

Under Pressure (Part 8)

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer and community support for Christians facing persecution and pressure, encouraging boldness in sharing their faith.

Duration: 31:28

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-14, Acts 3:6-8, Acts 3:12, Acts 3:19, Acts 4:29-31

Topics: "Pressure"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of examining one's faith during times of difficulty and pressure. He uses the example of Peter and John healing a lame man and preaching impromptu sermons in the book of Acts. The preacher emphasizes the need for Christians to boldly proclaim their faith even in hostile environments. He encourages believers to pray for God's enablement to speak His word with boldness. The sermon concludes with a call for the church to be a light in the world and to confidently share the message of Jesus.

Transcript

We know the church, as we've been studying the book of Acts, was born in a prayer meeting. Nobody was preaching, no one was teaching, they were waiting on God. Jesus had given the promise in Acts 1, you wait in Jerusalem and you're gonna receive power.

When? When the Holy Spirit comes on you. So Holy Spirit and power were linked together indelibly in the disciples' mind. Lack of power, that means lack of the Holy Spirit's influence and control and possession of our lives.

More Holy Spirit, you don't even try to have to have power. The Holy Spirit brings power. And then we heard in these first couple chapters how the church grew, and now last week we learned about the first persecution of the Christian church.

Church is being persecuted a lot of places around the world today. Buildings, church buildings are burnt down in Pakistan regularly, Egypt, other Muslim countries, also China, there's an underground church that has to meet in secret, and they're just, in the last couple weeks, the communist government now is tightening the screws on this phenomenal underground house church movement. Well, the first opposition came, we learned last week and why it came, very strange, came from religious sources.

Wasn't the pagan government, Rome, coming after the church, it was the Jewish religious establishment. We learned lessons from that. And now we're gonna see today the reaction to persecution.

What did the church do when it was under the gun? What did the church do, what should we do when we're under the gun? You ever been under the gun? You ever been under pressure? That's the name of this message, under pressure. Under the gun, how should we react? Because you can tell a lot about a Christian not when the day is sunny and everything's bright and everyone's high-fiving you, you can't tell them much about your faith then. What you can tell about your maturity is by analyzing what happens when the bottom falls out, when there's threats, when there's difficulties, when there's heartache, when there's pressure.

That discovers to us where we really are in the Lord. So now, let's just look. Peter and John, by the power of the Holy Spirit, had a healing of a lame man, born lame, crippled, so now he's jumping around, a crowd gathered in chapter three and Peter uses it again impromptu, the second impromptu sermon, no notes, no preparation.

What we're used to, having a preacher with notes and knowing he's gonna preach, that wasn't the messages that we hear in the book of Acts. It was just, you gotta be ready, instant, in season, out of season, ready to rock and roll at any given moment, how many say amen? And represent Jesus Christ. So now, they're hauled before the Sanhedrin and the Sanhedrin, who were the ones who crucified Jesus Christ, who got the verdict and got Pontius Pilate, really, to do that along with the mob, that same group that killed their leader, although he rose from the dead, is now threatening them.

Very precarious situation. So they threaten them and they say this. This was the last thing we read last week.

They said to them, we're telling you now, we're warning you, do not speak anymore in that name. No Jesus stuff, no talking about Jesus, no praying for anyone in Jesus' name. Stop saying the name, isn't that interesting? Satan is always trying to get us to stop saying the name.

How many are happy to say the name of Jesus? Everyone say it right now, Jesus. Say it again, Jesus. There's power in that name, when we put faith in that name.

Not as a mantra, not as some hocus pocus, just yell Jesus, no, but faith in Jesus. So now, they're warned and they're let go. Don't mess around, but remember what their response was? Hey, guys, you judge whether we should obey you, man, or God, but we can't stop speaking about everything we've seen and heard.

So now, what's gonna happen? They're threatened, and if they kill their leader, and Jesus had foretold this, it's gonna be tough for you at times. So now, what happens when they're released? So on their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests, this is Acts 4, 23, and elders had said to them, and when they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, notice the plural.

You made heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father, David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? He's quoting now from Psalm 2. The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, now they're back praying. Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant, Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen, the cross, the death of Christ.

Now, Lord, here's the point of their prayer. Consider their threats. They threatened us.

You just saw what happened. Consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Double request.

Speak your word with great boldness. And now, while we're doing that, stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. End of prayer.

And after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Praise God. No wonder the church grew so quick.

The statistics now, the latest ones out from George Barnier, the famous Christian pollster, just looking from 1990 to now or from 2000 to now, 2011, very negative statistics. Less women going to church, less men. Less involvement in church.

Forget a prayer meeting. Less just going to church on Sunday. Less Bible reading.

Less belief in hereafter. Less belief in the promises that Jesus gave. Now, again, for those of you visiting, what we're trying to do is offset our backgrounds and our ethnicity and what we saw growing up because your background and my background might be a little bit off the wall.

Our church background. You ever think of that? You ever think that what you're used to might not be what God intended? If you don't have that humility, you'll never learn from the Bible. If you're just worshiping how you were raised and you're Nazarene Baptist, Pentecostal assembly of God, charismatic, evangelical, Lutheran, Presbyterian, if you're just locked into that and oh, that's what church is, then you'll never change and this is the reason why things are not so good in the body of Christ now around this country.

We're making less and less influence each year because everyone's locked into their traditions and we're not looking at the word and saying, God, show me your word. Show me truth so that I can become more what you want me to be, not just individually, but as a church. Otherwise, we just keep on keeping on.

But I wanna change. How many wanna change? How many want more of God in your life? Wave your hand at me if you want more of God in your life, more of God in our churches and we wanna send you all back for wherever you're visiting. We're rooting for your church.

We don't care what denomination because there are no denominations. That's a figment of your imagination or my imagination. God doesn't recognize any denomination.

He only has one body, one church. We're in it. We're brothers and sisters in Christ.

Come on, let's say amen to that. So notice this. When they released and they were under the gun, they went back to their own people.

That phrase has always fascinated me. They went back to their own people. Did that mean they went back to their family, to the house? No.

Did it mean they went back to people who were just their own color or their own denomination? No. They went back to the church. The church was like one.

They prayed together, loved together, took the Lord's Supper together, studied the word together, worshiped together, helped each other, shared together. And when you're in trouble, it's wonderful to go back to your own people. I feel very bad for people who have no own people.

They didn't panic. They didn't call the government. They didn't say, this is not fair.

Why should we not have the right to speak in the name of Jesus? I want to appeal to Pontius Pilate. Maybe not, he's the one who crucified Jesus. That doesn't sound like a good idea.

I want to appeal to Caesar. No. They didn't complain.

They didn't make a political issue of it. They went back to their own people, their strength when you get together with brothers and sisters in Christ. I feel very bad for people who never settled in a church.

I pray for them almost like every meeting. I ask people that. What church do you go to? Are you a member here? No.

Where are you a member of? No, I'm just, I just move. I float. I feel so bad.

When you're in trouble, who you gonna pray with? People come up to me. It's sad. I gotta talk to you.

I don't wanna talk to anyone else. I have to talk to you. You have to counsel me.

Are you a member here? No. How many times you been here? This is my second time. Isn't this sad? Isn't this sad? You're back against the wall and you have nobody who even knows you in the body of Christ that you can trust and talk to.

You come to almost a total stranger. That's sad. So look, if God doesn't want you here, I say this to everyone, nothing fancy or good about this church, especially that I'm not, no advertisement for this church, but find out where God wants you so that you have a fellowship that when the storms get rough, you can get in the harbor and you can get brothers and sisters around you.

When they were threatened and persecuted, they went back to their own people. One of the signs of maturing in God is when your own people is not your race or your ethnic group, your West Indian-ness, your whiteness, your blackness, your Southern-ness, your Northern-ness. That's a sign that you just were babies.

The sign of maturity is I'm in trouble. I need encouragement. I gotta get back to my own people.

Come on, brothers, pray for me. Come on, brothers, pray for me. I said pray for me, brothers.

What kind of own people do I have here? How many get what I'm talking about? Say amen. So find out where God wants you. But notice, they had a peer group.

They had a team. You gotta be part of a team. You gotta be part of a family.

Why do you think gangs have such relevance? Because a lot of empty, lonely kids who have no dad and their mother doesn't care much about them, they want some identity. They want someone who will support

them. So they join a gang.

The body of Christ is a spiritual gang. It's a family. And we hang together.

Come on, do we not hang together? Come on, let's put our hands together. Come on, we encourage each other. We pray for each other.

We rejoice together. What is the Bible saying? Weep with those who weep. Cry with those who cry.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. How are you gonna do that if you're not even with them? If you're just so isolated, all by yourself. How that breaks my heart.

I see that year after year. What a heartache that is. Get, open up, be vulnerable.

Get connected with somebody. Oh, but I've been hurt. That's the enemy's gonna try to use a past hurt to keep you blocked off.

And always remember, predators, before they attack, they try to isolate the animal, the prey, from the group. Because in unity, there's strength. Hanging together, there's strength.

When you're out there alone, not going to church, and not calling anyone, praying with anybody, that's not a good position to be in. So now, they come back to their own people. And what do they do? They lift their voices up in prayer.

Couple things about that. They don't complain. They don't go back and go, oh man, can you believe this? The same Sanhedrin that sentenced Jesus to death, now they're on our case.

What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do? No. No, they were taught by Jesus. Men ought always to pray and not to give up.

So they gathered together to pray. That was their instinct. Trouble, pray.

Pressure, pray. Slap, pray. Threat, pray.

What's gonna happen tomorrow? I don't know, let's pray. Come on, somebody say amen. That was their instinct.

Is that the modern instinct of most churches? No, it's not pray, it's somebody teach. Teaching has its place. But teaching can't replace prayer.

Prayer can't replace teaching. There's a time for everything. And they were called, they knew to me men and women of prayer.

So they gathered to pray. I hope that's what we do when we're in trouble. Call people to pray.

Call other folks to gather around you and we lift our voices together and pray. Notice, they lifted their voices together and they prayed vocally and out loud, obviously with all their heart. To a lot of people, that's like, no, we don't do that.

No, other people do that, the emotional people do that. We just pray quietly, just. Remember the verse, be still and know that I am God.

There's this time to be still and know that God is God. And there's another time to lift your voice and just flat cry out to God and to do it together with other people. Notice, if you heard people praying out loud while we were doing that before, you thought that was out of order? That's very biblical, that's very in order.

It's in order to sometimes have someone lead in prayer and we all follow them, like we did it when I prayed for the offering. And then sometimes it's just good to just all lift your voices up to God. They were so aware of the threat that they just reacted by lifting their voices up to God together.

Imagine the power of that. The whole church lifting their voices up collectively to God. Let me close this on this matter of they prayed.

What did they pray? Before what they prayed, I want you to notice another thing. When they began to pray, they quoted from Psalm 2 and what they basically were saying is, Pontius Pilate gave Jesus over to be crucified. The Sanhedrin plotted it and now they're threatening us.

We got everyone against us. Oh, wait a minute. That's what Psalm 2 said.

Why do the heathens rage and the people imagine vain things? Why do they gather against God and his anointed? This isn't surprising. This is exactly what God said would happen, that the nations, like they are today, raise their voices and their fists against God. We don't want anyone to rule over us.

Don't mention Jesus. You can practice every perversion. You can curse.

You can say every four-letter word, but don't say that five-letter word, Jesus. It's exactly what was prophesied. So that tells us that the early church, under pressure, viewed things through a prism of biblical truth.

They saw things biblically. Did you ever think about that? What an encouragement is in life to stop and not just react and panic, but to realize, wait a minute, how does what I'm going through fit in with the Bible? You know? Like on the job, you witness to someone, and they blow up, and they tell other people, you're a religious fanatic, and now you're shunned, and you're looked down upon because they call you a nut. Now, you could just react to that and say, wow, that hurts, or you could say, did Jesus ever said something like this could happen? Did you know that Jesus said, from my sake and my name, you're gonna be hated by all men? That's what it means to be a Christian.

Sometimes it's glory and wonderful, and then other times it's people mocking you and making fun of you, but we shouldn't panic at either point. That's what Jesus, in his word, said would happen. So why should we be surprised? He's the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all of our trouble.

That means sometimes trouble comes. How many, since you've been a Christian, you've been in trouble? How many have been comforted by God while you were in trouble? Exactly. So they saw things through a Bible perspective.

A lot of us hurt ourselves because instead of seeing things biblically, we just react emotionally. We don't step back and say, wait a minute, God said there'd be trials. God said people would let us down.

Oh, wait a minute, Christians are fighting. I thought they were Christians. Why are they fighting? Oh, no, I remember Paul and Barnabas even had a fight one time.

So these things can happen. Christians do make mistakes. No, I thought they're not saved that they did that.

No, I look in the Bible and I see Paul saying to one church, let those who steal, steal no more. You gotta warn some people. Stop doing that old thing.

You're a Christian now. To see things biblically is to avoid all kinds of emotional cataclysms that throw us off. So they didn't panic.

They lifted their voices in prayer. And then they started to quote the word of God. And they said, God, look at what's happening, but this is exactly what you said in your word.

Man, everyone's ganging up against you, God, and against your holy son, Jesus, and against we, his followers. But that's okay. That's what it is.

If we suffer with him, we will also reign with him. How many are not afraid to suffer a little bit for Jesus? Come on, lift your hand. I mean, if we're gonna reign with him, we go through a little stuff here on earth.

And now they prayed their final sentence. This is so good. You know the one thing they didn't pray for? They didn't pray for protection.

Here they just were threatened. Hey, no more Jesus stuff. No more Jesus name stuff.

No more praying and preaching in his name. You know what we did to your leader? And now they let him go. And they never once said, now, Lord, protect us.

Put a circle of mercy, a wall of fire around us. They didn't say that. Is it wrong to pray that? No, that prayer is in the Bible.

Lord, protect us. You ever take a long trip, or you ever ask God for traveling mercies before you get on a plane? Do it before you get on the plane, because if there's turbulence, everyone else will be praying while the flight's going on. No, here's what they prayed.

They said, Lord, consider their threats and enable us to speak your word with boldness. God, we can't do it ourselves. Their threats have affected us.

We're not gonna toughen up, and we're not gonna get a stiff upper lip, and we're not gonna try harder to be strong. No, God, we come to you. We lift our voices up to you.

God, enable us to speak your word, even under pressure. Help us to open our mouth and say the name of Jesus. Even though the environment is hostile, open our mouths and help us to say Jesus, the good news.

He died, he rose again, he's changed my life. Give us, God, you have to enable us. We can't do it in our own strength, in this hostile environment, but God, you enable us.

And not just to speak your word, but to do it boldly. God, when we speak your word, help us to do it with boldness. Wouldn't it be wonderful if churches all over America and around the world started praying that way? Everyone, it seems, in the world has come out of the closet, whatever their background is, whatever their sin is, or political party.

I mean, you talk with people within, sometimes, 60 seconds. They're letting you know what their agenda is. But we Christians, many times, we're just quiet.

So they said, no, in this hostility, you enable us, Lord, to speak your word with boldness. You make us bold. We flopped, we failed, we're fishermen, we're whatever, but we followed you.

Now you've given us your spirit, you've made us your representatives. We are the light of the world. We are the salt of the earth.

Now God, give us, enable us by your spirit to speak your word and to be bold. And while we're doing it, God, stretch out your hand and do those things that only you can do. Notice the approach to church work that they had compared to ours.

God, enable your servants, all of it, all the whole church, the whole 100 or 200 people that were there, how many hundreds, we don't know. Not just the apostles. God, let Wanda, let Karen, let Felipe, back in Brazil, let him open his mouth and speak your word boldly.

And God, while we're speaking it, you stretch out your hand and do those things that only you can do because, God, we wanna be coworkers with you. We'll speak as you enable us, but while we're speaking, you gotta do something, heal someone, stretch out your hand, do something so people will know you're alive. What a formula for church success.

What a formula for the growth of Christianity. God, enable us to speak your word and help us to do it boldly, not timidly. But God, while we're doing it, stretch out your hand.

I can't stretch out my hand, God, it's just a human hand. But God, you stretch out your hand so that signs and wonders might be done in the name of your holy son, Jesus Christ. How many believe that God can speak your word and still do miracles? Lift your hand up, God can do anything.

Otherwise, he's not God, he's somehow been limited. No, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And he says to all of us today, I want you to represent me, but I'm not gonna use angels.

I only wanna use sinners to reach sinners. Isn't that interesting? God says, I only want sinners to reach sinners. Gabriel, Michael, no.

I want sinners who have been changed by my grace, who are full of boldness to speak my word, and when they speak, I will work. Do you know, brothers and sisters, as I close, we don't know what God can do until we open our mouth and begin to speak. Because notice what the prayer was.

As we speak your word boldly, you stretch out your hand, God, and you do signs and wonders, heal someone, do whatever, so that people will know that there's no God like you. How did God respond? Not while they prayed, but after they prayed, the building was shaken. Which God would come and, if he wants to shake this building, I'm fine with that, but I'd rather him shake all of us.

How many say amen? Shake us, God. Shake us, God. Shake the sound people.

Shake the musicians. Shake the pastors. Shake the balcony.

Shake the people out of town. Shake us, Lord. And the Bible says, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, this is the same group of people who back, at least some of them, who in Acts 2, were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance. Well, wait a minute. Why were they filled again? Because you can't live off of one experience with the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, look at me. You can't live on what God did 10 years ago. Somebody here, you're trying to live off of something two decades ago that God did in your life.

20 years ago. Can't live off of that. God shook the building and filled them all.

Again, that means took control of their lives in a new way, a new visitation of God's Spirit, and the next thing you know, they're out speaking the word of God boldly. Now, people have studied how the early church has grown and the church historians have no way to explain because they had no buildings, they had no money, they had no political power. They didn't have a building for 300 some years, public building.

They didn't have influence with the religious establishment. They were opposed by the Jewish religious establishment. They were poor people.

They were not well-educated, for the most part. And yet, the early church blossomed and multiplied. And the only explanation of it is they were simple people who kept going back to God and lifting their voices and saying, God, look at the environment we live in.

Brothers and sisters, if they needed God back then in that environment, what in the world do we need in the environment we're in? Who can you trust today? Are you into politics, some of you? You can't trust any politician. Look at the environment. Look at the stuff that's in the movies.

Look at the stuff all around us. Do we live in Sodom and Gomorrah or do we live in Sodom and Gomorrah? And the thing isn't, though, to panic and say, what are we gonna do in this environment? Look how they've forgotten God. It is what it is.

Let the world be the world, but let the church be the church. Let the people of God, come on, let's put our hands together. Let the people of God open their mouth, speak the word of God boldly.

Let's close our eyes, let's close our eyes. In a second, we're gonna lift up our voices together because somehow God put me and my wife, this church, you folks, he put us in 2011, not 1811, not 1711, not 1950, he said, no, that choir will sing in 2011. That building will house my people in 2011 and I know what New York, God knows what New York is like and what our country, the moral decay of our country and what's happening around the world.

We're not in China, we're not in Afghanistan, we're not in Pakistan, we're not in Egypt, we're not in Malawi, we're not in Puerto Rico, we are here in New York. And God knew it and he chose us to be here. He said, I'm gonna entrust people like the Brooklyn Tabernacle to speak for me, to shine for me, to represent me.

How will the world know? How will the world know what's going on unless we open our mouths and speak with boldness the word of the Lord? How will they know that God is alive unless as we do that, God stretches out his hand and begins to do things as we pray and react to situations each day? I wanna close this meeting with just a time of prayer for all of us and especially with like every visitor who's here today to go back with a new mandate from God, with a new sense of hunger for God, with a new experience with the Holy Spirit. What good would it be, I was at the Brooklyn Tabernacle, the choir sang, I heard the

minister speak and then I leave the building and I'm back to the same old, same old. I want every visitor, I've never done this before, every first time visitor who's here, get out of your seat and come here and stand.

We're gonna send you back with the fire of God burning in your heart. Father God, we believe that you have brought this morning to our church some of your choicest servants. Some have the call of God on their life and are gonna be missionaries or pastors.

Some have resisted your call but you brought them here today to hear your word. Some are gonna become mighty in prayer, mighty in teaching young people, mighty in that gift of music that you've given them. I thank you for them, they're our brothers and sisters.

And God, what we all need today is to be shaken by your spirit, filled with your spirit, so that we can do what you call us to do with boldness. And while we speak and open our mouths, we pray, God, stretch out your hand. Stretch out your hand, Lord.

And do signs and wonders and miracles whatever way you wanna do it, do it. We don't tell you what to do. But God, let the world know that you're not dead, you're alive, you are alive.

You recover stolen property. You are mighty to save. No drug habit is too strong for you.

And that one with a child who's gotten involved with homosexuality, you're gonna break that chain and you're gonna set that child free, Lord. You will set that child free because we believe and we receive from you today.

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