

The Threat of Christianity

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[0 : 0 0] Now, once we return to Acts chapter 5, and that section entitled The Apostles, Arrested and Freed, we briefly looked at that in our engine room down at the church a couple of weeks ago, and we're going to look at it again this morning.

Now I think for the vast majority of us as Christians, opposition makes us uncomfortable. We don't like opposition. We certainly don't like confrontation, and we are sometimes confrontation averse in our lives, and there's nothing wrong with that.

But it is an unpalatable paradox in our Christian lives. And the paradox is that very often when we are knowing blessing, when we are knowing good times, that along with that, trouble comes.

And that is often spoken of in the Bible. I think we've seen it, I think we've seen it at a wider level in our denomination. We've been battered by several battles that have happened to us, battles that have gone alongside blessing that we've seen in the church.

And that can happen personally also in your Christian life. You can know good things, and this isn't healthy, but sometimes we're kind of looking over our shoulder saying, when's the battering going to come?

[1 : 3 1] And that's not healthy either, so I don't want to give you that impression. But last week we did see a couple of wences ago, we saw that the early church in Acts had huge amount of blessing.

A whole lot of people were coming to faith. Jerusalem was being turned upside down. The community really loved one another, and things were going exceptionally well.

And there's this solid punch that comes in in chapter 5. Three bouts of opposition and suffering and difficulty. One caused by internal sin, Corey looked at last week.

This week we're looking at the persecution that the church received from the authorities, from the powers that be, and then there was also unrest, moving forward we see unrest, that was related to the growth in the church.

Things weren't getting done properly because it was growing so quickly and people were being left out, and so that was a kind of organisational unrest. We can sympathise with that a little bit in some ways.

[2 : 3 2] But I think it was really important to understand when we take a scripture like this, we want to apply it in our own lives, and remember at least three things very briefly by introduction. One is that we're not helpless victims.

So let's not think we're helpless victims, particularly when we think of opposition from outside persecution or when authorities stand against Christianity.

Secondly, we need to remember that we're in a spiritual warfare, but there is only one ultimate outcome. It's not an equal warfare between good and evil.

There is only one positive outcome and that is the Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign and king and lord. And therefore thirdly, in him, we will overcome.

So these are three kind of introductory lessons that we want to take from this passage. But I want to broadly look at this passage and don't switch off because you think it isn't relevant, because you think it's a society a long ago, because I want to take it and apply it quickly to our own society because it's really very relevant and it's very similar to the world in which you are going out tomorrow into and I'm going out to, the world we see in our media and on our television screens and everything else.

[3 : 50] But what I want to say is remember that we oughtn't to be and fight against being discouraged and being overwhelmed by the way in which the world in which we live laughs at our faith and ridicules our God and opposes what we believe in, very easy to just feel overwhelmed by it.

I often feel overwhelmed by it. I like to be liked. I think you like to be liked. And therefore when we find ourselves as Christians not liked in the world in which we live, in the society in which we live, in the media that we see and in the politics of our nation, that is difficult for us to cope with.

So by way of introduction the Christian message we see here clearly is a threat. The Christian message, the Christian life, Christian message is a threat. Verse 17, the hybris rose up and all who were with them, that is the party of the Sadducees, filled with jealousy.

They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. So for a certain group of people, the leaders, the politicians, the religious authorities, the power brokers of the day, the Christian message was counter-revolutionary.

It was a threat to them. The decision makers, the controllers, the liberal elite moralists of today, the vested interests find the Christian message a threat.

[5 : 22] They did then and they still do now. Those who want to hold on today to the status quo in the economics of power with a rich and poor divide, those who want to enforce a numerality on society and on every individual, the new decision makers of today, they know that the Christian message is a threat.

The Christianity is dangerous. It's a threat today, as it was then, against moralistic religion.

It's a threat against control and against power. Why is that? Because it speaks in your life and mine and it speaks in our church of a higher authority.

It speaks of a deeper allegiance. It speaks of the power of a changed heart and a heart that cannot be reached by fear and by control.

And that's a hugely significant message for you and me today because we're going out into that world all the time, a world that wants to squeeze us into its mold all the time and we get it in all the various public channels that we find ourselves confronted with.

[6 : 43] Here in the text, the leaders, political and religious, were jealous. They represent the people power of the day, those who had authority and control.

And they were fearful of the authority and of the healings and of the power and of the changed lives that was being reeked by the apostles.

And they did seem to hold all the cards against the apostles and against their teaching from a human point of view, didn't they? They had already the power to destroy Jesus.

They had crucified Him. They'd got rid of the leader. Gamaliel remembered that. They'd got rid of the leader. And they felt confident of threatening the remaining leaders.

They were kind of poor and educated people, so they could imprison them and they would silence them. And they had money and they had influence and they had power and they had legal authority to silence the Christian church.

[7 : 50] It was overwhelming. It was an overwhelming opposition that the new Christian faith faced and the individual Christians faced in the first century.

The church? In comparison with this mighty, powerful political machine, political and religious machine, they were uneducated hillbillies from Galilee.

No power, no money, no influence. All they had was the message of a new life. So who was weak?

And today, I think we're faced with the same, at least comparable situation that we find ourselves in. We find the power of the secular state and that liberal elite and lawmakers and the establishment ranged against Christianity, ranged against your faith and mine with its determination to speak of absolute truth.

And that state and that power under whom we must serve and obey and follow until it turns us against our God has great authority, great influence and has resources beyond compare.

[9 : 21] What are we? Who are we? It's overwhelming. And as things continue, it probably isn't too far away when Christian leaders and believers are at least threatened with imprisonment.

There's that determination to eradicate the gospel and Christianity from the public square, from the voice that people will hear, from the legislature, from education.

And its morality and your morality and mine is constantly demonized because it stands against the politics of greed, of lies, of unquestionable rights and of free and unfettered choice.

And that can leave us dispirited as Christians. It can leave us hopeless. It can leave us simply just wanting to have our own quiet little group of people and forget about what's happening outside.

It can lead us to compromise our faith because that's much easier. Well, there's so many issues that we can compromise on and then be friends with the world in which we live and not be radical in our Christianity.

[10 : 41] And that always is a danger for us in our lives. But I want to recognize briefly four truths that I hope counteract that in our personal lives and in the way we think and act publicly as Christians and think about the world that surrounds us.

I don't want us to wag the finger at the world. I'm hoping simply that our analysis is just factual of what's happening.

And it's to work in this world and love this world and serve in this world and go forward into this world in which we live and stand up. But I want to recognize four truths from this passage that I hope will encourage us, not briefly encourage us, I'll look at it briefly.

And then I hope you'll be in a long way encouraged for a long time. First is that God is in control. We remember and know and understand and we believe from this passage and many other passages of Scripture that God is in control.

And I give you a really highlighted that in his own way. Not convinced about him, not convinced about the wisdom of hedging your bets about whether God is involved in something or not.

[11 : 57] But nonetheless he said, if God is in this, we will not be able to overthrow them. And what he says there is the message that we find consistently throughout the whole of God's word is that God is the one who is sovereign and is in control.

Luke writes the book of Acts because we remember he says that I want to move on from what Jesus begun to do in the book of Luke and what he continues to do as he sets up his church in the book of Acts.

It's the unfolding of his sovereign plan, of his sovereign purposes. We see his power. We see changed lives. We see when the great strength of the public opposition in terms of leadership throws the apostles in prison that an angel of the Lord comes down and releases them.

So there's this great miracle that happens. People's lives are changed. God intervenes because his work must progress. God is sovereign and in control. And there's a great verse in Genesis which reminds us of the constant theme of the Bible.

It's a very opposite verse where Joseph is reunited with his brothers who, of course, had intended to kill him, thought he was dead.

[13 : 14] And he says to them, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good for the saving of many lives. And that's a counter-intuitive recognition of the way God works.

About what humanity and what Satan intends for evil, God turns round and uses it for the saving of many lives. He is sovereign and he is in control.

Now, please don't get me wrong. That's never an excuse for us to be fatalistic. Or just to shrug our shoulders and say, well, okay, sir, I'll say that.

Whatever will be will be. What is it, I think, wise for us to use that truth to hedge our bets? Well, you know, if Christianity is true, then we'll find out one day, a bit like Gimeliel, and say, you know, just maybe before I die, I'll recognize it's right, and then I'll put my trust in God.

And you can live your whole life gambling with whether God is sovereign and in control or not. And yet that is not what we are encouraged in any way to do, because we recognize that the sovereign God has the power of life and of renewal and refreshment and of trust.

[14 : 27] As we trust in him and follow him, we are reminded that we should fear nobody. And our task is to keep on sharing his love and his grace and power.

That was what marked the New Testament church, wasn't it? It was that paradox in a sense that we looked at on Wednesday night in the city group, that they were full of grace and power, that the two went together.

We, sometimes think grace is sweet and soft and sappy and sentimental, and power is what we're after. But power without grace is like grace without power.

They're the two sides of the same coin, but it's not the world's power, it is the power of the living God to recognize and know that he alone can change our hearts.

So the chaos of our current authority, and it is chaos, the morality and the direction and the thinking of this world is becoming more and more chaotic.

[15 : 33] Their idols have feet of clay, and we thank God that our God is good and just and loving. So God is in control. That's the first thing. The second thing is that the gospel is seditious, good news.

It's rebellious, good news. In verse 29, the apostles say, Peter and the apostles answered, we must obey God rather than men.

The God of our Father raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. And in verse 42 we have these words, and every day in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

It's a great phrase, I haven't got time to look at that, but the Christ is Jesus. And they were threatened with further imprisonment and with death, but they continued to preach the good news.

So the gospel is seditious, it's rebellious, good news. In other words, when the church and when Christians are at our best, when we are living and preaching the good news, then we will be threatening.

[16 : 48] We will be threatening, and we'll be threatening first to ourselves and to our own comforts and to our own self-centred hearts. When our identity is in Christ, there's that humble self-awareness, and it sets us free to serve and follow Him.

So holiness and recognizing who Jesus Christ is, a thing of beauty. I'm not advocating in any way that would be censorious or judgmental, because genuine Christian living is the whole of the law.

What is it? Is loving God and loving your neighbour from a grace filled heart. That's the power of the gospel, and that is the rebellion of the gospel, because you will need to stand up, and I will need to stand up and say no to a culture of blame, to a culture of undeniable rights for everyone, to a culture of self-absorption.

We will need to. Because Christ's message incites within ourselves a rebellion against greed and materialism and idolatry.

And it stands up today for the sacredness of life at either end of the spectrum. It rejects populist control from outside.

[18 : 05] We are not and should never be the flunky or the lackey of the state. The church should never be in that place. The church should be the conscience of the state, and you as a Christian should be a conscience to your friends, because Christ is a conscience in your life and has changed and transformed your lives.

We can't be a people who constantly, and the temptation is for me to compromise truth on the altar of expediency, because it's easier, because I want to be popular and I want to get on.

There is truth that makes the gospel seditious, rebellious, and that's great. It challenges the self-righteousness and the comparative morality and the low view of humanity that our society holds.

We hold a low view of humanity. We hold a view that doesn't recognize that we are image-bearers, the unborn child, the down syndrome person, the aged, the old, the infirm, that costs so much money.

All of these things, as God has thrown out of the picture, we recognize and we see the inhumanity and the brutality and the harshness of the world in which we live.

[19 : 27] And we are to stand up with seditious living for Jesus Christ. It's easy for us to cower with our faith.

It's easy to fuse ourselves towards society's norms and expectations.

It's easy to get drunk and to get laid and to be in a slipstream of the latest model and ethical revolution. It's easy to make money unbridled without concern for who and how it's spent to be selfishly ambitious, to be pleasure-seeking, hedonistic.

It's easy to be fearful, to be controlled and to be silenced. We go back to Christ with His resurrection power and His new life and His good news and His Holy Spirit.

And that's all we have. That's all we have. That's the only weapons that the New Testament church had. That is what turned their world upside down for good, for encouragement.

[20 : 39] Please don't think, and it's very easy to think, that I'm preaching a moralism. I certainly am not preaching moralism. I hate moralism because moralism is the truth without Jesus Christ.

And it's always pointing the finger at other people. And it's always nastily reactionary. There's no grace. There's no humility. There's no softness.

I'm not speaking about that. I'm just recognizing that in our lives we are on a collision course because we have a higher authority and one who we believe offers goodness and life and who offers wholeness and healing.

But of course, the challenge is His Lordship and our spiritual condition of sin and separation from Him. So I hope counteracting that potential danger of moralism is remembering that the gospel is also a people movement.

It's a people movement. In verse 14, we didn't read this. Corrie would have read it last week. More than ever, believers were added to the Lord in multitudes of both men and women.

[21 : 47] And in verse 42, we also have that recognition that more and more people did not cease preaching and teaching, going from house to house, speaking to ordinary people about the gospel.

So the gospel is a people movement. Now that brings us right into our own lives and right into our own neighborhoods and among our colleagues and friends.

The power institutions, the authorities, the media, they have a powerful agenda against change. And sometimes the church does as well, of course.

And that can be frustrating. You know, as a leader in the church, and maybe I find it a lot of times when people in the church still say, church say something about that in the media. Why doesn't the church get involved more in these areas?

Now I think a lot of people are trying very hard to get involved in these things. Maybe the media isn't interested in what the church has to say, certainly not the free church, unless there are scandalous, salacious things on the go.

[22 : 50] But there are people who are involved in these areas. And there are people who we must pray for in these areas of leadership within our nation. But as a body, we recognize that it's very difficult to work in that context almost to change the politics or to change the legislation or to change the direction of the media as a whole.

We don't really have a great deal of interest, of, we don't have a great deal of influence in that area. But we have a great message for the people, for the people.

We can't necessarily change the world in which we live, in the society in which we live. But this passage reminds us that we've got a great message for people, for ordinary people.

And Jerusalem was turned upside down because people came to faith in Jesus Christ. Generally the authorities did not. The authorities, the power brokers, the leaders, they resisted this great powerful movement.

But the people were changed and we live among, because we are ordinary suffering lost humanity. And we have good news for our neighbors and our friends.

[24 : 21] And that may include people in high places. And it may include people in the media and in politics and in business. And in all of these areas that are the power brokers and the decision makers of our society, praise God if that's the case.

But this city will change from the streets up when you and when I have confidence in our Christ.

And confidence that it's not a lost or a dead or an ineffective or a powerless or a hopeless message when we're not ashamed and when we can overcome our natural fear because we see who is sovereign and who has the message that changes lives.

And that comes from ourselves living grace filled powerful lives in His name and with His strength. Ordinary lives.

We are all ordinary people. None of us are world changers probably. Maybe some of the children in the creche or the Sunday school kids church will be.

[25 : 35] Maybe there's the next American, no they're not the next American president. Well maybe, well there could be. Actually there is, yeah. There's a few American children.

Whatever it might be, we don't know, generally we have the curse of ordinariness. But then so is Jesus, wasn't he?

Jesus was a nobody. Jesus was just a carpenter. Jesus is our friend and our Lord and our King and our God.

And we have the privilege of His strength to plead for the souls and lives of our neighbors, of our families and of our colleagues.

And our privilege is to, what is it to do? Is it to point the finger at them? Is it to be moralistic? Is it to be separate from them? Is it to be proud and self-righteous?

[26 : 36] No, it's to love them relentlessly and serve them. Serving and loving our friends and our enemies and standing up for the truth in Christ with humility, with reason, with respect and with authority.

The kingdom will grow one person at a time and we all have access to people. We might not have access to the media outlets.

We might not have access to the legislature of our nation. We might not have access to the political decision makers at any level. And the power and authority that they bear, which seems for us so problematic in its morality and in its hatred of the Christian gospel, but we do have access to people and our purpose and our calling is to live this new life that is spoken of here, that is spoken of by the apostles here.

They never stopped telling people about this new life and everything to do with this new life and to proclaim that message. That takes the burden off the church and it places the burden on each of us personally to be the bearers of good news and that's his way.

And for us and in us and as we do that we can rejoice just as the apostles rejoiced at the end of the chapter we read that they were counted worthy of bearing the name of Jesus even though they were beaten up.

[28 : 27] We don't want to be beaten up for being miserable and for being confrontational or for being self-righteous but we do, well no we don't want to be beaten up at any level, but we will rejoice if we are counted worthy for Jesus' sake because we spread, we lived, we live and spread the good news of a new life among our friends and that will be the revolution that we are looking for.

Where do you stand today? Don't be a gammalail and wait some time for the throw of the dice to show whether God is on our side or not.

The one that follows him and serves him and gives allegiance and reverence and worship to his holy name.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God we thank you for your word, we thank you for this New Testament church which was radical and refreshing and a church that saw changed lives powerfully against all the odds when the powers that bore so much antipathy and hatred and power against the church it seemed that there was no future and sometimes we feel like that and sometimes we hear people say well it's a day of small things and we should just batten down the hatches and wait for heaven.

May we not use that ludicrous excuse for not reaching out and not loving and not being a spiritual powerhouses who do not conform to the image that sometimes the world has and certainly does not conform sometimes to the image the church wishes to portray.

[30 : 39] But may we be people who love radically, who reach out, who love our enemies, who care and who rejoice and who live with that glorious light first shining into the darkest recesses of our own hearts knowing that forgiveness, knowing that authority and lordship of God and then confidently living out that love to him and to our neighbours and to our enemies.

And it is that life changing most powerful message that this world needs today and help us we pray to live it for your glory.

May your spirit speak to our lives and our consciences for Jesus sake. Amen.