

The Empire Strikes Back

Acts 5:12-42

I wonder what you would say the British dream is? What people aspire to?

We've all heard about the American dream, but what's the British dream?

I think the two phrases from years gone by which still ring true are:

“an Englishman's home is his castle”

“keep a stiff upper lip”

not because I think life is the same now as it was 100/200 years ago. But people still care about these things.

Having a really nice home, with just enough luxuries, but not too extravagant! We care about that don't we? I'd say it's part of the British dream, it's ultimately about **comfort**. Your home should be somewhere you feel safe and secure, somewhere you feel proud of, and ultimately somewhere you feel really comfortable. And our desire for comfort doesn't stop with the home, or the car, or those nice meals out, we want comfort in every area of our lives.

Similarly, we want to be really well thought of! That phrase “having a stiff upper lip” is all about not letting other people see your weakness. And caring about your reputation/being **approved-of**, is not just an old-fashioned thing. We care about what people think of us don't we? We don't want people to know about the stupid mistakes we make, and we do want them to know about fantastic achievements we've had. And it really hurts when someone thinks badly of you, especially if they tell others what they think. We care about being approved of.

What I want us to think about today is how our desire for comfort, our desire to be approved of, fit in with our Christian faith.

It's not hard to imagine the situation is it: we meet a new person and they are interested to find out about us. As we are talking, they say that they are not interested in any of that religion “nonsense” – and then suddenly we begin to feel quite nervous, nervous to say that we are Christians. We are afraid of what they might think, we don't want them to think we are weird or stupid or “one of them” – so we just keep quiet. We care about being approved of.

The same is true with comfort. There are workplaces where it's very clear that if you are a Christian you are expected to keep quiet and leave that at home. And so the Christian employee thinks through the consequences: they need to get that promotion, to live in the nice new house they have, they've got that mortgage to repay, they are under real financial pressure – they can't afford to miss out, so they follow what is expected at work. Comfort is the thing which they're really chasing after.

The desire for **Comfort** in this life, and the **approval** of others, can be idols, or rivals to God and stumbling blocks to our faith. And they can be particularly effective at *preventing* us from sharing our faith. I want us to see these two things at work in this passage.

But as we start, let's be really clear about just what happens:

At the beginning of our passage we hear that the apostles teach and perform miracles amongst the believers at a place called Solomon's Colonnade, at the temple. People bring their sick to them and they are healed, and a number of Christians grows.

The authorities hear about it, aren't happy and have them arrested and put in jail!

But the Lord sends an angel who breaks them out of jail! The angel tells them v20 “to go back to the temple courts and tell the people about new life in Christ”

So that's what they do, the next morning they are their preaching in the temple courts. At the same time, the authorities convene their court, and send to have the apostles brought in, only to find that they've somehow escaped jail. And then a report comes that they are back teaching at the temple! So they are rearrested, and brought to trial. The high priest is very upset, he says v28 "you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood". Peter is very brave and preaches a mini sermon about Jesus – basically saying he and the Apostles must obey God and not them. They're just about to put them to death, when a Pharisee called Gamaliel makes a clever speech with some simple observations and persuades them to leave the apostles alive. Nevertheless they are flogged and sent away, yet they rejoice and they continue daily to teach about Jesus. That's an overview of the events of our passage.

So let me start by pointing out some **surprising reactions** to the gospel. I'm not talking about the obvious ones – that the authorities throw them into prison, or tell them to shut up and stop talking about Jesus, or even that they have them flogged!

There are some surprising reactions to their message about Jesus. Look at v13. "No one else dared join them, even though they were hardly regarded by the people" That's quite funny isn't it, people were **afraid**. There's a real crowd of them, and some people are afraid. (Although not everyone)

Then there's **jealousy**, v17 "Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy" I suppose there was a real excitement, there were crowds flocking, people were full of joy and thanksgiving and praise, and those who *didn't* have that became jealous.

Finally there is real **anger** after Peter makes a little sermon v33 "When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death"

So perhaps fear, jealousy and anger wouldn't be the first things that you would name as possible responses to hearing the Christian message/hearing the gospel. But I want to suggest that they are still responses we get these days.

Just think how common it is that people say "I wish I had your faith" or "I wish I could believe". Have you heard someone say that? At least part of what is going on there is **jealousy**. People see your calmness in the face of struggle, or people see your joy, or people see you all sense of purpose, or whatever it is and they say "I wish I had your faith". (They think they can't have it when they can) but there is some sense of jealousy.

There is also **fear**, and I think those same people might also feel this. And they might not say it out loud, but they are probably thinking "I'd love your sense of purpose, but I don't want to be like you", or "I don't want to have to follow the God you follow, with all his rules". Some there is a real sense of fear, about what following God might mean for them. Have you come across that?

And of course, **anger**, "How dare you say that to me", or "how you dare you talk like that here". Sometimes it even goes as far as "how dare you think that". Of course we still see that sort of reaction today don't we.

The thing is, the fact that some people react that way, doesn't prevent the spread of the gospel. Throughout this narrative we are reminded that **God works despite this!**

So in v14 "Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" Even though some were afraid. God is at work, growing the church.

In v19 despite being locked up in jail "during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out." Which is about as miraculous as it gets as a rescue! God is at work. But that's not the only way that God works, because he works through this guy Gamaliel in v34. This is actually a really important moment, because it seems likely that they actually had **all** of the apostles locked up and had the opportunity to kill the whole lot of them.

If they had, that would have essentially stopped the spread of the message and the growth of the early church.

Gamaliel is a very well-known and well-respected Pharisee (he was the one who instructed Saul in the Jewish religion, who became Paul) We have no reason to think he was a believer in Jesus, but he is certainly a believer in God, and he is certainly someone who takes his own advice. He says in v35 "**consider carefully** what you intend to do to these men", and he takes his own advice, he has considered things carefully.

He tells them: there have been other figures who have taught, and caused a stir, and died, and then everything just faded away. If this Jesus character was just a normal human being, then this church movement would just fade away and die too, they could just leave it. But if he was more than that, then he suggests they really don't want to be opposing the apostles, they'd be opposing God! And Gamaliel's thoughtfulness is the tool by which God rescues the apostles. God isn't *only* involved in the miraculous, this is his handiwork too. And it's effective, he persuades them and the apostles are saved. God *is* at work.

However, although the Apostles are set free, they are also flogged, probably 39 lashes to the back. Amazingly though they praise God and leave rejoicing.

That's where I want us to spend the remainder of our time, thinking about what is going on with these apostles, why would they rejoice and still praise God? **And I want us to particularly think about their attitude to comfort and approval – they seek it from God!**

Let's start with comfort.

For the apostles, their own comfort is not their ultimate goal. That seems fairly obvious.

It was very recent in chapter 4 that Peter and John were in front of the Jewish court, and v18 [The court] called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. and although they let them go, it's only after "further threats".

So they have threats hanging over them. Threats from men with real power.

They know they could be thrown into prison, and so on. And yet we find them still teaching, preaching and healing, all in the name of Jesus – just what they've been told not to do.

You can imagine their threats can't you: "we don't have a problem with you, and we'll leave you alone, you can live a nice comfortable peaceful life, if you'll just stop talking about this Jesus fella, but if not, we're going to come down hard on you, your choice"

If comfort was their ultimate goal, if they were pursuing comfort for themselves, then these threats, and the flogging (39 lashes) would stop them. But they don't.

What a contrast to our world. Comfort is one of the highest goals isn't it? *And a part of all of us, really want it!*

You only need to see the sofa ads, or the shots of the car interior.

Why do people want to work hard and save up for a slightly earlier retirement? Why are people looking to buy a slightly bigger house?

Or think of the kind of discussion which goes on as we run up to the election: gone are the post-war ideas about people living scrupulously whilst the country tried to find its feet again. Now it's all about what I can get for me(!) and how much we can tax those people who have what I want! Our world loves comfort – it lives for it.

And actually, if you don't think there is a world to come, that makes some sense!

For a Christian, we know there is a world to come, and we should know that true comfort is found in heaven, and in the Lord.

We know that we have peace with God, because of Jesus, and that's a comfort to our souls.

We know that he has prepared a place for us in heaven, where there is no mourning, crying or pain anymore. We know when we're with him, we will be enjoying an eternal rest (Rest is a word used for heaven). God has rescued us to enjoy perfect and eternal *comfort*.

And the comfort that this world offers, is nothing compared to that!

We need to understand that, to have thought it through. Our hearts can be slow learners.

When that thought comes into our mind "just let someone else do it", "relax at home". When you don't want to get up for the early morning prayer meeting, or try to fit that extra activity in the day, or have a go at delivering the grapevines. When you think it might not be worth mentioning Jesus at work and talking about him, when it's a hostile environment.

We need to know that the comfort *this* world has to offer, will not satisfy, it won't feel as good!

It might feel good for a little while, but it won't bring the peace and pleasure which it promises, it won't! It can't! If you want real comfort, if you want the pleasure and joy which comfort bring, you need to seek them in God, and in his ways. And that's what we see here.

The apostles have the comfort of God in their heart, they love to serve him and do things his way, and so any discomfort that people bring into their lives, (jail/floggings) doesn't stop them, because they know what God has in store for them.

They *aren't* trying to *earn* their place in heaven, they just know that what God gives them is better than this world.

And I pray we would learn this about comfort!

And we wouldn't be afraid to speak about Jesus.

And it's the same with approval. (With their attitude to the approval of other people)

Now of course, when they are teaching amongst the Christians, (in the first few verses) they are encouraged by them and approved of, that's easy. There's a strong group atmosphere.

But someone who lives for approval, has real problems when their situation changes.

If they suddenly find themselves in a situation where everyone disapproves; where *they* might be disapproved of, where their actions might be thought of as wrong, where they might even be challenged. Well, then that person changes their tune, or changes their behaviour.

People like this will often say all the right things and make all the right noises... and then why a few days down the line it's all changed. It's because they were with a different crowd.

Yet, when the apostles are in a hostile situation, v29 they say “we must obey God rather than human beings!” And we can understand part of what they mean is “We must *please* God rather than human beings!” They have integrity! They don’t simply live for approval! They are ok with being disapproved of by people.

When you *do* live for approval, when you try to please everyone around you – it doesn’t satisfy. You still end up wondering, what *do* they think which they don’t say? What do they *really* think? You end up wondering, when I meet a new person, what *will* they think or what *could* they think? Even if you do your best and do a great job, there is always someone for whom it’s not good enough! And crucially, when it comes to sharing our faith – there is always someone who just doesn’t want to hear, or reacts with anger, jealousy or fear. And if what you want most of all is approval from people, you’ll never tell that person.

What we *should* want is approval from God!!! God knows our hearts, and knows when we’ve done our best. God knows our limits, and knows when we’re exhausted, or confused. And most importantly, if we trust in Jesus, if his blood paid for your sins, then because of him, God treats you as his perfect son who never did anything wrong, and did everything right. God who said – “this is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased” Says that of you: “this is my adopted daughter, whom I love, with her I am well pleased” And the depth to which God’s approval can move our hearts, and change us, is fantastic. That’s why the apostles don’t give a second thought do disobeying the Jewish leaders, they want to please and obey God. They want to tell people about him!

Now the apostles may seem amazing with what they do, and you may be thinking – but I’m not called by God to stand up and preach, or to face jail or beatings. And that’s right! But you are called to love the lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And that means loving him more than your own comfort, or the approval of others.

Particularly when it comes to sharing your faith – telling other people about Jesus! Inviting them along to hear!

We cannot simply add Jesus to be part of our week on Sundays, and do the church thing then. We need to work out how our faith impacts our lives in the week, and more than that, our desires and goals.

Don’t seek comfort in this life, or the approval of people – that would be crazy! Seek eternal comfort, in the arms of a loving God who’s opinion of you matters more than any person’s could, and who loves you so much, because of Jesus.

We want to tell others about Jesus because we live for God not ourselves, and because we love to live that way.

And if that way of life seems scary – remember the apostles had joy, even after being beaten – because they were living for God.