

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 17, 2022

Christian Confidence

Acts 12:18-25

Jeff Sellers, an editor at Compass Direct News, once reported on a story told by a Vietnamese pastor called Silas. According to Sellers,

Local authorities warned that if his church continued to meet without a permit, he could expect to see trouble. "Be careful," one official told him. "Watch out."

This was a threat as much as a warning. In Vietnam, as in many other Communist (and some Islamic) countries, governments commonly deny or delay church permits, then jail Christians for meeting without a permit.

Silas shot back: "I don't have to watch out or be careful; God will care for us." He went on to thank the official for the harassment and opposition that Vietnamese authorities had meted out, as it unified the country's Christians.

"Your persecution has made us stronger," he told the officer.

Moreover, the pastor told him that he loved him. "You can shut down our churches, jail us, torture us, it doesn't matter, because we'll still love you," he said. "We'll love you, because God loves you and wants to see you come to know Christ's salvation." Then he delivered the final, loving blow—asking the official if he didn't feel badly about mistreating Christians. Silas told him he suspected it was tearing him up inside.

The official stalked away.

Late one night, the officer came back. He expressed regret about harming Christians, but also feared mistreatment at work, and the possibility of losing his own job in the midst of workplace corruption. Silas told him about God's plan for his life, and the official prayed to receive Jesus. It turns out he advanced to a high position, where he knew when church raids were about to take place and could tip off Silas. He would tell Silas on Saturday that the police were coming on Sunday morning, so they would come and find nobody there. Then they would meet for worship in the afternoon. As Sellers put it,

These miracles, the pastor concluded, could not have happened without the prayers of believers worldwide. Many other oppressed believers tell of receiving supernatural consolation in the midst of their ordeals. Suffering Christians are actually protected, comforted, and rescued through our prayers.¹

In the story right before today's text from Acts, Luke wants us to know that the church's prayers for Peter were part of his comfort while incarcerated, as well as his deliverance from captivity. The narrative of Peter's "great escape" isn't primarily a story of how the chief apostle managed to break free from prison. It's more a story of divine deliverance. In the midst of Passover, when God's people were remembering and celebrating their own rescue from Egyptian bondage, the church is praying, and God's response to these prayers comes in the form of an angel who rescues Peter from Herod's clutches.

What follows is the story of Herod's own demise. The one who has gone to extremes to stamp out the church ends up being eliminated by God. When a delegation from neighboring Syrian cities arrives, desperate for help with food distribution, a pretentious Herod coerces them into worshipping him. The ruler of a people called to give all glory to God alone tries to claim some of that glory for himself, and God pronounces judgment on him. As one preacher has put it, "The response of God to such silly presumption on the part of kings is swift, ruthless, pitiless, ugly desecration. Herod becomes food for worms. God is not nice to those who try to be God."²

So Herod is brought to an end. But "the word of God continued to increase and spread" (v. 24). That's Luke's striking summary of how the gospel not only survived, but also thrived, in the face of opposition. In fact, attempts to silence the good news of what God had done through Christ actually served to extend its reach and impact.

This isn't the first time in the book of Acts where the word of God triumphs over forces that resist the inbreaking of God's reign. The story being unfolded by Luke is a story that goes beyond human efforts and human determination to move the gospel mission forward. First and foremost, this is God's work, God's mission, God's kingdom. God is on the move, bringing redemption to bear on the lives of individuals, towns, and regions. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8b). So Acts is about the advance of the gospel, through human messengers, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes that advance may first look like a retreat, or even a defeat. But even when some of the gospel's witnesses, such as Peter, are in chains, the gospel itself remains unchained. God's rescuing and restoring purposes still prevail. And that's because the Holy Spirit remains resilient and creative, overcoming barriers and removing things that hinder the progress of God's word. The Spirit stays busy knocking down walls of race, ethnicity, nationality, economics, gender, age, and geography, forming the people of God who give praise and glory to God.

One of the ways this happens is through prayer. Luke says that in the face of hostility from a tyrant king, the community of Jesus followers "was earnestly praying to God for [Peter]" (12:5). When hostility to the gospel arises, the church swings into action, not by grabbing weapons and overcoming its enemies by violence and physical force, but by exercising its primary power, the power of prayer. This may at first seem like a passive and ineffective way of advancing the gospel. But in reality, prayerfulness can become the place where God gets some of his most important kingdom work done.

Singer-songwriter Sandra McCracken wrote about her experience of sitting with some friends on the front porch of an old farmhouse, where a hummingbird feeder attracted tiny winged visitors. She says:

Hummingbird wings move at about 50 beats per second. But when they (hover), hummingbirds can appear completely motionless. A miracle of fitness and form, God made these creatures to be a delicate display of paradox: They are still and active at the same time.

These birds are a moving metaphor for the kind of trust that God outlines in Isaiah 30:15: "You will be delivered by returning and resting; your strength will lie in quiet confidence" (CSB). When I think of God's grace at play in my own life, my most successful moments happen when I hold steady at the center. Confidence is not found in productivity, but in quietness of heart.

Our plans are not like his plans. As the hummingbird moves, his wings are invisible to us. So too the work of God is often hard to see in the moment, but nevertheless something remarkable is happening. This is what the Lord says: "Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it?" (Isa. 43:19).³

As it interceded for Peter, perhaps the church, like the hummingbird, was still and active at the same time. Still in prayer, and thereby active in the power of God, the God who releases captives, works good out of bad, and does something new. That's why our confidence is in him.

That's what defines Christian confidence. Christian confidence is less about our productivity and more about God's activity, especially when it seems like our witness is ineffective and the gospel appears to be going nowhere. But there's more going on than we recognize or realize. God is present. The Holy Spirit is operating. The word is accomplishing its purpose. The authorities of this present world rise and fall. We who follow Jesus reach our mortal end as well. But the gospel, the saving power of God, continues unhindered, toward the redemption of the world.

Author Douglas Coupland wrote a novel titled *Girlfriend in a Coma*. It tells the story of Karen, who falls into a coma in 1979. While she lies in the hospital in a vegetative state, life goes on. Her teenage friends grow up, get married, get divorced, do drugs. With the passage of time, Karen misses the fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS crisis, and the arrival of the personal computer. Then, 17 years after collapsing, Karen suddenly awakens, which is a huge story in itself. Though she initially resists all the media hype, Karen eventually agrees to do an interview with a local TV reporter named Gloria. The big question is, just how is Karen finding the new world she has awakened to? Part of the interview goes as follows:

"What's the biggest change in the world you've noticed so far, Karen? What strikes you as the deepest change?"

Karen speaks: "You know what it is, Gloria? It's how confident everybody comes across these days. Everybody looks like they're raring to go all the time. People look confident when they're buying chewing gum or walking the dog."

"You like that then?"

"There's more. You take the same confident-looking people and ask them a few key questions, and suddenly you realize that they're despairing about the world—that the confidence is a mask."

"What kind of questions?"

"What do you think life will be like in 10 years? Are you straining to find some kind of meaning? Does growing old frighten you?"

"Hmmm. We're a culture searching for meaning."⁴

Christian confidence isn't a mask we wear to conceal despair and meaninglessness. On the contrary, Christian confidence is who we authentically are and how we genuinely live because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather than hiding despair, we radiate hope. Rather than succumbing to meaninglessness, we display direction and purpose in our lives.

This doesn't mean ignoring the reality of suffering or thinking that life is just one God-given victory after another. No, we stay real. We stay humble. We recognize the ways that we resist the reign of God in our own lives. And we're under no illusions about the many who are indifferent to, or antagonistic toward, the good news of Jesus Christ. But our power for the present, and our hope for the future, are grounded in the faithfulness and redeeming grace of God, who will have the final word. I like the way that John Inazu and Tim Keller put it when they write:

The audacity of Christian hope is that Jesus Christ came into the world and is reconciling all things to himself. He is both the subject and object of our confidence, and as generations of saints who have come before us have testified in word and in deed, he is sufficient. It is with that hope and that confidence that we engage in the world in an anxious age.⁵

Return to today's text. Luke pulls no punches about the anxiety of his own age, and its resistance to the gospel. "But," he says, "the word of God continued to increase and spread." In that God, and his word, is our confidence.

¹ Jeff Sellers, "Cure for the IDOP Holiday Blues." Christianity Today. November 16, 2005. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/novemberweb-only/32.0b.html> (July 13, 2022).

² William H. Willimon, *Acts*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) n.p.

³ Sandra McCracken, "When God's Hand Is Invisible." CT Magazine (April 2021) 24.

⁴ Douglas Coupland, *Girl in a Coma* (New York: Regan, 1999) n.p.

⁵ John D. Inazu and Timothy Keller, "How Christians Can Bear Gospel Witness in an Anxious Age." Christianity Today. June 20, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/tim-keller-john-inazu-christians-gospel-witness-anxious-age.html> (July 14, 2022).