

Where to Turn to in Persecution

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Date: 26 November 2017

Preacher: Calum Murdo Smith

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn back to our reading in the book of Acts, chapter 4. Acts, chapter 4.

Our focus this evening is really going to be on verse 23, down to the end of the chapter. But just read again the beginning of the chapter, just to set the scene in context of what's going on. And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. At the beginning of the chapter, you see the disciples, and especially Peter and John, had been doing great works in the midst of the people.

But those who were rulers of the day, the Sadducees and the chief priests and the captain of the temple, they didn't like what was going on at this time. They didn't like what they were hearing. This people teaching about Jesus as the way of the resurrection from the dead.

[1 : 20] They were preaching the gospel, and people didn't like it. And so they had them arrested. But when we turn then to verse 23, when they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them.

And when they heard it, they lifted up their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your seven, said by the Holy Spirit, why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain?

Why did the people's rage and the people's plot, Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain?

There's a quote from the psalm that we were singing, Psalm 2.

And that is where they turned to in this time. They turned to God's word. They turned to God in prayer. But what is going on here? When you think about the word persecution, what do you think? Does it automatically take your mind somewhere else? Perhaps another country, another people.

[2 : 45] Persecution is very often a word that to us can seem like something very far away. Something that we're not very familiar with. Something that we don't have to struggle in.

But as we look at the world around us today and how quickly the world is changing, you see more and more in our country today, and even coming to our own islands, the challenge of persecution is becoming more and more real.

And if the day comes when we enter into a more serious form of persecution, if it comes to a stage, for example, where to proclaim the name of Jesus means you're a rest, what would you do?

How would you deal with that situation? Well, that is exactly what was happening here in the early church in the book of Acts.

I enjoy reading many different kinds of books. I remember when I was younger, I always would pick up a book and start reading it. But as soon as I would start reading a book, I start hearing about different characters or different situations that are going on.

[4 : 06] I would put myself into that situation. I would have a picture in my mind of what was going on. I would have a picture in my mind of what the people looked like.

It's like watching a film in your mind, but you're reading a book. It's amazing what we can do with our imagination. Have you ever tried doing that when you're reading the Bible?

Do you find yourself putting yourself maybe into that situation you're reading about? Picturing the people that the Bible is talking about. Seeing what's happening and thinking, well, how would I behave in that kind of situation?

The book of Acts is one of these books where you find yourself, I find myself anyway, as you're reading through, there's so much going on. There's so much happening that you can't help but

enter into the kind of experiences that they were going through.

You think of the opening chapter in the book of Acts. A small group of people gathered together in a room, praying to God, just wondering what's ahead for them.

[5 : 11] What is going to happen? The Lord Jesus has now gone back to be with the Father. What next? He's promised the Comforter will come, the Holy Spirit, but what will that mean?

You come into chapter 2 and you have the whole place being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Amazing things happening. You have 3,000 being added to their number in one day.

There's all these kinds of amazing things happening. And the people were living in a day when the extraordinary was just the daily way of life. Dramatic events, amazing events were happening on a daily basis.

But when you put yourself into that kind of situation in the Bible, you maybe think to yourself, well, that was a day then. It's not something we're going to see again now.

And in many ways that is true. The early church, as we read of in the book of Acts, it was a unique time. It was an amazing time of God's Spirit being poured out in a special way.

[6 : 22] But we can also get caught up in the idea that, well, we could never see anything quite as dramatic as that. God's Spirit at work. But yet we can easily forget, well, God has done it since.

God has blessed nations and people. He's blessed our old islands in amazing ways in the past. But too often in our own minds we can think, that was something for back then.

And we can easily forget, but wait a minute, this is still the same God that we're speaking about today. And we should never lose sight of the fact that God is able to do these things today.

The people may have been living in extraordinary days. But for God, nothing is impossible. So things initially seem to be going very well.

The church is growing. There is great and amazing things happening. But then you come into chapter 4. And what happens? In the midst of all these good things that are taking place, persecution comes in.

[7 : 30] The people, the leaders, the captain of the temple, the Sadducees, the chief priests, they're greatly annoyed, it says in verse 2. They don't like what they're hearing. And they have Peter and John arrested.

And this is the way persecution starts. People don't like what they're hearing. Greatly annoyed because of what they were teaching.

And do you not see that in our own day and age now? People are annoyed when they hear the Bible. People are annoyed when they hear people talking about Jesus.

It upsets people. They don't want to hear it. So they try and quieten it down. And it's not what we're seeing. A sense of persecution coming.

A sense of the word of God trying to be silenced by many. And we have to open our eyes to the fact that this is taking place. And we should open our eyes to the fact that we're not immune to it here.

[8 : 35] Even in our own islands where we feel we've been blessed by God in so many ways, we are not immune to it. But how can we prepare ourselves if that day is coming?

Because very often God will bless through a time of persecution. The Beatitudes say that. Blessed are the persecuted, doesn't it?

And if that is to come our way, what will we do? We don't want it. We don't ask for it. But God so often uses these times to bless his people and to make them grow in the faith.

And as we're looking through chapter 4 here, we learn so much about how we could, or how maybe we might have to, deal with persecution.

What would you do if persecution was to become more and more serious, more and more severe for you? Well, there's three things I think we can take from this section of how to deal with persecution, and especially where to turn in persecution.

[9 : 42] And that's what we see from verse 23 downwards. And the first thing we see here is they turned to their own.

They turned to their own. When they were released, it says in verse 23, this is Peter and John, They went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

There's a great image there. They were not alone. And I think as Christians we can often feel a sense of loneliness.

We can feel a sense as if we're the only ones going through this, or I'm the only one going through this experience. But what you see in the early church here in the book of Acts is when they were

released, they went to their friends.

They knew exactly where they could go. They had been together so often with their friends before. They knew where they would find them.

[10:53] They knew where they could go. And that is where they went. This is the first challenge that arises in the early church. There are great things happening.

There's a real awakening. The spirit is at work. And persecution comes. And what does persecution want to do? It wants to silence the Christian voice. And so how are they going to deal with it? Peter and John, they've got two options. They could say, well, let's be quiet. Let's do as they're saying. Let's just let it be. We can carry on quietly.

Or they could do as they did. Turn to God. Begin to pray and continue to proclaim the name of Jesus. They could have said, let's get out of here.

Things are going to become difficult now. These people don't like what they're hearing. This is going to become more and more serious. We should go and tell our friends, pack your bags. We're leaving Jerusalem.

[11:53] Because this is not going to be a good place to stay. Is that what they do? Not at all. Instead of thinking this is the end of their witnessing for Jesus, they realize this is just the beginning.

This is just the beginning for them. Everything that Jesus had been talking about to them.

Everything Jesus had been teaching them. That they will suffer. That they will be mocked.

That they will be beaten. All these things are becoming real for them now. Persecution is about to come their way. And where do they turn first? They go to their own.

They turn to their friends. They go to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Not to warn them to get out of Jerusalem. Not to warn them to turn away.

But to come together as one. To come together as one. And doesn't the parable of the sower make that so plain to us as well?

[12:54] As Jesus teaches in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is a man who bears the word. And at once receives it with joy.

But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes. Because of the word, he quickly falls away.

And that is why it is so important.

To be grounded in the word of God. To be together around the word of God. To be sharing with one another.

Encouraging one another. Helping one another. Through the word of God. It was such a natural thing for the church. The early church.

[14:06] As soon as they were released from prison. They went to their friends. They went to be with those who were like minded. They went to be with those who they knew they could talk to.

It was the most natural thing to do. If it was to come to you. Where would you go? Do you have people you can go to?

Do you have people you can talk to? Do you have people you can pray with? Do you have people who are helping you to grow in the faith? That is what the word of God is saying here.

They had friends. They had genuine, true, deep, meaningful friendships. Where they could share in everything together. As the writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews chapter 10.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. For he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

[15:12] Let us not give up meeting together as some out of the habit of doing. But let us encourage one another. And all the more as you see the day approaching.

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. There is a challenge for you in this coming week.

Think how you can spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Think of people you can meet with and speak with and encourage and spur on to love and good deeds.

Let us encourage one another. That is what they were able to do so readily. Because they had meaningful, true friends in Christ.

They went to their friends. And it is always important as believers to meet together. As often as you can.

[16:14] And it is great to be coming to the places where it is organized. It is great to be able to come to church on a Sunday or to the prayer meeting in the middle of the week.

But what about the rest of the week? Do you deliberately and intentionally go to visit a Christian brother or sister? To share together from the word of God.

To meet with your friends. To talk about what is happening. Talk about what is happening in your life. The challenges that you face. It was natural to them.

But perhaps we have lost what was natural to us once. We are afraid to share. But if there are true and meaningful relationships in Christ.

We should be able to turn to one another. And to wait for persecution to come in a serious way is not the time to start. It is now. It is not about reacting to something that maybe will happen in the future.

[17:16] But about being proactive about it just now. Today. Today. To have it in our hearts or desire to meet together with one another. To encourage one another.

So the first thing we see that they were doing. When they were released. They went to their friends. What was the second thing they did? Where did they turn to?

Well they turned to God. As they meet together. It is not about gossiping about what happened. It is not finding out the finer details.

Peter and John. What happened? Who spoke? Who was there? What did they do? What did they say? That is not what they are interested in. Look at verse 24.

When they heard it. They lifted their voices together to God. They turned to God in prayer.

[18:18] And need does that. Doesn't it? Or it should. It should drive us to God. But you notice here as well.

They don't just come. Praying for their needs. And that is very often the way our prayers can be. Isn't it? When we feel we have to go to pray to God.

It is because we have a need. Lord help me in this situation. Lord give me this.

But is it natural for us first and foremost to turn to God. And praise him for who he is. Do we remind ourselves often enough.

The power of the one to whom we are praying. We are praying to God. Never lose sight of who God is.

[19:17] Never dumb God down by merely just bringing requests to him. But first of all praise God for who he is.

Remind yourself again and again who you are praying to. Because look how they pray. They lifted their voices together to God and said. Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea.

And everything in them. What a place to begin. Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth.

Everything around us was made by God. If you have a right view of God first and foremost. Your prayer life will be so much better.

Because the more you realize the power of God. The more you realize who he is. The more your prayer will be filled with faith.

[20:23] You can't doubt coming to God. The one who doubts as James says. It's like being tossed around by the wave of the sea.

God I'm not sure if you can help me here. But if you can. Doesn't God say that to one in scripture as well. The man who comes with his daughter.

Isn't it who says. If you can. And Jesus says to him. If you can. You don't realize who you're coming to.

All things are possible with God. And the more we can realize who God is. The more we can realize how able he is to do.

Above and beyond what we ask or imagine. They turn to God and praise him. For who he is. They turn to God and they praise him.

[21:23] For all his provision. You see that as well. The verses here they recount. In verse 27. For truly in this city they were gathered together.

Against your holy servant Jesus. Whom you anointed. Both Herod and Pontius Pilate. Along with the Gentiles. And the peoples of Israel.

There was a real sense of hatred. Towards God. There was a real sense of desire. To get rid of the Christian faith. Both Herod and Pontius Pilate.

Arch enemies. Came together. For this to get rid of Jesus. The Gentiles. The peoples of Israel. They were all in this together. But what do they say? They say. Well even this. Is of God. To do whatever your hand. And your plan.

[22 : 20] Had predestined. To take place. Now even as the believers. In these days. Had seen. The Lord crucified. Would that not have been a reason.

To lose hope. It's not what they expected. To happen. And it would seem. As if. Herod and Pontius Pilate. The Gentiles. All these people.

It seems as if. They have won. They have crucified him. But no. This is what God. Had planned. Had predestined. To take place. This was God's plan. And purpose. All along. And now. They have seen. The Lord. Risen.

Just. As he had said. Would happen. God's power. Is evident. In their midst. God's hand.

[23 : 15] Is in this. God's hand. Is in his hand. Is in his hand. And there are times. When that can be hard. To take on the Lord. When things. Seem to be going. Against us.

When things. Seems to be going. Unexpectedly. For us. And yet. We have to say. That the hand. Of the Lord. Is in this. It is his plan.

He has predestined. All things. To take place. But even. In the midst. Of the most difficult time. We can still.

Turn. To God. Providence. Is a difficult thing. To handle. At times. But where else. Can we go. But. To God. They turned. To God. In prayer. And as you read. Through their prayer. Here. You see. The prayer. Is filled.

[24 : 13] With praise. Of God. It's filled. With praise. Of God. And after they praise God. You may expect.

Them to turn. Now. To their desires. Take this. Persecution. Away. Would be the obvious. Prayer. Would it? It's. Take these.

Evil ones. Out of our midst. That we can proclaim. The word of God. In peace. But is that. Their prayer. No. And now.

Lord. They say. In verse 29. Look upon. Their threats. And grant. To your servants. To continue. To speak. Your word. With all. Boldness. They don't.

They don't even. Pray. Take these. Threats. Away. But. Give us. Boldness. To speak. And don't.

[25 : 08] We need. That same. Prayer. Ourselves. We can. Pray. Yes. Lord. Change. The hearts. Of those. Who are. Hard. Against you. Take away.

The threats. That are coming. Against your word. We can. Pray. That. But. Do we. Pray. Lord. Give me. Boldness. To speak. Give me. Courage.

To share. My faith. With others. Give me. Courage. And boldness. To say. That you are. God. And we all. Need. God.

That's. What they. Prayed. Boldness. To speak. But. Look at. What they say. In verse 30. They want. Boldness. To speak. But.

They're also. Saying. But Lord. You are going. To work. In this. As well. While you. Stretch out. Your hand. To heal. And signs. And wonders. Are performed. Through the name. Of your holy. Servant.

[26 : 03] Jesus. Lord. They're saying. Do not leave us. Remind us. That you are there. And God. Does. When you.

Honor God. God. Honours you. So. There's this. Prayer. For boldness. And look. What happens. When they are together. Here in prayer.

Verse 31. When they had prayed. The place. In which they were gathered. Together. Was shaken. And they were all. Filled. With the holy spirit. And continued.

To speak. The word of God. With boldness. The place. Shook. Shook. What a prayer meeting. That would be. To be together. With this unity. In God. Lifting up our voices. As one.

[27 : 01] Praising God. For who he is. Praying for boldness. To speak. And being filled. With the holy spirit. And the place. Shaking.

We don't expect that. Do we? We don't go to a prayer meeting. Now anticipating.

That the place will shake. But why not? Why not go to the prayer meeting. This week. Expecting to meet.

With God. Expecting to realize. Again. How great. A God. We have. Expecting him. To be at work.

In our midst. Having. A prayer. Of expectation. Why not? They were gathered.
 [27 : 58] Together. In the place. Shook. This week. We have a national. Day. Of prayer. How are you approaching that? Is it with a sense.

Of anticipation? Is it with a sense. Of delight? All of us. Coming together. To lift up our voice. As one. To God. Do you expect.

Results. From it? Do you expect. To see. A nation. Changed. As we pray. For our nation. Here in Scotland. Do you think. Our national.

Day of prayer. Is going to do anything. To change it. Sure. Many of us. Will approach it. Just thinking. Well. Don't really expect. Much to change. Why not?

Do we not believe. That God. Is able. To change. Our nation. Do you not believe. That you are praying. To our God. Who is able. To do abundantly. More than you ask.

[28 : 53] Or imagine. Come with your prayers. It's not us. That will change. Anything. But we come. To our God. Who is able.

And they came. To our God. They knew. They worshipped him. They praised him. And they saw. God at work. In their midst. They were filled. With the Holy Spirit.

It. And they continued. To speak. The word of God. With boldness. Persecution. Came. But they never shrank away.

They came. They rose. And they went forward. Trusting God. They turned to God. The one. Who is able to help. Will we not turn.

To God. God. And what do we see. Happening. As a result. Of this. The final thing. I want to see here. Is. They turned. To the work.

[29 : 52] They turned. To the work. And you see that. Outworking of it. In verse 32. Down to the end. Of the chapter. And there's this. Wonderful illustration. Of togetherness.

Of believers. And. It's very similar. To what you have. At the end. Of chapter 2. The fellowship. Of believers. In chapter 2.

At verse 42. They devoted themselves. The apostles. Teaching. And fellowship. The breaking of bread. And the prayers. And there's a sense. Of awe. And wonders. And signs. Being done.

And they all. Who believed. Were together. And had all things. In common. They were together. And had all things. In common.

And that's what we see. At the end. Of chapter 4. Now the full number. Of believers. Those who believed. Were of one heart. And soul. And no one said. That anything belonged to them. And they were together.

[30 : 50] There was a sense. Of oneness. And. Not anyone. In their midst. Had need. Isn't it remarkable. Just. What was going on.

And you see there. In verse 32. It says again. They had everything. In common. The same as it says. At the end of chapter 2.

Now at the end of chapter 2. Things were great. Things were wonderful. There was no sign. Of persecution. And it's no surprise. You say. They had everything.

In common. But at the end of chapter 4. Things have changed. Persecution has arisen. There is this. Peter and John.

Have been arrested. They've been challenged. To be silent. But no. Even in the midst. Of persecution arising. They are still together. And they have everything.

[31 : 44] In common. And it's a word. That's mostly used. In the book of Acts. A special word. That's used here. It's like a. A oneness. Of mind. It's a hard word.

To translate. But it boils. It boils down to. There was unity. True unity. In their midst. God was at work. In their midst. And they were giving themselves.

To God. And to the work. They were of one heart. And soul. Not a needy person. In their midst. And what we see here. Is with persecution. It's not a time. To start shrinking. To start shrinking. Away. It's not a time. To start thinking.

About ways. We can hide ourselves. Away. It's a time. To rise as one. It's a time. To show. As believers.

[32 : 42] There is unity. There is oneness. Of mind. We have all things. In common. Now. There is variety.

Everywhere you look. In the church here tonight. We are not the same. We are all different. But what brings us together.

Do we not have something. In common. We are here. To hear. About Christ. We are here. Because there is a desire. For that.

For some. It's as believers. There is a hunger. For the word of God. For others. It's maybe as seekers. You are here. To hear. The word of God. But there is something. That unites us.

The Lord. The word. And that is what united. The early church too. They were together. And had everything. In common. God was in their midst.

[33 : 43] And how often do we sing. Psalm 133. The blessing of unity. But we can sing it at times. When there is no unity. In our midst. Where there is unity.

God will bless. And a time of persecution. Is a time for God's people. To come together. To come together.

As friends. To unite our hearts together. In that way. To come together. And turn. To God. And to turn together.

In the work. That God has prepared. For us. To do. It would be a shame. If. If as God's people. It took a time. Of real persecution.

To galvanize us together. Today should be a day. When we come together. Encourage one another.

[34 : 45] Lift up our voices together. As one. Maybe God. Will allow it. To come into our land. Maybe a God. Will allow it.

To come into our midst. When there will be persecution. Of a more extreme nature. In our midst. If it comes. Where will you turn?

Where will you go? Are we together? Do we have friends? That we can go to. And share with. Do we know God well enough?

Do we trust him? As the creator. Of the heavens. And the earth. The one who is able. To do the impossible. Do we trust that?

And do we have a unity of purpose? Look at what they were doing. They were proclaiming. Jesus. As the resurrection. From the dead.

[35 : 47] They would not be silenced. They prayed for boldness. And so may God give all of us. Boldness. And courage. To believe.

The word of God. To believe in Jesus Christ. As the one who is. The resurrection. And the life. And to encourage one another. And even more.

As we see the day approaching. We have a great God. Let us remember that. And that he is on our side. And that with God on our side.

Nothing. Is impossible. Let us pray.