

The Apostles Persecuted

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[0 : 00] Great to be with you again, back bringing God's word. So if you have a Bible, we're continuing on in our series in Acts. So it's Acts chapter 5 and starting in verse 17 down to the end of the chapter.

Let me just get it there. So Acts chapter 5 and verse 17.

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. Go stand in the temple courts, he said, and tell the people all about this new life.

At daybreak, they entered the temple courts as they had been told and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders of Israel, and sent to the jail for the apostles.

[1 : 09] But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

Then someone came and said, Look, the men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people. At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force because they feared that the people would stone them.

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. Peter and the apostles replied, We must obey God rather than human beings.

The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior, that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. When they heard this, they were furious, and they wanted to put them to death.

[2 : 42] But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin, Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men.

Some time ago, Thutis appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about 400 men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.

After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census, and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

Therefore, in the present case I advise you, leave these men alone. Let them go. For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it's going to fail.

But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God. And his speech persuaded them.

[3 : 45] They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. And the apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing, because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

And day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

So, Father, just help us now as we look at your word, and we look at this passage here in the book of Acts, and just teach and guide our hearts to what you want to tell us this morning and where you want to lead us.

Amen. So, as you read through this passage that we've gone through, and even over the first five chapters of the book of Acts, one of the things that you'll see again and again is this idea of the

advancement and the spreading of the gospel and the good news of Jesus Christ.

You know, we see it from the very start of the book of Acts, and a promise is given when Jesus says to his disciples, he says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[5 : 05] And then, from that moment, the disciples, they gather together in a room together, they're praying together, and then we see the day of Pentecost comes, and the Holy Spirit comes like a violent wind, and the Holy Spirit falls on them, and they're all filled with this power of the Holy Spirit.

And from this point on, right through up to now, and for the rest of the book of Acts, we see the outworking of that power from this promise. And immediately we see Peter standing up in front of crowds of people and proclaiming the good news of Jesus, what he's done for them.

And it says that the crowd were cut to the heart, and 3,000 people became believers that day. And from that moment on, we see healings take place.

There was a crippled man in the next chapter, and he's healed. People were bringing people just to lay them, even in Peter's shadow, it says. And spiritually possessed people were coming, and they were all being healed.

And all these healings, these miracles were taking place, and the gospel was advancing. And even last week when we saw, when Tom was preaching about Ananias and Sapphira, and we see their deception and their lies, and yet out of that came, it says a great fear came on the people.

[6 : 37] And it says many believers were added to their number after that. So even in the fear that the people had, they realized there was something about this message, something about this news that Peter and the other apostles were telling, that there's something to be taken seriously here.

And they looked into it, and many people were added, and became believers at that time. And here today we see, despite the persecution that the apostles are facing, despite the religious leaders' best attempts at putting a stop to it, we finish by reading that day after day in the temple courts, and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

And, you know, for those leaders, those religious leaders at the time, it must have been such a nightmare. Like, it must have been like fighting a wildfire.

You know, you think you've one part of it put out, and you've Jesus put down, you've killed him. And then, you know, a few days later, here he is, seems to have risen from the dead again. And then, here are his disciples sharing the good news.

And, oh look, we'll throw them into jail. They throw them into jail. The next morning they come out. They're gone. And you're just thinking, you know, if you're one of those leaders, you must be like, you just can't get your head around it.

[8 : 02] Like, what on earth is happening here? And this is what the book of Acts is all about. It's seeing how the gospel is spreading from that promise at the very start, first in Jerusalem, and then later as we go on through the book of Acts, we're going to see how it spreads through to Judea and to Samaria, and then eventually to the ends of the earth.

And even today you could probably say that we're still in the book of Acts because we're still looking to go to the ends of the earth. There's so many hundreds and thousands of people groups and tribes around the world that have never heard this good news of Jesus.

And so we're still, in one sense, in the book of Acts looking to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. And we all have a part to play in that.

We're all called to be disciples who will bring that good news of Jesus Christ to others around us today. Each, you know, each in our own way and using our own unique gifts and skills that God has given each one of us and blessed us with.

But what we see specifically here today is that the gospel is spreading despite the opposition that they face and despite the persecution that the apostles know is going to come their way.

[9 : 28] And I suppose one of the things that struck me most when I was looking at this was the conduct of the religious leaders. And you look at how they were acting. They really, really hated seeing the gospel being preached.

Because look at how we, look at how you finished up last week whenever Tom was speaking. It says more and more people were becoming believers. They were following after the apostles and their teachings.

And that meant they weren't following after these religious leaders, after the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And we see they're bringing the sick, they're bringing the demon-possessed out into the streets and they're all being healed.

And the religious leaders are looking at this and in their minds they're thinking, look, there's no way we can compete with these guys. And so you see jealousy starts to creep in.

And it creeps in so much that we're told at the start of this passage that they were filled with it. They were filled with jealousy. And eventually we see that jealousy, that wanting to have what the apostles have, wanting that power and authority that the apostles have with the people.

[10:40] And because they know they don't have it themselves, they really don't want the apostles to get all that glory. And so they decide to put a stop to it and let's throw them into jail. And I think, you know, in a way, as I was reading it, it's a warning, it was a warning to me and a warning to us, I think, as a church.

Because jealousy doesn't start out with throwing someone into prison. You know, it's more like a cancer that if it isn't caught early and gotten rid of, will start to spread and spread more and more and more until it finally, completely overwhelms you.

And, you know, you think throughout the Bible, there's so many examples of this, the sin of jealousy here in the Bible. And we see it going right the way back to the start with Cain and Abel.

Abel brought, Abel brought a sacrifice and Cain brought a sacrifice. And God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's. And Cain was filled with jealousy and anger towards Abel.

And so he kills him. And we see the same with Saul and David. People are praising David and saying, David has killed tens of thousands of people, but Saul only thousands.

[11:53] And Saul is jealous. And it says from that day on, he looked to kill David. So jealousy is such a destructive feeling that can come into any one of our hearts.

And it can come in almost unnoticed and in such a variety of ways. And, you know, it's, we have to be really careful because, you know, I can start with something as simple as looking at what other people have, looking at someone's money or their house or their car or, you know, how they look. And we want what they have. And even here in the church, we look at other people and we wish, oh, I just wish I could be like that other person. They seem to have everything. They seem to be so good at doing this or that.

And I just wish I could be like them. I don't seem to have any skills or gifts or anything like that. And so jealousy starts to creep in. We want what other people have.

And so these verses, I think they're a reminder that we must learn to fight against this jealousy or else it can lead down such a slippery slope.

[13:04] And we must be careful that we don't try to hinder the spread of the gospel with those feelings of jealousy or really any other sin in their life. It's a call to examine our hearts and look at them.

Is there anything that's trying to, where we're trying to hinder the gospel because of our hearts and our own sin in our lives like these religious leaders were doing?

And oftentimes, you know, when the gospel is spreading like it is here in acts of other people, other people are going to be jealous of it and they're going to try and steal back the limelight just as these leaders here are doing.

You know, they see the apostles getting all the attention and so they put them in jail. But what we see from this passage is that no matter what they try to do, they cannot stop God's plan.

You know, they think they have the situation under control because they've locked them up in prison. But that doesn't stop God. And you know, he sends an angel during the night and he opens up the door and they simply just walk on out of there.

[14:17] And by daybreak the next morning, they're back in that same temple court preaching the gospel again. And I think what you see from these verses is how useless it is for anyone to try and stop God.

You know, you cannot do it. It's like trying to hold back the wind or a big wave that's crashing over you. It's just impossible to actually do. And the chief priests and the religious leaders, they couldn't do anything about it.

Even when they try it. And you see eventually one of their own leaders, one of these Pharisees, Gamaliel, he stands up and he says to them, look, he says, lads, leave these men alone.

Let them go. For if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.

And I think that should give us great hope because it means that in our own lives, if we're doing the will of God, then nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop us.

[15 : 27] If we're doing what God has called each one of us to do, then he will lead us and he will guide us and bring us safely through it all to the other side.

You know, it mightn't always be a straight road. There'll be, I'm sure, plenty of twists and turns in it and some bumps and bruises. But we do have the assurance from God's word that he will bring us out the other side.

You know, we're told in Philippians that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. Or in the book of James, we're told that blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.

For when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. So let us take heart to know that God is in control of all situations and areas of your life.

Every fear and doubt that you may have, he knows about it. Every problem that seems unsolvable, he has the answer for it. Every second of every minute of your life, he knows exactly what's going to happen and he will bring you out the other side of it.

[16 : 47] And knowing this should spur us on to go deeper with God, to walk more closely with him, to take more risks for him as we seek to do his will. You know, there's, when I was growing up, there was a very simple song that I learned growing up and one of the verses said, I do not know what lies ahead the way I cannot see.

And it goes on and then the chorus comes back and it says, but I know who holds the future. He'll guide me with his hand. With God, things don't just happen.

Everything by him is planned. So as I face tomorrow with its problems, great and small, I'll trust the God of miracles and give to him my all.

And you know, Peter and the apostles here, they didn't know what lay ahead, but they trusted God and God led them into jail and he led them straight back out again.

And in the same way, we do not know what lies ahead. You know, God will lead us through down difficult paths, but we have the assurance that he will lead us out of them again and into something much better.

[17 : 59] And he knows the future and he will guide us with his hand. And so in response to this, knowing that God holds the future, how should we actually respond?

Well, again, look at Peter and look at how the other apostles respond. They're thrown in jail. They're brought out of jail. They immediately go back preaching again. They're brought before the religious leaders.

They're accused of trying to stir up all sorts of trouble. And then just as they did back in the previous chapter, in chapter four, when they were before the Sanhedrin, they say, look, we must obey God rather than man.

They knew the risks as they preached. They knew that there was such a real chance that they were going to be killed for their faith at some stage or another.

And all they had to do to avoid this persecution was to stop talking about Jesus. If they would simply just keep quiet a bit, keep it to themselves, look, you can practice the way you want in your own time, in your own house and everything, but just don't go spreading it around to other people here around Jerusalem.

[19 : 11] And I don't think the religious leaders cared what they did in their own private time just so that they didn't start spreading it all around Jerusalem. And in one sense, isn't this what the world kind of says to us as Christians today?

It says, look, you have your own beliefs about Jesus being the Savior of the world and that's fine. Look, just keep it to yourselves. Don't go spreading it around and telling others that Jesus is the only way to have life after death.

Don't go telling everyone that they're sinners, that they need to be saved from sin. Just keep it to yourselves and don't try to impose your own beliefs on everyone else.

That's what the world says to us today, just as the leaders in Jerusalem were saying to Peter and the apostles. But like the apostles, we have to say the same thing to the world and to ourselves that

we must obey God rather than man.

You know, we've been commanded to go into the world and to make disciples and to tell others the good news of Jesus and to bring that message of hope and reconciliation to a fallen world, to a world that does not want to hear it.

[20 : 31] So let us be willing like the apostles to take whatever may come to share with others this good news. And you know, I'm not saying that we all have to do it in exactly the same way as the apostles did.

We don't all have to head down to the middle of Skibreen outside fields at daybreak, six o'clock in the morning and start shouting the gospel from the rooftops there. I'm not saying that that's how we do it exactly like the apostles.

But in our own way, God has given each one of us skills and gifts and different ways of when we see an opportunity to share that good news with others, to come alongside others and to give them that good news of what Jesus has done for them.

You know, we're told to be salt and light of the earth. We are told that we are to be Christ's ambassadors. And that means we're representing Christ.

And just as our, you know, our president here in Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, he's an ambassador for Ireland and he looks to represent this country and to present Ireland in, you know, the best possible light.

[21 : 41] And since we are Christ's ambassadors, we are representing a heavenly country and we are representing the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and he has given us all the power we need to accomplish this task.

He's given us the Holy Spirit to help us as we seek to go about doing this. And you know, it won't always go well when you talk about Jesus to others because lots of people don't want to hear this message.

The leaders in Jerusalem, they certainly didn't want to hear that message being spread all over Jerusalem. And so to make sure that this wasn't going to happen again, they flogged the apostles and they told them, don't speak about Jesus anymore.

And so they went out of the Sanhedrin and yet we're told again, day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

You know, in one sense, you have to laugh thinking about these leaders. Like, you know, the apostles, they go out and they wouldn't even go outside the city of Jerusalem or keep it on the quiet or anything.

[22 : 55] They immediately go back into the temple courts preaching the gospel again. And if you're one of those chief priests, you're saying, would they ever just give us a break?

Like, they're just non-stop. Yet the apostles, they were obedient to their calling. But I think what surprised me the most is after they left the Sanhedrin, it says, they rejoiced because they had been counted worthy for suffering, disgrace for the name.

These were men who had just been beaten. You know, put yourself in that situation. If you had just been beaten or flogged, you know, what would your attitude be after that?

And yet these men, these apostles, they were joyful that God had allowed that to happen to them. They considered it an honor to be beaten for Jesus' sake.

Now, why would they think that? I mean, in one sense, that's madness right there, to rejoice in being beaten. And as I read it, you know, it reminded me of those verses in Corinthians where Paul says to the Corinthians, he says, that our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

[24 : 19] And so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. And these apostles, they realized it was okay. Even though it was hard going and they were put in jail, they were beaten, all these different things that happened to them, there was something much greater in store for them.

These troubles and these hardships that they were going through were achieving something for them. They were achieving for them an eternal glory that far outweighed anything that the religious leaders could do to them.

They had fixed their eyes on the unseen rather than the seen. And I think the question for us this morning is, where is our focus?

Where are we looking around at? You know, is our focus on us and our situation around us? Or is it fixed on the unseen, on the eternal picture, on the very fact that one day when Jesus comes back, when he returns, that we will be living with him in eternal glory, in a heavenly city, in a place where the glory of God is going to shine all day and all night and where there will be no more tears and no more troubles?

That's what we are achieving in this light and momentary trouble in our lives. And we all have our troubles.

[25 : 47] Some of them are more difficult than others. But let us be encouraged that they are achieving for us something far greater in the future. And so as we read these verses, there is this caution to be wary of our own hearts and to look and to examine them.

You know, is there anything in our hearts that's hindering the gospel? But secondly, we can take courage to know that God is in control of all situations that are going on in our lives, that are currently going on, that have gone on already, that will go on in the future.

Thirdly, there is a call in us to obey God rather than man, despite what the world may say and do to us. But then finally we see that what we are going through now is achieving for us something that is far greater.

We are, it's achieving an eternal glory. And so, let us be encouraged today to go on with our walk with God, to look for those opportunities, to share into people's lives that amazing news of what God has done for each one of us, to know God and to know how good he is and to know how he has blessed us in so many ways and given us his son.

And so, we look forward to that day. But let's pray and ask for his help as we continue on our journey to that day. Father, we just come to you this morning and we praise your name.

[27 : 28] and God, we know that there are so many times in our lives where we have ups and downs. It mightn't be necessarily like the apostles where we're thrown in jail.

We see so many of our brothers and sisters around the world who are thrown in jail, who have been killed for their faith. And God, we see that they could rejoice in that knowing that there was something far greater in store for them.

And I pray this morning that you would help us to fix our eyes on what is unseen. To see Jesus. That he is the author and perfecter of our faith.

That he is going to be our prize. And we look forward, we know Jesus in some way now, but oh, how much greater it's going to be when we are with you together in glory.

and we look so much forward to that day, but help us on our journey at the moment today and into this next week, God, give us strength.

[28 : 38] Give us eyes to look to heaven, to look to you and to focus our eyes on you and to not look at our situation around us. God, we struggle so much with that.

I know I do. but God, you have given us the Holy Spirit just as you gave the Holy Spirit to these men here in Acts. And we have your power working in us.

So would you work in us today and over this week, God? Would you fill us with your Spirit and continue to help us to live a life pleasing to you and to bring that good news to others, I pray. Amen.