

The Futility of Opposition

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[0 : 00] Well, we're turning to our Bibles now when we are reading from the book of Acts. So turn with me to Acts chapter 5. And if you have one of the church Bibles, that's on page 913.

We've been working through the book of Acts over the last few weeks, and the previous chapters have seen continued opposition to the progress of the gospel, both from outside and within the church, and that continues in our passage today.

So we're reading from Acts chapter 5 and verse 12. Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles, and they were all together in Solomon's portico.

None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.

The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. But the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy, they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

[1 : 39] But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out and said, Go, and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.

And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came and those who were with him, they called together the council and all the senate of the people of Israel and sent to the prison to have them brought.

But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported. We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.

Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed, wondering what this would come to. And someone came and told them, Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.

Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council.

[2 : 52] And the high priest questioned them, saying, We strictly charge you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

But Peter and the apostles answered, We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.

God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things.

And so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.

[3 : 52] And he said to them, Men of Israel, Take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days, Theodas rose up claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about 400, joined him.

He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him, Judas, the Galilean, rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him.

He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone.

For if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God.

So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

[5 : 01] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Good. Well, please do turn back to Acts chapter 5, and we'll spend a bit of time now thinking about that together.

So Acts chapter 5, and from verse 12. Unhindered progress of the gospel, that is the unrelenting base note in the book of Acts.

But it's unhindered progress of the gospel in the face of stern and determined opposition. You see, God's kingdom cannot be advanced without Satan doing everything he can to hinder it.

That was the case in the early church, and it's the case today. We know that. So how are you and I to think about opposition to the task God has set us as people?

[6 : 19] We're his witnesses. We are to witness to the ends of the earth. Is opposition fatal? Is it a sign of failure on our part?

Should it cause us to fear? Well, the success of gospel witnessing rests not in your hands or mine, but in God's hands.

That is at the very center of our passage this evening. He will ensure, no matter what, that the witnessing to Jesus as the Christ will go on unhindered.

Opposition is therefore ultimately futile, though it is undoubtedly painfully in the present. Our passage begins and ends with gospel growth.

Look at the start of our passage from verse 12. We see the work of the gospel flourishing. God has answered the prayer of the apostles from chapter 4, verse 29.

[7 : 22] Flick back there for a moment. To see what they prayed for. It's what I prayed for just a moment ago. Look at what they pray there in chapter 4, verse 29. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

Well, that was their prayer. And that is exactly what we see happening here in chapter 5, from verse 12. The apostles are at the work of proclaiming Christ, and God is at work through their hands, healing many.

God is authenticating the work of the apostles through signs and wonders. And look at verse 14. And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.

Great gospel growth. Look at the very end of our passage, down to verse 42. The apostles are still about the task of teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Look on one verse to the start of chapter 6. What is the fruit of their teaching and preaching? Well, the disciples are increasing in number.

[8 : 47] And look on to verse 7 of chapter 6. The word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly. The apostles are getting on with the task that Jesus set for them in Acts chapter 1, and believers are being added all the time.

So what happens between these two markers of gospel growth in our passage? We see gospel growth at the start and gospel growth at the end. What goes on in chapter 5, verse 17 to 40 that leads to gospel growth?

Well, what happens in the middle would seem to an onlooker to be deeply counterproductive to gospel growth. What we read about is severe opposition, hostility to the gospel.

Opposition from the highest religious authorities in Israel. In fact, the apostles were thrown in prison. They are ordered to silence. They are humiliated.

They're dishonored. They're disgraced. How is that a good strategy for gospel progress? It seems absolutely counterintuitive, doesn't it? If we try to forget all that we know for a moment, forget you know what happens in the book of Acts.

[10:05] Forget what happens next. Focus on the events at the start of this passage, and it looks to human eyes to be absolutely devastating. On the ground, the apostles, despite popular support, they're dragged before the authorities, they're thrown in public prison, is designed to humiliate, to silence.

It does not look promising from their point of view, does it? Imagine that was happening here today. Imagine there were officers at the door ready to escort me to Barlini because of what I'm saying now.

Not promising. Deeply humiliating. Not much chance of gospel advance, we think. But the writer, Dr. Luke, he is realistic about opposition to true gospel messengers, and he's realistic to the opposition to the true gospel message.

And really, that should not surprise us. Behind all the opposition we read about in the book of Acts is the great enemy of the living God. Satan is the great opposer.

And so he will focus his opposition. He will focus his efforts on where the church is being most effective. It's the same today.

[11:25] Satan will always seek to disrupt and disgrace the work of the gospel and those who proclaim that message. And so it ought to be no surprise to us as we read about great gospel flourishing there in verses 12 to 16 that we're met by another one of these great buts there in verse 17.

Great gospel progress, but. And we see again and again through Acts, we can observe it through church history, that opposition is most fierce where the gospel is most advancing.

One preacher put it this way, God's children must not expect peace in this world because the enemies of truth will always rise up to bring them down if at all possible.

Luke writes so that we would be realistic about that. But Luke also includes these verses because something absolutely extraordinary is going on.

Despite the best efforts of the high priest and his Sadduceean cronies, God miraculously intervenes twice in this passage. Two interventions that lead to the continued proclamation of the gospel message, which leads to gospel progress and many being added to the number.

[12:49] God will ensure that his gospel goes to the ends of the earth. God will ensure that. And that is the great encouraging truth from this passage.

God is in absolute control. nothing will stop his plans for his word and his plans for this world coming to pass.

Nothing will ultimately hinder the progress of the gospel despite how things might look to us, despite things not looking very promising at all. God will not have his gospel hindered.

So then, two key things for us in this passage. First, an encouragement and the second, an example. So firstly, the encouragement. We see here that God intervenes so that his gospel message will go to the end of the earth.

We see that in verses 19 to 24 and again in verses 34 to 40. There are two great interventions in the passage and they come immediately after moments of heightened opposition.

[14:00] look firstly from verse 17. We read that the high priest rose up and all who were with him were filled with jealousy and they arrested the apostles and put them in public prison.

But, during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison door. And again in verse 33, a moment of heightened opposition followed by a but.

Look at verse 33. when they heard this, they were enraged and they wanted to kill them. But, verse 34, a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel and he goes on to speak.

Both of these interventions follow heightened opposition and both are followed by continued proclamation. Look at verse 25. Following the release from prison, the apostles are straight away back in the temple teaching the people.

And again, look on to verse 41. Following their release from the council, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. So, we'll look at these two interventions in turn.

[15:11] First, we see God working supernaturally, the extraordinary angelic deliverance. Verses 19 to 24. The apostles are thrown into public prison.

And in doing so, the high priest and the Sadducees hope not just to silence them but to humiliate them. This is the second imprisonment in Acts, the first coming in chapter 4.

And that attempt to silence them had failed miserably. The movement had grown from that point. The high priest and those around him cannot stand to see this happening.

They're filled with jealousy, we're told. when they actually witness the work of the living God, they are hardened. Having seen and heard the Lord Jesus Christ, having seen and heard the witness to his resurrection, having seen and heard the signs and wonders and proclamation by the apostles, they refuse to follow the evidence.

They refuse to respond with repentance and instead, they respond with this hardening opposition. But no sooner had the apostles been thrown into prison that God intervened supernaturally.

[16:30] An angel of the Lord opened the door of the prison and brought them out and straight away they're back preaching. Now this ought not to surprise us, but it does.

We live in a world that is ruled by the rational, by the provable. We very much shy away from the supernatural. It really isn't something that registers as legitimate in the Western mind.

But don't forget who the God of the Bible is. He's the creator of everything we see. Every star and every planet was fashioned by his hand. If he wants to send an angel to open the doors of a prison, he is able.

people. And isn't there just a wonderful irony that God works in such a blatantly supernatural, miraculous way to thwart the efforts of the Sadducees?

They were the ones who were trying to silence the apostles and the witness to the resurrection of Jesus and the Sadducees could not countenance a bodily resurrection on the last day.

[17:35] They denied divine activity in the world and yet here God is working supernaturally to thwart their plans to free his apostles. And the high priest and those around them, they're made to look so foolish and feeble, aren't they?

It's almost farcical. They try to shut them up, they put them in prison. But the very next moment they're being led out the front door by the angel and within hours they're back preaching.

How futile the attempts to silence the gospel. But this is not always the approach that God takes when his people are opposed, when they're in prisons.

We don't have to look very far, even in the book of Acts, to read of apostles and others being put in prison, but no miraculous escape for them. In fact, many of those early leaders were killed for what they continued to say about Jesus.

So it's clear that God does not work to intervene like this in every instance. But it is clear that God will do whatever is necessary to ensure the continued proclamation of his name.

[18:52] That may well look very ordinary. It may seem to us quite strange. It may be, as in this case, something more obviously supernatural.

supernatural. But God will work as he pleases to ensure that his gospel goes to the end of the earth. He will ensure that.

Now, we don't get an insight to the prayers of the apostles here. We don't know if they prayed for angelic deliverance, but we do have an insight to some of their prayers.

We looked just earlier at their prayer in chapter 4, verse 29, and we saw there what they prayed. that they would be able to continue to speak to Jesus with all boldness.

And the events here in chapter 5 are surely an answer to that prayer. God answered that prayer, and he answered it supernaturally. And so we today can pray that same prayer, knowing that God will answer it, and knowing that he may act in ways that to us seem absolutely remarkable, supernatural.

[20:04] But it may be that he answers them in very mundane, normal sorts of ways. And that gives us great confidence, doesn't it, that God will do whatever it takes to ensure the progress of the gospel.

Now we've known that, undeniably, as a church. We lost a prominent building for the sake of the gospel five years ago. And now we have three buildings across the city, multiplication of gospel proclamation.

God will ensure that his gospel advances, won't he? Sometimes supernaturally so. That is something you can take great confidence from, great encouragement.

He will work to ensure his gospel goes forward. But there is a second intervention. There's a second intervention in this passage. It's no less miraculous, but it's much more mundane looking. Look on to verse 34. We see here that God works providentially. We see the everyday sovereignty of God. Now this deliverance is not at all as spectacular as the angelic rescue from prison, but it is no less God's deliverance.

[21 : 22] Now as you read the account, as you get to verse 33, you think that the apostles have had it, don't you? The response from the council is not encouraging. Verse 33, when they heard this, they were enraged, and they wanted to kill them.

To say it's not encouraging is an understatement. This looks like the end for these apostles. But help comes from a very unlikely source. It comes from within the council itself, from one of its more respected men, Gamaliel.

And he takes a rather pragmatic approach. He appeals to the council to let this thing play out. We've seen this sort of thing before, he says. These movements die out.

Then this one will too, unless, well unless it's the real deal. Notice what he says there in verse 39. But if it is of gods, you will not be able to overthrow them.

You might even be found to be opposing gods. Now he can't commend Gamaliel for his fence sitting. In spite of all that he's seen and heard, he still has not repented, but at least he's not joining in the clamor to kill these men.

[22 : 45] And he's right, isn't he? He speaks more truly than he perhaps realizes. His words might even give us a good summary of the book of Acts as a whole. If it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.

The message of Acts is that the message the apostles carried was of God, and no one was able to stop it. Astonishing words to hear from a man on the council.

But behind all of this is the Lord's providence. He works in ways that can really surprise and shock us. Who would have thought that the apostles' release would have come down to Gamaliel's intervention in the council?

But the Lord took one of the council's own members, one of their own number, one of the enemies, and made him an instrument of his will. The Lord secured his apostles' release, and immediately, verse 41, they continued with the task of teaching and preaching.

Now, this intervention was certainly not as dramatic as the angelic deliverance, but it was no less effective. Both interventions led immediately to continued proclamation.

[24 : 09] salvation. And so, as we pray for those who are at this very moment in prison for the gospel, of which there are many across the globe, for those who are facing stiff opposition in their gospel work, we pray not just that God would answer our prayers in supernatural ways, but also in the ordinary, in the everyday looking ways.

Here was a man standing to speak in a council meeting. Nothing unusual or particularly extraordinary about that.

That is an everyday occurrence, someone standing to speak in a council. But God was at work, even through that seemingly ordinary looking thing, God was at work ensuring that his plans would not be thwarted.

And again, this gives us great confidence and encouragement. God works through the normal. He works through the normal to achieve his plans and again demonstrates the absolute futility of human attempts to restrain the message of the gospel and to restrain the gospel itself.

How futile to try and prevent the God of all creation working in his world to achieve his goals. Nothing can stop that.

[25 : 38] How futile. So there's our first main point and it's an encouragement. God intervenes so that his gospel message will go to the end of the earth.

Two interventions, one miraculous, one mundane. God will ensure that his gospel message is unhindered. He's in total control.

And so now more briefly as we close, we see the outcome of these great interventions in the example of the apostles. This is our second main point. We see the example.

God's witnesses keep on with the task of speaking about Jesus. And we see this in verses 25 to 33 and again at the end, verses 41 to 42.

42. As we've seen, the outcome of both these interventions is continued speaking about Jesus. Continuing to speak about Jesus.

[26 : 42] That is what the apostles do. They did not cease in that task. And notice again what they proclaim. There's no watering down. There's no dodging the difficulties.

Under the fiercest pressure they hold firm. Look firstly at verses 25 onwards. As they are released from prison, they go again and preach in the temple.

And they're brought back to the council in verse 27. And the high priest questions them. And Peter then answers from verse 29. The high priest challenges them in verse 28.

And how does Peter respond? Well, he keeps at it. He keeps speaking about the sovereignty of God. He speaks of their guilt, their murder of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He speaks of Jesus' ascension, his exaltation as leader and savior. He speaks of Jesus' lordship. He is the one to whom you must submit.

[27 : 46] He speaks of salvation only in Jesus' name. He speaks of repentance and forgiveness of sin. This is straight down the line. There's no soft peddling, no attempt to change the message for the high priest.

And so Peter and all the apostles here, they are an example to us as they set forth the content of the gospel with great boldness in the face of opposition.

Imagine the pressure. You've just come out of prison. You're dragged before the authorities, the great authorities of the land. How much pressure would there be to conform to water down the message?

But they don't do that. This is the gospel message that has filled Jerusalem. This is the gospel that has led to multitudes turning in repentance.

And it is the gospel that we must continue today to proclaim. But Peter and the rest of the apostles are an example to us as well because of their attitude in that proclamation.

[28 : 58] Look first at the apostles' reaction as the angels release them and then instruct them to carry on teaching in the temple. You could well imagine the apostles saying, hold on a second, asking for some clarity.

We've just been locked up for doing that very thing and now you want us to go back and do it again? human wisdom might determine that it might be a good idea just to hold back for a while. We must wait for the dust to settle. Let's just take it easy. But no, the apostles get straight back to it. And they don't wait till lunchtime.

They're there at daybreak, straight back in the temple, proclaiming. no recovery time after a night in the clink. Their obedience to the command of the angel was immediate. They were rescued for service.

They were rescued for continued proclamation, not for putting their feet up. It's quite an example to us, isn't it? Look on to verse 41.

[30 : 07] They've been let go from the council, and they are rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. They were rejoicing.

And that's not surprising. I think I too would have rejoiced, but possibly not for those reasons. I think I rejoiced that I was free, that I could go and see my family again.

But rather, they rejoice because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. Now, isn't that a total shift in mindset that you and I need to ask God to help us with?

To suffer for Jesus' name is a sign of worthiness and something to rejoice in. Is that how you and I think about suffering for Jesus?

To be talked about by other mums at the school gate because of the gospel truths you hold to? Because of the church you're a part of? That is reason for rejoicing.

[31 : 17] To be overlooked at work for promotion because you're too committed to gospel work or you're too keen to share your faith in the office. That is reason for rejoicing.

To be sneered at because you won't, as a doctor, vote for decriminalizing abortion. that is reason for rejoicing. To be threatened with prison because of what you believe and what you proclaim about the Lord Jesus.

That is reason for rejoicing. To suffer dishonor for Jesus' name is reason to rejoice because that was Jesus' path.

that was the way for him and it's the way for all who are in him, for all who follow him. It is the path to glory.

But dishonor we may experience does not ultimately disrupt God's plans and purposes for the world. We may think that opposition is going to somehow slow down the progress of the gospel, but no.

[32 : 28] the dishonor we might experience does not disrupt God's plans and purposes. Nothing will, nothing can stop the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

And so we rejoice, we press on with the task no matter what happens. Whether there's opposition or whether there's a wide and open door for ministry, we rejoice, we proclaim. opposition is ultimately futile. God will see to it that his plans will succeed, and so we can press on with our task with total confidence, knowing that God will do whatever it takes, and he will answer. He will answer prayers that align with his gospel purposes. Now isn't that encouraging as we go about our task, week by week, year by year.

Nothing can thwart his purposes. Let me pray. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, you know our hearts perhaps better than we do, certainly better than we do.

[33 : 58] You know how fearful we become when we think about or have to face difficulty in opposition. And so please, would you, in light of what we've heard and learnt tonight, would you strengthen our hearts, encourage us in the knowledge that you are in control, that you will not let your gospel be hindered.

and so we can go on with great confidence knowing that you will answer our prayers. And so we pray that you would look upon the threats of those who seek to oppose the gospel and grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

So help us in that task, we pray, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.