

The bumpy road of Gospel progress

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Date: 20 October 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know whether you wish that sometimes you just want to get from A to B, just like that, at the snap of a finger, in a twinkle of an eye. Perhaps you're traveling to a holiday destination, driving there, and you have a few kids in tow maybe.

Are we there yet? Have you heard that one? Or perhaps it's more serious, a mercy dash to another state to see someone critically ill, and you just want to get there. Of course, we want to get there because often journeys can be bumpy, can't they?

They may involve hazards or roadblocks, and there are risks sometimes that the journey might fail altogether. And that's what we find in our passage today in Acts.

If only the early church didn't have to go through these things. As Graham was saying last week, we saw the phenomenal growth of the church. They were going from strength to strength.

The apostles were preaching, and many were believing. People were healed. How wonderful that is. If only all of Acts was just like that. And we skip to the end of, not quite the end of the passage, but a bit further in Acts chapter 6 and verse 7.

[1 : 13] We see that again, the word of God spread, it says, and the numbers of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. And a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

And yet, what do we have this week? Well, apostles arrested. And then we'll look quickly at it as well. Internal conflict in the form of Hebraic and Hellenic Jews having complaints.

What are we to make of all these events? Do they fit into God's gospel plan? Or would we be better without these disruptions in the church? Well, let's take a closer look to find out.

First point in your outline is that we see that gospel progress, there is gospel progress in the face of external opposition. And in verse 17, we see the high priests, motivated by jealousy, arresting the angels.

But then God comes and releases them miraculously. And then they go out the next day, very next day, to preach in the temple. But the high priest tracks them down and drags them back to the Sanhedrin.

[2 : 20] And so we pick up the action at verse 27. The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. We gave you strict orders not to teach in his name, he said, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

So not only are they jealous, now they are offended by the accusations as well. Peter is unfaithful and he says, we must obey God rather than human beings.

The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

Peter knew the dangers of what he was saying, that he would get killed, but he said he had to obey God rather than humans. And in particular, he remembered the Lord's commission.

Back in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, you would have, I guess, seen that a few weeks ago, where Jesus said, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[3 : 31] Well, Peter picks up these very ideas in verse 32. He says, we are to be witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to those who obey him.

Peter doesn't miss a beat, does he? Even in the midst of opposition, he finds the chance to present the gospel, doesn't he? He declares that God has raised Jesus from the dead and there is forgiveness of sins and salvation for those who repent.

He's just preached the gospel, hasn't he? The only thing he hasn't done, just about, is to offer an altar call for the high priest to come forward. Now, they could have, but they were blinded by pride, weren't they?

And so what they do to the apostles is exactly what they did to Jesus, verse 33. When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

We saw in the first instance that God intervened by sending miraculously an angel. Well, now God intervenes again, but this time in the person of Gamaliel, just a human agent.

[4 : 42] But he says, he stands up in the synod and he ordered that the men be put outside for a while and then he says to the synod, men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men.

Some time ago, Theodos appeared, claiming to be someone. About 400 men rallied to him. He was killed. All his followers were dispersed and they all came to nothing.

After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed and all of his followers were scattered. Someone appeared, big following, killed, scattered.

Someone appeared, big following, killed, scattered. You get his point, don't you? Leave these men alone. Verse 38.

Let them go, for if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. They will be scattered.

Jesus has just been killed. Scattered. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men.

[5 : 45] Instead, you will find yourselves fighting against God. It's pretty compelling logic, isn't it? So much so that even these high priests who were against the disciples were persuaded.

Anyway, they still flog him for good measure. But they told them not to speak the name of Jesus.

But in all of this, twice now, we can see God's hand over the whole incident, can't we?

And Gamaliel is right. If God is in this, then there is nothing you can stop, do to stop God. God's word, God's gospel progress will happen even in the face of opposition.

I wonder whether you've ever tried stopping the flow of water. Maybe it's a pail of water in the driveway which you've kicked and the water comes out.

Have you tried to stop it flowing down the hill, you know, put your foot on it or, you know, you can't, can you? You may stop it at your foot but then the water will just divert, wouldn't it?

[6 : 50] It will find its way down the hill. You may put a cloth on it and that may soak the water up. But if there's too much water, that's not going to be possible, is it? And that's the same with God's word.

In that Old Testament reading we read, As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.

I think I've got it on the slide, Peter. It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. It's an amazing thought, isn't it?

That one drop of water in the heavens when it falls like rain to the soil and then it runs into the river and the ocean and it returns to the sky by evaporation, that very drop of water remains the same, doesn't it?

It's still the same molecule, isn't it? H₂O. And yet, what happens in the meantime? It's transformed the whole landscape, hasn't it? Plants and trees have grown, there's fruit, there is harvest.

[8 : 05] And that's the same with God's unstoppable word. We see it in Acts. Lives are changed. No one is left untouched by the gospel, by God's unchanging word.

Now, you think, oh, you know, if people don't believe, then really, you know, you know, what effect has that had? You know, has God's word really had its effect?

Well, the Bible says, yes. Even when people reject God's word, God has still achieved its purpose.

You see, the high priest and the synod, they heard God's word, they were given a chance to repent, and the point is that even if they do not repent, God's word has achieved its purpose because come judgment day, they, and anyone else that hears God's word, will have no defense if they do not repent.

And that's why I think the apostles' response is to rejoice. Of course, they would love people to believe. Of course, we would love people to believe. But it doesn't matter.

That's God's job. As long as the name of Jesus is proclaimed, we have done our job. And so we find out what I think are the most heartwarming words of this passage in verse 41.

[9 : 30] The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name. Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

How does the thought of having to suffer for Jesus' name make you feel? Does it fill you with joy? Do you count it as an honor?

You know, for the apostles, the name of Jesus meant so much to them that they were willing to suffer disgrace.

They didn't mind their own name being put to shame as a result. Their own safety, their own well-being. They were nothing compared to the fact that Jesus' name was exalted.

because why? They knew deep down what the Lord Jesus had done for them. And yet, at the same time, I find them having such profound humility, isn't it?

[10 : 39] Because they're saying, you know what, Jesus' name is so exalted that we don't deserve to be associated with that name. What gives us the right to be called God's Jesus disciples?

But then they go, wow, the fact that we can suffer disgrace for that name, what an honor it is for us. I don't know whether you've heard, but there are stories coming out from Iran that the church and the Christians there are being heavily persecuted, and particularly Christian women.

And yet, that has not stopped them from sharing the gospel. They're fearless. They can't do it in the open, so they do it one-to-one as they meet people in the markets or whatever.

But every time they do that, they run the risk that the person they're talking to might be an informer. So, married couples have talked about the fact that, you know, the wife may leave home on the understanding that they may not return if they're caught.

And yet, they're not afraid. They do it with joy. They count their lives of more value. They do not count their lives of more value than their saviour.

[11 : 53] And in fact, they rejoice because the greater the persecution, the easier the conversion. Because people see the moral bankruptcy of that regime and their religion.

And it makes the gospel shine more brightly because of that. Now, we don't suffer the same threats here in Australia, but if we lose our respectability because we're Christians, you know, people no longer invite us, you know, for dinners or to go play tennis with them or whatever, if that came to it, would that thought horrify us or would we go, it's all right, we can rejoice to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.

Friends, I know many of us feel like it's getting harder and harder to become a Christian and to stay a Christian in Australia. But let's take heart because God's gospel is spreading and progressing provided we keep proclaiming the word.

Well, we saw external opposition in the last passage and now in chapter 6 we see internal conflict and we wonder whether the gospel will be hindered by that.

So, verse 1 of chapter 6, I'll read it. In those days when the numbers of disciples were increasing, the Hellenic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of the food.

[13 : 23] So, we see here one of a problem of language and culture. They were both sets of Hellenic Jews but one spoke Aramaic, the Hebraic and then the other Greek.

For some of you, you might understand this, the Chinese in Australia are the same. You look at me and I'm Chinese, sort of on the surface but I can't speak the language, not much.

Whereas those who come straight from China, they speak mainly Mandarin and not English. Well, how does the church resolve this because both sets become Christians? Well, the twelve gathered all the disciples together in verse 2 and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven from among you known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibly over to them and we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

So the apostles had a dilemma to solve, didn't they? Because on the one hand, the Word and prayer were still important. They were not to be distracted from it. And yet they realized that it was important to serve the widows as well.

[14 : 28] Not because it was something to do, but because it was actually an expression of the Gospel. You can't believe in Jesus and not believe that we are united in Christ. And so they appoint a group in verse 5.

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Spirit, and we will soon see to be a martyr. Also Philip, a procurist, a corner, Timon, Paminas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. So these were presumably Hellenic Jews and maybe even a Gentile. But what's important is that they were full of the Spirit and the apostles prayed and laid hands on them, which means that what they were doing is not second-rate work.

It's not, oh, what the apostles are doing is so important, but these people are just backing up so that, oh, you know, they can do the important work. No. They were doing God's work as well. And the result we see as we read in verse 7 already, the Word of God spread. Many more became disciples. And the point is, I think, that were it not for Stephen and the others' work, the Word of God would not have spread.

[15:44] It was important work. Now, if you look at our church vision, which is at the bottom of the slide there, to go, gather, and grow in Christ, we have sort of the same principle as well.

There's actually, on the next slide, a tagline that goes with that vision. Keep going. And the tagline is, we are to go, gather, and grow in Christ.

How? By prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's Word in love. Proclaiming is to preach and teach the Word, as the apostles were doing.

But promoting, on the other hand, is to do whatever is required to support the proclaiming. And in our church, we need godly and wise people to do that work as well.

For example, people with the patience to go and look after the kids in Kresh, so that mom and dad can come into church to hear the sermon on Sunday. Or, helpers at Wednesday at 2, who offer lifts so that people can come to church to hear God's Word.

[16:54] or people to show hospitality to new people so that they feel like they belong, so that they'll keep coming back or go to Bible studies to keep learning the Word of God.

All these are great ways of promoting the Gospel and they're important in order for the Word of God to spread. We do them because they're a clear expression of the Gospel.

And I know many of you do that. So please, take encouragement from it. Keep doing it as God allows you because that is what allows God to do the work in our church.

But as we've seen today, Gospel progress doesn't mean everything is smooth sailing, is it? There will be bumps along the way. We should expect it. We should not be discouraged by it.

At times, this will be external opposition. At other times, it may simply be growing pains within the church as new people come in and we need to help them to belong and to adjust into our church.

[18:02] And that may cause disruptions. But again, let's not see that as, ah, you know, what distractions to the work that we're really doing. But rather, seeing it as a way in which God will still grow His kingdom by His Spirit.

God's work, God's Gospel progress is like a huge flood of water coming down the hill. Nothing is going to get in its way. And as Christians, my suggestion is that we simply go along for the ride. Go with the flow and rejoice in the bumpiness of it. I've got a slide, hopefully, of a picture of a ride in Seawo. slides are a bit wonky today, I'm not sure.

Don't worry. Okay, anyway, if you can imagine, keep going. One more. There, you go. Might be a long time since you've been in one of those rides.

But that's what being part of God's work is like. Getting to the boat like that. It will be bumpy along the way. It will get your heart racing.

[19:13] You'll probably most likely get wet. But we're in a secure boat, secure in Christ. And God will safely get us safely to our final destination.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that ever since Pentecost, your gospel has progressed according to your will and by the power of your spirit.

Thank you that through hardship and persecution, those who came before us have passed the gospel to us so that we may find salvation in you. Help us not to think that suffering for the gospel stops with them, but that we will take up the baton and endure hardship so that others may know Christ.

Give us joy to be counted worthy to suffer this grace for the name of Christ. Grow your church through us along this bumpy road of gospel progress, we pray.

In the glorious name of Jesus. Amen.