

# Growing Pains

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Date: 29 June 2025

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's scripture reading comes from Acts 6, verse 1-7. Please follow along on the screen, your bulletin, or your Bible. Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, apostolite from Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

This is the word of God. All right.

[ 1 : 21 ] Good morning, everyone. If you don't know me, my name is Niels, part of the staff team. It's a privilege to bring God's word. I should have done this during the break. Sorry. But, yeah, let's keep this passage open as we're going to look at it together in your Bibles or your bulletins.

It's a short passage. Lots of things God wants to say to us. Why don't we pray together? The psalmist says, The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The priests of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

Father, we pray that all these things would happen. You would enlighten our eyes. You would make us wise. You would rejoice our hearts as you speak to us through your powerful words. Thank you that is living and active and increasing among us.

So, yeah, would you do a deep work today? Help me to speak. Help all of us to listen. In Jesus' name. Amen. All right. Yeah, this is our last sermon in this series in Acts.

[ 2 : 33 ] Now, in a few weeks, as you probably know, we'll be moving to Wong Chuk Hang, to Viva Place. I guess I don't need to tell. Maybe if you're new, you didn't know that. Most of us will know it, and I don't need to rehearse why we're moving, right?

It's more accessible. It is, yeah, hopefully a great place to invite people to because it will be more accessible. Although, I guess for some of you here, actually, you might still not want to invite people here, right?

Because maybe it's not just the distance and the parking. You know, the church should be something great, right? The church should be a bit of heaven on earth. It should be, you know, a little microcosm of what God is doing in building something beautiful.

Except that, you know, maybe there's things you struggle with and people you struggle with. And you're not sure if you really want to invite people to that, right? You ask the average person on the street, hey, you want to come to church?

And then people think of conflicts. And they think of churches splitting over the color of the carpet or something like that. Or, you know, stories where the church is no different or even worse from the world.

[ 3 : 40 ] But that happens, right? And you think of that and then, well, do, you know, church, I come, right? Because I think I need to, you know, I think I should and this place is convenient.

How excited are we about church? How excited are we about what God is doing? Maybe you're here and you're visiting for the first time. You're not a Christian. You're looking into things.

Well, yeah, you're looking for something. But you're not sure if you will find it here. Because, yeah, church doesn't always have a big rep, a good rep. Well, today hopefully will be good.

I hope the book of Acts will have been good. Because, well, we are seeing what God is doing. And hopefully it will give us confidence. Confidence in what God is doing in the church.

In what's something that can't be stopped. Something that's wonderful that God is building. And that's what we're going to see today. That will hopefully address our doubts.

[ 4 : 38 ] And, yeah, give us joy. Now, today, like I said, is the final sermon. In this series, 6 verse 7 is like a bit of a summary. And it rounds off this whole section.

And if you've been here for the past few weeks, we've always had kind of problems that were resolved. Right? There was hypocrisy and false faith in the church. And that was dealt with. And there was persecution and death threats. But that was dealt with. And today, a new problem. Maybe an unexpected one. But nevertheless, real. And so, basically, my three points will be, I don't know, the problem, the solution, the result.

Easy to follow. And, yeah, as we look at that resolution and what's behind it, it should give us confidence. In the church. In the gospel. And ultimately, of course, not just in things.

Right? In the Lord of the church. In Jesus who is at work. And that will get behind it. So, what was the problem here? The problem? I guess we can see a division and conflict.

[ 5 : 41 ] Just like previous weeks, a problem. Although it's a good problem to have. Right? What's the good problem to have? Well, 6 verse 1. Now, in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number.

This has to do with the church growing and growing. And more and more people coming to faith. That's a wonderful thing. But it has some consequences. A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.

Because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. There were widows being overlooked. Hellenists. What is that? That's Greek-speaking Jews.

At this time, the church was just Jews. Basically, they hadn't gone to the Gentiles yet. But, of course, there were Jews who lived in Jerusalem. But there were also Jews that lived all over the world.

600 years earlier, you know, when Jerusalem was destroyed. You know, they went everywhere. Many of them lived all over the world. Well, all over the Mediterranean. They spoke Greek, the world language.

[ 6 : 44 ] But, in a way, Jerusalem was special. It was a holy city. And so, they liked to retire there. But that means you had a church with a lot of people who are, yeah, not the locals. And they were being overlooked.

I guess they had some system to take care of the poor. We saw that in other chapters. People would give money. They would sell a field. And that would go to the poor. But, yeah, the Greek-speaking widows missed out.

I guess the locals, they have the language. They have the connections, right? Living as an expert in Hong Kong. Some people, they could get much better deals than me, basically, because they speak Cantonese.

And I don't. This one is a bit high. They know their way around. And that was probably the thing here. But, of course, it wasn't just that there were some hungry widows, right?

What was at stake here? Well, the unity of the church, right? There was a complaint from the Hellenists against the Hebrews. It was, okay, these two groups that, you know, the church was really one heart and one soul.

[ 7 : 44 ] But now we had one group that had something against another group. And it's quite a strong word, right? It says a complaint. Now, a complaint, you know, it's not just a letter in writing.

The word is grumbling. Now, if you have read the Bible a lot and you know the word grumbling is a very bad word, right? You think of the Israelites in the desert and what happened to them, grumbling.

But, yeah, there was grumbling in the church, right? So, this conflict and just people's hearts, yeah, this could derail the church. So, a real problem of division and grumbling.

Now, before we go on to the solution, a few things we should learn, right? Just to pause. First of all, I think it's encouraging maybe. No church is perfect, right?

No church is perfect. And so often I meet Christians and they just think, oh, we should be like a church in Acts. We should have the Holy Spirit like they do and preach like they do. And then we'll be so perfect and we'll have so many miracles and everything.

[ 8 : 46 ] And, well, that church wasn't perfect either, right? I mean, there was, the widows went hungry and there was conflict and grumbling. You know, this church was not perfect. No church is perfect.

And so, if our church is not perfect, it doesn't mean that, you know, there's something wrong in a way, right? That's good to know. Maybe you've experienced problems in church. In a way, it's normal.

We're still sinful human beings. We're not fully perfect yet. And if you have imperfect people, you'll have an imperfect church. Don't expect perfection because you're just going to be disappointed. And also, I think when I see this, you know, not everything is malicious. There's no indication here that, okay, this was racism or something, that the locals discriminated against immigrants or something like that.

And there's nothing about that in the text. It's just a practical problem. Too many people and some people get overlooked. And maybe your experience of church hasn't always been good.

[ 9 : 46 ] But it's easy to take that personal, right? Maybe 10 years ago, you were at Watermark and everyone greeted you and you know everyone. And now it's very different. That's not because, you know, people are against you.

It's just our church has grown. There's a lot of new people. It happens. Don't take it personal. We're moving to Viva in Wong Chuk Hang. For some people, that's really great. You know, maybe you're someone and it affects you negatively because of where you live or your ministry.

That's not necessarily something personal. It's just you move a whole church and, you know, there's pros and cons. And, you know, some people win, some people lose. That happens.

We can't please everyone. At the same time, this passage warns us that small issues can have big consequences, right? And it was just, you know, okay, some widows were overlooked in the food distribution.

And yet there was grumbling and division. All right? Sometimes it's the circumstances, but our hearts, they respond negatively. And it can have a, it can potentially have a big impact.

[ 10 : 50 ] And I guess that's what Satan wanted, right? He wanted to destroy the church. You know, persecution didn't work. Well, let's try conflicts. Let's try division. That's what he's trying.

But thankfully, it's a positive passage. That did not happen. So what was the solution? What did they do? Well, what we see here, I guess, is new structures, right?

That's just practically what's happening. How would you solve this? In a way, the apostles could just spend more time on food distribution, right? They were involved in that. Chapter 5, people, they sell a field.

They give the money to the apostles. They take care of it. But they will now need to do that a lot more. But that would cause a problem, right? Verse 2, and the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it's not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Right? The apostles, they had the message of Jesus. They were commissioned by Jesus to teach and preach. And it's the gospel that drew people. That was needed.

[ 11 : 53 ] And so if we're going to spend all our time on food, that's going to be a problem. Maybe that was Satan's real plan, just to distract the apostles. And yet it was important, right?

We couldn't have this problem going on. And so, well, let's delegate, right? Let's get some new group of people who can take care of this. So they involved the community. Verse 3, therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

They involved the community. Why don't you pick some people to take care of this? We'll appoint them officially. And then it's sorted. And we can focus on preaching and on prayer. And that's what they did.

This pleased the congregation. And they chose Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, et cetera. And when you read that in those names, you'll notice it doesn't sound like an Old Testament list, right?

No one with ya or el or something. These were all Greeks. They kind of, hey, of course, they chose people from the community that was missing out. And that sorted it out. And, yeah.

[13:04] And it seems like that pleased people. And we don't know exactly what they did, but, yeah, the problem was solved. Now, what should we learn from that? Again, we want to go to the results because that's actually the big thing.

But at the same time, you know, we see here some things from the early church we can learn, we can look at. Of course, delegation is a good thing, right? I don't know if you're too busy at work. Maybe you should delegate. I'm not very good at delegating, but it's a good thing. But biblically especially, what we see here is an early version of elders and deacons.

You may wonder, how are churches organized? What kind of leadership do they have? Well, the New Testament talks about elders and deacons. But what do they do? Well, this is kind of like a prototype.

You have the apostles, the 12, and the 7. And the 12, they focus on the word, shepherding. And then the 7, they take care of practical matters. They, you know, they get stuff delegated to them that they didn't execute.

[14:07] The reason people think that, the word for deacon, kind of, the Greek word behind it shows up a few times. So if you look at the passage, the daily diakonia, and later, it's not right that we should give a preaching the word of God to diakoning tables, right?

So the word for deacon, which means service, serving, that lies behind here. And it makes sense, right? We as elders, we try to focus on the word, but there's so much that needs to be done.

So we appoint people. We have Graham and Vicky, who look after missionaries. That's great. We have Sherman, who is the deacon of prayer, and is trying to get the prayer team and really kicked it up hugely compared to what it was.

Because of someone who, you know, we don't have the time, but she can really be dedicated to that. Sam Lowe, helping with the men's ministry. It's great to have deacons. We need more. So that's how a church works.

You want to know elders and deacons. Well, elders, they focus kind of on the spiritual leadership, the ministry of the word. And then deacons, they assist the elders in practical matters.

[15:13] Although that can sound a bit like, okay, there's the important stuff and the non-important stuff. That's not the case here, though, right? I mean, all ministry is important. You know, it sounds like, okay, we don't want to serve tables.

We are too good for that. No, it's just a matter of not enough capacity. I mean, look what kind of people they get for the food distribution. Men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, right?

They need really qualified people for this. It's not just, you know, oh, anyone can do this. They think this is important. You know, Stephen and Philip, they're huge characters in Acts.

Stephen gives the longest speech of the whole book, longer than Peter or Paul. You know, Philip is the first to take the gospel to the Samaritans. You know, there's more about them than any apostle except Peter and Paul.

No, they're good guys. And also, it's not like the elders think of themselves as something else than servants. I mean, what do they call their job? In verse 4, they say that we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

[16:19] It's again the same word, diakonia, serving, right? But all church leaders serve. Some serve with the word. Some serve, well, with food.

But we all serve because, of course, Jesus is the servant. He came to serve, right? And they, yeah. So, you know, I don't know what you're doing in church. If you feel like, oh, it's not important.

All ministry is important. Everything that makes the church run, that keeps us together, it's all important. Although, at the same time, of course, clearly some things are more important.

Next week, we'll talk about scripture. But, yeah, the apostles, okay, we really can't neglect the preaching of the word, right? How did the church start back in chapter 2? They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, right?

They needed the gospel at the heart. They needed Jesus at the heart. And that would come through these people who spent 12 years with him. So, you know, teaching the word needs to happen.

[17:17] That can't be neglected. And so, yeah, if you're a CG leader, lots of things you can do for your CG. Make sure you keep leading Bible studies. For us as elders, don't neglect this.

Useful points. But, again, what is the, they're interesting. But what is the big thing? Well, what do you want to, what would you expect the result to be?

So, we've had this problem. There is a resolution. But what is the result? You know, is it that, and the Hellenist widows now had enough food? That's a great thing. The people stopped grumbling and were happy.

That would be a good thing, right? The Hebrews and Hellenists got along again. That'd be great. The church was again of one heart and soul. Now, what does Luke say? Hey, this is what happened.

And this is so important. 6 verse 7. And the word of God continued to increase. And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. Had a result is unhindered growth.

[18:19] It's the gospel going out. It's the gospel growing in the city and in the world. Right? And so, I mean, that's the point. We can learn about leadership and those kind of things.

But the big thing is, here was another obstacle to the gospel. And it's been overcome. And the gospel keeps going out. And people keep being saved. And people keep growing.

And God keeps being at work. That's the thing. It's about the growth of the gospel. And, you know, it's such a significant phrase. If you were here last year, I preached once on that.

But, yeah, increasing and multiplying. That is an Old Testament allusion. I know it's because of Greek. And so, you may not have picked it up. But the very first chapter of the Bible, God commissions Adam and Eve and says, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

And that is, well, it's the same word. It says that the word of God increased and multiplied. And this is about God's plan to fill the earth with his glory, with his image. That, of course, failed because humanity sinned.

[19:25] But now God is at work. And, again, his plan is going out across the world. And the gospel is growing. It's now happening. It's what Acts is all about.

I mean, 6 verse 7 is one statement. But you get basically the same thing in 1224. Right? The word of God increased and multiplied. 1920, the word of the Lord, the word of God, continued to increase.

The book of Acts is divided into four sections. And every section ends with the word of God increasing and multiplying. Right? So, basically, that's what the book is about.

That's what the summaries are about. The book ends with Paul preaching without hindrance. And so, in a way, what we see today is not just the result of this one problem.

All the past weeks where we've seen problems being overcome. It's all about how the gospel keeps going out. Nothing can stop it. Hypocrites, they're dealt with.

[20:29] Persecution, it stops. And now division, it's overcome. And it kind of also shows that it's all God's doing. Right? I mean, who overcame the hypocrisy?

Who made people fall down dead? That wasn't Peter. That was God. Who stopped the apostles from being killed by the council? Well, it was this crazy speech by one of the council members that clearly could only come from God.

And even here, I mean, it might look, hey, those apostles, they're pretty wise. That's how they solved it. I hope you see the connection. Now, this is God working through it. God making sure, through a different means in this case, that the gospel keeps going.

Right? This is about God. This is about, yeah, the word increasing. It's not about the church increasing, ultimately. What is behind there? It's God at work. Through the word increasing, multiplying the living and active word of God.

Jesus, he guides his church. He protects his church. He makes sure it keeps growing. He's powerfully at work by his spirit through his word, just using different means.

[21:37] And that's so encouraging. Right? I mean, what do we want? We want the church to grow. We want, of course, the gospel to go out. Well, we see that God, that Jesus is committed to that.

Right? Of course, he died for the church. No wonder he's going to keep going with it by now making the gospel go out. Well, so how should that affect us? Again, we've said it many times the past few weeks, but again, confidence.

Right? When Luke wrote Acts, Luke and Acts, he said, I want you to have certainty. I want you to have confidence in this gospel. This is the real deal.

This is what God is doing. This is something you can give your life to. Jesus is gone. True. True. Jesus isn't here. But he's poured out the spirit and he is at work.

The word of God is increasing and multiplying. And that means this is something you can invest in. Something you can commit to. I mean, I'm a pretty cynical person sometimes.

[ 22 : 39 ] Or I call it realistic. Right? Someone has an idea and I see, okay, well, this problem, this problem, this problem. And I think it's not going to work. Right? It's never going to work.

And that doesn't motivate me. Right? If I say, shall we do this? And I'm kind of, no. Right? That's what I'm like. Because I don't want to waste my time. Right? I don't want to waste effort on something that I think is not going to work.

Well, if we think the church is not going to work. If what we're doing here is kind of fun. But it's actually, we're not really sure. It's not going anywhere. Why would we give our time and our effort and our money and everything to the church?

But if this passage is true, if what we've seen in Acts, then church is not a waste of time. Right? The gospel is not at all a waste of effort. The word will increase and multiply.

Nothing will stop it. God's plan will be fulfilled. The church will grow. People will be saved. But it's something you can invest in. Right? Something you can work for. Maybe, yeah.

[ 23 : 40 ] You want to serve. Thinking about kids ministry. I mean, Claire said it's a long-term thing. But, yeah. Maybe you don't see much fruit. But you know the word is powerful. Right? If you're teaching these kids, it's going to be fruit.

So, this is something, yeah. You can spend your time on. Because it's going to work. You know? Serving in your CG. Maybe, yeah. Inviting someone to church. It can seem like a big step.

But if you know this really is what God is doing. And this will happen. This will be exciting. Well, you can be involved. Right? You can see. Yeah.

You can see it. And you can be involved. Of course, God is wiser than us. It's not like every church ever has survived. It's the big C church. Right? The worldwide church that is unstoppable.

We are just one local expression. Of course, we can't presume. But in general. Right? We know God is at work through the gospel. We know the word of God is powerful.

[ 24 : 37 ] The spirit is powerful. We have those here. Why wouldn't we be involved? Right? I hope that's what this passage will make you do. That the past nine weeks going through Acts.

And seeing the church. And seeing what God is doing will make us do. Being involved. Right?

Giving our lives. Yeah. To the gospel. To the church. Maybe you're here.

You're not a Christian. I don't know what you're looking for. Maybe you're looking for something that works. Because so much in the world doesn't work. Doesn't last. Well, if this passage is true. You've come to the right place.

God is doing something that will last. Something. God is doing something that will happen. Jesus says, I'll build my church. And nothing will overcome it. Right? So, let me encourage you to keep coming.

And see what God is doing. And then let it lead you to Jesus. Again, Jesus is the one doing it. He died for the church. He paid for all its sins on the cross.

[ 25 : 35 ] And he's now not going to stop. He is going to bring his people home. He's going to build his family. Build his community. And he is inviting you to come and be forgiven. And be part of that.

Why don't you take that great opportunity? Right? We just need God to be at work. So, yeah. So, why don't we pray? I mean, when I read this, I want to pray.

Yes, Lord. Come and do this. Make our church what you want it to be. Work in our hearts. Let the gospel keep increasing in our lives. In our church. And around us.

So, why don't I pray? And then we're going to continue praying as we sing. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Our Father, thank you that the gospel is unstoppable.

Because you are unstoppable. You. You're committed to your plans. You will save your people. And so, you will build your church for your powerful word and spirit. Give us confidence.

[ 26 : 34 ] Lord. When we have our doubts. Where we are distracted by so many things. This is something that lasts. Something that works. Something that gives lasting joy.

Lord. Help us to be involved. And, yeah. To call. How you call each one of us. To be involved in what you are doing. Help us to reflect on these things.

Lord. As we. Maybe with the summer. Things are quieter. Just to come before you with what we've heard. And, yeah. And let you change us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.