

Standing with the Lord of Life

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[0 : 00] So our reading today is from Acts chapter 5, starting at verse 12 all the way to the end. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him, that is the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy, they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out and said, Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.

And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent them to the prison to have them brought.

But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported. We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.

Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. And someone came and told them, Look, the men who you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.

[1 : 36] Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council, and the high priest questioned them, saying, We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

But Peter and the apostles answered, We must obey God rather than man. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at the right hand as leader and saviour to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

And we are witnesses to these things. And so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in honour by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.

And he said to them, Men of Israel, take care what you do about this. So take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days, Theodos rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number joined him.

About 400 joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him.

[2 : 55] He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone. For if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.

But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God. So they took his advice. And when they called the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that Christ is Jesus.

Well, we've been tracing through the early acts of the apostles, but what stands out isn't these ordinary people, but that through them, the Lord is powerfully gathering in his died-for people.

He's exalted to the highest position at God's right hand. And what the Lord began to teach and do, he now continues through his church by his spirit. The promised new age of salvation is bursting into the world, people being filled with the spirit.

[4 : 09] The church is being given boldness to speak up for Jesus. The church is being given a new identity and a whole new agenda as they express the love of Christ as they serve each other, selling everything to look after each other.

What started as like 120 people, pretty similar to our group now, is now thousands of people within a matter of weeks. And Christ continues to heal people just miraculously to underscore the point that this new life has arrived, to help, to underscore the apostles' testimony that they did see Jesus risen from the dead.

Then faced with serious opposition and threats, the church doesn't shrink back, but prays and receives boldness to keep speaking and serving. Satan doesn't succeed with that external threat, and so he tries to get in the church and divide it from within.

But then God disciplines Ananias and Sapphira, protecting his name. And fear spreads throughout the church and everyone else hears about it.

Jesus is unstoppable. That's what this series is about. That's what this section is about. Jesus is unstoppable on his mission. So if Jesus is so unstoppable, I don't know about you, but why is it so often so hard to stand with Jesus before unbelievers?

[5 : 47] Why are we so easily stopped in speaking up for Jesus? Someone asks you, how was your weekend? And we happily share about going shopping and playing sport or needing to work or study or do stuff around the house.

But then in our heads we're like, do I mention that I went to church? I'm not sure. How are they going to receive that? Or when a conversation turns to gay marriage or abortion and things like that, you just feel the anxiety rising.

Do I speak into this? I really disagree with what they're saying, but I don't want to cause a fuss.

We're just silent. Or a friend is going through a really hard time.

You're feeling deeply for them and you just wish they knew the love of God. You wish that they had the Christian hope found only in the gospel. You just don't know how to say it.

How do you say it in a winsome way? How do you say it in a loving way? There are just a few examples. I'm sure you can think of others. But why can it be so hard to speak for Jesus if Jesus is so unstoppable and his mission is so good?

[7 : 07] I'm not sure about you, but when I look into my own heart, I fear the loss of respect from other people. In those moments, I just don't want that confrontation.

I want to keep things friendly. I want to be accepted. I want to belong. If it's a family member or a friend, I fear the loss of the relationship.

If it's a group, like a sporting situation or a group of friends, I fear that I'm going to be pushed to the outer. I'm not going to be in the circle. Or if it's like a business situation, there could be disadvantages to admitting that you're a Christian.

I think that's what gets in the way. When the London bombings were happening a few years ago on the buses and in the subways, the news reports were like people were running away from danger. But the police and the fire crew, they were running into danger. What motivates people to do that? What would make you run towards the danger?

[8 : 27] What about us in a Christian setting? What will give us the power to not just stand with Jesus but walk into danger intentionally? I think this story in Acts 5 gives us at least five perspectives that will empower us to stand with Jesus lovingly walking into danger.

So this is what we're going to look at. Here's the five perspectives we're going to spend our time on. Firstly, abundant life flows only from Jesus. Everyone needs this new life and it only comes from Jesus.

Secondly, the Lord is totally in charge every single moment. Thirdly, we need to see disagreement and conflict not as a blockage to gospel but as an opportunity for the gospel.

Fourth, we need to see humiliation for standing with Jesus as a source of honour, something we can rejoice in, not because we like hurting. That would be weird. But because we belong to the Lord.

It confirms that we belong to the highest name. And the last perspective is we don't get courage by just stirring up ourselves like a war cry or something to run into danger.

[9 : 50] We get courage when we pray and the Lord answers the prayer and fills us with his spirit. So that's what we're going to look at. So perspective one, abundant new life only flows from Jesus.

Jesus, the new temple. I want you to picture John Hunter Hospital. When Emma had her emergency C-section, I was just so thankful for the professional care in John Hunter Hospital that kept her and Sam alive.

I was just overwhelmed with thankfulness. Incredible stuff. Now imagine, and they were just like, I was fearing and they were just like, oh, it's just another day in the office.

Incredible stuff. Now imagine in the car park, there's this group of people who sit up and they start offering alternative medicine. They're not official. They've got no degree.

And they give like herbal concoctions and stuff. How would the medical profession look on that group? What would they think of them? Suspicion?

[11 : 00] Disgust? I reckon anger. They're leading people astray. I think that gets close to what the temple authorities and the Jewish establishment would have looked on this new cult called Christianity.

Well, it's not called Christianity yet. The way, the life. I'm not sure what to call it yet. It would have been disgust and anger that they're leading people astray. The temple was the place God said that he would cause his name to dwell.

All his goodness would be in the temple. It's where God and man can meet. The temple is where forgiveness can be obtained through the sacrifices.

It's where the rule of God is taught and protected. It's where prayers were to be received. It's where the blessings of life in God's kingdom flowed from.

But that's not where it's flowing from. On the eastern... Which way is east? I don't know. Some way. That way.

[12 : 11] Let's say it that way. Yep, my head's confused. On the eastern edge of the temple, under the porch, called Solomon's Porch, is this little ragtag group.

But it's a weird group, but it can't be ignored. People were being healed. People heard of the lame man being healed. People heard of the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira.

This is a serious group. Luke says that multitudes were added to this group. Something compelling must have been about their teaching.

The love of this group for each other, selling all their goods for others, that's just unheard of. It's still unheard of. It would have been so compelling.

Peter's reputation is so huge that people line the streets just so his shadow could pass over them and heal them. Something different is about this group under this porch.

[13 : 17] This wasn't just superstition. They were actually healed. Life was pouring out of this group in abundance. It wasn't pouring out of the temple, but out of this porch.

Obviously not the porch, but through Christ, through his people. This is what Ezekiel saw in Ezekiel 47.

In the midst of talking about this new temple, talking about the new age of salvation and heaven, he pauses to describe that the river flows out of the temple.

And it starts as a trickle. And then it gets knee deep. And then it gets waist deep. And then it just becomes this flowing torrent of a river. And this river, everything it touches, it heals.

Everything around it just produces life. I think this is the picture going on. There is something new going on here. Abundance of life.

[14 : 17] Now, I think we think of physical healings as the best part of this new life. But when the angel tells them to keep standing in the temple and speaking, the instruction is speak to the people all the words of this life.

It's by the words of the gospel, more than the healing hand of the apostles, that brings this life. It's by the words, most importantly.

The physical healings are called signs and wonders. Signs. They're pointing to something else. To a greater healing. So what is this abundant new life?

We could describe it a number of ways. But verse 14, more than ever, believers were added to the Lord. Multitudes of both men and women. I think that's a lovely phrase.

Added to the Lord. Coming to the Lord is this new life. Belonging to him. Or verse 31 and 32. It's forgiveness of sins. It's being given the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 20] It's belonging to and being filled with the very life of God himself. That's this new life. And the accepted, respected, trusted Jewish establishment couldn't offer it.

It couldn't deliver. It couldn't deal with sin. It can't bring this new blessing. I don't think our world's way of life, which is respected and accepted and trusted, can deliver.

Can it? Just a small example of this. I was listening to the radio the other day and the presenter was saying that she'd been feeling really down and low recently.

And so she went to the hairdresser and got a haircut and just some treatment. And she said it just gave her a new lease of life. It got rid of all her negative energy.

It was really good. And she asked other people to call in and say, what do you do to kind of renew your life? I thought it was an interesting phrase. I was just like, no, there's nothing wrong with that, is there?

[16 : 32] There's nothing wrong with, I feel nice after a good haircut, a good nose trim. But there's nothing wrong with it per se. But if that's all you can turn to for life, that's a little sad.

She needs more. Like we can turn to the fact that we have forgiveness in God, that we are loved by our Father, that we have a certain future. That's refreshing. This world, the way of life that's trusted, just can't deliver.

So that's perspective one. Abundant new life only flows from Jesus, the new temple. And that's still true today. Perspective two, what will help us stand for Jesus?

Perspective two, the Lord is totally in charge every moment. The high priests and the Sadducees, they were the ruling class. They decided to throw their weight around.

This movement needs to be stopped. So they stand up and do something about it. They put the apostles in prison. Now imagine being them in the prison cell.

[17 : 49] This is a scary situation. These guys are in charge. They've been before them before and had a strict warning. Do not speak in the name of Jesus. This is a court order.

And now they're in prison. These guys have the power to kill. This is a serious situation. I just wonder what they're feeling and thinking and what they're doing in this moment.

They were in serious trouble with those in power. And then the doors come open by an angel and they walk out.

This is a laughable, farcical scene. The high priest convenes the court. And so you're just picturing these men full of official men in their religious attire.

They're ready. Okay, call the criminals in. Summon them in. About that, we're not sure where they are. But it's a hilarious scene.

[19 : 00] The Lord is clearly in charge. And later, when they're about to be killed, who should the Lord use to deliver them? A Pharisee.

That's surprising as well. He gives a persuasive speech, basically saying, implying, let the Romans kill them. Theodos and Judas, they wipe them out.

If this movement keeps advancing, let the Romans do it. God used that speech to deliver them.

God can use whoever he wants.

He's in charge. I think we often think that we need Christians in the top jobs to make the Christian movement advance. We need Christian principals in the schools.

We need Christian premier. We need Christian prime minister. He can use whoever he wants. He can use a Cyrus or a Constantine.

[20 : 00] Sometimes he'll choose to deliver his people from harm. Often, he lets his church thrive by allowing the harm to go ahead. Either case, he's in charge.

The Lord is in charge. The apostles learnt it. The question is, are we learning it? When we're scared of what people think of us or the disadvantage that might come to us by associating with Jesus, these persons we're afraid of, the power they have is laughable.

I know it can cause serious hurt, so that's not laughable. But their power is laughable. We know the one who is in charge.

And we've got to remember it when we're afraid. So perspective one, abundant new life flows from Jesus, only Jesus. Perspective two, the Lord is in charge in that moment when we're afraid.

He is in charge, whatever happens. The third perspective is disagreement and conflict. They're an opportunity for the gospel. The people in the temple, when the apostles were teaching, they had such a high regard for Peter and the apostles.

[21 : 28] Like, blessing was flowing to their families and communities. They were outraged that the authorities put them in prison. They were ready to stone the guards who came to arrest them again. The guards weren't willing to take these guys by force. They had the power in the situation. So what did the apostles do? They didn't have to go with them. They had the power. They could have used the crowd to defend themselves. So why did they go with them? They didn't have to.

Why did they go? Surely they knew it could not end well. They had only just got out of prison. Now, I think part of the answer is that they're submitting to the authorities out of reverence for God. And that's true. And so should we. But there's more to it than that. I think we see it in Peter's speech. It's far from a legal defence.

[22 : 32] He's not, they're not offering a defence for what they're doing. So picture that courtroom again with all this religious robes, the court officials encircling this straggly looking bunch of guys.

The high priest lays two charges on them. We told you not to speak in his name. Their reply isn't to shift the blame or give excuses.

Instead, they confront them. Nope. We're not going to listen to you. You're telling us to do something that God, you're telling us not to do something that God told us to do. No.

Okay. That's a dangerous answer. Secondly, second charge, you are blaming us for the blood of Jesus. There's no compromise offered.

Okay, we'll just leave that part out about you crucifying Jesus. Nope. They say the God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. That is not a defence.

[23 : 38] That is a dangerous thing to say. What are they doing? They're using it as an opportunity to offer these men eternal life.

They're offering these guys a chance to own their sin. God raised Jesus to give you repentance and forgiveness and his Holy Spirit.

Please take it. You need it. These guys are filled with jealousy. And in hearing the gospel message, they're filled with rage. They want to kill them. These guys, although they've got the power, they are enslaved by their sin.

The apostles use this situation as an opportunity to offer them life. So why did they intentionally walk into danger?

Love. To offer the Lord's enemies that abundant life by hearing and believing the gospel. So I wonder how we can see differences and conflicts as an opportunity for the gospel.

[24 : 46] I often try and find this positive way into the conversation. But sometimes we've just got to – and that's good. We don't want to just be arrogant and rude. But sometimes conflict, difference of opinion just needs to be had.

It can clarify the gospel message. Otherwise, people can think Christian is just being good. We need to go deeper than that. So how can we see differences of opinion and conflict as opportunities?

How can we use them in constructive ways to make the truths of the gospel clearer? Is it worth risking being cut off by that person in order for that person to be reunited with God?

Perspective one. Abundant new life only flows from Jesus and everybody needs it. Perspective two is that the Lord is totally in charge. Three, disagreement and conflict is actually an opportunity to offer life in the gospel.

The fourth perspective is that humiliation for Jesus' name actually serves to confirm that we belong to his name and that we share in his mission. I think we see this in the way Luke tells this story.

[26 : 07] If we step back from the details or just look at the big picture, we can see so much similarity to the mission of Jesus himself. We have signs and wonders that give – that validate the gospel message.

Like the bleeding woman who believed that if only she touched Jesus' cloak, she would be healed. We've got people believing just if Peter's shadow touched them, they would be healed.

Even escaping from prison, they just – the guards can't explain how they lost their prisoners. Even that's similar to the resurrection. We've got the crowds gathering to this, but then a mixed response. Some dare not join it. Others are just flocking to it and coming into the church. Then we've got the rising tension with the religious rulers.

And very soon we come to the story of Stephen. And Stephen is killed in a way that is very similar to Jesus himself. I think Luke wants us to see that Jesus' mission is continuing through his church.

[27 : 15] And part of sharing in Jesus' mission as his church is sharing in his humiliation. The apostles are beaten by the council for good measure and again ordered not to speak in his name anymore.

And how do they respond? Do they walk out with the tail between their legs ashamed? They don't, which is surprising. Verse 41. Then they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name.

What is that? Rejoicing for being humiliated. Have you ever seen a joy like that?

Have you ever experienced it? How can you rejoice when experiencing pain and humiliation? When snubbed by friends and family, caught a bigot and narrow-minded, intentionally disadvantaged? How can we rejoice in moments like that? How can we willingly endure such treatment? Partly it's love for those who need to hear the gospel.

[28 : 37] That's part of the answer. But I think the main motivator is that we see it as counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. To hurt, whether internally or physically, standing with Jesus is one of the best gifts of confirming that we belong to the one who has been exalted to the highest place.

It's exactly how he was treated. We belong to the one whose name is above every name, before whom every knee will bow and tongue confess that he is Lord.

To share in his mission and to share in his humiliation is a gift of confirmation that we belong to him. Is there a greater honour than belonging to him?

So we can rejoice. We don't have to be afraid. What can man do to me? Which sets us free to walk into danger, to love with the gospel.

Not cavalier, like, oh, don't we love pain? But it sets us free to love others, accepting the pain, knowing that we belong to our Lord.

[30 : 05] Okay, last perspective. This courage that we see in the apostles does not come from within us. It's a gift from the Lord. The apostles were not superhuman.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of that. Weeks earlier, Peter had denied Jesus three times publicly. He's an ordinary person who falters, just like us.

So what's the difference here? What changed Peter? Well, the Holy Spirit. Christ's spirit received through prayer.

So if we flick back or remember back to chapter 429, what did they do when they were confronted with the authorities the first time? The church prayed. Now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, and then they'll field with the Spirit.

What did they do after receiving this beating? They keep going. They go back to the temple and keep teaching. And then they go house to house and keep teaching that the Christ is Jesus.

[31 : 23] We can understand with Jesus if he actually gives his power for us to do so. We receive that by praying.

So are we going to be a people that pray for boldness? Are we going to be a people who pray for a love for people to willingly accept pain for them?

Are we going to be a people who pray that help us represent you, God? Your name is above every name. Help me not be embarrassed that I'm a Christian, but rejoice in the fact that I am.

Let's pray before we walk into a daunting conversation. Let's pray in the midst of a daunting conversation. When someone else, a brother or sister, is in the midst of preaching or teaching or in a conversation, you know they're having an opportunity.

Let's pray for them. Let's be a people that pray. So how in the face of humiliation will we stand with Jesus walking the hard way?

[32 : 28] We've got to see things the way they are. That abundant new, total, eternal life flows only from Jesus. The world can't give this life. Everyone needs it.

The Lord is totally in charge. Disagreement and conflict are opportunities for the gospel. Humiliation means we belong to his mission and the highest name.

And so we can rejoice. We can have unspeakable joy. We don't need to rustle up the courage. We can ask for the Lord to stand with us and fill us.

Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Father, even as I preach this, I feel like a hypocrite, knowing the many times I have remained silent.

Lord, please fill us with your spirit. Fill us with a love for people. Help us see people from an eternal perspective, knowing that they are lost without you.

[33 : 46] Lord, help us to see you as the highest name and count it as great honour to be associated with you.

Lord, please fill us with your spirit, individually and as a church. Please use us. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.