

Growing Through Opposition

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[0 : 00] Thank you Lisa and let me add my welcome to Lucas. As has been said my name is Alistair. I have the privilege of being the assistant here at the church and this morning it is my privilege to open up Acts 4 for us. So please do keep that passage open in front of you as we look through it this morning.

Now many of you will know that my wife Sabina and I in 2019 took a six week trip to the Middle East to help serve a local church reach Muslim refugees with the gospel.

And it was an eye-opening time for us to see what ministry looked like in that setting where it is illegal to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. We met many faithful men and women who were serving the Lord at great risk to themselves and to their families.

We'd heard stories of missionaries who'd been found out by the government that they were sharing the gospel and so they were sent home from one day to the next. And one night a group of us sat with a missionary couple as they talked about their stories and their experiences of their time there. And someone in this group asked the couple if it was a hard decision for them to move to the Middle East. To intentionally move and live under the persecution for the gospel.

[1 : 19] And his response really challenged all of us that night. This man who was the same age as me, was newly married, had a son who was one year old, said that it wasn't a hard decision at all to move to the Middle East.

Because every single Christian counts the cost to follow Jesus when they become a Christian. And one of those costs is persecution and potentially death for our faith.

The decision, he said, had already been made years ago when he decided to follow Jesus. And what we learned in our time there, and what we see through the book of Acts, is that the gospel grows as it is opposed.

Throughout history, nations and rulers have sought to silence the voices of those calling people to believe in Jesus. But with every single attempt to quench the gospel, to suppress the good news of Jesus, the exact opposite has happened and it has grown.

Take Iran, for example. Which, according to Open Doors, is eighth on the list of countries where Christians are extremely persecuted.

[2 : 38] In Iran, it is estimated that there are one million Christians who meet every week in small, underground, illegal house churches.

Constantly under the threat of imprisonment, violence and death. But despite that persecution, it's estimated that the church in Iran grows about 20% every single year.

The gospel grows as it is opposed. That's what we see happening in the book of Acts. This morning, we're going to see how the early church faced persecution and how they responded to it. We're going to see how the gospel grows as it is opposed. As we consider three things from Acts chapter 4. Persecution, proclamation and prayer.

So the first thing we see in this passage is the persecution of God's people in verses 1 to 7. The persecution of God's people.

[3 : 44] Now think back with me to the story in Acts chapter 3. Peter and John there, they're going up to the temple to pray. And they come across this beggar who's sitting at the gate.

Lame, unable to walk. And he's been that way for his entire life of 40 years. And he asks Peter and John for some money to get him by through the day.

But boy, does he get more than he bargained for. Because by the power of the Holy Spirit within them, they heal him in the name of Jesus Christ. And this man immediately jumps to his feet and starts walking and leaping and praising God.

Without a doubt, a massive grin on his face. And people in the temple are completely amazed. And so Peter stands up in front of this crowd.

And he gives them a belter of a sermon. Of who Jesus is. And that it was through the power of the resurrected Jesus that this man can now walk. You can almost feel the excitement and the buzz as this guy is walking around praising God.

[4 : 48] Never been able to walk in his life before. And the crowd hanging on every single word that comes through Peter's mouth. You can feel the buzz. The tension and the excitement in the air is unbelievable.

But then we turn to Acts chapter 4 and it's all over. Instead of cheers of happiness and excitement, you can hear heckles in verse 1. As the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees storm through the crowd in anger.

Because they are greatly disturbed. They don't like the message being proclaimed. Which Luke summarizes in verse 2. That Peter was proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

And so Peter and John are seized in verse 3. Thrown into jail for the night. Waiting to go on trial in the morning before the Sanhedrin. A kind of religious supreme court of the Jewish elite.

Now imagine how they're feeling in that moment. They could have thought this is it. We're done for. It's all over. Sitting in prison because they'd healed a man and told people about Jesus.

[6 : 08] What a contrast to that excitement and awe that they experienced just moments earlier. But all is not lost. Even in this persecution.

Because look at the amazing news in verse 4. Many who heard the message believed. So the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000.

The gospel grows as it is opposed. So whilst these religious leaders were fighting through the crowd to get to Peter and John. And lock them in a cell for the night.

Maybe they overlooked the fact of what was actually happening before their eyes. Whilst they're trying to stop the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ. It's having the opposite effect.

As the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives. Many who heard believed. If you remember back to the beginning of Acts.

[7 : 11] In chapter 1 verse 15. The local church began with just 120 men and women. And then at Pentecost. A further 3,000 men are added to the church.

In chapter 2 verse 41. And now we see that the number of men in this group of Christians has grown to 5,000. Now that is exponential growth.

And that's only the men being counted. So taking into account that women and children there as well. The number would be much higher. Friends, regardless of what the world throws at the church.

Regardless of how the devil tries to silence the voices of those calling people to repent and believe in Jesus. The gospel grows as it is opposed.

Now we might not be thrown in jail for sharing Jesus with people. But the persecution of the Lord's people comes in all different ways. It can be uncomfortable and scary to stand up and proclaim Jesus to a world that rejects him and refuses to acknowledge him.

[8 : 25] It's difficult to be shunned in the workplace because people know you're a Christian. So they don't invite you to things because of your views. It's hard to think of friends and family members rejecting you because of your faith in Christ.

The Bible is crystal clear. Christians will be opposed and persecuted. But we are also told that the gospel grows as it is opposed.

So how did Peter and John respond to this persecution? Well, that's the second thing we see in this passage. The proclamation of God's word in verses 8 to 22.

The proclamation of God's word. Now imagine the scene. You have two fishermen from Galilee standing before the most religious and important group of people in all of Israel.

These fishermen have little to no education at all. And they're going to be cross-examined by people who have spent their whole lives dedicated to understanding the Old Testament.

[9 : 33] And understanding the things of God. But all of their learning has amounted to absolutely nothing because they ask in verse 7, By what power or what name did you do this?

They can't even discern a work of God that happens before their very eyes. They refuse to believe the truth. And I'll contrast that with Peter who filled with the Holy Spirit, verse 8, Speaks boldly and clearly about who Jesus is.

And he even has a better grasp of the Old Testament than these learned men do. Peter answers their question in verse 10. Read with me. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, But whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Now do you see that boldness that the Spirit gives Peter to speak with such authority? To men much more educated, much more trained than he is.

He even beats them at their own game in verse 11 by quoting from the Old Testament in Psalm 118, verse 22.

[10:47] Peter tells these men that thought they were wise, That they have actually no idea what they've just done. They have fulfilled what the Old Testament said would happen hundreds of years before it took place.

That Jesus would be rejected. But that God made him the cornerstone of the church. That's what verse 11 means.

Now we don't make buildings like this anymore, so we maybe don't understand exactly what Peter is saying, But these guys would have known exactly what he was illustrating.

Back then the cornerstone bore the entire weight of a building. It was the standard, it was the spirit level, if you will, of how straight and safe the building was going to be.

If the cornerstone was off, if you had the wrong cornerstone, the building would crumble. Now the religious leaders thought Jesus was just a random teacher who went against the status quo.

[11:52] But he is the foundation of the church. And if you imagine this entire court scene as a boxing match, the Sanhedrin are definitely on the ropes.

Fighting for air, looking for a free seconds to come out. But Peter is just about to deliver the final blow. Verse 12, Peter says this. Salvation is found in no one else.

For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. Now remember who Peter is speaking to.

A group of the religious elite who thought that their religiosity was enough for them to be right with God. A group of people who assumed because they were born into the people of Israel that they were automatically in God's good books.

Well Peter gives them a wake up call. And it's one that we need to hear too. We cannot earn our way into heaven. No amount of religious living will save you.

[13:03] You can have absolutely perfect Sunday morning attendance and still not know Jesus. You can have all the right answers to the difficult questions.

But if you do not believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead. You are not saved. Salvation is found in no other name than Jesus Christ.

Now maybe you are here and you are not a Christian. Listen to that message. There is nothing and no one else in this world that can save you but Jesus.

There are not multiple ways to God. Jesus isn't a good option among many. Jesus is the only way to the Father. Will you come to Jesus and be saved?

It is an exclusive message but it is an invitation. Will you listen? And so Peter has just stood up and he has taken this group of religious elite to school.

[14:15] They see Peter's boldness and his courage. They recognize that he is just an ordinary unschooled man as verse 13 says. But something is different.

Once someone's been through a life altering moment everything about them can change. Their perspective on life. The way they interact with others. The way they perceive everything going on around them.

And you can't quite put your finger on it but something just seems different. That's exactly what the Sanhedrin see in Peter and John. But they know exactly what the cause for it is.

Verse 13. When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled ordinary men. They were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Now that verse should be a huge encouragement for every single Christian because we are ordinary. We fail all the time.

[15:21] We make mistakes every single day. We don't have all the knowledge in the world. We don't always have the right words to say. We don't have the ability to convince people to become Christians.

We are sinful broken human beings. But. But. Like Peter. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. And the wonderful news.

Is that God can take ordinary people. Like you. And like me. And do extraordinary things for his kingdom. And he does it every single day. All over the world.

Do you know what my prayer has been this entire week. As I've prepared this sermon. Do you know what I want people. I would like people to be able to say. About my life after I'm dead and gone. I want people to be able to say. That they knew I'd been with Jesus. That's my prayer. And this should characterize every aspect.

[16:24] Of every Christian's life. People should know. That we are Christians. Based on how we speak. How we act.

And how we face persecution. For the gospel. People should know. That we have spent time. With Jesus. What did that look like.

For Peter and John. What does that have to do. With the fact that the gospel grows. As it's opposed. Well the Sanhedrin refused. To acknowledge the truth. That the lame man was healed. A wonderful miracle done. In the name of Jesus. They wanted to reject. All of the evidence. But they couldn't. They had all the evidence. Right in front of them.

They wanted. To refuse it. And that's what they do. In verses 14 to 16. And in verses 17 to 21.

[17:19] They threaten the disciples. Never to speak about Jesus again. But remember. The gospel grows. As it is opposed. The tighter their fist.

Gets in anger. And frustration. That these men are sharing Jesus. The more. They attempt to stop. The gospel spreading. The harder the disciples fight.

The harder they go out. And tell Jesus. To the world. Nothing. Nothing. Will stop them. Sharing the gospel. As they say in verse 20. We cannot help.

Speaking about what we have seen. And heard. Now we get this. Don't we? We do the same. If we like something. We get enthusiastic. With people.

And we want to share it with them. For example. Two months ago. Sabina and I. Got a new cooking gadget. And it has changed. Our lives completely. And it has changed. The food.

[18:16] That we eat. And if you've spoken to me. In the last two months. You've probably already heard. Quite a bit about it. So I apologize. For bringing it up again. But that's normal. Isn't it?

For you. It might be the new. Netflix series. Or TV program. It might be the hobby. Or the sports you play. It may be a new skill. You picked up during lockdown. When we find something we love.

Something that changes our life. We cannot help. But tell everyone about it. So why don't we do the same. With Jesus. We're all evangelists.

Of something. Let's make it the thing. That really matters. The good news. About Jesus. So these men. Had been with Jesus.

Their lives were never the same. Again. And that meant. That in the face of persecution. And threats. Their response. Was to continue. To proclaim. The word of God.

[19:15] And friends. That should be us. That should be our response too. We will want to back down. When opposition comes. Because it's easier.

To shy away. We are called. To suffer for Christ. When we follow Jesus. We are signing up. For a life of suffering.

But it is a life of suffering. With Jesus. It is a life of sharing. The greatest news. In the world. That the world can ever hear. That God sent his son.

To die in our place. To make forgiveness. Possible. And give us new life. The life that we were created. To live. We cannot keep that news.

To ourselves. But even in the face. Of persecution. Regardless of how severe it is. We must proclaim. The word of God.

[20:12] The gospel grows. As it is opposed. And the last thing. That we see in this passage. Is the prayer. For godly boldness.

In verses 23 to 31. The prayer. For godly boldness. So Peter and John. Are released from jail. They've been through. A tough ordeal.

As they were cross-examined. By the religious elite. Of their day. And now. They might be tempted. To head home. To put their feet up. To rest.

I know that's what. I would be tempted to do. But Peter and John's. First response. Is that they want to go. And gather with the Lord's people. They want to see. Their church.

Family. So they immediately go. To their church community. And tell them everything. That's been going on. But from the reading. Of verses 23 to 24.

[21 : 06] It doesn't. You don't get the sense. That they're grumbling. You don't get the sense. That they're angry. Or complaining. Well their response.

Is the right one. And man. I wish I was. As I was writing this. I was convicted. By their prayer. Because that's what they do. They gather with the Lord's people. And they pray. As they're persecuted. In verse 24.

They say. Sovereign Lord. You made the heavens. And the earth. And the sea. And everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit. Through the mouth of your servant. Our father David.

Why do the nations rage. And the peoples plot in vain. The kings of the earth. Rise up. And the rulers. Band together. Against the Lord. And against his anointed one.

Often I find. Our response. To persecution. Is to ask God. To take it away. We don't want. To be mocked. For being Christians. We don't want.

[22 : 03] To be shunned. By our family. And our friends. We don't want. The emotional. Or maybe even. The physical scars. Of persecution. So we ask God. To just take it away.

It's hard. But we would do far better. To respond. As they do. Recognizing. That God is in control. And that he can use.

Even the most painful. Things in our lives. For his purposes. The gospel grows. As it is. Opposed. And on top of that.

Verses 25. To 28. Show that the early church. Saw this opposition. This persecution. As a direct fulfillment. Of Psalm 2. The nations.

The Gentiles. The nation of Israel. Rulers. And leaders. All gathered together. In opposition. Against God. Against his anointed one. As of the cross. They crucified.

[22 : 58] The Messiah. Sent to save them. And they are continuing. Even now. To rage against God. By persecuting the church. Friends.

We are promised. Suffering. If we follow Christ. Christ. But the Bible. Encourages us. With two truths. When that. Two truths. When that happens. First of all.

God is in control. Regardless of what your situation. May feel like. God is. In control. And secondly. When we suffer. For the gospel.

We are partaking. In the suffering. Of Jesus Christ. And somehow. Somehow. God will use it. For his glory. The gospel. Grows. As it is.

Opposed. Now. What we do. When we are persecuted. Is important. We should learn. From the early church. And put prayer. As our priority. It's so easy.

[23 : 54] To forget. About prayer. Until we've tried. Everything else. In our ability. But our first port of call. Should always be. To run to God. In prayer. And what we pray.

Is also important. They pray. Look with me. In verse. 29. Now Lord. Consider their threats. And enable your servants. To speak your word. With great boldness.

Stretch out your hand. To heal. And perform signs. And wonders. Through the name. Of your holy servant. Jesus. They pray. For boldness.

They pray. That even in the face. Of threats. That by the power. Of the Holy Spirit. They would be bold. To proclaim Christ. To the world. And share. Jesus. Friends.

That should be our prayer. Every single day. Every single day. This is exactly how. Ordinary people. Like you and me. Do extraordinary things.

[24 : 52] For the gospel. By relying on the Holy Spirit. Not by our own intellect. Not by any skills. And not by human enthusiasm. But by a work of the Holy Spirit.

In our lives. Who empowers. And enables us. To go out. To a lost world. And tell them. How to be saved. Why not start.

Every morning. This week. With that simple prayer. Lord. Enable your servant. Today. To speak your word. With boldness. Pray that. And act on it.

And act. In anticipation. That the Lord. Will equip you. And enable you. With boldness. To proclaim. Jesus. To a dying world. In verse 31.

We see. That by God's grace. Their prayer. Is answered. Immediately. After they prayed. The place. Where they were meeting. Was shaken. And they were all filled. With the Holy Spirit. And spoke the word.

[25 : 49] Of God. Boldly. Friends. When we come to God. And we pray. For boldness. By his spirit. To proclaim the gospel. Despite persecution.

The Lord. Is not. Reluctant. At all. To grant us. That prayer. Because. Such boldness. Goes in perfect.

According. With his will. That his people. Would share the gospel. So let's pray. For boldness. Because the Lord. Will give it. By his spirit.

And let's act on it. I think back. To my missionary friend. In the Middle East. And how spot on. He was. That when we become.

Christians. We have already. Decided. To willingly. Suffer. For the sake of Christ. We will. Be persecuted. But we must. Continue. To proclaim. God's word.

[26 : 42] And to pray. For godly boldness. By the Holy Spirit. Who enables us. To act. In the face of opposition. Friends. The wonderful truth.

That should spur us on. As we are persecuted. Is that the gospel grows. As it is opposed. We just have to be ready. To act.

And do the mission. God has given us to do. God has given us. God has given us. God has given us. Let's pray together. Father. Anytime we face.

Persecution. And opposition. To the gospel. Our temptation. Is to shy away. To hide. But father. We ask now. That by your Holy Spirit. You would give. Each and every. One of us. Boldness. Give us. The desire. To take the gospel. Out to the world. To reach.

[27 : 37] Our family members. Our friends. Our work colleagues. Everyone around us. With the gospel. Because they are lost. And on a path. That is leading. To an eternity.

Of God's judgment. And yet. We have the message. We have the good news. Of Jesus. That God. Has made forgiveness. Possible. That salvation.

Has been made possible. Through. The work of Jesus Christ. On the cross. Holy Spirit. We ask. That you would give us. Boldness. And we ask.

That you would. Help us. Act on it. To share the gospel. With the world. We ask this. In Jesus name. And for the upbuilding. Of the kingdom of God. Amen.