in the story?

How long does it take? Have a look. One verse. It takes one verse before these guys are being attacked. You see it in verse 2.

Straight away, the religious leaders start a campaign of slander against Paul and Barnabas. And then I love how verse 3 starts. It says, So, what would you expect to happen after this?

So, their character has been completely maligned. So, they remained a long time. Speaking boldly. Isn't that brilliant?

Despite the opposition, they stick with it. And God is really, really kind to this city of Iconium because he confirms the words that Paul and Barnabas are preaching with signs and wonders.

[ 2 : 21 ] Back in the old country, back in New Zealand, before I became a very respectable priest in the Anglican Church, I was a sexual health educator and a mental health educator in high schools.

And I worked for a Christian organization called Attitude. And I would travel around the country and I would speak in high schools about sexual health stuff, how to make decisions about that kind of thing, about mental health stuff.

And I worked on developing curriculum for students and teachers. I was one of the first employees in this organization. And we did it all from a Christian perspective. There was another organization doing stuff in schools as well called Family Planning.

And they were New Zealand's equivalent of Planned Parenthood in North America, if you've heard of that organization. And so, when we, Attitude, the organization Attitude, started up and started going into these high schools, Planned Parenthood went after us.

They went after us. They went after our organization. They were approaching the media. They were vilifying us in the media. They were slandering us in the schools, calling up the teachers, saying, don't use these people.

[ 3 : 35 ] Don't use these people. And their accusation was this. These people are evangelicals. Stay away from them. So what did we do?

Well, we, you know, we prayed about this and we felt the Lord said to us, just keep going. Keep going. This is a huge distraction. This is a huge drama. But keep going.

And in fact, don't say anything bad about Planned Parenthood. Just keep doing the job that God has called you to do. So that's what we did. We just went on with our business.

By the time I finished working there, I worked there for about seven years. Our organization, Attitude, had grown incredibly. And we were being used in about 99% of the schools in the whole country.

We'd basically taken over a good portion of the health curriculum. And Planned Parenthood had actually stopped doing things in high schools. Folks, when Luke wrote the book of Acts, he wants us to know that when you are public about your faith, when you're public about your faith, it will create unity.

[ 4 : 47 ] You will get support. You will see amazing things happen. And you will also create division. And it's miserable.

It's miserable that it should create division. But it does. And we shouldn't be naive about this. And I think we're reminded here, just don't be surprised when this happens.

Don't be surprised when you talk about Jesus that there's drama. Don't hope for drama. But don't be surprised when it does happen. Just keep doing what you think the Lord has you to do.

So that's Iconium. Now, eventually, Paul and Barnabas left. And they left because the anger against them got so hot that they had to get out of there because people actually wanted to kill them.

And Paul and Barnabas found out about it. And so they jetted to the next place. And I think the lesson is there is be courageous and be wise. Be courageous and be wise.

[ 5 : 49 ] Now, before we move on to the next place that Paul and Barnabas visits, let's just stop for a moment because I want to ask you a question. And the question is this. Why bother?

Like, why do they even bother doing this? Why preach the gospel? Why preach the gospel? I mean, for some people, what they said, it was like life-giving oxygen to somebody that was starved of oxygen.

And for other people hearing it, it's like poison. So why bother? I mean, what a drama. Why not just keep your mouth shut?

You folks at your work, school, why not just keep your mouth shut and save yourself for all the drama that might happen? Just get on with your life. Well, what Paul and Barnabas faced when they came to the next city gives us the answer to that.

See, Paul and Barnabas went through all this drama because they knew that the stakes were very high. So the next city explains this quite well.

[ 7 : 01 ] Let's get to it. So we're at verses 8 to 18. So they wind up in a place called Lystra, which is part of, today it's sort of somewhere in Turkey. So the place they were in was thoroughly polytheistic.

So that means lots of different gods. You just worship the god that you think will help you. And there are tons of options. And things start off really well, as you heard it read, right?

Starts off well. They had a cracking great start. They arrive. There's a guy who can't walk, and he is healed. That is a tremendous start.

But then what happens? Look in verse 11. The crowd says, The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes. And priests from the local Zeus church came out and wanted to sacrifice some stuff to them.

And this feels a little bit random, I know. Like, why these guys? Well, there's a back story here that will make sense of all of us. So there was a legend in this place.

[ 8 : 02 ] And the legend was this. A long time ago, Zeus and Hermes, who is the son of Zeus, came down from, you know, wherever they were. They came to Lystra, and they looked like normal dudes.

They just looked like basic bros. They're just guys just walking around. And they just started knocking on people's doors and asking if they could stay the night. And they knocked on hundreds and hundreds of doors.

And everybody said, No, we've got nothing. You can't stay the night. Get out of here. Except for one old couple. So remember, this is part of sort of a Roman mythology. Except for one old couple who opened the door and said, Yes, come in and gave them some food and stuff and let them stay the night.

And they were quite a poor couple. So they gave sort of quite sacrificially there. Anyway, the gods, Zeus and Hermes, eventually revealed that they really, who they really are.

We are not, you know, Larry and Bob. We are Zeus and Hermes. And they rewarded the old couple really generously and just destroyed, just like destroyed everybody else.

[ 9 : 00 ] So that's the legend. That's the back story. And so that's on the minds of these guys in Lystra, which is why the crowd was very, very keen to get on the right side of Paul and Barnabas. Because they're thinking, Maybe this is Zeus and Hermes who have come again with another test.

And they really wanted to impress them. So how do Paul and Barnabas respond to the crowd who want to worship them? Well, first they kind of tear their clothes, which was, it was kind of a thing that you did in the presence of blasphemy.

And Paul says in verse 15, Why are you doing these things? We're just like you. And we've come to bring you good news. And you should turn away from these vain things to a living God.

Turn away from vain things. That's a great line, isn't it? Like I said, this is a polytheistic society. And he's saying all these things they worship, they're vain things. Vancouver's a polytheistic society.

The meta-narrative here, like in Lystra, is there's no supreme belief. Just worship the thing that helps you. So back in Lystra, it's, you know, soldiers worship the gods of war. Merchants worship the gods of commerce.

[10:10] And Paul said to them, and we can say today to the many gods in Vancouver, we can say these things you are giving your life to are vain, which means they are empty.

They will take from you more than you will give. You know, the ancient gods were capricious. Like the modern gods, they ripped you off.

You know, if you live for money, like Kira mentioned, you live for money, it will control you. You live for romance, it will just control you. And Paul says, stop trusting in these things.

Stop putting all your hope in these things. I've got really great news. And then he goes on to summarize this really great news. And you'll notice that he summarizes the gospel in quite a different way than he does to a typical Jewish audience.

There's no talk of the Old Testament. There's no talk of kind of redemption sort of stuff there. He just, he talks to them in a way they'll understand. Verses 15 to 17, he says, in summary, and we don't have time to go into this, I'll just give you the bullet points.

[11:18] He says, there is one God. So that's a big thing to say to a polytheistic society. There is one God who's responsible for all creation. It's like us in Vancouver saying there is one God.

It's Jesus and he is unique. Nothing comes anywhere near Jesus. So Paul says, there is one God responsible for all of creation and he's good and he's kind.

Just look at all the created things. He's, look at the world he's set up for you. That shows you that he's really good and he's revealed himself to us. There's other gods that you serve.

They will enslave you and they'll leave you empty. It's great stuff, isn't it? It's fantastic. And I think it's helpful for our own witness. You have to speak to people in a way they understand.

You've got to meet them where they're at. But also, don't be afraid to call out their idols. I remember being on a plane years ago and talking to a woman beside me and she was just, I just have the kind of face that people tell their life stories to.

[12:24] And she was telling me a life story. And when she was saying when she was a teenager, she was basically homeless. She was living on the streets. And now she has this incredibly successful career. And it was a very impressive career.

And I noticed she kept bringing up all the stuff she owns and talked about bank accounts a lot. It was quite interesting. And I'm looking at the time we're going to land soon. And I just say to her, I blurted out, I say, listen, Jesus saved you from the streets.

And you've given your life to money. And you need to give it back to Jesus. I just, you know, I thought, I've got 10 minutes here. I need to have a crack at this.

She started crying. And we had a great conversation. Let's keep moving. Actually, no, let's summarize where we're at so far. What have we learned so far from our passage? Be courageous. Be courageous in your faith. Be wise. Speak to people in a way they understand. Don't be afraid to call out people's idols. And don't be surprised if people are not into what you're saying.

[13:29] Don't be surprised if people say you're crazy. We see this again in our story as Paul continues. So back to Acts 14.

What happens next? After Paul rejects their worship, in the next scene, some folks from another town come in and they almost beat Paul to death.

Now, you're not going to, you're probably not going to experience something like that. But you might get cancelled. And that's the modern day assassination, isn't it?

Now, as I finish, just back to an earlier question. I mean, I hope you've been encouraged by this. To be courageous. To be bold. To be wise.

To call out idols. But again, the earlier question I asked is, why bother? Why bother with the hassle? Why bother with the drama of it all? Why put yourself through that?

[ 14 : 32 ] If you keep reading in Acts, wherever Paul went, he just left like a trail of blood. And he's a, I mean, he didn't look for an easy life.

He didn't make decisions for ease. But so why do it? Why put yourself out there? Why put your faith out there? We do it because the stakes are high.

And Paul saw that in this place called Lystra. What people were giving their lives to. Giving their lives to things that will enslave them.

And they need to know, and people in Vancouver need to know today, that there is a real God. And he is a living God. And he is not silent. And he's revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Who is good and who is kind. And that's why Paul went through the drama and the pain of what he was doing. That's why he risked all what he risked to say the things that he said.

[ 15 : 37 ] Paul did the hard thing. That's why we do it.