

Considered Worthy to Suffer for the Name

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Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, we come to a scary story, really, and it really does require courage. As we read about the church and the book of Acts, as persecution intensifies, why don't we pray as we approach this great message?

Lord Jesus, we thank you for Luke's recording of the book of Acts, for the message of your people bold and standing firm and being strong and courageous.

And we pray that their spirit would spill over into this church, into our lives, as we take stance today for our faith and for the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, friends, it's clear, isn't it, that the early church was a suffering church.

The early church was a suffering church. You're being led up a garden path when people read Acts as a sort of just success story, a success story. They are suffering people, suffering for the name.

And I love the ending of the reading that Dorothy read to us. After all this persecution that we're going to see, the people, the whole church, rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

[1 : 1 7] They rejoiced that they suffered for the name of Jesus. It's a great privilege, friends, to carry dishonor for the name of Jesus.

It's actually an honor in the eyes of Jesus to suffer dishonor in the world for him. We must all face suffering at some time, all kinds of suffering, suffering for doing wrong, suffering for just growing old, suffering for just being sick.

The question is, will we suffer for this great purpose, for the purpose of the name of Jesus? I had a friend who came to me.

His name was Mark a few years ago. And he's kind of a bouncy kind of person. And he bounced up to me and said, Wayne, I'm going to preach the gospel to the Queen of England.

And this was in the year 2000, the year of the Queen's 13th tour of Australia. And he said, I'm meeting the Queen. I'm going to evangelize her.

[2 : 2 0] I'm going to tell her about Jesus. And what had happened was his mum had scored him a ticket at one of those events where there's a line of 100 people and you get your 10 seconds shaking the hand of the Queen.

And he had a whole sermon prepared for that 10 seconds. Now, I did try and give him some advice. I said, well, I think she's an Anglican.

So, you know, I think she's a Christian, actually. I didn't want to discourage him. I said, so encourage her as a Christian to love and follow Jesus. And he thought that was good.

And he did it. My friend did it. And apparently when it happened, he was just so bouncing afterwards that the media pounded on him.

And he was on the news. And I've got the Age article. And all the media asked him, what did the Queen say to you that you're bouncing up and down like that? And he said, it wasn't what she said to me.

[3 : 20] It's what I said to her. And I encouraged her to love and serve Jesus. And so at which point, you know, the Age article kind of mocked him. And the newspaper and the news report did the same pretty much.

My friend knew that it was socially unacceptable to initiate a conversation like that, an evangelistic or a Jesus-y conversation with someone like that.

There were security around. Everyone's watching. There's media. He knew that would be kind of a dangerous thing to do. And yet he had a gospel positivity, had a gospel confidence, a gospel courage.

Now, it is true that there are some of us who have a real gift of evangelist. And my friend, like granted, he's kind of quirky. He does stuff like that. But we don't want to write off Christians who are like that.

What we want to see is actually that the early church was like that. They had that boldness. And we are called as a church today to have that kind of boldness. And so as we look at the story of persecution, I want us to take it really seriously.

[4 : 23] And I'm mindful of the fact that around the world today, you know, tens of thousands of Christians are in jail for their faith. Or pastors have been killed. Or, you know, it's a dangerous thing to be a public Christian in many countries around the world.

It's hard for us to imagine. But I want us to have a sense of reverence and prayerful concern for our brothers and sisters around the world this morning.

And I want to draw out the lessons. And the first lesson I want to draw out is in Acts, the Christians gather publicly together to take a public stand for the gospel.

We have a picture, Luke says, that many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. Jesus is really putting his stamp on apostolic ministry to say that they are the eyewitnesses and listen to them.

And I'll do miracles to show you that they have a unique and special message. And they were all together in Solomon's portico. None of the rest dared to join them, yet the people held them in high esteem.

[5 : 29] And they gather in the temple, in a public place, to worship Jesus, to teach about Jesus, and also to tell others. They take a public stand together.

It's not just apostles going to the temple to evangelize. The whole church is there to take a stand. And they grow in numbers. More than ever, believers were added to the Lord.

Great numbers of both men and women. I think one of the lessons Luke is showing initially is that we need to take a public stand for the gospel together.

Where they are is Solomon's portico, which is exactly the same place two chapters ago. Peter preached the sermon that got him arrested.

And so Peter has now taken the whole church to that very place. And together they're taking a stand for the gospel. It's as if I went out on a limb and got my Bible in a milk crate during the week.

[6 : 30] And went on the grass to the Manningsham council offices, to that public kind of space out there. And started on my milk crate preaching the gospel. And maybe reading some texts.

And maybe people were offended. And they tell the council. And the council rings the police. Please come and arrest me. They let me out on a kind of warning. And then the next Sunday I've invited all of us to go and do the same thing as a group on the same grass where I was arrested.

That would be a bold thing to do. You know, would you join me if I said that's what we're doing? And yet this is the stand that the early church takes in Solomon's portico.

Together we stand for the gospel. Not just a few quirky evangelists, but the whole church. And that's what we're doing right now. This is a public place in effect. This is a public meeting.

And we are saying that we belong to Jesus. And we're drawing people in. Now there might not be many people in Melbourne who are offended that we are meeting today. But there might be people in your family or work colleagues who are really just getting really ticked off at how much time you spend at church.

[7 : 35] Or the time you put into small groups and meeting with other Christians. And there might be people among us who have copped flat for even turning up today. Now as the church meets we read that there are great signs and wonders.

Even Peter's shadow heals people. The Lord Jesus is both drawing people in through the apostles' miracles. But also he's setting them up for persecution.

Because it's the miracles that draw the attention that gets the leaders of Israel angry. And so that's the first lesson. Christians gather publicly to take a stand for the gospel.

And then what we find is the Sadducees and the high priests and all the leaders of Israel are jealous. And they're angry at the power and attention this group of Christians are getting.

And so they arrest the apostles and put them in prison. And almost, it's immediately in the story, but that night an angel comes and lets them out. And teaches, I think, the second lesson for us to learn.

[8 : 42] And that is, preaching the gospel is more important than our safety or our comfort. Now that's a controversial lesson to read.

Because the angel releases them. And if I was the angel, I would have said, Here's your ticket out. Sneak out of the city. Get out of here right away. But the angel says, verse 20, Go stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.

And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak when it opened. And they went on with their teaching. And so the angel frees them from jail in order that they can go and preach the gospel some more.

In order to get persecuted more. And so clearly the value is that God values the preaching of the gospel above the safety of the apostles. And I think above even our own comfort and safety.

We need to know that wherever we go, God is sovereign. And he can protect his people. But sometimes for the sake of his name, he allows his people to be persecuted.

[9 : 55] Because that brings more attention to the gospel. And that brings glory to him. We value security very highly, I know. We invest a lot in our health care and our super and paying off our homes.

I think security is almost the highest value in Western society. But to the Christians, security cannot be the highest value. The highest value is the name of Jesus going out.

The name of Jesus being preached. The gospel being proclaimed. And it's almost comical. The high priests and the leaders go to the prison and it's locked. And they unlock it.

And he's not in there. And they're kind of trying to figure out what kind of Houdini thing. How do they get out? And someone pipes up and says, The men that you arrested for preaching the gospel in Solomon's Portico are in Solomon's Portico preaching the gospel.

And it's like, oh right. And they go down and they say, oh, there they are. And they re-arrest them. The angels set them up to be arrested so that they could preach the gospel to this audience of the leaders of Israel.

[11 : 06] So the first lesson was we gather to take a stand for the gospel. The second lesson is preaching the gospel is more important than our safety and comfort. And the third lesson we see coming out comes here when the leaders say, We gave you strict orders to not preach in this name.

Why are you preaching in the name? And Peter says, We must obey God rather than any human authority. And the lesson I think is that preaching the gospel is more important than obeying earthly authority.

Preaching the gospel is more important than obeying the government. Now Christians by default, we have a very high view of the government. We believe that God is sovereign and sovereign over human governments.

Therefore, Christians are to be good citizens and obey the government and obey the laws and pay our taxes and not speed and pay our rates.

But like all human authorities, the authority of governments have limits. And here one limit is seen. If we are commanded by the government to deny our faith or to not share our faith, then we will disobey.

[12 : 23] Respectfully, we will disobey. We must preach the gospel even if strict orders are given to not preach the gospel. And Peter makes it so clear because he actually shares the gospel then and there.

He says, The gospel logic is, how can I not share the gospel in Jerusalem?

This is Israel's gospel. This is for their forgiveness. This is good news for them. I can't not preach this gospel. We are witnesses to these things.

So is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. In short, you killed him. God raised him. We saw him. Forgiveness is now on offer through him.

It's amazing boldness. It's not disrespect. There's a sense of, we can't not do this. But it is unflinching. They say, why are you preaching the gospel still?

[13 : 34] They say, we must. And the God of our ancestors, and he just preaches the gospel to their face, to this kind of grand kind of assembly of the leaders of Israel.

That shows great courage, great spunk to actually disobey the command to the very face of those who gave it. Standing up for being a Christian is more important than obeying earthly authorities.

The next lesson comes through one of the non-believers there, Gamaliel. And it's a great lesson because Peter gets the leaders so angry that they want to kill him.

They were enraged, verse 33, and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, asks the apostles to be put out.

And he addresses this group of Jewish authorities in private. And he basically says, it's not hard to kill a religion.

[14 : 41] It's not hard to kill a religion. If you're trying to kill Christianity, well, you don't have to try. It's easy because we've all seen these Messiah movements before. We've seen Thutis.

He raised up 400 people, in effect a kind of medium or a kind of megachurch for the day. It's the size of Holy Trinity's English congregations probably, 400 people.

And yet when he died, it all dispersed and came to nothing. The same thing happened with Judas the Galilean. He thought he was raised up as kind of a prince-like leader and people wanted to follow him.

And yet when they killed him, they just dispersed. Gamaliel is so wise. He says, I tell you, keep away from these men and leave them alone. If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail.

But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them. You will find yourself fighting against God. It's very, very wise. They want to kill Christianity as a religion.

[15 : 46] They want to stop this virus spreading. Gamaliel says, it's easy. Don't worry about it. I mean, do you know any followers today of Thutis? Do you know of a church dedicated to Judas the Galilean?

The movements are gone. They don't exist. Messiah movements come and go. And if what they're saying is made up or a lie, it won't last.

It'll fade away. But of course, Luke is writing 30 years after these events with a wink in his eyes saying, 30 years later, no one has been able to stop the preaching of the risen Jesus.

And we can say now, 2,000 years later, no one has been able to stop the preaching of the risen Jesus. Christianity was bombarded with an avalanche of persecution.

And yet, the great historical conundrum is, why didn't it all just fall apart? Why didn't Christianity just disperse like all these other Messiah movements?

[16 : 52] The answer, of course, is that Jesus is alive. He is the Lord of the church. Therefore, the church can never die or never be stopped. And persecution especially cannot stop it.

Which leads me to the final lesson. Persecution, in fact, grows the church. Persecution emboldens gospel preaching.

The apostles are flogged. They don't get off lightly. They are physically tortured and ordered. Don't preach the gospel. But as they leave, they rejoice.

And they say, that was great. We just preached the gospel to the whole Jewish authorities. And we got through. Yes, we got physically tortured. But here we are.

And we can preach the gospel some more. And we've suffered for the name of Jesus. And that's an honor. And you can feel the sense of energy that, having stood up for the name, they'll do it again and again and again.

[17 : 55] Persecution only helps spread and grow the church. I mean, it's amazing to think that you would rejoice that you are flogged for the name of Jesus.

But I think they remember Jesus' words. Do you know, on the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Jesus promised it would be a blessing when you suffer for him. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus doesn't ever promise to protect us from persecution. In fact, he promises it will happen. He says the servant in John 15, The servant is no greater than the master.

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. The Christian church has always grown through persecution. Friends, hear the lessons of the book of Acts.

[19 : 07] They are, We gather publicly to stand for the gospel. Preaching this gospel is more important than our safety and our comfort.

Preaching the gospel is more important than obeying the government. Persecution will never stop our preaching of the gospel. And in fact, persecution can only grow it. Who knows where the times are coming in Australia, Where there will be more overt government pressure to not preach the gospel.

We kind of ride a very fine line at the moment With things like teaching Christian religious education in schools. You know, we're told we're not to proselytize when we go into schools.

And I take that to mean we're not to use the position To manipulate children into believing our religion. And I think that's a good thing. But I still think I'm there in a school To share the gospel with the hope that children will believe.

And I'm doing evangelism. And this tension rides in a lot of our ministries, In our primary school mentoring ministry that we're launching. We're not there to proselytize.

[20 : 17] But we do hope we will make a spiritual impact. That ambiguity as to what is acceptable and what is not May be clarified in years to come.

And we will not be allowed in schools. And we will not have these opportunities. The government may ban, Or religious vilification laws may make impossible Public evangelism without breaking the law.

Friends, are you ready for that day? Are you ready to take a stand for the gospel? I can't help but wonder, I don't know enough about the persecuted church around the world, But I can't help but wonder if their growth, Their amazing growth of the gospel in China, And the Middle East, And in Northern Africa, You know, it clearly is tied to their persecution.

That they are fired up and focused on the gospel. And yet the church in Australia is, You know, Lazy and apathetic and comfortable. You know, The lack of persecution in Australia Has just allowed the church to be in this sort of dull stupor.

Friends, one day it will come. I don't want to be, I don't want to have a death wish. I don't want us to be persecuted. But you can't help but wonder if it is one of God's means For growing the gospel, For growing the church.

[21 : 41] And never fear, friends. So many people have predicted the end of the church from persecution. Never fear that the church will be stopped, Or that Christianity will be killed.

It cannot happen, Because Jesus is Lord. And while he is Lord and reigning, Nothing can stop the spreading of the gospel. I'll share with you this wonderful quote from Charles Spurgeon.

It's a bit long, And it's a bit explicit. So if you've got a sensitive stomach, I apologise, But this is just a great quote about the suffering of the church.

Spurgeon says, It is perhaps the greatest miracle of all ages, That God has a church in the world. Always a church.

When the full force of the pagan emperors came like a thundering avalanche upon her, She shook off the stupendous load, As a man shakes flakes of snow off his shoulders.

[22 : 39] And she lived on uninjured, When papal Rome vented its malice yet more furiously, And ingeniously, When the medieval reformers poured out their blood in rivers, And dyed the snow with crimson, She lived still, And never was in a healthier state, Than when she was immersed in her own gore.

Let the covenant signed in blood, Witness to the vigour of the persecuted saints. Ask me, Where is the church? And I can find her at any and every period, Even until now.

In one unbroken line, Our apostolic succession runs, Through the blood of good men and true, Who never forsook the testimony of Jesus, Through the loins of true pastors, Laborious evangelists, Faithful martyrs, And honourable men and women of God.

We trace our pedigree from the fishermen of Galilee, Up until the current day. Isn't that a great quote that, Through the blood of the ages, Through the blood of God's people, His gospel has grown and grown and grown.

Friends, I hate pain. I hate suffering. You know, We don't have a death wish. It's wise to want to avoid suffering.

[24 : 07] But I think suffering is actually inevitable. Suffering is inevitable. It's just a question of, What will we suffer for? The name of Jesus is worth suffering for.

Because it's the only name given among people, By which we can be saved. And it's actually the name by which you can pass, From suffering into glory. So it's a great name to suffer for.

Friends, God forbid that, That one of us should reach heaven, And meet a brother or sister, From this century, From China, Or from northwest Africa, Or from the Middle East.

And they ask us, They say, Are you too from that glorious century, Of martyrs? And all we have to say in response is, Well, What were we doing when God was spreading the gospel?

If all we have to say is, While that was all happening, I was watching TV, And being obsessed with my own comfort. Friends, Right now, God is glorifying his name around the world.

[25 : 13] Let us join in, To this great army of humble servants, God's Christian soldiers, Who don't fight, But lay down their life, For the name of Jesus.

Let us be a people who are praying, Giving to world missions, Speaking, Witnessing, Commenting, Standing together, Gathering, Going out, To play our part, Friends, In what God is doing for the kingdom.

May we not miss out, In what the Lord Jesus is now doing in our world, This great gospel outreach, That cannot be stopped.

Let us draw on him now, And pray for our church to be part of it. Our dear Lord Jesus, We pray that you would, Give us a strong sense, Of your presence, And of your rule, And of your power, And that that might therefore give us courage, To not be ashamed of you, To not be ashamed of being Christians, But to take a stand, And to be confident, And bold in our Christian faith, And Lord Jesus, Do prepare us as a church, For even the persecution, That may come on us in the future, And we pray especially for those, Among us now, Who this week, Or this year, Have copped flack for the name of Jesus, Who have been persecuted, Who have been teased, And dishonoured for the name of Jesus, We pray that you would comfort us, And strengthen us to continue, In standing for him.

Amen.