

Jesus grows his church

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[0 : 00] So, we're reading from Acts chapter 6, and we're just reading the first seven verses. Now, in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip and Prochorus and Nicanor and Timon and Parmenas and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Well, good morning, everyone. Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Father, we use the word church family a lot in this church, and I pray that through your living word this morning, that you would send your spirit to move so that you might create us more and more into the likeness of the family that we are, because of Jesus.

[1 : 58] So please speak to us through your word. Humble us. Give us listening ears. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're getting into the book of Acts, obviously, from the Bible reading, but we haven't been in Acts for three years, so I had to go back and look that up, so I can't remember, although I can't remember a lot of things, but I'm guessing you can't remember where we're up to.

Now, as we come to the book of Acts, we may not realise it, but we Christians often read the stories in Acts very differently from how we read the stories in the rest of the Bible.

Like, we're starting our church lunches again next Sunday after the Lord's Supper, and I'm not expecting anyone to bring on this beautiful platter some locusts and wild honey beautifully presented while they're wearing camel skin clothing, because they just think, John the Baptist, I need to follow his example.

No one's expecting that. And yet, we read the book of Acts, and many Christians just assume and use it as a point of debate.

It's obvious we should do this. We read it very, very differently. I think it can cause us to... You get a sentiment sometimes, and I've fallen into this myself, where you think, the church, if only we went back to what it was like in the early days.

[3 : 39] We need to go back there. But we don't realise that we're romanticising what Luke didn't paint a rosy picture.

They had problems. If we romanticise the book of Acts in the early church, it can actually lead to too much disillusionment in the church today.

It's in a very unhealthy way. So, that's all to say. We need to, as we're coming into the book of Acts, we need to get our bearings. What is it about? How do we read it? What is the book of Acts about? So, if you've got your Bibles, if you don't, just listen along. Acts chapter 1, verse 1. Let's go to the first verse. So, Luke is the author, and he says, So, this is following Luke's gospel, and that word began.

The focus here, from the word go, isn't on the apostles. It's on the Lord. What Jesus began in his earthly ministry, he is continuing in his heavenly ministry by sending his spirit through his apostles, through his church.

[5 : 10] Jesus is the hero, in other words. The apostles are not the heroes. Jesus is. Jesus is. Empowering his apostles. Luke pauses throughout Acts to give this narrative summary statement so many times, and in effect, they all say, And the word of God increased.

The word of God spread. The word of God multiplied. All throughout, you'll find it. The focus is on Jesus and his word. He's gathering in his church.

The other key to helping us get our bearings for Acts is, I should have stayed in chapter one, stay in chapter one and look at verse eight.

Verse eight. You will receive power. Jesus talking to his apostles. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And then the book finishes with Paul in Rome, the center of the Gentile world, and he's still nothing stopping him from teaching God's word.

[6 : 26] So the emphasis that Luke wants to paint, he doesn't actually trace all the stories of the apostles. He's not telling us a history of this apostle did this and this apostle did that.

No, it's tracing where the word is going. And he's not even tracing everywhere that the word went. He's picking these stories in particular to show us the word going from Jerusalem to Samaria and out even to the Gentiles, and we finish up in Rome.

So the emphasis is on Jesus gathering in his church and he's making his church witnesses, witnesses to the gospel, to the truth of the goodness of belonging to Jesus.

And he's empowering his church through the Spirit to do this. So the focus is on Jesus. The theme is about being witnesses.

Jesus is gathering in his people through the proclamation of the word and through just the winsomeness of the church. If you remember the story, the first church after the first sermon, it's this beautiful picture of they're sharing all their goods in common, they're having fellowship.

[7 : 45] Anyway, I'll let you go back and read it. So it's a witness. Witness is bigger than just telling someone about Jesus. It's bigger than that. It's the witness of the character of the church.

It's how we go about things. It's got to be word central, but witness is a bigger term than evangelism. So the focus is on Jesus.

Witness and the spread of the word is Luke's focus. The third theme that we see through Acts is that this happens despite serious threats.

And some of those threats are outside the church, external pressure, persecution. And some of the threats are inside the church.

But Jesus is unstoppable. His word keeps spreading. But don't expect the unstoppable Jesus. It's not going to be smooth and easy.

[8 : 52] So the external threats, I don't think I need to go into this too much. They're pretty obvious, aren't they? Like the apostles are warned and then beaten and then imprisoned. And we're about to come next week to the first martyr.

The external threats are obvious when you read the book of Acts. I think we can skim over and lose sight of the fact that the internal threats could have destroyed the witness of Jesus and the church being gathered.

So for instance, it's doctrinally impure and it's morally mixed. So for instance, chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira, out of love of money, they lie to God and they lie to one another.

If that had spread, it would have just been toxic for the church. You've got the power-hungry Simon in chapter 8.

You've got the fearful and retreating John Mark on the missionary journey he pulls out. You've got the bitter dispute between Paul and Barnabas. You've got Apollos, who doesn't, his doctrine isn't quite complete.

[10 : 08] He's a bit doctrinally confused. You've got professing Christians in Ephesus who for a long time it seems were hiding the fact that in private they were still practicing black magic.

All these internal problems, and I think there's more, but the risen Lord is unstoppable. He can use our sin and weakness and he keeps going, not to excuse that, but he can also transform his people from the inside out.

Now that's a long intro, but I think it's important as we come into chapter 6. The focus is on Jesus. It's about witness, and there's external and internal threats to Jesus gathering and building his church, and here in chapter 6 I think we see another occasion of internal threat.

And we've got two. There's two dimensions to it. So have chapter 6 open in front of you if you've got your Bibles open. The first one, verse 1, that kind of rhymes, disunity.

Now in those days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

[11:31] Now I don't want to look over the amazing fact that early on this very early church had set up a system for caring for the widows in the church.

Already, they're caring for the most vulnerable in the church. Their identity in Jesus is controlling their wallets.

Like we read that the rich were selling their property and laying it at the apostles' feet and they were distributing it as anyone had need. No one had any need because the transforming power of belonging to Jesus' people.

It's a beautiful picture. It's fulfilling what God had commanded in the Old Testament. So Deuteronomy 24, you may want to look it up or just listen as I read it.

21, when you gather the grapes of your vineyard, so you're a farmer, you're gathering in the grapes, you shall not strip it afterwards.

[12:42] So once you go through it, there's bits left over, leave them there. Why? It's for the sojourner, the visitor, the fatherless, and the widow.

Go. You shall remember that you are a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore, I command you to do this. Throughout Scripture, God has a heart for the vulnerable. James chapter 1, James is probably here this day.

He's saying, if you say, go, be warm and well fed and do nothing to help, if you've got the ability to help, that is, and do nothing to help, that faith, it's worthless.

Why? Because your love of money is greater than your love of God and love of people. God is a heart for the widows. We see in James, we see in Deuteronomy.

And there's signs that what God commanded through Moses wasn't happening in the Jewish society of the day. So, I thought of Mark chapter 7 where Jesus, he condemns the Pharisees.

[13:53] He says, you set up your own laws above what God commands. You say, in effect, I don't need to look after you, mum and dad in your old age, as long as you give that money to the temple.

And Jesus is like, you're setting aside God's word. You should be caring for your mum and dad. And, so they were teaching this.

And Jesus condemns the Pharisees for it. Another thing we see in the Jewish society in Jerusalem was there was division in the synagogues.

there were some synagogues that were Hebrew speaking and there were some synagogues that were Greek speaking. And we see that in the next paragraph. The synagogue of the freedmen's and they're from different countries.

Because, even though they're all Jews, some Jews had been dispersed among the nations and they only spoke Greek. So you can imagine that this language difference created cultural difference and you could imagine that the Hebrew speaking are more pure.

[15:04] They haven't been mixed with the other nations. You could imagine that prejudice. It's a problem that the synagogues couldn't, they didn't solve.

But here we see that this division has come into the church. This prejudice has come into the church.

It's a real problem. If this was left unaddressed, if the Greek, Jewish, converted to Christianity women weren't looked after, it would basically say, well, you're not quite family enough to be cared for.

It would totally undermine what the gospel says. The gospel says who are God's people? All who come to Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

There's no distinctions. It would undermine what the church is, the household of God, if we didn't care for, if they didn't care for all their widows.

[16:22] It would undermine the witness that Jesus' word and spirit can actually create our hearts after the heart of God who does care for the widows. If this wasn't addressed, it's the age-old problem.

We wouldn't be practicing what we preach. It would undermine the testimony. Here in our church, why would we expect friends and visitors to want to come in to this family of faith if our family is marked by the sorts of things that you can find out in the world?

Why would they want to come in? But how compelling would it be if our practical love for one another demonstrated who we are as family so much so much that we even surpassed what biological families do?

What a witness that would be. What a witness if any difference that you find awkward in this church, someone that you're like, I'm not sure I can talk to them, for whatever reason, whether that's a language thing, cultural thing, or whether it's a dispute thing, that's an opportunity.

Disunity is not just a threat, it's an opportunity to demonstrate who we are in Jesus. So this is a real threat to the church going forward, but it raises a second threat if it's dealt with wrong, in a wrong way.

[18:06] Now I'm guessing the first threat of disunity we kind of all agree with. I'm guessing it's not controversial at all, but the apostles are wise to see another just a serious threat and that's being distracted.

Being distracted from word and prayer. It's not right, verse 2, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Now, Jesus washed his disciples' feet.

Is serving tables beneath them somehow? I don't think that's the point. It's not a matter of they've got a higher status. It's not about that. It's that they've been set apart for a specific task to teach, to proclaim.

you could imagine to deal with this problem, the emotional and mental and time resources required to navigate the relationships and to practically address this would have eaten into their prayer and their preparation and their proclamation.

they would have been distracted from the word of God. So a very, there's a need here that needs to be addressed but if they dealt with it themselves they would have stripped the church of the lifeblood of the word of God and prayer.

[19:37] apparently Charles Spurgeon who if you're in church land you'll know his name he's got the title Prince of Preachers because God used him powerfully to save many people.

His preaching was that, it was very powerful and apparently anyone any kind of anyone visiting his church he would take them downstairs into this very empty room which apparently he called the boiler room and it's just these bunch of chairs spread around and while he was preaching there was just dozens of people praying and he was in effect saying I give all the glory to God it's he's he's he's praying I wonder if we have that view of the centrality of the word of God and prayer it's that the word it's what creates us it's what sustains us it's what transforms us it's our lifeblood I think if Satan can't get this church to be quiet from external social pressure to compromise he'll try and undermine our witness through scandal and disunity oh they call themselves family but look at how they treat each other if he can't do it that way he'll just get us being busy with everything good except talking about Jesus and learning from his word his schemes are not new they're not new they're right there in the early church but the risen

Lord through his apostles he protects his church from both threats they bring a proposal brothers pick out from among you seven men of good repute full of the spirit and of wisdom whom we'll appoint to this duty now I think we can treat this as a bit of an illustration of deacons we're going to actually do a sermon next week on deacons so I'm not going to spend much time on that but the word deacon here as a title isn't used so it's not precisely but anyway we'll come to that next week what I'm amazed by is even the way they go about the solution to this problem demonstrates being family in Jesus I love that there's not political manoeuvring here there's not backdoor conversations going on there's not identity politics going okay fine we'll get four Greek men and three Hebrew men on this committee it's not political it's not whoever gives the money to the church gets to decide it's the whole church gathered whole church deciding we're told that they're all pleased with proposals so the Hebrew Christians they're going yes we love we love you we love you Greek speaking widows we do they're pleased with this proposal they're pleased with the proposal in the sense that yes we agree the word and prayer must remain central if we're going to survive and be a witness they're pleased with that the church is entrusted with appointing those put in charge it's not an autocratic decision nor is it just pure democracy it's led by the apostles but they're also given it's like a family it's calling a family meeting around the dinner table they decide together that's the picture that comes to my mind anyway and they gladly use the gospel criteria they've got to be of good repute these men their character must be known to be trustworthy but notice they've got to be full of the spirit be worth talking at morning tea how you tell if someone's full of the spirit

I've got some ideas but I'll let you talk about that they've got to do a very practical task but they've got to be spiritual men they've got to be spiritual people like imagine how fragile these relationships were between years of prejudice experience between one another these people put in charge had to be so saturated in the gospel and careful in how they handle this situation so to be spiritual isn't just to teach like I am you need to be saturated in the truth of Jesus to handle practical situations gotta be spiritual and the church loves that because the apostles commissioned them they approved their choice it's a wonderful picture of family

[25 : 16] I think and a unity of yes let's be witnesses for the gospel centrality of the word but also how they make the decision is as family it's a wonderful picture and what's the result verse 7 and the word of God continued to increase and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith the word increase the apostles were freed up to keep speaking we see that two of these men go on to be evangelists I'm not sure if I can say this but maybe the authority given to them by the church empowered them to go on to other things as well so it increased in that way it increased in the way that how they come to this decision and that they are treating one another as family between the

Greek and Hebrew speaking I suspect that's why Luke talks about the priests I suspect it's that they saw in this church led by the apostles a unity that they didn't see in the synagogues that unity that goes across cultures and they submitted themselves even though they were priests in the temple system teaching the law of Moses they submit themselves to the authority of the apostles going you apostles are the true leaders of God's true people priests doing that I think that's because of the winsomeness with which they solve this problem it seems to be the connection that Luke is drawing anyway so the

Lord didn't only protect the church he used the threat to cause the gospel witness to increase that's how unstoppable he is now example came to mind of our church last week we just had a grace kids meeting I didn't go to the meeting mind you I just want to say that Catherine just does such a stellar job I didn't feel like I needed to be there but grace kids now I am super encouraged there are so many people helping with grace kids this year it's a wonderful thing but if you're new to the church you may not realise the fruit we're reaping today was born out of controversy five years ago was it there was a dispute in the church for those who were here it was a tension point like some people were ready to leave because they thought we weren't prioritising children and teaching children others were really worried that sending the children out would be not treating them as family they should be part of the family gathering bad prejudice violin and saw this story by their 1 and 7, which is the increase of the Word of God.

What was driving the concern of the apostles and the Spirit-filled church was the witness of Jesus. I'm not sure what internal threats we're going to face this year.

Updating the Constitution, what great way to debate and set up 20, 30 different arguments.

[31 : 04] We could if we chose to make a battleground on certain things. It's always a threat, I think. Clicks in the church, relating to one another based off personal preferences and even prejudice, remaining prejudice.

Who knows the toxic spirit of complaining without seeking true solutions or maybe neglecting serious practical love for one another.

Maybe it's drifting away from devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching. The impact being in Acts has had on me is it's calming my fears of the unknown.

Because it's making me ask the right question. If we can trust the Lord to sustain us, even using internal threats to cause us to grow, we've just got to ask the right question.

Threats will come. They're here now. They're more than what I listed. But the question is, what will be a compelling witness to the life found in Jesus' people, of belonging to Jesus in his people?

[32 : 30] I think the takeaway here is asking the right question. What's going to be a witness to how good it is to belong to Jesus?

Because once we ask that question, we'll go back to Scripture to get guidance. And whatever threats do come this year, being back in Acts, I'm taking comfort and I'm taking confidence that we can see that nothing can hinder the risen Lord.

Not external, not internal threats. Nothing. Not the Jewish leaders with all their power, even putting Stephen to death, as we're going to see next week.

That just spreads the gospel. It's not unbelievers who make it their mission to destroy the church, like Saul. It can't stop Jesus.

It's not inside the church, like we've seen today, remaining prejudiced and being hesitant to include Gentiles. Jesus transforms his church from the inside out.

[33 : 56] It's not secular leaders like Herod, who's eaten by worms. And then the next sentence is like, but the word kept spreading. It's not even...

There's real losses, like the martyrdom of Stephen. We're told James is put to the sword. There's some serious things that happen. But Jesus' church keeps going.

It's not legalism inside the church, adding laws to going, you want to be a true Christian, you need to also do this, this, this.

It's not religions and secular opposition from Greeks when they take believers to court and there's riots and there's beatings.

That doesn't stop Jesus. It's not the doctrinal incompleteness of Apollos. It's not even natural phenomena like shipwreck and snake bites can stop Paul.

[35 : 01] It's not imprisonment or house arrest. The gospel isn't chained. While we're in Acts, we've got to see the big picture.

Nothing's stopping Jesus and the spread of his church. So we should take comfort from that and trust him to guide us through whatever's coming, whatever we're in right now. And I think just ask that simple question, but the right question, what will be a compelling witness to how good it is to belong to Jesus and his people?

Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you are ruling, that you are ruling this church family.

It's your church. Lord, I pray for each one of us that in the moments where it feels anything but family with, there's going to be things that feel so awful.

And so I pray that in those moments that you would help us remember your words and remember the encouragement of Acts, that you will complete your church.

[36 : 29] You will continue to grow your church. So I pray that you would comfort us in that knowledge and drive us back into your word and being dependent on your spirit to guide us.

Please use us, God. Please use us to spread the knowledge of you so that others will come into your family and be saved.

Please use us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks, Dave.