

Rock Of Ages (Acts 5:12-42)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 July 2022

Preacher: Nathan Cutforth

- [0 : 00] Thank you, thank you Pastor William. Always a privilege to read the word. A pity you still have to see me on a screen, but I guess that's what it's been like for the last few years.
- Today I will read from Acts chapter 5 verses 12 to 42, the NIV version. The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people, and all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade.
- No one else did join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought those who were ill into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.
- Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.
- Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.
- [1 : 17] But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. Go stand in the temple courts, he said, and tell the people all about this new life.
- At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders of Israel, and sent to the jail for the apostles.
- But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, We found the jails securely locked with the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.
- On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to. Then someone came and said, Look, the men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.
- At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.
- [2 : 31] The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said.
- Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than human beings.
- The God of your ancestors raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and saviour, that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.
- We are witnesses of these things, and so the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

But a Pharisee named Gemaylium, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

[3 : 37] Then he addressed the Sanhedrin. Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do with these men. Some time ago, Thudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about 400 men rallied to him.

He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people to revolt.

He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case, I advise you, leave these men alone.

Let them go, for if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering, disgraceful in the name.

[4 : 48] Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. Hello, everybody.

It's great to be back with you. My name's Nathan. If you don't know me, the regulars here will have seen me before.

But if you don't know me, I'm Nathan. And I'm going to talk about that passage, what it means. And it's super relevant to us, to you here this week.

And so I'm excited to speak with you about this passage. Before we do that, I'm just going to pray for us as we seek to understand God's word.

Father, I thank you so much that we can be here this afternoon to think about what you have said and what you have done in the past, how you have worked through the ages, how your church has been about your mission.

[6 : 09] And I pray as we read this passage, as we understand it, you give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to receive who you are and what you've done and who we must be because of that.

Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. When I was young, my mum made us watch this TV program.

It was called like Seven Wonders of the Industrial World or something. And they went through all these different things that were like things that people built during the Industrial Revolution like bridges and buildings and works of engineering that were really incredible.

And I don't remember any of them, how they built what I did, except for one. There was one that really impressed me. It was called The Lighthouse at Bell Rock.

And I don't think any of you have heard of that. But it is the oldest sea-washed lighthouse in the world. Now, what I'm asking, does that mean? Why is that impressive?

[7 : 15] A sea-washed lighthouse is one that is built like in the water. So, we see one up here, that's a good picture of a lighthouse. A lighthouse, as we all imagine, a lighthouse sitting on a little outcrop, beaming light.

A sea-washed one is built like on a reef. It's built in the water in the middle of nowhere. This one, this particular lighthouse is built north, on the north coast of Scotland.

And it's like miles out to sea, on this reef that boats kept crashing into. And there was heaps of challenges, the chief most of which is that the little reef that they built it on, it's only above water for four hours a day.

For 20 hours a day, this thing is below water. And so they had to figure out how they were going to engineer this lighthouse onto this little, this rock in the middle of the ocean.

And by the time they finished, when it was done, they had a lighthouse that was warding ships off. And it has stood for over 200 years.

[8 : 27] I think they completed it or built it in 1810. Now that's all fun sort of facts about it.

But the reason I remember that particular lighthouse is not because it had some cool facts, or some cool engineering, or whatever it is. The reason I remember that lighthouse is because I have this image in my head of a lighthouse in the middle of the ocean with a storm approaching and just huge wave after huge wave smashing into this building.

The spray going up taller than the lighthouse over and over, hitting and hitting and hitting for 200 years. And the lighthouse stood, still there today, protecting ships, from the reef.

As we look at this passage in Acts, Acts chapter 5, I think what we see is the church being like this lighthouse.

The church being like that lighthouse. In the book so far, if you've been coming and as you've been reading, you will have noticed that this young church, the followers of Jesus, they've had a few problems.

[9 : 44] They've had a few issues. In chapter 4, you see this persecution coming. And that's freaky. The people from outside the church start attacking the church. And that's scary.

That's a big thing. But the church is bold. They continue to proclaim the gospel. And that's amazing. And then later you see not a problem of someone from without the church doing something to the church.

It's a problem within the people of God. There's Ananias and Sapphira. And they're put to death. They're killed because of sin. And that's terrifying as well.

Problems within. Problems without. Problems everywhere. It would have been an unsettling time for any believer. What is going on with this new group of this new church?

That the problems are just everywhere for them. Persecution without. Conflict with them. Pressure on every side. And our passage just feels like another problem.

[10 : 47] Another wave to hit the church. Another thing they have to deal with. Breakers smashing against the church. How is it going to keep standing?

How is the church going to keep going? And as you go through Acts you'll see again and again issues cropping up things which seem to threaten the church and its life.

And it doesn't stop at the end of Acts. All through history we see these waves that hit the church. And maybe some of us feel like that a bit this morning. Or not this morning, sorry.

This afternoon. That waves keep hitting. We thought we had kind of gotten past COVID and we were over that. But now another fresh wave has just come and hit.

How is the church going to survive? How are we as believers going to survive when we feel just battered by every wave, by every storm that's coming?

[11 : 48] How will we stand? So as we look at this passage I'd like us to have an image of this lighthouse standing in the ocean, standing against the waves.

Because I think as we think about a lighthouse as a great image for us to understand this passage. passage we see this lighthouse standing alone and see we see waves hitting the lighthouse the challenges that the church is facing and we see the rock that the lighthouse holds to so that it doesn't fall. Firstly the lighthouse let's think about that for a moment picking up in verse 12 the disciples are in the temple teaching you forget the apostles for taking a day off at some point but it doesn't seem like they ever do they just keep going and going and going they've just had this massive church conflict and they're back teaching in the temple almost straight away the first big pastoral issue they've put that behind them and they're plowing on forward they're back in the temple and notably they're doing signs and wonders they're doing all these kinds of miracles and it's kind of a contrast in what we've seen before or just before we've had these two people die and sort of miraculous circumstances now we've got this contrast of the apostles bringing life healing driving out unclean spirits that kind of thing. Now the question we often come up with or we often ask is you know how come they could do so many miracles?

Wouldn't it have been handy to have an apostle round these last couple of years who could have just you know healed the COVID cases before they came across the border or whatever it is?

Why are we getting something wrong that we don't see these kind of crazy miracles happening? And I don't think so. Here's my take and you know maybe William will stand up next week and say Nathan is wrong and don't listen to him but this is my take on what's happening.

I think the reason we see God doing a lot of miracles here with the apostles is to kind of validate them as his messages. You see it in the Bible kind of all the way through when Moses goes to Pharaoh and says I'm speaking for God and you need to let these people go.

[14 : 32] It's accompanied by all these incredible miracles that kind of validate Moses' message. I think we see the same thing here that these people say we are speaking from God and there's this validity to it because they're doing all these crazy things that no one else can do.

And we see the result of the miracles that many believers were added. And so I think what Luke is trying to show us is that through these miracles, through what they're doing, it's not just you know great people are healed, that's awesome.

And through the gospel, through the gospel, the message of Jesus is going forward. And that's the point. And Luke is trying to show us that even though the church is facing its first kind of internal problems that it's kind of had, the gospel is still going forward.

Even though it's not a perfect community, even though there is sin happening within the church, the gospel continues to be proclaimed and people continue to be saved.

The problems within the church don't stop the gospel. Now, much like the first miracle Peter did, these signs led to an arrest.

[15 : 57] The powers that be say we don't want men doing all these amazing things. We need to put them in prison. And there's a bit of irony here and I think it's kind of funny, so I'm going to share it with you.

The funny side of the situation is that we're told it's the Sadducees who were in charge of the imprisonment. The Sadducees were a group of Jews who were a bit skeptical about the supernatural.

They didn't really believe in like resurrection or anything like that. They weren't keen on miracles. And so it's ironic that they're the ones who come and say none of that. You can't be healing people and casting out demons there.

We're going to put you away for doing these crazy things we don't believe in. It's ironic. And there's a lot of details from the first 17 going on that we'd kind of like to know.

How do we get away out of prison without anyone noticing? How does that all happen? What is going on here? We're not told. There's all these, you know, this escape.

[17 : 00] We'd love to know how exactly it happened. But we're not told. We're only told one thing, and that is the message from the angels for the apostles.

Go back to the temple and keep proclaiming. Go back to the place you were yesterday where you go rested and keep doing that same thing.

Keep preaching the message of the gospel. Don't stop because of persecution. Don't stop because of internal conflict. Don't stop because waves are battering you.

Keep preaching. Keep telling the words of life. At this point, maybe I sound like a broken record.

Maybe the book of Acts sounds like a bit of a broken record. Because keep saying one thing. That the gospel must keep going. The gospel must keep being proclaimed.

[18 : 03] That the mission of God, that the whole world needs to hear the message of Jesus, has to keep happening. The great mission of the church to speak the words of love.

And this is how I think we should maybe picture ourselves. Lighthouse. This lighthouse that is beaming lights, warning ships and passers-by of danger.

Speaking the words of life. And if a lighthouse, you know, in the ocean somewhere, on a reef somewhere, isn't shining a light, isn't warning of the danger, then it's no good to anyone.

In fact, it's sort of more dangerous. It's just a tower on a rock. The lighthouse to be a lighthouse needs a light. It needs to shine and warm and bring life.

And the church is the same. We need to be proclaiming the mission of God to have his gospel preached everywhere. It isn't finished. And so we need to keep going.

[19 : 16] It's worth asking, when is the light of the gospel shining from my life?

This week coming up. How am I going to be a beacon for the words of life? Where is Jesus going to resound from my life?

Are we just a magnificent feat of engineering, but never actually completing the mission for which we've been built? Standing majestically, here we are, this organisation, the church, looking great, but failing to complete our mission.

We can't beat that. The church needs to have a light. We need to be sharing the words of life. And so that's the lighthouse. You can see it there in the ocean. The lighthouse shining as light so that all may know and live.

But we move on. We keep thinking about this story following their night in prison. The apostles go back to the temple and they're preaching some more. And they're kind of brought back in to see the high priest.

[20 : 42] But this time it's a bit different because everybody's asked a bit more nicely. They're not arrested. They're just sort of politely saying, could you please come back? And they're brought before this council and they're questioned by the high priest.

And he's saying, we told you to stop talking about Jesus. We told you not to preach. We don't want you doing this in our city. And here we see this attitude of the apostles as these waves are breaking against them.

As these storm clouds gather. As so many things seem to be a problem. They say and they respond to these powerful people accusing them.

These powerful people trying to stop them. They say, we must obey God rather than man. There's a lot to admire about this attitude, isn't there?

It's brave. It's faithful. It's steadfast. It's brazen even. It's so courageous. I think you and I, at least in our better moments, would like to be like this.

[21 : 49] Being the people who say, I must obey God rather than man. I don't care who's telling me what to do. I will obey God.

I often wish that I was braver and more courageous and could stand up more often for what I believe in. And just obey God rather than man.

And sometimes when you read a passage like this, you'll say, you feel discouraged. You'll say, I'm never going to be. I'm never going to be like that.

Sure, it's encouraging to see these people and see God working through these people just so brave. But I don't think I'm going to be able to do that. Why aren't I as brave as those people?

Why aren't I as bold as the apostles? Why can't I stand up for what I believe all the time? Maybe you come up with excuses why you're not. I'm not an apostle, so obviously I'm not going to be as good.

[22 : 51] I haven't spent three years with Jesus and I'm the best Bible college in the world. It's different. But we need to be those who speak.

We need to be those who are brave, who are bold. And so we should ask, why am I not as confident? And I think when we ask that question, we see something interesting about these apostles.

Because what we see about them first when we're reading this passage is not that they are bold and brazen and courageous and standing up and challenging and full of bluster.

They are these things, but there's a deeper attitude. What is the reason they must obey? Why are the apostles able to boldly proclaim the gospel, even though they're being directly opposed by these powerful men?

It's because they realize who they were. It's because they know their place in the world. They know why God had put them where they were.

[23 : 58] Who are they? They're the witnesses of their leader and saviour. They're the men who have seen Jesus, who have heard Jesus, who know the risen Lord.

They're the men who have in their minds and in their hearts and in their mouths the words that bring life. They know they're the ones who have the message by which all may be forgiven.

They're the lighthouse. And they know if they turn the lights off, there will be no one. They know it. There will be no salvation. If they don't warn of the rocks, then the world will be shipwrecked.

They are the witnesses of the saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah. They are the ones who must speak so that people might be forgiven. And so they must keep on speaking.

There's no other choice because that's who they are. That's their mission. That is why they've been put on this earth. And so even though these waves are smashing against them and they're being battered again and again, they don't stop.

[25 : 08] Because they know if they stop, then the message won't go on. And I think it's the same for us.

If we have found this forgiveness, if I know the saving work of Jesus Christ, then I am in a similar way a witness to him of what he has done.

Witnesses to the world of the forgiveness that's available. Of the life that's available. And if that's us, then we must go on shining.

Storms may up, waves may come, problems will arise, but we must go on speaking the words of life. From time to time, you find something that's truly great.

Something that changes your world. That you have to tell everybody about. Last month I was on holiday and I went to Wanaka and I found something truly great.

[26 : 12] It was a, it's like a little, like a fast food place that was out of the back of a trailer. And they did deep fried chicken. And I had this burger that was like sweet and spicy, deep fried chicken.

And it changed my life a little bit. And so I came back from Wanaka and said, you people actually need to go over there and try this. Don't, don't look at that tree that's in the lake, that's not, come on have the deep fried chicken.

It's amazing. But in Christ I've found something much better than deep fried chicken. I've found hope, I've found forgiveness, I've found joy, I've found peace, I've found righteousness.

I've found all these things. I've found true love, I've found true acceptance. I've found eternal. And so how can I not share it with the world?

How can I not go on speaking? Amen. Finally, in the last part of this passage we see the members of this Jewish council getting together and having like a chat.

[27 : 25] What are we going to do about these apostles who won't stop for anyone preaching this message about Jesus? What are we going to do with them? And one of these guys gets up, he seems to be older, he seems to be respected, and he reminds them that Jesus Christ was not the first man to stand up at that time and claim to be someone special.

He quotes a number of examples of other men who claim that they were someone special, that maybe they were even the Messiah. These guys who kind of upstarts, who got a bit of a following, who made some waves, rocked the boat a bit, but then they died and their following dissipated.

They disappeared and we don't know anything about them other than they're mentioned here. And that brings us back to our question because this group didn't fail.

All these other men rose up and had their disciples and then were kind of swept away, but the church didn't fail. Why didn't the church fail like these other upstarts?

How has this church, this group of disciples, withstood everything that's been thrown at them? Well we're kind of told, indirectly, if it wasn't man, it would have failed.

[28 : 57] But because it is of God, no one can overthrow it. The answer is so simple, yet so profound.

God is for his church. It is by God's power that his church is sustained and keeps going. Those who oppose God's church oppose God himself.

Paul is going to discover that in a few chapters time when he tries to persecute the church. He's going to be confronted by God and he's going to say, why are you persecuting me?

God is so kind of identified with his church that if someone is attacking the church, God kind of takes that personally, so to speak.

And so ultimately the church will never fail, will never be overthrown, it will never crumble. Not because we'll be so amazing. Not because, you know, the leaders will be so strong and brave and bold and the followers will be so incredible.

[30 : 09] Not any of that. The reason the church continues and the mission goes on is because it is being driven by God.

Ultimately, the lighthouse of the church stands because it is built upon a rock. God is founding and making it possible.

The church is God's work and he stands to defend it. As we gather here this afternoon, particularly given the situation, some people online watching, a few of us here, it can kind of feel a bit mundane, a bit ordinary, a bit difficult, a bit hard.

But don't be fooled. This community here, this fellowship here, if it is being built by God, no one will be able to bring it down.

No conflict within will be able to crush it. No persecution from without will be able to tear it down if God is formed. If God is at work in his church, then even the hardest and most difficult and the most ferocious problems are nothing.

[31 : 31] Because God is bigger. I think what we see here is interesting for another reason.

I think the church often confuses the world. We have a perfect example here with the Pharisees and his council and what's going on.

The world thinks that if it kind of inflicts enough damage, enough pain, enough hardship, then eventually Christians will give up. That's kind of, a lot of people have taken that attitude if you kind of want to look at church history.

The early centuries of the church's life, it's what the authorities thought. We can snuff this out if we try hard enough. They thought Jesus was just another person, another man, and if they push hard enough, people will disappear.

But what they found was the exact opposite. Far from going weak, the church grew stronger and stronger with every hit, with every wave.

[32 : 41] When Jesus died and rose and went to heaven and ascended, the church grew stronger because its followers went out and proclaimed this gospel message.

Christ's death, the worst thing that could happen for any other religion, any other leader, that the leader dies, the worst thing that could happen for the church, for us, for believers, is the best thing that could happen.

Christ's death is the power for salvation. It's the thing that keeps fueling the church year after year, century after century, instead of taking them away, it means Christ is with us always.

It brings us closer to him. Instead of meaning we're alone and we're by ourselves, Christ's death and his resurrection and ascension means we are never alone. Instead of meaning defeat, it's victory.

Instead of causing despair, it brings hope. Instead of being sadness and it's joy. Instead of being the end that was the very beginning. That's why the church won't fail.

[33 : 49] Because it's founded on Christ. It draws its strength and power by holding tightly to this leader who died and rose again, who faced the worst of things.

For us, he is our rock. And we are the church he has died for. Our salvation is sealed in his death. We're a precious treasure. And it is sight.

And that's what we're built upon. That's what keeps us going. The lighthouse at Bell Rock. We've been talking about it. It stood for over 200 years, smashed by waves.

That kind of thing. One of the reasons it is so strong and so sturdy and has stood against everything the ocean has to throw against it is because when they were building the foundation, they carved each rock particularly to fit into the reef so that the bricks that they were laying to build the lighthouse were individually fitted into the rock that they might cling to the rock.

That's the reason why the lighthouse has been able to withstand hundreds of years of ocean fury.

[35 : 11] And that's how we must be. Christ is our rock. And we need to form ourselves so that we cling more tightly to him. So when things get tough, when it's hard, when the waves break, when there are difficulties within and without, we cling more tightly to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the reason the church will never fail. That's the reason the church has persisted on this mission to tell everybody. It's because the church has always clung to Christ.

And the reason the church will never fail is because Christ is clinging to us. He is holding us fast. He won't let us go.

And so there we have it. The church is this lighthouse. We are here because there is a mission to be done. We must shine the light. And that will bring opposition.

There will be trials and tribulations and problems. And it will be difficult at times. Waves will hit us, but we'll survive. Not because we're amazing all the time, but because we have an amazing rock.

[36 : 26] A great foundation that is Christ himself. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that we are built upon the rock.

We thank you that even as we meet here this afternoon, some of us at home, some of us here, all kinds of things going on, that we do so in confidence.

Because we know you are working. We know you are in our midst, that you are building this church. We thank you for that encouragement. And I pray that as we go from here and the weeks and months and years that follow, that we would seek to cling closely, cling tightly to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that in His name, Amen. We pray that in His name, Amen.