

New Message

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[0 : 00] Well, we're continuing on with our Acts series, and please turn to page 117.

This is a passage that is all about the persecuted church, and you may not know it, but today happens to be a day of prayer for the persecuted church. And it's wonderful that we've celebrated Remembrance Day as well today, because it is a day of remembering people who sacrificed their lives so that people can actually, in freedom, worship the Lord Jesus Christ as well.

And of course, many churches throughout the world do not have those protections and those freedoms. We're very fortunate for it. Two of those people are two Iranian women who are persecuted right now, and I just want to tell you their names.

Miriam Rastampur and Marzia Islamabad, they're ages 30 and 27. They were arrested in March in Tehran because they became Christians.

They were Muslims who converted. They've been in jail since then. They're experiencing a lot of physical problems right now. But their faith is amazing. They had a trial in August, and the prosecutor asked them if they have any regrets about converting.

[1 : 24] A lot of things have happened, problems in their lives because of it. And they said, we have no regrets, they responded. And then the prosecutor demanded them to renounce their faith right there in the courtroom.

And they said, we love Jesus. We will not deny our faith. And when they made reference to their belief that God, by the Holy Spirit, had convicted them to turn to Jesus Christ and worship him, the prosecutor told them, it is impossible for God to speak to humans.

And Marzia asked him in return, are you questioning whether God is almighty? Great thing to ask a Muslim. And the prosecutor replied, you are not worthy for God to speak to you.

And Marzia's response was, it is God and not you who determines if I am worthy. Amazing response. How could they be so bold?

These are men who hold their lives really in their hands. Why or how could they speak with such faith and boldness? Well, it's simply because of the conviction that the Lord Jesus Christ lives and reigns and is with them.

[2 : 40] That's why they had that boldness. And that's what's going on in this passage in Acts for Stephen as well. These two women, who we should pray for, helps us to understand Stephen's situation today.

He is in a desperate situation that's very similar to these two women. There is no hope of fairness. No one is standing up for Stephen.

And everyone is against him. This is a change, by the way, that's happened in Jerusalem. Look at chapter 6, verse 8. Stephen is alone because the people, the elders and the scribes, had turned against him.

There's a kind of a popular turning against Stephen at this point. Even though he has done wonderful miracles and spoken with such power. There are people who have orchestrated a turning against Stephen.

So they seize him and bring him before the council. And at that place, in that time in his life, he must have felt desperately alone and scared.

[3 : 43] Humanly speaking, this would be his response. It's a place of weakness. And at his trial, there are false witnesses surrounding him, lying about him, saying two things.

That Stephen had said Jesus would destroy the temple. And that secondly, Jesus would change the customs which Moses delivered to us. So he faces the Supreme Court with these very serious charges.

And there's dozens of these guys who are the leaders politically and the religious leaders of the time. They had the human power of life and death. And interestingly, probably many of that council were the same ones who approved of Jesus' death, his execution as well.

So here's what he's facing. But like Miriam and Marcia, it is his time of weakness. In that time, he is bold as he faces them.

And the way that Luke tells us is in verse 15. He says that his face looked like the face of an angel. There was something so remarkable about the way that he looked that the council, it says, actually gazed at him intently.

[4 : 59] There's something unique about him. His face was shining in the way that one's face would shine if they were in the very presence of God. This is Moses' face when he is on the mountain, Mount Zion, in the presence of God.

And of course, that is because God is in fact present with him. His boldness comes because the living Lord Jesus, the risen Jesus, is with him.

And it's in that place of great weakness, the worst place in his life, that he preaches a sermon that changes the world. Because as a result, the church was literally pushed out from Jerusalem in a great persecution.

But they are pushed out with the firm understanding and knowledge that the risen Lord Jesus is with them, just as he is with Stephen.

And so there's this powerful sermon that he preaches. And it is powerful because it literally begins and ends with the glory of God. And I think it's important as we see the thread of his sermon to understand what the glory of God is.

[6 : 08] It's something that we pray about. We want to glorify God in our lives as well. But what is the glory of God? Well, it's helpful to understand that it is God's holiness that is displayed to the world.

That is, it is the infinite worth of God that is being made manifest, that is being revealed. And in the scriptures, God shows his glory as being the infinite value of God.

He shows his infinite value and it enters into created experience. It's important for us to see that God's glory, his infinite worth is shown in our experience in creation.

And this is a great gift to us. This is the blessing beyond all blessings. That God's glory that we can't comprehend and it is of infinite, inestimable worth is revealed in many ways by God himself to us.

And so Stephen's argument is that God's glory is not confined to the temple, that incredible manifestation of God. He says that when you go through the Old Testament, you're going to see how God shows himself in all of his glory in places far away from the temple, in places that are the most unlikely places and the most unlikely people as well.

[7 : 34] And there's three people he points out. Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. And by the way, everything that he talks about, the Sanhedrin would agree with.

They'd say yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, all down the line. It's not until the application, which has to do with Jesus, that there are problems. It's an application that literally kills him.

But of course, it's the point of the whole Bible. Now look at chapter 7, verse 1. It says the God of glory appeared to the Father Abraham.

God's infinite worth is shown to Father Abraham. Now, why this person? Abraham is a pagan. He worships the moon. And God speaks very clearly to him alone of all the people in the world and says, you must leave everything that is familiar with you, your family, your land, the economy, everything that gives you security.

And I want you to go to a place that I'm going to show you much later, at a later date. You don't know. God's calling him to leave everything that is insecure and go to the place of insecurity.

[8 : 43] And in that call, you have this place that Abraham is in of being completely vulnerable to God. He is weak at that point.

And it's there, in his weakness, that the infinite worth of God is made manifest. And he gives us this incredible promise that we are seeing fulfilled in our lives today through Jesus Christ.

And that promise is this, I will bless you so that you will be a blessing. And in you, all the families of the world will be blessed. You see, God shows his glory by saying, I am going to save the world.

And that that glorious work is going to begin through him of all people. It's not in a magnificent temple where God's going to do this work. But in the wandering homeless man that God most clearly reveals.

That saving work in the Old Testament. So it's a marvelous thing. God's glory in this man's weakness. Now, according to the Bible, you and I are spiritual descendants of Abraham through Jesus.

[9 : 48] And I think that we can relate, in our particular situation at St. John's, to Abraham. Because as with him, God has called us to be obedient and to walk with him.

He has not actually shown us the way that he is taking us. Or where he has taken us to. Only that he will bless the world through the gospel that we carry with us.

Through the gospel that we are faithful to. There is a weakness for us about being in that place. But we, as we hold on to the promise that God will bless the world through our faithfulness.

We find that God is glorified. He is glorified in that call, in our weakness. Well, Stephen turns right away to Joseph, the second person, in verse 9.

And again, he shows that, in verse 9, that Joseph is a man who is in great weakness. Okay? So the patriarchs, the great fathers, are jealous of Joseph.

[10 : 50] And they sell him into Egypt. In their jealousy, they send him into slavery. To a far away land. But, we see this glory of God.

God was with him. God was with him. And not only that, but God rescues him out of all his afflictions in Egypt.

And makes him ruler over Egypt. And then God saves Joseph's family, the forefathers of Israel, from starvation. It's a crucial part in God's work of salvation.

And it takes place through Joseph in the most evil and tragic of circumstances. God brings great good through it. And I think that those four words, God was with him, was an incredible strength for the church at that time to hear.

And it is for us at St. John's as well. Because it says that in every hard time or betrayal or injustice, in which we find it difficult to hope, we are weighed down and things seem to threaten to crush us, there is this promise that in Jesus, God is with us.

[12 : 03] He never wastes our suffering. God comes into the midst of all suffering. Jesus has come into human suffering through the cross. And his glory is perhaps most clearly revealed that in that most weak aspect of humanity, God saves and he works his goodness through the worst evil.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost guarantees what Jesus said to his church. Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

I am with you. This is the gift that the church understood through Stephen's sermon. And it's something that we need to be renewed in our understanding. He is with us in the risen Lord Jesus.

And then finally, in verses 17 through 44, Stephen talks about the giver of the law. Remember, Stephen's accused of blaspheming the law. But he raises up Moses.

And he says, God made Moses to be mighty in his word and deeds in Egypt. And Moses is positioned to save the Hebrew people. He's got all the qualifications.

[13 : 11] He grew up in Pharaoh's palace. But everything tumbles down around him. He kills an Egyptian to protect his own people. And they themselves reject Moses.

And he runs away as a great leader ought to do. You know, he runs away and he goes into the wilderness. He's in exile in the land of Midian for 40 years.

It's the low time in his life. He is homeless in the sense that he's far away from his people. He doesn't know where he's going. There's no security. And he lives a wandering kind of life.

But after 40 years, God speaks to him in a flame of fire in the wilderness around Mount Sinai. In the middle of nowhere, God so powerfully reveals himself to Moses that there is no question that the living God is talking to him.

In fact, so clear is this that God says, I am the living God who is with you. You are standing on holy ground. And God in his power overrides Moses' own huge lack of confidence.

[14 : 19] And look at verse 35. It's a wonderful verse of Moses in his weakness suddenly being transformed by the presence of God. It says, In other words, the one who was rejected and said, you know, who are you to rule and be a judge?

This man God sent to be both ruler and redeemer. The one who saves. The one who releases his people from slavery. So this is the thumbnail sketch that Stephen gives of the Old Testament.

It's an Old Testament overview that, as I said, these guys would have agreed with who were listening to him. And what he does is he shows through that overview that God is present wherever his people are.

particularly in the place of weakness. And his glory shines in the lives of people far away from Israel, long before the temple was built. And in fact, he is saying that the Holy Land is anywhere God was working through his people to save the world and to bless it.

And that's why Stephen says that the Most High doesn't dwell in houses made by hands. But he quotes God's word from Isaiah, Heaven is my throne. Earth is my footstool.

[15 : 44] The temple can't confine or imprison God. There is no one place that contains God's glory. It is too big for that. His work of salvation is so far-reaching.

And then what Stephen does, he makes clear in this, is that God's own people rejected Joseph. They rejected Moses as well. They thrust him aside, he says.

And in their hearts, they turned to Egypt, the place where they were slaves. And all of a sudden, he applies it to his congregation, which is actually the courtroom. And he says, And you are rejecting God's rescuer again.

Just as you rejected Moses and Joseph, you are rejecting the one person who is the perfect presence of God in your lives, the perfect rescuer, the righteous one.

You have betrayed and you have murdered him. That's the one that God had announced well beforehand by the prophets. It is a more serious rejection because they are actually rejecting God himself and his glory in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[16 : 51] Well, this infuriates the council in verse 54. And what does Stephen do? He doesn't stop because at that moment, he has a vision.

And I want you to notice that Stephen hasn't talked about the resurrection yet. He just said, You rejected the righteous one. But the teaching on the resurrection comes by God himself.

Because Stephen says, I have a vision. I see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. I see Jesus alive and exalted in the place of God.

He is the risen one who is with me. It is a significant vision because it's an illustration of the gospel. Jesus, who has been rejected and killed, is risen.

He is God and Lord. And what he is doing now is bringing his people into the very presence of God. And he's doing it with Stephen right in front of their eyes.

[17 : 51] You see it beautifully in Stephen's life in this vision because the Lord Jesus stands to welcome Stephen and affirm Stephen at the moment of his greatest weakness.

And it really reveals to us what Jesus does for every faithful Christian who stands for him in the time of great weakness, who is faithful to him in the time of weakness and understands his presence.

God welcomes and affirms them in Jesus Christ. Well, we know that what happens after this is the gospel offends the council so much that they kill him.

But what we see in Stephen is this amazing awareness of the living Jesus in his life. Because if you look down, it says that he asked Jesus in verse 59 to receive my spirit.

Lord Jesus, he calls him God at this point. He says, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Just as Jesus asked the Father on the cross. And then in verse 60, he said, Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them.

[18 : 58] And of course, Jesus said that as well. And he fell asleep. In this violent death, he dies peacefully in the understanding that Jesus, the risen Lord, is with him.

And he dies with Jesus in that sense. Jesus is present in his death. And this must have had a power effect on Saul. Saul is mentioned there in verse 1, chapter 8.

And Saul met the risen Lord Jesus a very short time later. But I just want to close by saying that this whole thing that happened, which is so awful in one way, is actually one of the most wonderful days of the life of the church.

Clearly, the church has been deeply encouraged by Stephen's boldness. What happened on that day probably was an awful sense of grief.

The church was deeply shaken by his loss. They had lost a deeply loved and powerful leader for the gospel who also had a servant heart, that combination which is so wonderful in the church.

[20 : 03] But not only that, on the day of Stephen's death, a great persecution arose, and they were scattered from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. They would have felt weakened and uncertain about the future.

It felt like a time of failure. But Luke shows that this is a time of greatness, that God reveals his glory and his saving work. The church understood that God was with Stephen and that he was ministering to him and speaking through him.

Luke is clear that God in his power made that day glorious because the church understood, their eyes were open to the fact that theirs was not a little movement confined to the holy city of Jerusalem.

The church is actually carrying out God's saving work into the world, to the ends of the world, to bless the world as Abraham was promised. And that's why this sermon is so important.

Stephen prepares them for this by teaching that God's presence and glory fills everyone with faith in Jesus. Every place where God's people were actively witnessing is a holy place.

[21 : 13] And so for us at St. John's, we need to understand that God is with his church, particularly in weakness, when we must depend upon him. We need to understand that this building does not confine God.

It's very tempting, especially when there is a beautiful church building, to see it as the place where God is. But the truth is, is that God sends us out. He uses places like this to send us out.

God is with us wherever we meet together in Jesus' name. Each one of you who has faith in Jesus is a beautiful temple. The Bible says your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

And not only that, but all of us together are being built into that temple as well. It's not made of mortar and concrete. So the place that you speak about, where you witness to Jesus, the place where you pray, these are the holy places.

And that means the place where you serve for Jesus' sake, the place where you love your brother and sister in Christ, the place where you make decisions, your workplace, the place where you have colleagues that don't know the Lord Jesus, these are holy places.

[22 : 25] And so they are places where God's glory shines through you and what you do and what you say. So very likely, holy places are offices, which can be very unholy looking places, or boardrooms, or hospital rooms, or classrooms, or coffee shops, or kitchens, or living rooms, places where we honor God in what we do and what we say.

And I know from my own experience, and I know you've experienced it as well, it is sometimes very, very difficult for us to be faithful to God. It can be inconvenient, it can be incredibly costly, and it can be something that makes us insecure.

But God has called us to bless the world. And wonderfully, the great thing about Stephen's sermon is that our feelings of inadequacy can no longer be an excuse.

In fact, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Stephen himself show us that it isn't the place that you feel most weak that God intends to show his power and his glory.

He did this through them in the most desperate of circumstances. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus does it through you in the very challenging places where you feel weak.

[23 : 43] There is where God reveals his glory and his saving work. And that's why God speaks to us directly through Paul and says, My power is made perfect in your weakness.

Thanks be to God for the presence of the Lord Jesus in our church and in each of our lives. Amen. Let us pray. There will be moments of quiet between the spoken prayers when you may add your own intercessions.

Heavenly Father, Almighty God, Holy One, Loving Abba, we are so thankful that we can come to you trusting in your wisdom, your provision, your care for every detail of our lives as individuals, as families, and as a church.

We know that we are weak and often besieged and beset by many things. But we have assurance that as we turn to you and step out in faith as Stephen did, you will give us your strength.

we will see your glory. Thank you, Father, that you are with us, that by your Holy Spirit and through your risen Son, Jesus, you reach out to embrace us, to live in us, and to bless us, and through us, the people of the world.

[25 : 25] Father, as we approach Remembrance Day, we are mindful of the many areas of the world in conflict.

We think particularly of Afghanistan and pray for the Canadian Armed Forces stationed there, that you would offer them your safety and protection.

But we also pray for Iraq, with the recent bombings in Baghdad, and Pakistan, and the many civilians in all of these countries who suffer loss of life, of family, and of community.

relieve the suffering of these people, and bring your peace to these war-torn regions. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, we pray for those in our city, our province, and our country, and beyond, who have fallen ill with swine flu.

We remember those who are most vulnerable in our communities, particularly the young, and pray for their protection. Father, we thank you for the vaccines and the medical care that is available, and entrust our loved ones into your hands.

[27 : 13] Amen. Heavenly Father, we now bring to you the church worldwide, particularly the part of the body who suffer on a daily basis for their faith in the Lord Jesus.

We join others around the world on this Sunday, praying with our suffering sisters and brothers, especially in Muslim and communist countries.

Father, lift their burdens, keep them courageous in the faith, and bring them relief, safety, and comfort.

Lord. And as we continue to think about the church beyond our own community, we pray for Richie Spidell with Navigators, Kirsten Rummery with Living Waters, both here in Vancouver, and then Jeremy Curry with YWAM in Nepal and Tibet, and Erica and Jess Catalan in Jerusalem.

Jesus, we ask that you would care for them, protect them, and supply their every need. Father, we lift to you the Synod of the Anglican Network in Canada, meeting in Niagara this coming week.

[28 : 58] We pray for Charlie Masters, Trevor Walters, and Stephen Leung, who will be consecrated as bishop, that you would enable them by your Holy Spirit to honor and serve you.

Father, we ask that your wisdom and leading would be very evident in this gathering, and that it would be a time of encouragement and reflection for all those who attend.

Heavenly Father, we turn now to our church family and our clergy and staff.

We particularly remember David and ask for healing for him, that you will sustain him, protect him, and encourage him as he convalesces.

We pray, too, for Bronwyn, Ben, and Josh, that they will know the covering of your Holy Spirit, your comfort and assurance during this time.

[30 : 08] Father, we lift up Dan and Jim and pray for strength and protection, both for them and their families. And we remember our trustees and all of the staff who work tirelessly on our behalf.

Thank you for them and grant them your wisdom during these challenging times. And as we await news of the court decision, keep us looking to you as a church family, united and confident, with hearts full of gratitude and peace.

Thank you. Heavenly Father, we take a few moments to remember others in our church family who are in special need of our prayers this morning.

We remember the family of Dr. Don Ricks, Lori, and Neil as they mourn the loss of a dear father. And we also lift up to you Rowena, Harold, George, Owen, Marguerite, and Rosemary.

We thank you for your loving kindness to each one and pray that they might know your great mercy and healing touch. Lastly, Jesus, we bring to you any special concern that might be on our hearts this day.

[31 : 49] All these prayers we offer in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen. Amen.