

Proclamation and Persecution

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[0 : 00] If you take your Bibles out and open to Acts chapter 5, you'll find it helpful. Page 116. Yesterday a number of us were at a meeting in the Trendle Lounge.

It was one of those very dull, long, three and a half hour church type meetings. You know, you put your head at this and people think you're praying.

It is a kind of a prayer, Lord. Help people to be quiet quickly. Anyway, there were about 40 of us there and we were going through the agenda and it was going on and on and on.

And right in the middle of the meeting, a rat ran through the meeting under the tables. And I looked at my agenda and I couldn't see this on the agenda anywhere.

The meeting suddenly got very interesting and even entertaining. And, you know, it's true we live in a questionable neighbourhood after all. But you will be pleased to know that amongst his many skills, Dan Gifford is a hunter.

[1 : 12] And he successfully caught the rat and dispatched it to another parish entirely. Now, I tell you that because that's what it must have felt like to be part of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

Everything had been going according to the agenda and then suddenly this Jesus problem arose. And no sooner had they managed to put him to death when this rag tag bunch of followers began to claim that he had risen from the dead.

And if that was not bad enough, they arrested these people. They told them not to speak about Jesus and not to speak about the resurrection. It had only made them more bold. And to make it worse, there were now reports of miracles of healing.

And thousands of their finest donors had transferred allegiance to this new movement. And the Sanhedrin smelled a rat.

And I think Luke wrote this passage with a smile. It's very clever. And there are a whole series of ironies in the passage. Let me mention one. At the beginning of the passage in verse 17, we read this.

[2 : 31] But the high priest rose up, all who were with him, that is the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy, etc. The word rose up reminds us of the resurrection.

Here is the high priest trying to rise up because the problem that lay at the root of everything is these rotten apostles who are preaching the resurrection. And when we come to the end of the passage in verse 42, we read, every day in the temple and at home, which means in the house churches, the apostles do not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

So whatever they've done in between time, this mighty and great council with all its power and legitimate ecclesiastical authority, it's failed miserably to silence the gospel.

There are three scenes and I just want to work through them, look at them quickly together and then make three applications. Verses 17 to 21, 26, I'm sorry, verses 17 to 21, I've called a little rescue.

Now, the Sadducees were in firm control of the council. High priest, his family and his group, these were the men who had their hands on the levers of power.

[3 : 46] You remember, they denied any possibility of life after death. So this teaching about the resurrection is not just dangerous and destabilising, it's totally impossible.

And because they are the inner ring, they are the ones who are most invested in the church because the church served as the basis of their power and recognition and influence.

And I need to tell you, it is a constant danger for those of us who are church professionals that when we see our power base attacked, it releases a creative and violent energy which is called jealousy.

Here is the highest ecclesiastical assembly in all Israel. Here are men who know their scriptures better than most theological professors today.

They are the most devout and senior clergy in the land and what is driving them is nothing other than jealousy. Verse 18. That's the right response.

[4 : 49] Verse 18. They arrest the apostles and put them in prison publicly. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out and said, go stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.

When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and taught. Lovely irony. Here are the ones of all the authority and power, but they don't have any real power when it comes to spiritual things.

They think they've got the gospel under lock and key because they've got the apostles safely secured away in prison, but God has other plans. That's why I call this a little rescue.

Because you see, there's not a lot of emphasis on the actual rescue work of the angel. The point of the angel delivering them is not that he's delivering a privileged group.

He's not trying to save them from discomfort and pain. The point is to show them and to show us that here in the first event in the life of the church where there is violence against God's people, the risen Jesus Christ is still Lord.

[6 : 02] He knows each circumstance. He controls each circumstance and that his deepest concern remains the spread of the gospel. That's why the angel says to them, go into the temple and speak all the words of this life.

Isn't that a lovely way of describing the gospel? Don't go and preach a philosophy of life or a system of beliefs. Preach Jesus himself, the person, the risen Jesus.

And the angel says, it's this life. It's almost as though he points his finger, he's just come from heaven and he says, it's this life, it's here and present now because you have the life of heaven within you through the promise of Jesus Christ.

Same thing is true for us today of course in the crucified and risen Jesus. God offers to us his life, salvation, freedom, Holy Spirit.

And it is a message worth living for. And it is a message worth dying for. There will come a time when God will not rescue them from prison.

[7 : 15] There will come a time when God will not deliver them from death. Every one of the apostles with the exception of John is executed. But here he does rescue them.

And the reason is because there is something more important even than their lives. And that is the progress of the gospel. And that's why I call this a little rescue. When I'm halfway through 21 down to verse 32 in scene 2, I call this the big rescue.

And 21 to 26 is almost a comedy routine. And I hope you noticed that when Deb was reading it. Here is the most powerful body in Israel. They think they've got the prisoners safely locked away. They send the police off to collect them. The guards are there at the gates, at the prison doors. They have a mother hubbard excuse. We thought they were there.

They come back together. What should we do? They then discover they're preaching in the temple, this rotten message about the resurrection again. And so they do the only thing that they can do.

[8 : 21] They arrest them again. And in verse 28, they bring them up and they say, 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.

Such is their jealousy and rage. They can't even bring themselves to say the name of Jesus. They call him this man or this name. And when they say we strictly commanded you, in the original it's we commanded this command or with a command we commanded you.

The big issue for the council, the big issue for every ecclesiastical authority is that this group has disobeyed a clear command.

And of course to ecclesiastical authorities, there can be no greater offence, can there, than someone who stands up against their power and disobeys them. It's a hideous thought. But you see, when ecclesiastical authorities disregard or deny the word of God, they replace the authority of that word with their own authority and they begin to speak as though they are the ones who speak for God.

They lose their legitimacy. They no longer do the work of God but the work of Satan. Don't you remember Satan says, that the Apostle Paul tells us that Satan loves to disguise himself as an

angel of light.

[9 : 47] Much has been made in our own diocese in recent days about how clergy must obey their bishop as though that is the really big issue. But it's not. The really big issue is, will we obey God?

Look at verse 29. Peter and the Apostles answered, we must obey God rather than you. 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're witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

Again I say, it's very important for Christians to obey those in authority. They have been placed there by God. But if those in authority seek to lead us away from obedience to his word, we must disobey.

This is, you could not have a higher pedigree of legitimacy than the Sanhedrin. And the Apostles flatly say, we're going to obey God, not you.

[10 : 51] And then Luke gives us another lovely irony. I mean, you just, here is a trial and the express purpose of the trial is to silence the preaching of the Gospel and there in the middle of the trial, the trial becomes a pulpit and the Apostles have this wonderful opportunity to preach the Gospel to those who want to kill them.

It's an extraordinarily loving thing for the Apostles to do. They're not defending themselves. They are holding out the gift of life to those who brought Jesus to his own death.

It would have been so easy for them to write off the Sanhedrin as a lost cause. They succeeded in Jesus' death. They've now arrested the Apostles three times.

They refused to face the facts of any of the miracles. They refused to even bring into evidence the fact that they were rescued by an angel from prison.

There's no mention of this now in the trial. And yet Peter and the Apostles graciously and truthfully offer them the person of Jesus Christ clothed in the Gospel.

[12 : 06] And I think Luke means us to stand back and say, who really is on trial here? In the Gospel of God, the Gospel about Jesus, God comes to us offering forgiveness and salvation.

And this is the big rescue. And it still comes to us today. And then the third and final scene, verses 33 to 42, is about another little rescue.

And there's this wonderful and immediate response to their preaching in verse 33 that most preachers would be proud of. When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. Now that's what you call effective preaching. The response is immediate and determined. Don't need to apply it. See, the council should have been moved.

I mean, they should have been deeply moved. You know, what were we thinking? We rejected the one whom God has selected as leader and saviour of Israel. And God is still willing to give us his gift of the Holy Spirit and repentance.

[13 : 12] But instead of softening their hearts, they harden their hearts and their guilt turns into rage. Before they can reach over and kill the apostles, Gamaliel speaks.

And Gamaliel is a distinguished, learned and popular character. And while the council has no fear of God, they fear his popular opinion and so they listen to him.

I don't know what you think of Gamaliel. I think his argument is the classic head-in-the-sand pragmatist. He says, leave the apostles alone. It'll all blow over.

And if you oppose it, you might be found opposing God. Well, of course, we all know that if it's of God, it will stand. The question that Gamaliel neatly avoids is whether there's any basis for thinking that it is from God.

And then the passage finishes in verse 40 to 42. The council took his advice and when they called in the apostles, they flogged them. That's not a mild beating. That's 39 lashes with a whip, sometimes with bits of metal in it.

[14 : 18] They flogged them. People died from floggings. And charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. And they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for their name.

And every day in the temple and at home, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. Well, Gamaliel's advice saves their lives, but does not save them from a flogging.

And the passage finishes with the gospel going forward despite the best efforts of the council. Now, it's a treasure, this passage, and I encourage you, if you have some time this afternoon, to read it

over.

We've only flown over it quickly. There's much more here. But I want to try and make application from the passage with three main lessons. And the first has to do with the freedom of God. The freedom of God. It's very instructive that the angel should rescue the apostles at night, in the dark.

[15 : 28] The rescue is not for the purpose of the guards or the Sanhedrin or the popular show in Jerusalem. The rescue is for the apostles. It is to show them that even though they are in deep trouble, even though they are seemingly in the grip of their enemies, they are not.

They are in the hands of God himself. Because prison walls and all the authority that the world can muster is no great threat to God's freedom and God's power and God's love.

God is free to work in the prison and out of the prison. He can open the doors. He can leave them closed. He can send an angel to rescue us or not. And the point is that there is no circumstance beyond his control.

There is no situation that is so intractable it is beyond his grace. There is no difficulty in your life or in my life or in the life of any believer that is beyond his power.

And the angel makes very clear that the purpose of the rescue is not their comfort and safety. The point of this is not that God will stop all bad things happening to his people.

[16 : 43] If that had been the purpose they wouldn't have ended up being flogged by the end of the passage. The point is that even in the prison they are still in the sovereign hands of God.

And that is still true for us. It doesn't matter where you go it doesn't matter what circumstances are in your life right now you and I are never out of the hands of God.

Our lives are defended by the hands of God the Almighty and you and I will never die one moment before God will allow it to happen.

And sometimes he delivers us from death and sometimes he does not. but in each and every circumstance he is working his good purposes.

And we pray for deliverance and we pray for a solution for those intractable problems that we face and sometimes they come and when they don't come it's not because God is weak it's not because God's power is restricted or his love is constrained it's not because you are not important enough or I am not important enough as though he really only works for those important people like apostles it's not because he hasn't got enough angels to spare on that particular morning it is because it is better for us and it is better for the gospel and in all things he is fulfilling his loving purpose that is the freedom of God and that's the first lesson.

[18 : 15] The second lesson is the freedom of God's gospel you can't miss this as you read the passage the freedom of God's gospel the Sanhedrin is trying to squash and silence the gospel and God God wants the progress of the gospel every part of the narrative bears witness to this when they're rescued from the prison the angel says go and speak about all the words of this life when they stand when they stand before the Sanhedrin the Sanhedrin provides them a perfect platform for preaching and even after the flogging they preach Jesus as the Christ with more zeal and a deeper sense of privilege and here is the priority of God from this passage this is God's concern and I wonder if you see it that way I wonder if you have come to see that God desires the progress of the gospel in us and through us

I wonder if God's concern is your concern and I think if I could set you any homework today it would be to look at the summary of the gospel in verses 30 to 33 three short verses it takes 20 seconds to say those verses and I think they're worth memorizing as a way of helping us articulate what the gospel is when we have opportunity the message comes anchored around three things that God does God raises Jesus from the dead the crucified one who's rejected the one who died on the cross has been raised to life secondly God exalts him to his right hand as leader and savior it is in the person of Jesus Christ we have salvation and thirdly from heaven God gives these wonderful gifts forgiveness repentance and his holy spirit these are not things we can work up in our own strength forgiveness repentance and his holy spirit they are not within our power but they are his to give that's the gospel that's why the angel calls it all the words of this life it's about life Christ raised from the dead Christ ruling over all things Christ pouring out his gifts upon us and even in those things that are most frustrating and most distressing this gospel goes forward because it is life you cannot stop it that is the freedom of the gospel thirdly and finally there is the freedom not only of the gospel and not only of God but of God's people and I want you to think back for just a moment if you had been in the apostles shoes and the angel had rescued you from prison

and you find yourself standing in the street outside the prison what would you have done I mean if the apostles had been thinking strategically or politically or tactically do you not think that it would have been a very bad idea to go back into the temple immediately and preach

I mean surely this is the time to make a strategic retreat to go back up to Nazareth to write a barn burning epistle or two to wait for things to settle down and then begin preaching again to wait for the danger to pass but if that's our strategy we will never ever speak about Jesus Christ because it's never entirely safe to speak about Christ you know what it's like when you're in a conversation at work or at a dinner party and someone is sharing the great weekend they had at the Buddhist retreat and then you mention the name of Jesus Christ and there's this cold fog that comes down on the conversation it's dangerous to speak about Jesus the apostles could have said to themselves well the angel didn't actually tell us when to go back into the temple and start perhaps we were to set up a task force we don't feel equipped for this perhaps we were to have some training days together no no no they demonstrate their great freedom and they are an example to you and me in that and you see the same freedom when they're before the Sanhedrin they're not defending themselves they show grace and love they offer the gift of life to their enemies under the worst possible circumstances they preach the gospel it's a lovely picture of Christian freedom you see Christian freedom means you don't crumble in front of hostility and yet you don't give up upon you don't give up on those who seem most opposed to Christ and perhaps most movingly even after being beaten and flogged they counted they counted an honour to suffer dishonour for the sake of Christ and they go straight back preaching and teaching Christ with the wounds bleeding on their backs it's remarkable I mean the gospel has turned the world upside down these things the world hates most pain and shame and humiliation and suffering they're now received as a glorious badge of privilege for the sake of Jesus Christ the risen Jesus Christ swallows up our shame and turns it into glory converts our suffering to something precious I read these words from Calvin this week on this verse he says woe be to our daintiness who having suffered a little persecution do by and by resign up the torch to another as if we were now old worn soldiers need to repent of the sin of daintiness you see in his death and resurrection

[24 : 22] Christ has set us free he has forgiven us by his spirit and now our hearts are tied to his approval and his concerns and his priorities and not the approval and not the priorities of the world where Christ there is life freedom to live out to share out and to enjoy our forgiveness with the star and the glory and these songs go ahead and and and hug and and — come to when we come to Jacqueline square and when they come to him away and one — anthem really and in the Afghanistan guys behind know are■■ if underscore close