10. Harassment of the Church: The disgrace of the world and God's strange providence

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[0:00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to that passage we read in Acts 5, page 912 in our church Bibles. It's all about harassment of the church.

A wide and effective door has opened to me and there are many adversaries. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 8, about his city centre ministry in Ephesus has, I suppose, become something of a motto for this series in the early chapters of Acts because we've seen so clearly, haven't we, that wherever God is at work, the enemy is likewise at work, sowing weeds amongst the seed that the Holy Spirit is sowing and planting and nourishing.
And in particular, these chapters, Acts 4 to 7, are all about adversaries, adversaries without and adversaries within. Adversaries that threaten the church's work in a whole variety of ways.
And it seems that Luke has chosen to record these things for us as a kind of case study about how the devil attacks a real and a living and an effective church.
Because that's certainly what this church is that we're reading about, isn't it? And actually that's a lesson in itself because it's the living churches and it's the active churches that the devil attacks.
[1:27] The devil's attention isn't a mark of failure. It's quite the reverse, isn't it? Where the church is dying, where it's dead, he hardly needs to bother. And so these chapters are a warning and an encouragement to the living, not to the dead.

The needed most, perhaps, where we're conscious of God being with us and helping us and working among us. So that means that if we've any cause of encouragement here in St. George's Tron, and I think surely there must be many things to encourage us, well then that means that we need these lessons all the more, don't we?
And last week was a very sobering lesson, if you were here, about the enemy within. Within the church and the enemy indeed within our own hearts.
The leaven of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. The powerful lure to falsehood, to fakery in our Christian lives.
But today we're back with enemies without. And the message is one, again, of warning, but also of great encouragement. Warning to the enemies of the gospel, and encouragement to the church.
[2:40] That the gospel of God, that the kingdom of Christ, is unstoppable. That the victory of God is certain. That the defeat of all of his enemies, all of the enemies of his kingdom, will be absolutely sure.

And that's a message that we need to hear again and again, isn't it? We need to hear it again and again, because it doesn't always seem that that's going to be true. I bet it doesn't seem true at the moment to those Christians in Joss in Nigeria, where they've been attacked and dispossessed by violent Muslims.
Or these missionaries that have been arrested in Gambia. It may not seem true to them, that all the enemies of God will be vanquished. It may not seem true to you, in your school classroom, perhaps.
Where most of your friends laugh at you, or most of your teachers actually give you a sneering look, when they know that you're a Christian. They think you're very odd for believing it.
They perhaps dishonor you, or talk about you behind your back. But it is true. And this passage today is a great reminder of that.
[3:48] It's all about harassment of the church, but what we see is how the disgrace of the world, the dishonor of the world, is met by the wonderful working of God's strange providence, to vindicate his name.

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Again, if you look at the text, the pattern's very same as last week. First of all, in verses 12 to 16, we have a little summary of God's blessing. The wide and effective door, if you like. And then in verse 17, there's another but.
But the adversaries are doing everything they can to stop it. But as we'll see today, there are two other big buts in the story. But gods that change everything.
Buts that snooker the enemies and cause the triumph of the gospel. You don't want to look at it under three headings. First of all, verses 12 to 18 speak about an effective people.
Verses 19 to 25, an effortless power. And verses 26 to 42, an extraordinary providence. First look at verses 12 to 18.
[4:49] They speak about the effective people of God who always, always provoke enemies. What's pictured for us in these verses is a wonderful dynamism, isn't it?

The fledgling church is dynamic. And yet, the hallmark of such an effective growing church will always be two other things, beginning with D.
Division and disgrace or dishonor. Think first about the spiritual dynamism of this church. Look at verse 12. It says, Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.
Well, that was an answer to their prayer back in chapter 4, verse 29, wasn't it? They asked God that they would be bold to go on proclaiming the gospel. And they asked that God would honor their proclamation with signs and wonders to authenticate their message.
Now, remember that we've seen this term, signs and wonders, is almost a technical one. In the Old Testament, it was signs and wonders that accompanied great new revelation from God, above all in the great salvation of God's people in the Exodus.
[5:58] So, signs and wonders, of course, would mark the great revelation of God in Jesus Christ, God's final word to men, his final act in the great drama of his redemption.

And, of course, the apostles were part and parcel of that unique revelatory phenomenon. And that's why signs and wonders, verse 12, were done at the hands of the apostles. And, in particular, at this stage, at any rate, through Peter.
These things are the sign of a true apostle of Jesus. That's what Paul says plainly in 2 Corinthians 12, verse 12. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you, he says to the Corinthians. Signs, wonders, and mighty works. And when you read of Peter here in verses 15 and 16, it reminds you vividly, doesn't it, of Jesus' ministry on earth.
It was just a sense of the presence and the power of God overshadowing him. People could sense it, and so they just knew that they wanted to be near him. It was just like, well, remember the woman that Luke tells us about in chapter 8 of his gospel.
[7:02] The woman with the issue of blood. She just wanted to get near enough, Jesus, knowing that somehow to be near him, to touch him, would be to bring her into the presence of God's power. And no doubt here, there may well have been some superstition involved among the people.

It does sound a bit odd, doesn't it, to want Peter's shadow to fall on you and think that would have power. But it may be that Luke is drawing us to something more here. It's very interesting that the language he uses in that verse about Peter's shadow in verse 15 literally says he wants his shadow to overshadow them.
It's exactly the same language that's used by the angel to Mary in Luke 1.35 when he says to her, the power of the Most High will overshadow you. It's a very similar expression that's used in Zechariah's song when he speaks about the Lord himself having visited his people from on high. The sunrise visiting us from on high. It's the language of the personal power and the presence of God himself coming to be with his people, upon his people. If you remember the very last words of Jesus at the end of Luke's gospel, it was a promise, wasn't it, that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and do what?
Clothe you with power from on high. Well, if that's so, you see, then the apostles are clothed with the power and the presence of the risen Lord Jesus himself.
[8:32] And all his beauty and his grace rests upon them. And that's what we saw last time. Great grace and great power was upon them all. And it seems that that grace and power was contagious.

People could sense it. They just wanted to be in their presence. They sensed that to be with this band of people was to somehow come into the place where God was dwelling. Of course, the apostles are unique, aren't they?

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In the events of the inauguration of Christ's kingdom on earth. Well, by their very nature. It's a once-for-all thing. And we shouldn't expect personal apostolic ministry like that today.
In fact, there can't be apostles at all in the biblical sense today, can there? Because, if you remember, when we looked at chapter 1 of Luke's gospel, one of the criterion for being an apostle was that you had to have lived through the earthly ministry of Jesus and witnessed his resurrection. Acts 1.22 makes that plain. When they were choosing a successor for Judas, that had to be the criteria that fitted the person. So there are no apostles like that today.
[9:42] But nevertheless, it certainly remains true, doesn't it, that where the Spirit of God is at work powerfully in his church, among his people, and in individual believers' lives, then God's presence and his power are felt by people.

Even when people don't quite understand it, even when they can't articulate it properly, they know that there's something there that's real. Paul speaks about that in 1 Corinthians 14, when he says about the church, that if an unbeliever comes in, or somebody who even is quite mentally deficient, somehow, if God's word is being spoken in the midst, they will sense that God is truly present among you.
They can sense it enough to fall down on their faces and worship Jesus. Something draws them in. Now we know that's true, don't we?
Many of us find our way into the kingdom of Christ exactly that way. We didn't understand it at first. But we knew that there was something overshadowing that place, that church, that company of people.
We wanted to be part of it. We wanted to belong. Well, that's the dynamic. That's the power of a truly living church, because Jesus is in the midst. And his shadow is felt, because his spirit is at work through his people.
[11:03] And that's the hallmark of an effective people. But so also is division the mark of an effective people of God. That might seem strange, but it's certainly true.

You cannot build a gospel church, and you cannot maintain a truly gospel church without division. Why is that? Because the gospel is always a double-edged sword.
And as some are attractive, and as a church becomes more and more true to the gospel, and keeps ever more true to the gospel, some are more and more attractive, and others are repelled.
That's what you always, always see in true biblical gospel ministry. That's exactly what's seen here, in this dynamic church, isn't it? Some of them, verse 13, some of them find this very alarming. None of the rest dared join them. They respected them, we're told. They heard them in esteem. They couldn't deny that there's something powerful going on in there, in the midst of that group, that united group, meeting weekly in the temple.
[12:08] But, it was very threatening to them. It was alarming. And they didn't want to get too close. Well, that's always the way, isn't it? When we were in London, we lived in Wimbledon, we went to a church plant, and met in a local school.

And it was held in deep, deep suspicion, especially by the other established parishes round about. And some of our friends and neighbours, they couldn't help seeing the growth, the dynamism, the real spiritual life that was there, but it made them very uncomfortable.
People don't do enthusiasm like that. They don't like that sort of fanatical twist that it seems to be. You see, exactly the same thing often when a teenager, perhaps, or a young student is converted at camp, say, in the summer, or at university.
They go home in the holidays, or go back to their parents. And even if their parents are church people, sometimes they're really quite alarmed at what's happened to them. They're worried that they've got too involved, they've got a bit fanatical, that this is going to mess up their life, it's going to interfere with their career, it's going to skew their education.
They don't like it. And any church which becomes increasingly gospel and mission focused, where the gospel increasingly sets the agenda, drives structural changes, perhaps, in a church, sets aside traditions and things like that, it will ruffle feathers.
[13:39] And people will get alarmed. And they'll keep their distance. Or they'll take their distance. That's always the hallmark of effective gospel ministry. And we should expect that today.

And yet at the same time, there's verse 14. More than ever, there was real spiritual fruit being seen. Dynamism, real gospel power at work, always leads to division.

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More and more spiritual fruitfulness, but at the same time, alarm, distance, suspicion. Because, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2, real gospel ministry is both a fragrance of life unto life, and to others, a fragrance of death.
So some are repelled, and others are wonderfully drawn in. And that's why the other hallmark of a truly effective church is always disgrace, and dishonor, in the eyes of the world.
An effective people of God will always provoke enemies. Look at verse 17. But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, and they threw the apostles into prison.
[14:57] Notice, we're told, it was the public prison, thrown in with the common criminals, the lowest of the low. It wasn't just something to stop them preaching, but it was a deliberate public humiliation, a shaming in the eyes of the world, because of their jealousy, we're told, or perhaps, better, their zealous religious zeal to persecute and choke off the true message of Jesus.

And they suffered great public disgrace for the name. That's how they put it in their own words, in verse 41, for the name of Jesus. It's interesting that that word there that they used, dishonor, is exactly the same word used in the Greek Old Testament of Isaiah 53.
He was despised, dishonored, and rejected of men. Disgraced, and we esteemed him not. Well, that's always the mark of God's true servants, isn't it?
Because it was the mark of the Master. And as for the Master, so also for the servants. They called Jesus a Samaritan, a demon, in John 8, 48. And Jesus said, I honor my Father, but you dishonor, you disgrace me.
And it's still true today in many places in this world. Today, there are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ who will be being publicly disgraced and dishonored and imprisoned. And often it's their families that bear the worst shame, isn't it?
[16:27] If you read the Barnabas Fund news or the Release International news, I hope you do, you'll read about persecuted pastors put in prison. You'll read about the pressure put upon their wives to divorce them and have nothing more to do with them because of the shame they brought to the community.

I read about one pastor who said that it was his children at school that suffered the worst ignominy when he was imprisoned. Your father's a common criminal, they said. He's in there with the scum. Very, very hard, isn't it, for a little boy, a little girl to be told that of their father who's imprisoned for the gospel. And it'll always be the same today even in our own culture, in our established denominations and so on.
Evangelicals, those who stand for the truth of the gospel of Christ will always be in disgrace, always bear the shame, the opprobrium. Tom McGill will tell you that if you read our Presbytery Minutes for this very month, you'll see that there are pages devoted to exactly that.
Isn't that right, Tom? An effective people, real dynamism from the spirit of Jesus Christ in the midst, but division because the gospel divides and disgrace because the gospel always provokes enemies in this world.
[17:45] A wide and effective door. That's verses 12 to 16, isn't it? Absolutely. But, verse 17, many adversaries. Now there's another but here in verse 19 and another one in verse 34 as we'll see.

But God, and Luke's reminding us that God, even in all of these circumstances, God himself is the great circumstance that changes everything.
The ever-present, invisible God will complete all that he has begun and Jesus Christ will build his church and nothing will ever hinder or prevent it.
One writer says this, if it's true that the forward march of the gospel draws the enemy's fire, it's also blessedly true that Satan's attacks are swiftly and superlatively counted and made the occasion of a glorious display of divine power.
And that's exactly what we read about here, isn't it? And Luke reminds us of God's constant presence in two very different ways. First, in verses 19 to 26, we see the effortless power of God to sweep aside his enemies in a way that's quite dramatic, obviously supernatural.
[18:58] But then, in verses 27 to 42, we see the extraordinary providence of God at work to achieve exactly the same end, but in a way almost so mundane and quiet as it seems like an anticlimax.

look first at verses 19 to 26, the effortless power of God that mocks his enemies. More than ever, we're told, the church is growing and bearing fruit, but enemies are aroused to frustrate the plans, to humiliate the apostles, to disgrace them and to shame them.

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But, verse 19, God intervenes and he turns the tables and pretty soon the enemies are perplexed and God's people are back preaching.
I think this story reads like a pantomime, doesn't it? It's rather like one of those old silent movies, Harold Lloyd or Laurel and Hardy or something. The baddies put the goodies in prison and they lock the door, but it's a revolving door and no sooner have they turned the key in the lock than suddenly the door is revolved and the baddies are in prison and the goodies are out again.
It's like a scene from Scooby-Doo or something like that. We're meant to laugh at this, aren't we? So look at verse 18. They put them in the public prison, but, verse 19, the angel of the Lord brought them out again immediately.
[20:13] There's a pantomime, you see. The enemies lock the door and they turn around to the audience and say, they're not going to preach about Jesus anymore. And we all go, oh yes they are.

And that's what the angel says, verse 20. Yes, you are going to speak. Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life. And off they go, verse 21. They don't wait until the middle of the morning.
At first light, they're in the temple. And then, the high priests and all the pompous senators come in in their flowing robes. Bring us the prisoners, they say. And then we see them scratching their heads like Stan Laurel.
Looking at the key, looking at the locked door. We put them in there, but they're gone. What do you mean they're gone? And somebody immediately rushes in, says verse 25.
Look, the men that you put in prison, they're standing in the temple preaching the gospel just like you told them not to do. It's meant to be comic farce. We're supposed to laugh because God is mocking his enemies.
[21:19] The powerful enemies, they're absolutely stumped. They were perplexed about this. greatly, says verse 24. They're perplexed and the apostles are still preaching.

Effortless power of God that mocks his enemies, that ridicules those who dare to think that their puny efforts can ridicule and dishonour the Lord Jesus Christ.
That's why the psalmist says, he who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in derision. And he still does the same today to the self-important people, the self-indulgent fools who think that they're a match for Almighty God.
Who think that they can have his truth disgraced in public life. Who think that it can be shut up and depressed and kept out of the way. See, God is mocking acutely these Sadducees in a particular way.
Remember, the Sadducees are the ones who don't believe at all in anything supernatural. and he faces with something so absolutely plainly supernatural they're absolutely stumped.
[22:24] There's nothing they can say. Just like back in chapter 3 when the man was healed they said, it's a miracle. We don't believe in miracles but it's right in front of us. We can't deny it. You see, the tables are totally turned.

The apostles were in the dock. Now, it's their accusers who are in the dock. Are they beginning to realise perhaps that they can't stand against this God and this gospel?
That's what they should be learning, isn't it? It's a deliberate sign to them just as Ananias and Sapphira's judgment was a sign. A deliberate sign of God's judgment and God's determined victory for his kingdom and his people.
Now, God doesn't always save his people from enemies in that way, does he? He doesn't always do that in the Bible. He doesn't always do it through Christian history.
There have been many martyrs. There are still martyrs today. But sometimes he does and he does it just to give a glimpse of his effortless power to mock his enemies and to remind them that his victory and the victory for all his own people is absolutely not in doubt.
[23:35] That nothing can derail his plan or his purpose. Remember, he did it with Daniel in the lion's den, didn't he? He did it with Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

And he still does works of effortless power today. Sometimes he does it just to mock his enemies, to give heart to his people. I've read about evangelists who have been imprisoned by the communists who walk free from a prison in something very similar to this, under the noses of their captives.

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I've no reason to disbelieve that. God can do that. He doesn't always, but at critical moments, times that are of absolute importance for his kingdom, sometimes he does.
And when deepened and concerted opposition arises to his church to exterminate the Christian gospel, he will not allow it to happen, not ever. The communists learned that, didn't they?
The Nazis learned that. You can't choke the gospel of Jesus Christ by chaining up its preachers. Can't be done. Sometimes, the invisible God does make visible a flash of his effortless power in dramatic ways like that, to mock the arrogance of those who think that they can.
[24:55] But he has other ways also of dealing with his enemies, to defeat them and to delight his people. And that's what Luke shows us in this next part of the story, verses 26 to 42. No less astonishing, the extraordinary providence of God that uses his enemies, uses his adversaries against themselves so that the enemies of the gospel are left utterly defeated and God's people instead are utterly delighted.

So you see, in verse 26, the apostles are brought again by the soldiers, but this time we're told they're a bit more subdued, not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.
I expect probably like the police will be next time they try to get somebody out of the houses of parliament. Probably they won't barge in just quite so jollily as they did last time. I think the metropolitan police have seen better days, haven't they?
But anyway, here they are, they come into the council, but once again the tables are turned and they're left completely defeated. Notice how they are defeated.
They're defeated by the totally undeterred preaching of the apostles and by a totally unexpected providence of God. Look at the preaching first that defeats them. Verse 25 says they're back in the temple preaching in total defiance of the ban.
[26:16] Verse 28, we strictly charge you not to teach in this name. Notice by the way they won't even bring themselves to mention the name Jesus, this name they say.

But undeterred they went on preaching and what was the result? Verse 28, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. Now you see Luke wants us to know the kind of teaching that had filled Jerusalem.
The kind of message that was causing the church to grow more than ever with people being added and being saved. That's important isn't it? Because people are very keen on knowing what makes the church grow today.
Lots of movements that will tell us the things that we need to change if we want to get church growth. If we want to be really seeker friendly. We mustn't mention any of the negative things at all must we?
No sin, no judgment, no wrath, no calling people to repentance. You'll leave that until later on but if you want real growth it must be the positive things, the nice things.
[27:17] Well, at this point quite deliberately Luke is giving us the message that filled Jerusalem and that made the church grow enormously.

What kind of message is it? Well, it's a thoroughly challenging one isn't it? There's absolutely no soft peddling not to offend the establishment here. Look at verses 30 to 32.
It's all about sin and guilt isn't it? The need for repentance, obedience to God. It's all focused on Jesus specifically isn't it? In a two-fold way.
See verse 31? Jesus, he says, is God's exalted leader or prince and he's God's appointed saviour. He's God's prince, that is, he's the exalted Lord and so to oppose him as they had is to oppose God.
You killed him. Well, that is to incur terrible terrible guilt, isn't it? It's to be in need of forgiveness which comes, says Peter, only through repentance.
[28:18] Verse 31. This is God's captain, his leader, his prince. Therefore, he must be obeyed. You see, twice he says we must obey God.

And he's God's saviour. He's the one alone who can grant, says Peter, forgiveness. Who can give repentance. It's his sovereign gift.
It doesn't come any other way. Therefore, he must be proclaimed. Well, that's the true gospel, isn't it? That grew the church. The proclamation of Jesus as Lord, who must be obeyed, and his saviour, who must be trusted and must be proclaimed.
Salvation, Peter says, is simply a matter of obedience to this Lord. Begins with repentance. That was Peter's gospel in Acts chapter 2, wasn't it? You must repent, he said, for the forgiveness of

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sins.
You must bow the knee to Jesus as Lord. That's the only way to receive forgiveness, through repentance. It's just the same here. There's no soft-pedaling to grow the church.
[29:24] Undeterred preaching of the truth, isn't it? Verse 32, he gives the Holy Spirit to who? To those who obey him. You see that? It's very, very important to grasp that, isn't it?

Conversion to Christ isn't just about acceptance of an offer of grace. It's bowing the knee to a sovereign command from the exalted Lord, Christ.
That's what faith is. It's capitulation to Jesus Christ. It's obedience to Jesus as Lord and Savior. So if you look at Acts chapter 6, verse 7, Luke sums up the growth of the church by saying many became obedient to the faith.
That's what faith is. Faith is the opposite of disobedience to Jesus. But you see, the message that defeated the enemies and filled Jerusalem with life more than ever and grew the church was the message of the true, complete, sovereign gospel of God.
A message about sin and guilt, about the need for repentance and forgiveness only through obedience to Jesus Christ, the exalted Lord, the unique Savior.
[30:37] That's the message that defeats the enemy. That's the message that defeats the great enemy of souls that holds men and women in darkness and in bondage and in slavery. That's the words of this life that the angel told the apostles to preach.

But as always, of course, that message will be a savor of life to some and a stench of death to others. So verse 33, when they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.
You see, nothing has changed, has it? The gospel always produces fury and rage. It always produces those who want to silence it. Think of Richard Dawkins' campaign today to rid the world of Christianity, putting it on the buses in London.
He's now writing books to try and make children have nothing to do, even with Bible stories in school. Listen to the BBC religious broadcasting. When did you last hear a gospel like Peter's one here on Thought for the Day in the Morning or on Songs of Praise or something like that?
But the undeterred preaching of the truth is honoured by God. And he steps in again, you see, in verse 34 with another big but, but God.
[31:59] And here it's a totally unexpected providence, isn't it? Yes, it's just as much God's power at work. This time using the very enemies of the church, themselves, to rescue his people and to advance the gospel.

But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, well, he becomes the instrument in God's hand, doesn't he? He's a Pharisee, not a Sadducee, but he's certainly one of the council, one of the enemies.
And yet, he becomes the instrument in God's hand to bring freedom to his apostles. So in the private session that they discuss it all, he says in verse 31, look, if this is just a human thing, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, then you can't win.
You might even find yourself opposing God. Now, don't mistake here, Gamaliel is certainly not throwing in his lot with the Christians. In fact, his personal attitude actually of sitting on the fence is indefensible.
What more evidence could he possibly need that it was of God and therefore it couldn't be opposed? He's a bit like Pilate, isn't he? He thinks he can sit on the fence and wash his hands of it. That's very wrong.
[33:10] But that's not the point here. The point is, what an extraordinary, unexpected providence of God. Who would have thought that the Jewish council themselves would win freedom for the apostles?

Isn't God amazing? He doesn't have to use angels in the prisons in the middle of the night, does he? His silent providence is always at work in extraordinary ways, working all things together for the ultimate good of his people.
That's what the Bible tells us. And he even uses his bitterest enemies to actually be the building blocks to build his kingdom, to glorify his son. Isn't that astonishing?
There must be again laughter galore in heaven when this was going on, don't you think? Just that there must have been laughter when baby Moses was fished out of the Nile by the very daughter of Pharaoh.

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And he's taken off the leader and the future saviour of God's people and he's given a lavish upbringing and education at the hands of the Egyptian and even his own mother is paid by Pharaoh to look after him.
[34:11] Don't you think the angels were rolling in the aisles? Or when Haman, the despicable enemy of God's people who wanted to massacre and kill every one of the Jews, when Haman in the book of Esther was quite literally hoist on his own petard, hung on the gallows that he had built to an extraordinary height to humiliate and hang Mordecai, the Jew.

Or when Satan himself, in the greatest crime of all, caused the death on the cross of the Son of God himself through the hands of evil men.
And yet, in that very act, he inflicted upon himself and all his own his utter and complete destruction. And he who sits in the heavens laughs.
See, God doesn't always act with great drama. He doesn't need to. He's so great that just through the silent working of his extraordinary providence, he weaves a tapestry of glory, even out of the threads of his enemy schemes that are spun against him and his people.
We might not always see it happening, of course. Sometimes it is perplexing to us. Think about when the CIM missionaries were thrown out of China after the war, and people mourned all over the world.
[35:38] But what happened? More than ever, believers in China were added to the Lord. Multitudes of both men and women. Isn't that true? I couldn't help thinking when I was thinking about this, of the defeat in parliament to the government's incitement to religious hatred bill.

Do you remember about a year ago? It was a serious threat to evangelizing openly in this country, especially of sharing the gospel with people of other faiths. And do you remember the House of Lords tabled a very vital amendment to secure the right to speak the gospel to others.
The government was absolutely opposed to it. It had a three-line whip against it. But do you remember? The Prime Minister was so convinced that he would win the vote. What did he do? He left the chamber before the vote.
And they lost. By how many votes? One. And I think the Lord was laughing. Laughing at an attempt to silence the true gospel. was thwarted.
Perhaps it was just one step too far for the worst government in the entire history of our nation for passing anti-Christian and anti-righteous legislation.
[36:52] Well, what was the result here in Acts chapter 5, verse 41? The enemies totally defeated and the church totally delighted.

They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Notice their delight was not in their safety. They got a terrible, terrible beating.
Forty lashes minus one, enough to kill people. Their delight is in the victory of God and his gospel. Their delight is in the honor of being dishonored and disgraced for the sake of Jesus.
Dishonor for the sake of the name. John Stott points out that in these two episodes of persecution that we read about here in Acts 4 and Acts 5, the first drives the believers to prayer for the courage to go on speaking and the second to praise for the honor of being disgraced to the name of Jesus. With prayer and praise on their lips and in their hearts they went on as verse 42 says, every day, everywhere, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.
[38:08] Why does Luke record all of this for us? Well, as he says in the introduction to his gospel, so that we might have certainty about the things that we've been taught.

Certainty that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is unstoppable. It's a warning to all of those who would fight against the gospel of Jesus Christ.
And it's an encouragement to all of those who fight for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 39, Gamaliel's words are absolutely true. You will not be able to overthrow the church of Jesus Christ.
Harassment of the church by enemies without, disgrace and dishonor from the world, and even the religious establishment, that's a tactic Satan has used from the beginning and still uses today.
It's very violent some places in the world this very day. But for a church whose focus is on the true gospel of Jesus, whose love is the real Jesus, then that persecution can never ever destroy the church.

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[39:15] All it can do is refine it and strengthen it and make it bolder and stronger, filled with grace and power. And it's true for you as well, you know, in your personal life.

many trials will come to us, as we sang. And you will feel at times the shame and the disgrace and the dishonor of the Lord Jesus Christ.
You'll feel it at school, perhaps, you'll feel it at work, you'll feel it perhaps even in your own family, maybe this Christmas when you gather together. And you'll be hurt by snide comments about your faith, by scorn of the Lord Jesus that you love.
But you see, if your real delight is in the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ, then even honour and disgrace in the eyes of the world, it can't cow you. In God's hands it can only bring you real joy. Because you see, in God's economy, to be dishonoured is to be honoured. To be miscalled and to be mistreated is to be filled with great grace and great power. It's to be overshadowed by the spirit of glory and of grace.
[40:30] So friends, remember that. Let's remind one another of it. When we face hostility, when we face harassment for Jesus' sake, when you face the disgrace of this world, remember God's strange providence.

Strange, yes, perplexing at times for us, but extraordinary and unexpectedly marvellous all the same. So that even the dishonours and the disgrace of this world will be woven by his silent hand into blessing, into great blessing for his church and into great honour for our Lord Jesus Christ himself.
Remember that and help one another to remember that. Because it's people who remember that and who rejoice in a God of effortless power and a God of extraordinary providence who will be in our generation an effective people for God.
In that church, says verse 14, more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of men and women. May it be so for us also.
Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you are the God who is indestructible and your gospel is unchallengeable in this world.
[41:55] And so, Lord, when trials come, whatever form they may take, would you encourage our hearts with your goodness and grace that we may stand firm and know the sheer joy, even in the midst of disgrace, of standing for the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and our leader.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. We're going to end our service by singing number 255.
Do you not know, have you not heard, that firm remains on high the everlasting throne of him who formed the earth and sky? Mere human power shall fade and die, and youthful vigor cease, but those who wait upon the Lord in strength shall still increase.
That is the message of this table before us. Number 255. in his family.
Amen. Amen.
[44:04] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Still catches us out, doesn't it, that last line?
Let's pray. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever.
Amen.

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