

Big threats and an even bigger God

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[0 : 00] Acts of the Apostles. Over the last five weeks, we've seen something strange about the Acts of the Apostles, and that is the Acts of the Apostles isn't actually about the Acts of the Apostles.

Sounds a bit weird. But primarily, the Acts of the Apostles is about the unstoppable Jesus. The unstoppable Jesus gathering his died-for people from the four corners of the earth.

The first volume of this was Luke's Gospel, talking about how Jesus actually died for his people. Now Jesus is gathering them for the four points of the earth.

Why is he gathering them? Because he wants them to be a wonderful spiritual empire that we call the church. Now, of course, the apostles had a critical role in Jesus' mission.

They were appointed as witnesses. Witnesses of God's long-promised, long-awaited Savior and King.

[1 : 03] And as we've gone through each of the five weeks, we've seen what happens when the Gospel of Jesus is spoken. Remember? Ordinary people speaking the extraordinary Gospel of Jesus.

What happens? Well, all sorts of people are radically changed. That's what happens. From the inside out. According to chapter 4, verse 4, we're at passage this morning.

That number is now in excess of 5,000 people. Just get a feel of that. Radically changed. People who've turned to Jesus in repentance.

People who've now received complete forgiveness for their sin. They've received a fresh start in new relationship with God. A new acceptance before God. Including, as we saw last week, this 40-year-old who had been profoundly disabled.

Unable to walk since birth. And he, above all else, was thought to be visibly, thought to be carrying the curse of God.

[2 : 12] That's how the Jews would have viewed him. And yet, this man also was just renewed and swept into the kingdom of Jesus. Nobody is beyond the scope and the power of the Gospel of Jesus.

And the renewing of Jesus. But that's not all of it. This renewal was expressed in a radical new community. We see that at the end of chapter 2. A radical new community defined and shaped by the mind of Jesus.

And we're told in chapter 2 that that community was marked out by people's concern to learn more about God's salvation. To share in thankfulness to God, one with the other, and together.

Thankfulness for God's mercy and grace. And they were caring for one another. Practically. Deeply. And all of that combined to make them such a winsome community.

That people on the outside were looking in saying, hey, I want a part of that. And so, they themselves were responsible for more people being attracted to the Gospel. More people receiving a fresh start.

[3 : 25] Now, if you want an exciting picture. Man, the first three or four chapters of Acts give you just that. An exciting picture. What do we expect when we speak the Gospel of Jesus?

Make it more personal. What do you expect when you speak this Gospel of Jesus? At risk of perhaps being negative.

Do you expect anything if you speak the Gospel of Jesus? Well, with all that excitement behind us, suddenly we move into chapter 4.

And it seems like all the excitement just disappears, dissipates. And things go terribly, terribly dark. Over the next two or three weeks, we're going to see the rise of opposition.

Opposition from outside in. And even more awful, opposition from inside out. But things go dark. The Gospel of Jesus, which has given thousands a fresh start in relationship with God, now attracts opposition and persecution.

[4 : 42] So, we need to add one more thing. What happens? What can we expect when we hear the Gospel of Jesus spoken? And the answer needs to be opposition.

Persecution. Persecution. We pick up the story here. Once again, these Jewish political and religious authorities make it their business to stop any mention of Jesus.

Making it their business to reverse any influence that they perceive Jesus might be having. Just a few weeks earlier, we're not sure exactly what time gap there is between the start of Acts and chapter 4.

But it could be as little as 6 or 7 weeks. It could be a couple of months, 3 or 4 months. But just recently, anyway, these guys had sought to silence Jesus by having them murdered illegally. And they're up for the task again. But, as we move into the story, we need to take with us this thought.

[5 : 48] That as their first attempt to stop the unstoppable Jesus was an exercise in futility, then so this attempt will be an exercise in futility.

We'll see that as the story plays out over the next few weeks. Let's look at the story with the first heading, then. A strong Gospel will most likely bring strong opposition. Picking up the first 22 verses, really, just the story.

So, verse 1. Quite literally, Peter is mid-sentence. He's explaining how Jesus was the fulfillment of God's foundation promise of salvation.

And mid-sentence, he's interrupted. And he's interrupted by a sizable contingent of people. We're told here, as Simon reminds us, the commander of the temple police was a contingent of police. The duty priests at the temple. A contingent of Sadducees. They were the religious professors of the day. Pretty heavy duty guys. All of these made part of the Jewish religious authorities.

[6 : 54] What's their intention? Very clear. They're going to silence any reference to Jesus.

And so, only hours after healing, this profoundly disabled guy, Peter and John were illegally arrested and locked up.

Just hours later. He hasn't even finished explaining the context of it. And he's dragged off and locked up. Why? Well, we're told in verse 2.

At first glance, it seems like it was a sort of doctrinal problem. These Sadducees took exception. They didn't believe in resurrection. So, the Sadducees appeared to take exception to Peter and John speaking about the resurrection of Jesus.

But another possibility is that these guys were just intellectually outraged. Because here are these uneducated, unsophisticated fishermen teaching the people in the temple precincts.

[7 : 56] And these sort of Jewish religious professors may well have taken that, you know, not well. How dare they? Whatever the reason at heart, it was an association with Jesus.

These men, Peter and John, in their eyes were enemies of the truth. They were danger to God's people. They needed to be stopped.

The next day, Peter and John would have been seriously intimidated because they were dragged before what we would call today a high court.

Hastily convened. And even that would have echoes in their mind of just a few weeks earlier. That's exactly what happened with Jesus. The heaviest court in the land, the Sanhedrin, was sort of rushed together, patched together for an ad hoc meeting.

And Peter and John were dragged before this court. Now remember, this court was therefore full of the brightest professors of Jewish religion. They were full of the most powerful Jewish political leaders who only weeks earlier had actually manipulated the Roman governor into turning a blind eye to an illegal murder.

[9 : 12] These were seriously powerful men. They had the power of life and death. Weeks earlier, they had murdered Jesus without regard for truth or justice.

Yet, we're told in verse 7 that Peter and John are stood before them. Uneducated, unsophisticated men are stood before them and asked to give account of what had just happened.

Overkill, you'd say. Serious intimidation. But their attempt to intimidate Peter into silence failed abjectly.

Verses 8 to 12. Peter sort of takes a deep breath and you can just see it happening, can't you? You can see him fighting down the fear and the nerves. Trying to get control of his breathing and speech.

Takes a deep breath and with the enabling of God's spirit, we're told. Looks them in the eye. And repeats to these powerful men the same thing as he'd repeated to the crowd, as he'd said to the crowd the day before.

[10:18] He'd talked to them about Jesus. Now, that's what they call tweaking the tiger's tail, is it not? You're standing there in the clink because of what you said about Jesus.

And you turn to the guys who've got the power of life and death and talk to them about Jesus. Phew. Strong stuff, isn't it? And once again we see that the real issue is not the actual healing of the man.

They don't seem to have a particular issue with that. They can't argue with what they see with their eyes. No, the problem for them is their association with Jesus. These guys thought they'd gotten rid of Jesus.

But through the words of Peter and John, he's back. And once again drawing huge crowds. Once again influencing deep responses from those crowds.

And look at verse 12. I don't think it's possible to get more bold than what Peter's just going to say.

[11:33] There's salvation in no one else. For there's no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

And in that sentence, Peter exposes the useless traditions of the Jewish religious leaders and Judaism.

He exposes their blindness. He exposes their false teaching. He exposes their sin and their wickedness. Which interestingly connects back to chapter 3, verse 26.

Because the whole point, Peter had been saying to the crowd, the whole point of God sending Jesus was to deliver his people from wickedness. And here we see, rather than being delivered from wickedness, we see these guys pursuing wickedness.

They taught, these Jewish religious leaders taught, that heaven was secured by performing religious duties. Going to the temple, saying your prayer.

[12:41] Giving alms to the poor on your way to pray. Peter says, salvation or acceptance with God is only found through faith in Jesus and is actually undeserved.

Chug and cheese. They believed they were actually protecting God's name and God's character by killing Jesus. Peter says, verse 11, Uh-uh.

You guys need to understand that what you did with Jesus was essentially a rejection of not only God's plan of salvation, but a rejection of God himself. That's not really looking for common ground here, is it?

They taught that God kept heaven for good religious Jews. Which meant that people like that profoundly handicapped man would never have gotten into heaven.

But there he is before them. With Peter saying that this newly healed cripple was proof that heaven was for sinners.

[14:05] That heaven was precisely for people who were under the curse of God. Heaven was for sinners who turned to Jesus alone for their salvation like this man had just done the day before.

Friends, I suspect, as we read into the story here, these guys, this Sanhedrin, this Supreme Jewish Council, this Supreme Court, a term we might recognize, were utterly frustrated and seething with anger.

And so, they're caught.

They can't silence Peter. They can't deny the reality of this guy standing before them healed and praising God and looking to Jesus as a source of his healing.

They're surprised, utterly surprised by Peter's confident defense. Their options are severely limited. And so, what do they do? They revert to type. And they physically threaten violence on Peter and John before releasing them.

[15:24] In their frustration, they're saying that something needs to be done here. But they recognize they couldn't simply kill Peter and John because, if nothing else, a fear of the crowd.

The crowd had seen what happened. They couldn't deny it. And the crowd as a whole were just praising God, not quite understanding exactly what happened and how it happened, but they could see the evidence of it.

So, in a sort of lame conclusion to this big drama, they call Peter and John in again and threaten them. Say, look, we're going to release you, but we're warning you, do not speak of Jesus again or there'll be trouble.

And once again, Peter looks them in the eye and says, well, you'll need to do what you do, but I can tell you now, I cannot but speak about Jesus. Now, that wouldn't have sort of helped the speaker of the Sanhedrin to sort of settle down inside, would it?

Peter's defying them. Not only defying them, but defying them knowing full well what it's going to mean physically. It was a big call.

[17 : 00] Friends, let's just prop there for a minute and just step back and get a bird's eye in the story. Now, it's an absolutely amazing and unexpected response to what was an incredible miracle.

Less than 24 hours earlier and everybody could see the evidence of it. Unexpected and sad response because these guys seem to be totally lacking any joy at seeing this man suffering relieved.

Their only concern appears to be to stop any mention of Jesus. and they've taken the decision once again that if violence is their only option, then violence is a good option.

And Peter and John would have left that, been released knowing that full well. So, bring it up into our day.

the cost of refusing to be intimidated and silenced, I would suggest he continues unchanged in our own day.

[18 : 33] How sad is it then that we are so quickly prepared to pay the cost of not speaking about Jesus? Now, my friends call me Eeyore, so I put that really negatively there, didn't I?

Because I want to emphasize that the point is that a quiet life can be purchased, it may be purchased. The world out there makes it clear to us you can purchase a quiet life, you can exist well among us.

But the cost of that quiet life being quiet about Jesus. Being silent about Jesus before our families, and gosh, we know how easy that is.

It's horrible to be closed out of family discussions. Christians. It's horrible to see the family cluster over here and leave one stuck out like a sore thumb who happens to be the Christian.

It hurts. It's difficult. It makes family gatherings just awfully tense. but the contract's on the table.

[20 : 01] You can be back in the family if you shut up about that Jesus of yours. Same applies for workmates in the workplace, friends and neighbors. We've got a neighbor across the road who hasn't spoken to us in 20 years except to swear at us.

Keeps telling all the other neighbors he's really friendly with how we've devalued the neighborhood. We've devalued the price of houses. We've devalued everything. Why?

I've asked him. He's never been able to tell me. He just yells at me. I suspect it's because I'm a Christian. We're a Christian.

And it hurts. It hurts when you see the neighbors round about chatting away and that's not extended to us.

Likewise, my friends, a quiet form of Christian life can be purchased through a modified gospel. That's a real pressure as well. So if we have a form of gospel that sort of plays down unique and life-changing confrontation with Jesus, if we decide to be flexible, if we decide we'll just fit with where people are at, and everybody has a view of God they would like to sort of operate with and hold on to, and a view of what it means to do life well, well, if we can just accommodate that, then we will have a quiet life.

[21 : 43] People around us will think we're nice. But friends, surely the cost of no opposition is the cost of betraying the gospel.

Surely that cost would be far greater than the cost of speaking about Jesus. This might sound a bit brash, but in my mind this week as I was preparing, I just thought, well, it comes down to a very simple equation.

who would I be prepared to take a beating for? I don't like pain, not at all, but that's the equation, potentially.

Anyway, let's move on. So a big, a strong gospel will most likely bring strong opposition, and a big gospel with strong opposition needs a big response.

continue the story, verse 24. Once released, Peter and John waste no time getting back to the other believers to bring some potentially disconcerting news of the new normal for them as Christians, a

new normal which is starting to look dark with violent opposition.

[23 : 10] situation. Now, if Peter and John come into the room that we were in here today, and they said, well, look, okay, here, this is what's going to go down in the next few days and weeks.

Be prepared, everybody. These guys are threatening serious violence. How would we respond to Peter and John? Well, I think we might be tempted to say, Peter and John, just come in here, sit down there, pick your head down and be quiet.

Don't stir the possum anymore. Perhaps we need to get our best PR people on the job, and let's try and rebuild this relationship with the Jewish political and religious authorities.

Let's get them to see that we're not all hotheads, that we're not going to make life miserable for them. Now, that's not what happens.

We're told very simply, the believers just go to prayer. They go to prayer. Big opposition, big response.

[24 : 23] Verse 25 and 26, big response, let's pray to our big God. sovereign Lord.

Do you hear it? Sovereign Lord. How comforting is that to say when you're under the shadow or the umbrella of a potential beating, potential powerful guys who seem to be out of control.

Sovereign Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. God is in the world.

That's a powerful God. That's a God who's in charge of every single moment and part of his universe. God is. And so the big response is that they remind themselves of just how big God is.

They remind themselves that what they're part of here is God's salvation history, God's salvation pathway. It was God's cause that they were witnesses to.

[25 : 38] it was the died for people of the unstoppable Jesus who were being opposed and threatened. The ones that the Lord has said all eternity was shaped to save and having been saved would never be lost, not one of them.

They remind themselves that God was not threatened by the wicked threats of evil people. He quoted from Psalm 2 there. And that God would deal with opposition to his cause and his people as he has always done.

What has God done, Psalm 2? Well, God sits enthroned in heaven and he just has a bit of a cackle. Is that the best you got? Even more than that, Peter's confident that as with the death of Christ, the wickedness of these people will actually just become part of God's overarching plan.

And so rather than stop or derail God's plan, we'll actually serve to fulfill God's plan. Now that's sovereignty, isn't it? That our worst intentions is simply just picked up by the Lord and used for good.

And they reminded themselves, verse 27 and 28, that that's exactly what happened with Jesus. So, friends, do you see the point of their prayer?

[27 : 13] They're reminding themselves that opposition, whatever shape or form or severity it took, opposition did not mean the unstoppable Jesus suddenly was stopped.

But opposition does not mean the unstoppable Jesus is somehow or other unexpectedly defeated in his task of gathering his died for people.

In fact, they're reminding themselves that opposition has always been the trademark response of rebels, especially to God's servant, Sam 2.

what else might we have expected is really what they're saying as they pray. And so filling their hearts and minds with that truth squeezes out any developing panic and enables them to continue to have a quiet trust and confidence in God's care of them.

And even more than that, as we'll see in just a second, it actually gives them boldness as they face a potentially awful future. And so verse 29, 31, they actually ask that.

[28 : 39] They ask God for boldness to keep on keeping on being witnesses, to keep on keeping on speaking the gospel of Jesus. and now Lord, this is the bit when we go to our prayers and we say, Lord, this is what we need, this is what we want.

This is the supermarket aisle of the prayer list. And now Lord, remember the context? And now Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

What a prayer. They pray to be faithful witnesses. As God wants them to be, and clearly as they want to be.

And most amazingly, they pray this, knowing the likelihood that this prayer would bring them more opposition and very likely physical harm.

And that's exactly what we'll see as the story unfolds next week. What a prayer. Pray it in the context and under the lordship of the unstoppable Jesus.

[30 : 08] In the power of the secret weapon of witnesses, the Holy Spirit. And not only that, they keep on praying, and they pray for the unstoppable Jesus to continue demonstrating his power among unbelievers.

So they're praying for that, that they might be faithful witnesses, while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

Do you get what they're praying there? the very thing, the healing of this profoundly disabled man and other miraculous things, the coming of the spirit and other things, the very thing that stirred up these Jewish religious authorities to see the hand of Jesus, the fingerprint of Jesus back among them when they thought they were rid of him, they're praying for more of that.

Why? Because that's the thing that's swept to this point in time with the interpretation of the focus on to Jesus, that's the thing that's swept more than 5,000 people into a fresh start with Jesus.

And they want that. And they're willing to pay the price for that. And they're willing to they know full well the consequences of their prayer, suffering and pain for them personally, but forgiveness and a fresh start in a new relationship with God for countless thousands of needy people.

[31 : 48] Again, as they saw it, a fresh start for countless more thousands of people. is well worth the cost they might have to pay.

My parents, I got one brother who's not a believer, and I could never understand why my parents said, until I became a parent myself, I could never understand why my mom and dad said it was so hard to pray for my brother.

and the prayer had to go along these lines. He was married, a lovely, still is married, lovely wife, three beautiful girls, very successful businessmen.

Mom and dad had to work out if they were prepared to pray the prayer that said, Lord, do whatever you need to do in this man's life to get his attention and bring him to repentance.

I'm a dad of four kids, twelve grandkids. I'm finding the same difficulty praying the same prayer.

What will it mean? What will it mean for me if the Lord uses me as the model of sweeping my children into the kingdom, and I believe most of them already are in the kingdom, thankfully?

[33 : 11] what might that mean to see them mature and grow in Christ? Am I prepared to be the model, the model of handling illness, or rejection, or whatever that model might be?

Big prayers, big responses to the gospel. So my friends, hopefully that personal thing didn't clutter what I've been saying this morning, but question now to you, do you expect and accept opposition and persecution and real loss when you speak the gospel of Jesus?

To family, friends, workmates, neighbours, whoever? Or do you simply conclude that opposition really shows that the so-called unstoppable Jesus is actually really quite easily stopped in real life? How sad is it when the first response of Christians to opposition is to lose confidence in the message of salvation in Jesus? Jesus? We need to, we forget rather, we forget that so often people don't oppose God's pathway to salvation in Jesus because it's stupid or there's a lack of evidence for it.

They oppose it because they don't want to go to Jesus. They don't want to give up their autonomy. they don't want to admit they're not good people.

[35 : 02] They don't want to admit that of themselves they can't earn heaven and acceptance before God and they'll stick at it in their defiance. And so my friends, we need to remember that often times opposition is evidence that the gospel is getting under the skin of people.

Or perhaps you're already defeated when you speak the gospel of Jesus to your friends and family because your horizon is dominated by the power of those who are opposing you.

Social media, absolutely cruel. People just lash out and tear you to shreds if you dare to say anything against the sort of normal accepted culture.

But if we focus on that horizon then we will be defeated. But there's a horizon behind that horizon which is the sovereign Lord. And yes, the sovereign Lord will use social media.

This is a really hard one for me but even the Lord will use social media for good. And probably he's the only one who can use it for good but I won't start my normal rant about social media.

[36 : 23] Or perhaps you're just immobilized by fear. Fear of verbal attack. You just find that you can't cope with the notion of being dismissed as a hate speaker or a lunatic.

Fear of physical and emotional loss. Loss of friendships. Loss of other relationships. Loss of career promotion. Sometimes we think that when we become a Christian that that means our career will be onwards upwards.

Oftentimes it's the opposite. Oftentimes we lose out on promotion. because we're Christians. And so on and so forth. Loss of a hassle-free life. Loss of ease and comfort.

Fear will immobilize us. We need a big prayer. We need lots of confidence in God's Holy Spirit and confidence in the unstoppable Jesus.

So the question comes down to this and I'm finishing on this. I'm sorry I've gone over time this morning but the question is this. How much has prayer been part of your planning to speak the gospel in the past weeks and months?

[37 : 36] There's two assumptions in there. One that you have been speaking the gospel where you've had opportunity to you've been doing so in the context of prayer. prayer. Are you daily spreading out your helplessness before the Lord in prayer?

Looking to his power to effect change in those to whom you're speaking? Is it something that you say is important and uniting for us as a church family?

We want to impact our community with the gospel of Jesus. We want to see people saved. But are we praying? One for confidence to speak and two that the Lord might sovereignly change stubborn hard-hearted lives, rebellious lives, angry lives.

If not, if we're not praying then most likely we will be carrying the burden of success as witnesses on our own shoulders.

And my friend, I tell you, I've learned, I've learned really painfully over the years, that's a burden you can't bear. And let me also say I've learned it's a burden you don't need to bear.

[38 : 58] So let's pray. Lord, too often prayer is our last resort. Lord, may our Lord, may our Lord, may our Lord, may our horizon be filled with you and your sovereignty and the unstoppable Jesus and the power of your spirit to change people from the inside out.

And help us then, Lord, just to be happy to do the part that you've asked us to do, and that is simply to speak the message of Jesus. Help us to hear this this morning, Lord, and change our hearts, warmer hearts.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.