

Gospel Pressure, Gospel Growth

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat, friends. Some of the issues that this chapter of the book of Acts raises for us are questions such as these. Where is God when I suffer for being a Christian?

Where is God when I cop an insult or flack for going to church or for my Christian integrity or faith? What do I need to do to be a faithful witness in the Christian life?

What exactly is first century evangelism? What does it look like to be an evangelist in the early church and how can we imitate that in our witness to the gospel today?

And thirdly, how can we tell when somebody is truly converted to the gospel and what should we do when people actually come into the church for reasons other than the worship of Jesus, when they actually are coming with their own agendas and they're not actually converted?

How do we spot such people and how do we deal and challenge such people? Now the book of Acts isn't like a kind of a TV serial where it's a nice neat closed chapter and then there's new issues raised.

[1 : 16] We're going to continue today right in the thick of where we were last week with the death of Stephen, that wonderful lover of Christ, the one with the face like an angel who spoke so boldly and courageously for his Lord and who was killed for it, the first Christian martyr.

And Luke outlines for us the aftermath of his death. Saul was there approving of their killing of him, this young rabbi, arrogant, self-righteous and bloodthirsty it seems.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. All except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

Persecution breaks out against the whole church after Stephen and we get a sense that the Christians followed Jesus' teaching in Luke 21 when he said, you know, when this time of trial comes, flee.

And the apostles seemed to stay in Jerusalem for the sake of the Christian church there and the witness there, but those associated with Stephen flee. Devout men bury Stephen and made loud lamentation over him and Saul goes off his nut.

[2 : 39] He ravages against the church, entering house after house, dragging men and women off to prison. This is not a good thing that is happening in the church.

Severe persecution. Someone like Saul who has the power and the authority to imprison people absolutely going on a vendetta against Christians. And godly men burying this wonderful young man Stephen and lamenting over him.

Luke is giving us a taste of persecution is ugly. Persecution is tragic. Persecution is a sad thing. The fact that Stephen, this godly young man, has lost his life for the gospel is actually a terribly sad and tragic thing. And they mourn his loss. I wonder if sometimes we're guilty of, and I think of myself especially, of romanticizing persecution.

I mean, persecution in the Bible is glorious. Stephen saw the face of the Lord Jesus and the saints who are martyred wear a special robe in the book of Revelation.

[3 : 55] Jesus promised if you're persecuted for his name, you'll be rewarded a hundredfold. So persecution is sort of glorious, but we cannot romanticize it as if it's kind of something we would look forward to and enjoy.

He presents persecution as being painful. This weekend my kids were at someone's house watching these Christian videos called, you may have seen them, The Storytellers.

And in a way, they kind of romanticize persecution by talking about these kids in the first century church. And it's a bit like Hogan's Heroes.

They're kind of running around telling people about Jesus and the Roman guards are kind of these bumbling fools. And it kind of romanticizes the adventure of persecution. But I think we need to see

the dark side.

The real reality is it would suck to be thrown in jail or to lose your property or to lose your life for the gospel would be a great tragedy.

[4 : 57] And the question I think Christians in the first century would have asked is, when we suffer, has the Lord Jesus turned his face against us? Stephen saw the Lord Jesus in a vision.

And then that vision goes with Stephen. And persecution breaks out. And you might be tempted to ask, has the Lord Jesus turned his face against his people? And Luke gives us an answer to that. No. Although persecution was negative, there are some amazing things that come out of it. Verse 4, Saul goes house to house, imprisoning Christians.

The Christians flee and they go place to place, preaching the gospel. And so although some are jailed, overall the gospel spreads.

Wherever they go, they share the gospel. And he gives an example of this. Philip. Just one example I think. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.

[6 : 08] The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs he did. And his witnesses attested to by the Lord Jesus, by signs and wonders and healing and deliverance.

And verse 8, there was great joy in that city. So in the midst of the pain of persecution, great joy is brought to new places as the gospel spreads.

The Lord Jesus hasn't turned his face. He's actually providentially working his gospel purpose in the midst of persecution, in the midst of pain, in the midst of gospel pressure.

Luke's readers wouldn't have needed to be told about the nature of persecution. They would have been living it. But they would have needed this encouragement that the Lord Jesus is at work in their persecution, in their suffering for the gospel.

And Luke's also writing, I think, to his Roman non-Christian audience, to Theophilus, people who are wondering about, who are these Christians and why do they not die out?

[7 : 17] The more we hurt them, the more they spread. And Luke's trying to explain that this is why they keep spreading, because the Lord Jesus is at work in them and they will keep preaching the gospel.

So I think that's the first main lesson from this chapter, that in our suffering for Jesus, in our insults and the pain we bear for being a Christian, he works good.

I think good in our character, good in our godliness. But Luke makes a point, he works good for the public spread of the gospel. He works a witness in your suffering for his name.

Now we go on to look at what happens in Samaria. We don't actually exactly know which city it is, but we see some evangelism happening there. The kind of Luke's audience, you see, would have been familiar with the Roman announcements.

Romans would make these great announcements with grand horsebacks and trumpets and calvaries announcing a new emperor or a new son of an emperor or the ascension of the emperor to a throne.

[8 : 26] And Luke presents a picture of the same kind of thing with the outcast Christians. They're not on horseback, they're not grand, but they are making a similar kind of announcement of a new lord.

So the kind of words that Luke uses in chapter 8 for this mission are things like proclaiming, heralding, announcing, preaching Jesus as lord.

As scattered, dispersed Christians, they announce the true gospel. And just imagine what it would have been like to be one of those outcast Christians.

On the run, you've lost home, you're just on the run, you're refugees, preaching the gospel. I doubt they could have used any of the common evangelical pick-up lines that we use today.

I doubt they would have said, God has a wonderful plan for your life. Or, are you interested in spiritual growth? Or, would you like to join our visionary church?

[9 : 31] No, they would have been saying things like, we are on the run, we are persecuted for believing that Jesus of Nazareth is lord, and in him we have forgiveness of sins.

This witness comes from the position of weakness, not of strength. And so they go into the city of Samaria, and many people are converted, even some of their pagan religious leaders.

And Luke draws our attention to one in particular, Simon the magician, or Simon the sorcerer. He's a kind of, he's not a kind of David Copperfield-like magician, but he is a kind of a performer, a

religious pagan performer, who impresses people by what tricks he can pull out of his sleeve. And they speak of him in this way, that this man is the power of God that is called great. And, Luke gives us a picture of, in the preaching of the gospel, hundreds, maybe thousands, come to a belief in the Lord Jesus.

And in that kind of sweeping net of revival, some people like Simon are caught in it. And we'll find out in a minute that Simon's actually not the real deal.

[10:50] He's there for the wrong reason. But Luke makes clear that he does preach the true gospel. He says in verse 12, he was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.

And then so the people are baptized. Now this is important because Luke gives us a bit of a puzzle. They don't receive the Holy Spirit when they are converted through Philip's ministry.

What happens in verse 14 is that the apostles hear about this ministry in the north, in Samaria, and they send Peter and John as apostolic representatives to go and check out what's happened.

And verse 15, that the two went down and prayed for them, that is, prayed for this group of new converts that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

And Luke tells us in brackets, verse 16, for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Well friends, this creates a puzzle for us.

[11:58] What is it that happened that they didn't receive the Spirit and then Luke says the apostles came when they did receive the Spirit. And Luke doesn't even tell us how they know or didn't know that they didn't have the Spirit and when they did have the Spirit.

He just says that's what happened. Can a Christian be baptized and converted and not have the Holy Spirit?

That's the question this text raises for us. You know, could I be a Christian and not be fully baptized in the Holy Spirit? Do I need, as it were, a kind of apostolic second blessing?

Well friends, let me give you an answer to those questions trying to plug into Luke's agenda. The first thing we have to remember is the book of Acts is not a spiritual shopping catalogue of spiritual experiences for us to have as individual Christians.

Christians. We're not meant to read Acts with our Western individual eyes as a series of experiences for us that are on tap. God works through his covenants and his covenants work through groups.

[13:14] They work through peoples. So he doesn't just work through individual people. God works through peoples. And so the question Luke raises for us is not why didn't individuals get the Holy Spirit but why didn't the Samaritans as a group not get the Spirit until Peter and John came?

Why didn't the Samaritans as a people not get the Spirit? And to answer that we need to think about who are the Samaritans? Who are these people? Well friends, they are a theological mixed up bunch.

They are the in a sense the covenant rejects from the Old Testament. A Jewish person would not travel through Samaria.

If they wanted to go to the Jerusalem's here, Samaria's here and they want to get here they'll go the long way. They hated their covenant reject cousins. The Samaritans are in effect the northern tribes that broke away from the southern tribes at the time of King Solomon's children.

King Solomon's son was a bad king and gave bad advice and the ten northern tribes said we're going to go our own way and in 722 BC the Assyrians came through and decimated all these ten northern tribes.

[14:36] They took some away they killed a lot and eventually this northern region was resettled and they tried to start again in the covenant but it never quite took off.

So for example the Samaritans believed in the first five books of the Old Testament but not the rest. So they're kind of covenant people but not. They built their own temple and like most temples in various wars things get destroyed again but they built a competing temple against the one in Jerusalem.

They had their own monarchy they had their own leadership they had their own priesthood they were kind of a second class version of God's covenant people. They were hated by Jews they were half-breeds.

To quote a recent TV show no offence but it's true they were scum in the eyes of God's covenant. And so what happens is in Acts chapter 1 Jesus sets out the plan and he says go to Jerusalem then

preach in Judea then Samaria which is where we are now then the ends of the earth. And actually that's not meant to be just geographical that's his theological agenda. In effect what Jesus says is to wind up the old covenant by preaching the gospel in Jerusalem and then wind up with the covenant cousins get them in and then go to the ends of the earth.

[16:04] And so what was needed was to show the world and to show the church that the Samaritans were fully accepted as Christian equals on a par with Jerusalem and they never would have believed that unless apostles themselves went and gave the spirit.

So it seems that the Lord Jesus holds back the giving of the spirit to make the point that these covenant cousins are to be rejected no longer.

They're to be second class no longer. We're not to have a kind of apostolic Christianity in Jerusalem and a Philip Christianity in Samaria now we're to have one church one spirit one gospel.

So if you're here today and you're a Samaritan you can be assured that you're an equal member of the Christian church. You have the spirit in full measure. And you can kind of see that this is the dynamic that it's about the opening of the door to the Samaritans because as Peter and John leave they go back preaching the gospel in every Samaritan village.

Luke says the door is open the gate is open and they preach the gospel. They would have travelled to Samaria ignoring those people and they come back preaching the gospel. So that's what's happening I think with the holding back of the spirit.

[17:22] Now that's actually not Luke's main agenda. His main agenda is to tell us about Simon and about the Ethiopian eunuch and he wants to tell us about true conversion by allowing us to compare this dodgy magician with this godly convert or with this high official who converts to Christianity.

Simon watches the apostles lay on hands and give the spirit and says can I buy that power? I'd like that in my act. That would be a good performance piece for me if I could buy that ability to lay on hands and give the spirit.

Peter is rightly angry. It's a lot like his position with Ananias and Sapphira. He says repent of this wickedness. You have no part in this. Your heart is not right with God.

You are full of bitterness and the chains of wickedness. And he actually tells Simon to repent and pray and Simon doesn't do it. He says can you pray for me?

So he shows that he's still unrepentant. Simon the magician is the kind of person I guess who would join Hillsong Church in order to try and get on Australian Idol.

[18:35] He joins a church for his own agenda. He comes not to serve the Lord Jesus but to get out of it what he wants to do what his sinful agenda is.

Just think about it how could that happen in a church that's persecuted people jumping on the bandwagon for the benefits of a persecuted church.

How much more today in a time of peace and affluence are people going to jump on the bandwagon of Christianity for their own agendas. He's not a true convert unlike the Ethiopian.

Now we see more providence here. The Lord Jesus pushing the gospel out the spirit snatches Philip and puts him in front of this chariot of this Ethiopian eunuch.

He's an official he's high up in the court of the queen of Egypt and he's a seeker. He's a genuine seeker unlike Simon.

[19:39] It's quite incredible. He's been to Jerusalem to worship and we know from Deuteronomy chapter 22 that eunuchs actually aren't really allowed in the covenant of God.

They were limited in the old covenant to their access. So he may not have even been allowed into the court of the Gentiles. So he's been to worship from the outside of the temple and somehow he's gotten his hands on a copy of Isaiah.

And this is not like us where we just give a Bible away or leave it in a motel room or a hospital bedside drawer. There was no printing press and the Jews revered their scrolls.

And so for him to get his hands on a copy of Isaiah would have been illegal, it would have been expensive, it would have costed him thousands of dollars to get this text.

And he's so keen, he's got his hands on this hot document, he's not waiting until he gets back home to Egypt, he's opened the scroll and he's reading it on this bumpy chariot on the way home.

[20:42] And he's reading aloud from Isaiah chapter 53. Maybe someone's told him that actually in Isaiah chapter 56 there's a great little gospel segment for eunuchs about how they will become full members of the covenant.

But he's reading the most important chapter probably, chapter 53, and Philip says, do you know what you're reading? He says, no, can you help me? And he explains to him of course from that great text of the lamb that was silent before its shearer, the sheep led to the slaughter, the one who on him he took the iniquity of us all, that great gospel text of the death of Jesus taking our punishment.

It's a wonderful example I think of how evangelism works. The Christian helps the non-Christian engage with God's word of promise and explain it in terms of Jesus' death and resurrection. Friends, we must be using the Bible in our evangelism. We need to encourage people to read the Bible. Don't hold back the Bible from our seeking friends. I was really mad a couple of years ago. One of my friends, there was this really dodgy Christian book that was out called The Bible Code, which tried to explain the Bible in terms of numbers and stuff. And my Christian friend gave someone the Bible code instead of the Bible.

[22 : 09] I said, how could you do that? That's a stupid book and why don't you just give them the Bible? Anyway, this is the hobby horse. Luke highlights how the evangelism works because the Ethiopian reads, the Messiah did not open his mouth.

And when Luke says Philip spoke to him, the exact Greek is Philip opened his mouth and explained the Messiah to him. So through the sharing of God's word through God's people, evangelism happens.

So they get to water and he says, why can't I be baptized? And he's baptized. And the spirit snatches Philip away to do some more evangelism. man, and Jesus is pushing the gospel. The Ethiopian is from a position of honor and he accepts Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Simon accepts a gospel of power and a gospel of signs and wonders.

He's fixated. The Ethiopian humbles himself and requests baptism. Simon the magician wants to buy the power of apostles.

[23 : 23] The Ethiopian has a humble searching heart. He's seeking out the scriptures. Simon's heart, Peter says, is full of bitterness and in the chains of wickedness.

The Ethiopian receives the gospel and leaves rejoicing, leaves reading the Bible with fresh eyes. Simon leaves unrepentant and unsure and bitter.

Friends, we want to pray and seek for people to have conversions like the Ethiopian. We want to be wary of people who just jump on the bandwagon.

Friends, let me tell you in conclusion these three main applications for us. One, we must remember God's providential purposes in our suffering for the gospel.

people. Persecution is tragic, it hurts, but it's used by the Lord to develop and refine our faith and expand our witness.

[24 : 22] And so we need to trust God that he will keep using our suffering for his name. Secondly, we see what true evangelism is like. True evangelism is Christians speaking, proclaiming, initiating conversation, sharing the word of God with people, with every opportunity that God sovereignly creates.

And we keep seeing Jesus create these opportunities. God is preparing people right now to hear the gospel from you and me. He's preparing those people. A whole chain of kind of sovereign, serendipitous events are being brought together and you are to be part of that chain and it will be consummated in conversion of many people to the gospel.

And finally, Luke tells us what true conversion looks like. True conversion is a dropping of our agendas and of our idols and receiving Jesus as Lord with humility and wonder and joy.

I knew a lady in another parish a long time ago who won a citizenship award. I knew her through this church but I knew that she didn't come to church very much and she won a local council citizenship award and unfortunately the council printed her CV of her application and in it she put that she's a core member of the church I was at and we all knew that she wasn't.

And so it was quite telling that she was very regular at church for the next 12 months and she came to every event I think out of guilt for claiming that she was part of this church when she really wasn't.

[26 : 04] She was using it for her own self-glory and I think today there are many agendas that might be good but actually aren't the real reason we're meant to be here to worship Jesus.

I've seen people join churches to extend their business contacts to sell Amway. I've seen people join churches to gain political support in an election year to drum up people to vote for them.

I've seen people of course join churches to open up romantic interests or to fulfill a social need just because they're lonely but they're not actually interested in Jesus at all. Or join a church so their preschoolers can be entertained or their teenagers moralised or to relieve some kind of unrepentant guilt or to give a kind of a Sunday charge of self-righteousness to take me through the week.

True conversion is about bending the knee to the Lord Jesus in humble submission receiving his gift of forgiveness being made glad and full of joy. Like in Samaria like in the Ethiopian's life the gospel will bring true joy and those who only have false agendas can only be bitter.

So the challenge for us and one small example is in our meetings is do we display that kind of gladness in suffering that only the gospel can give?

[27 : 34] Do people visit our church and say what do these people have that they sing with such joy in the midst of suffering for the gospel? Will you show the gospel of gladness in your life even when you're under pressure when you're insulted and humiliated for Jesus?

Will you show the world that you believe in a sovereign God and that you believe in a wonderful gospel? Let's bow our heads and pray friends. Dear Lord Jesus please call all of us and individuals here today to repentance who have agendas that are not gospel agendas that are not in the service of you.

Help us to repent of trying to use church for our own gain and for our own benefit. Help us to be like the Ethiopian eunuch. Lord Jesus I pray that you would forgive us and heal us from all bitterness and help us to join your people in joyful glad praise for such a wonderful saviour and such a wonderful message of forgiveness.

So Lord Jesus give us courage to go out knowing that you are sovereignly going before us and create opportunities for us to share the Bible with people and to share the wonderful Lord Jesus with people.

Please do this heavenly father for the spreading of the kingdom we ask. Amen.