

Faith Under Attack

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[0 : 00] This morning I'd like to go back to Acts, to where we're looking in our ongoing Sunday morning series on Acts. We have read and looked at this passage, this large passage, when we did it in the city a few weeks ago, but we'll kind of take a slightly different look at it today, as we think of the church. Moving into a different phase of its early existence, we have now the churches, we'll see in a minute, undergoing great persecution, the first time it undergoes great persecution. If we're to ask the question, how is the kingdom of God coming?

We know that aspect of the Lord's prayer is that we pray that God's kingdom will come. Well, how does God's kingdom come? Well, it comes by us living as Christians, faithfully and honestly, but also it is speeded by people coming to faith. His kingdom is coming as people come into the kingdom and come to faith. And that is happening, and we know that's happening, we know it's happening all over the world. We may be a little bit grieved that it's not happening more here in Scotland, and in Edinburgh we're only a couple of percentage of the population go to any church at all. And where there doesn't seem to be a great movement of God's spirit and many people aren't coming to faith in Christ. But we do know that in many parts of the world, in South America, and in Asia, and in different parts of Central Asia as well as Southeast Asia, there's many people, many, many people coming to know and put their faith in Jesus Christ. But how do people come to faith in Jesus Christ? Well, I've said there's two ways primarily that people come to faith in

Jesus Christ. It's one way really, maybe it just happens slightly differently. And I've said that the first way is through covenant conversion. That is that people come to faith through the families they belong to, through belonging to a Christian family, and through the covenant of grace that works through families, which is highlighted very much in our understanding of the work of the covenant and the promise being to us as believers and the sign being us to us as believers in baptism and to the children of believers. And we recognise that they are set apart in this great way and they need to come to faith themselves. But they have this great privilege of being brought up in a Christian home where there are great parental responsibilities and a great church responsibilities, we speak about that when we take the vows, to nurture these children and to point them towards Jesus Christ, to enable them to not be put off the gospel and the truth. And many of us here will have come to faith that way, sort of gently, softly, so that we don't have a dramatic conversion story where we change from one very maybe atheistic or godless way of living and come to faith. But we've gently been, we've been whispered as it were into the kingdom of God and we recognise that very often that is how people come to faith through the privilege and the responsibility and the sharing of Jesus with you, from your parents and from your family and from your church family. It doesn't mean that there's not a personal commitment to coming to faith as that child grows up with the privileges and recognises the need to take Jesus for themselves and recognise that it's not enough to just rely on the faith of your parents, but you take Christ, you recognise the need for Christ for yourself. So that's what I would call covenant conversion. But then I've also called something else that there's contact conversion.

They're really the same thing, but the way people come to faith is really what I'm speaking about. And that is people who come to faith when we reach out of our comfort zone, reach out of our families and reach out of our church and where we share our faith in the world in which we live, a world where people aren't Christians and a world where people don't know about Jesus Christ and we share the gospel with them. Where we're living, wherever we're living, powerful, consistent and humble Christian lives and sharing our faith in Christ when we have the opportunity so to do.

When our own lives as Christians are transformed by joy, you know, we have that sense of loving Christ and enjoying Him and living for Him, trusting in Him. And when we're not trusting and enjoying Him, we'll probably never share Him. And so it's a very important reality. If we're not trusting and enjoying Him, we very probably won't share Him. So covenant conversion and contact conversion. I think one of the things that burdens us is a leadership and I know many of us also is there's so little of the latter happening in our context. There's, I hope and pray as we see many children and young people being born into Christian families here that there will be covenant conversion. But we don't see much contact conversion and it's quite a sobering question for us to consider. Why aren't there more people who are coming from situations that they don't have that privilege and don't have that background to know Jesus Christ? Is it that we don't really believe? Is it that we don't have joy? Is it that we're not really concerned about sharing what is so significant and important to us? Do we lack the confidence so to do? Or are we fearful of being opposed?

[5 : 47] Now this is a long passage. We missed out the middle chapter which was Stephen's long speech which he gave in response to their accusations. We did it recently in Citigroup. But we do come into, as I said at the beginning, a new phase of this early recording of the church in the New Testament. Up till now it's been really great. There's been thousands of people through contact conversion coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Lots of people even with a covenant background coming to faith and the church is just as Corrie talked about last week. Jerusalem is a mega church. It was massive. There was hundreds and hundreds and thousands of people coming to faith and things were good. They were sharing all that they had and there was a great love and a great communion and great community. And we come now to this different phase where the church is attacked with very severe persecution and opposition. It's not really what we expect. We want the early picture of the church to be full of roses and good things. But here, very early on Acts chapter 6, we recognize that a huge persecution begins to happen to the church. And we recognize that God wants us as believers, as Christians, to learn something very important from this, for our own understanding and for our own prayer and for our own lives. And kind of by way of introduction, broadly thinking of this chapter which introduces darkness and persecution and difficulty, there's a couple of things that I want to mention that I think God wants us to understand, not only from here but from His word.

The first is, and I want to explain it, that comfort, for the Christian, comfort is illusory. Comfort is illusory, okay? Let me explain that. If we think that when we become Christians, that we are given the offer of a life of ease and of comfort on our terms, then that's illusory.

It's an illusion. And it's unhelpful for us to think that, that we come to Christ and our exegesis of the words, our explanation of the words blessing and joy biblically, we take these words to mean popularity, a good job, constant health, financial security, good relationships, and the removal of suffering. If that's what we think Christ, the comfort Christ brings is on our terms in this way, then we will struggle in our Christian lives because what happens is that when that doesn't happen in our lives, and each of us battle and struggle with many different realities, then we grumble and blame God. It's too tough. What's the point of becoming a Christian if we don't enjoy all these good gifts from our Father and that life is great? Because we're believing an illusion and one that's never taught in Scripture. It's never His promise. Jesus has not promised to be a genie in a bottle, the bottle that we rub and bring out and He gives us our three best wishes. That's not the kind of comfort that is spoken of in Scripture. There is comfort spoken of in Scripture, and it's very genuine and real, but it is founded in our ongoing relationship with Lord Jesus Christ. That's where our primary comfort and peace and joy comes from, but the paradox is that that same comfort opens up tension and opposition because of who Christ is and because of who we are and the world in which we live. There is blessing.

There is comfort, but it's not ordinarily on our terms, and it usually challenges our own concept of comfort. And I think that is a biblical truth that is beginning to be unpacked in this chapter where persecution happens and it's a truth that permeates the whole of Scripture. So comfort is illusory. The second thing that God speaks from this chapter and throughout the whole Bible, of course, is that evil is real. Comfort is illusory on our terms and evil is real. In other words, bad stuff happens. How often is that the apologetic of the atheist that how can there be a good God when bad things happen? You hear that every day. We hear that from people.

Bad stuff happens to nice people. Bad stuff happens to Christians, and I guess it's Dovetail we mentioned earlier. We know that in the world we live in as Christians, people hate God and people therefore will hate and persecute Christians. And Christians sometimes will hate and be guilty of abusing their faith and the truth that they know to victimize and persecute others. And we see a world and a reality not just outside, not just on the news, but in our own experiences and sometimes troublingly in our own hearts. That speaks of the reality of selfishness and pain and evil and darkness. But the Bible, while it teaches that clearly, personal and world darkness and evil and indeed a personal source of evil and Satan, it also, its message, its mission to us is to remind us that it's in its death throes. It has been defeated absolutely and completely and entirely on the cross, not yet destroyed but defeated by the work of Jesus

[11 : 47] Christ and what he achieved on the cross. So the only place for our own sin, the confusion of sometimes the way we are in our own hearts and the darkness and evil and sometimes persecution that we face in the world in which we live and of course the opposition that we feel sometimes from personal illness and death itself, the only place, the only place we can go to is to the cross, because it bellows out the reality of evil and darkness. Christ faces it head on and defeats it, promises its future destruction forever for all who will put their trust in Jesus Christ. And more than that, he says for us, while evil is that reality, he says for us and we can have the confidence that what is intended to harm us can turn, be turned on its head for good as we look to and as we trust in him. It doubles evil's defeat. And we see that in this chapter, we'll see that as we look at this chapter just for a few minutes as well, a little bit more detail. So as we struggle maybe today with these two concepts, the kind of comfort we get as Christians and the reality of evil, and we recognise there is only one place that we can go and it's a repetitive message that we keep telling, we keep speaking about this message about going back to Jesus Christ and looking to Jesus Christ. And it's kind of symbolised and highlighted in this chapter where Stephen, as he himself is in his death throes to be martyred, looks heavenward, looks towards Jesus and gets a tremendous vision of Jesus

Christ. But as we take that, we recognise that there is truth there that we need to apply for ourselves. We need to keep our hearts and our lives and our focus as believers on the Lord Jesus Christ. There's no shortcut for us as believers. There's no other way for us to go. He has opened the way for us to be in relationship with him and as we are praying and learning and growing and worshipping, then we understand more about his comforts and recognise where evil and darkness and sin and illness and all of these things despair is dealt with and defeated. So this chapter is really about people who have stayed close to Christ at the very early stages of the Christian church. They've kept close to Christ.

And as a result, even in the midst of darkness and in the midst of persecution and opposition, they see many more people coming to faith in Jesus Christ who contact conversion because they remain faithful to him. And so we see different groups in this passage and we're going to just look at them very briefly this morning. We see that when this persecution and opposition happened to Stephen and he was martyred, that the people rose up. The people, the everyday Christians did the great work of the great commission of God.

See in chapter 8 and verse 1, it says, Saul, the leader, he approved of this execution then we say, and there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Sumeria. Up till now, this blossoming church had simply been in Jerusalem. But from this persecution onwards, they moved out and then we're told in verse 4 that it was scattered throughout the region, verse 1 still, and Judea, Sumeria, except the apostles. So everyone was scattered except the apostles and then we're told in verse 4, now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. So we have a really a comfortless situation and it seems that evil is one the day. The church is absolutely blown apart. There's just a big bomb has dropped right in the center of the church and the people are just sent out and have to scatter for fear of their lives. Everyone except the pros, everyone except the professionals, it's everyone except the apostles. They stay in Jerusalem. But everyone else, all the ordinary people end up in Judea and Sumeria and did this great persecution which was horrendous and brutal. Did it lead to their capitulation? Was this early days of the church, was it submerged by this persecution? Was it destroyed? No, these people left, they scattered and wherever they went, they preached a word. They shared their faith in Christ. They lost everything humanly speaking. Wasn't any of the comfort that maybe they expected but they knew that they had gained far more and they knew that they could be used to tell other people about Jesus Christ and God used the persecution. God used this difficult dark time to spread the gospel. Indeed, in many ways it's the fulfillment of his command to them from Acts chapter 1 where he reminded them of the importance of going out with the gospel and going out with the gospel not just into Jerusalem but he says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem where they were but also in Judea and Sumeria and to the ends of the earth. This is the beginning of this happening in Judea and Sumeria. Maybe not the way we intended, not the way they thought it would happen but we find that what was intended to be destructive and bring an end to the church actually was the means by which the church spread dramatically into the wider society and indeed into the rest of the world.

God's strategy, different from our strategy, using darkness, using the evil that was intended to destroy to bring about good and it came because the everyday Christians told people about Jesus. It wasn't about the apostolic dynamism or their power or the strength of their personality or charisma, it was the faithfulness, authenticity and trust of ordinary people and that's what we stress and have tried to stress again and again here. That is, your lives, it's your lives as you go out with a biblical understanding of comfort and the reality of opposition yet not within knowing that, not capitulating to the society or the opposition that we face and gently sharing Christ by our lives, preaching by our grace, by our openness, by our warmth, by the way we open our homes and by the way we are able to share the Christ who has transformed our lives and we seek to do that prayerfully and continue to do that and seven days of prayer will be coming up and we focused on these seven days of prayer and praying for three of our friends and we pray for the opportunity but we take opportunities to share Jesus with them. So we have the everyday Christians who are looking to Jesus Christ and who are spreading the word powerfully through their witness. But we also have Stephen in the story and Stephen was one of the deacons that Corey preached about last Sunday, they set aside deacons in the church, so Stephen was one of them and we saw last week that the characteristics of these deacons were characteristics we can all share in our Christian lives as we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. But we see particularly in this passage, the passage that we read, some of the characteristics of Stephen as he went about living his life for Christ and how that had such a powerful effect. He was one who was full of grace and power were told in verse 8, he preached grace, they opposed him because they thought he was preaching against the law and against Moses so he obviously was preaching that the way of salvation is the way of grace and his life had been changed.

[20 : 47] He went out, we are told among the people, he spoke, we are told in verse 10, with wisdom and with a spirit that couldn't be argued against, there was something about him, he was persuasive, he knows his Christ and he knows the word behind his Christ. The sermons in chapter 7 makes very clear that he absolutely knew the Old Testament and he knew the mission of God and he understood who God was and also who Christ was interestingly calling him the righteous one. Cues to being a lawbreaker himself by his opponents and he points to Jesus who is the lawkeeper, the righteous one and the one who even though he was a lawkeeper and was perfect, was crucified as a lawbreaker on our behalf, wisdom and spirit, the Messiah.

But also there was something memorable about him, not only could they not argue against even, there was something persuasive and powerful in his character and in his wisdom, but he reflected Christ. There was something very powerful about him in his life and as they gazed on him, we are told at the end of chapter 6, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. So he silenced his opposition but he also in some kind of, I guess, mystical way, he reflected the love and the grace and the gentleness of Christ as people looked at him and then as people heard him saying, look, don't hold, don't hold this against them what they are doing. I see he is stoned and martyred. I see don't hold that, they don't know, they don't understand what they are doing. There was this great face that was shining out. There is another occasion in the Bible where someone's face shines like that and that is Moses as he comes down the mountain from receiving. Interestingly what? The law, the law of God and it is as if God is here saying to all who are watching, you have accused him of law breaking. His face is shining. He is in my presence. He trusts in the Christ who is the law keeper and I approve of him.

And there is this great sense of God almost giving Stephen that peace and that sense of significance even at the darkest of hours. Now there are a few verses that I just want to throw up onto the screen which remind us of the kind of theology or thinking behind a shining face in 2 Corinthians 3, 18 and we all with unveiled faces beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

There is that sense in which we can reflect the glory of God in our lives and our faces. On 34 verse 5, those who look to Him are radiant, their faces shall never be ashamed.

Ecclesiastes 8 verse 1, who is like the wise and we know Stephen is spoken of here as wise and who knows the interpretation of a thing. A man's wisdom makes his face shine and the hardness of his face has changed. And Daniel 2 L 3, those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky above and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars for heaven and earth. And there is this sense in which what is almost symbolic, real but symbolizes a lot of these truths that here was someone who was very close to Jesus Christ and who was looking at Christ and who was therefore powerful for Christ with a phenomenal clarity and peace. Yet, comfort? No, he's martyred. Blessing? No, he's stoned by stones. Brutally murdered. And yet, he was filled with the comfort of God and he was used powerfully in his, what we would say, his shortened life in a great way. Who were told it, and not a word is wasted here, who was witnessing, who gave permission for this to happen and who watched everything that happened. It was Saul, his clothes were placed at the feet of a man named Saul. And Saul saw that and Saul was surely moved and touched by what he saw, who later himself went on to meet Jesus Christ to become the most significant

[25 : 34] Christian probably in many ways who has ever lived. And so through Stephen's own closeness to Christ and influence on Saul, there was a huge influence for the gospel. And I hope none of us are called to be martyred. But we seek to reflect the grace of God in our lives, even in darkness and even in opposition. And even when we don't have the comforts that we think God should give us, we remain faithful and we don't compromise or capitulate our faith. Then very briefly, also Philip is the third person in chapter eight. It speaks about another Deacon Philip who goes on to preach the word. And again, we notice with him, he powerfully spoke and many people came to faith through him because not only of what he said, but his life, what he did, what he was, the miracles he was able to do, his exceptional life. So it was action and words. And there was proclamation and there was deed. And that remains a very significant and important duo of truth in order that our lives become effective for Jesus Christ, that we proclaim the Christ, but that we live out the Christ by our deeds and that we do great and miraculous things in His name. May not be the same kind of miracles as we're done here, but we can see answered prayers and transformed hearts and new lives from ourselves influencing others. And we can speak of the Christ who has done that.

And we see in that section also how Philip, with the gospel, goes out to those who nobody else is interested in, the needy, the damaged, the marginalized. Everyone who wasn't part of the crowd, everyone who wasn't part of the covenant, none of whom shared his morality or his outlook, he showed them grace and miracle in his life. And many of them came to faith in Jesus Christ. They opened up and listened closely to what he said because of who he was. The crowds with one accord paid attention to him and many came so that there was much joy in that city. So these are ordinary people whose gifts and whose graces we can share and have because of Jesus Christ, who saw many contact conversions because they looked to Jesus Christ, even in the midst of persecution and darkness and difficulty, and lived for Jesus Christ with joy and wholeheartedness and enthusiasm. And that is a great model, I think, a great picture for us. And when we're living like that, as

I conclude, when we're living like that, what happens? Evil happens and joy happens. We can't get away from that reality. Evil happens. We recognize and know and understand that.

Chapter 8 verse 3, but Saul was ravaging the church. Entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. That's the paradox, isn't it? That as we're looking to Christ and living for Christ and serving Christ and sharing Christ, the reality is that sometimes our lives are ravaged by evil. We have an enemy whose aim is to divide the church and conquer, to instill fear, to tempt us to capitulate, to just give up, and to compromise. And it's powerful, you know? I find that powerful, these temptations. But we remember and we remind ourselves that God is love, God is victorious, and God is more powerful still. Saul, who went around ravaging the church, becomes the great apostle Paul.

Let's remind ourselves of that. The one who was to destroy the church becomes the one who massively is used by God to build the church in a remarkable way. And can I encourage you today not to give up praying for and loving and serving people like Saul? Maybe, and by what I mean by that is people that you think they will never become Christians. I mean, everyone around that time thought, Saul, God please just nail him, get rid of him. I wonder how many prayed, well, we know Stephen prayed for his conversion. We know Stephen prayed that God would not hold it against him. I'm sure that had a powerful effect. But maybe that the people we think are most least likely to become Christians. Don't give up praying for them, especially if they're your friends, if you know them, if you love them, but even if you don't, just keep praying and recognize what Satan intends for evil, God will use for good when we trust him and recognize where our comforts lie. So evil happens, but also joy happens. So there was much joy in that city. So that's the reality. The two are a reality that we come to terms with, but we know where the victory lies. And we know that joy even in darkness and even in suffering can be our experience, because we recognize that it is temporary. We miss out if we look from Jesus Christ to give us worldly comforts.

[31 : 42] Or if we forget His truth that evil is in its death throes, and if we have no confidence in our God and Savior, pray that we will see that more clearly through His Word, and that we will see this city of Edinburgh that we love turned as the New Testament church saw turned upside down for Jesus Christ. Amen. Let's pray briefly. Lord God, help us to see you. If there are people here today who have joined us in our worship who don't know Jesus Christ, who think what on earth was the minister talking about for the last 20 minutes there, may you speak to them, may they search the scripture, and may they look to hear and know and understand where their comforts will be found and where evil will be defeated. So bless us now as we move into the joy and happiness of baptisms, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.