



"The Rising Tide of Persecution" Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 5:12-42

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The Apostles Heal Many

¹² The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought the sick 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. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil^[a] spirits, and all of them were healed.

The Apostles Persecuted

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

²¹ 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. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." ²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "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."

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean



appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² 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 Christ. ^[u]

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 5:16](#) Greek *unclean*
 - b. [Acts 5:42](#) Or *Messiah*
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Introduction.

There was a woman who had to do a lot of traveling for business, but flying made her very nervous so she always took a Bible along with her because she was a Christian. One time she sat next to a man on a plane, and when he saw her pull out her Bible, he gave a little chuckle and smirked and went back to what he was doing. After a while, he turned to her and asked, "You don't really believe all that stuff in there do you?"

The woman replied, "Of course I do. I'm a Christian."

He said, "Well, what about that guy that was swallowed by the whale?"

She replied, "Oh, Jonah. Yes, I believe it happened."

Then he asked, "Well, how do you suppose he survived all that time inside the whale?"

The woman answered, "Well, I don't really know. I guess when I get to heaven, I will ask him."

The man asked sarcastically, "What if he isn't in heaven when you get there?"

And the woman replied, "Then you can ask him!"¹

Is it just me, or does it seem to you there has an increase in the subtle persecution of believers in recent years? People are a bit bolder in their put-downs, and folks are not as tolerant of people of faith as they used to be. It seems you can say just about anything you like in the media regarding Christians and Christianity and get away with it.

This is not only true here in our country; it is especially true around the world where Christians are a distinct minority. It is estimated that 200 million people in more than 60 nations today are being denied their basic human rights for one reason alone: they are followers of Jesus Christ.

In the text we have read this morning, we learn of the rising tide of persecution against the early church. I believe there are many things we can learn from this passage about courage in the face of opposition, boldness when we are tempted to be timid, and joy even when we may have to suffer for the name of Jesus.



I. A Miraculous Rescue.

You will recall that last week we discussed the first time the apostles came into conflict with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Today we read of the second wave of persecution by the religious authorities. They were angered by the failure of their first confrontation with Peter and John to curb their preaching in the name of Jesus, and the disciples unashamedly ignored the Sanhedrin's prohibition and threats. Filled with anger, the Court decided to take further action.

This time they arrested not only Peter and John but most if not all of the apostles as well, and the Sanhedrin had them put in jail. However, during the night, they were rescued by an angel of the Lord and set free from the prison. We are told that at daybreak they entered the temple as they had been instructed, and they began to teach once again.

Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin was convened. When they sent for the apostles, they were embarrassed to discover they were no longer in prison, even though the jail was securely locked and the guards were still standing at the doors. They discovered the apostles were at the temple once again, and the captain of the guard and his officers had to re-arrest the apostles and make them appear before the Sanhedrin a second time for questioning. It must have been quite a comical scene!

The high priest charged the apostles with contempt of court and defiance of the Sanhedrin's authority. He stated, *"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood,"* referring to Jesus. The apostles' response took the form of a mini-sermon, and their concern was not to defend themselves but to lift up Christ. They said, *"We must obey God rather than men!"*

This passage points up once again the fact that there are times in the Christian life when, because of our higher commitment to Jesus, we must go against what the person in authority tells us to do. It may be a boss, a teacher, even a parent, or a judge. They tell us to do something we know is clearly wrong according to Scripture, and out of our commitment to Christ we must choose to obey God rather than the person in authority and suffer the consequences.

The passage also reminds us that the follower of Jesus should be bold for Christ, even when it costs us something. All too often, when we are confronted in the classroom or at work or at home with the issue of our commitment to Christ, we become timid or we avoid the subject altogether. We are afraid of what other people will think, and we fear they will write us off. But here we see the apostles were bold in their witness for Christ. What would you have done if you were in their shoes? How would you have reacted to this situation - really? Perhaps you and I need to pray for greater courage in our own lives.

II. A Voice of Reason.

When the Council heard these words of defiance, they were furious. The New English Bible translates the passage, *"They were touched to the raw."* Many wanted to put the apostles to death, but Gamaliel, a Pharisee, stood up and asked that the apostles be put out of the Court so the members of the Sanhedrin could talk about the matter among themselves.

Gamaliel was the grandson of the famous rabbi Hillel, and he was given the honorific title "Rabban," which means "our teacher," meaning he was a teacher of the nation of Israel. Saul of



Tarsus was one of his students, and Gamaliel had a reputation for scholarship and wisdom. The text also tells us that he was highly respected by all the people.

Gamaliel stood up and advised caution because of historical precedent, and he gave two examples involving Theudas and another man named Judas called the Galilean. Both men made Messianic claims for themselves, and they both won a following. But then each was killed, all their followers were scattered, and their movements faded away. Gamaliel took the failure of both revolts as an object lesson which justified a policy of *laissez-faire*. His advice to the Council was, *"Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. If, on the other hand, it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God"* (vv. 38,39).

Gamaliel was an example of reason and a cool-head in an emotion-charged situation. I think every business, school, church, and home needs a Gamaliel - one who can speak a word of caution and be a voice of reason in the midst of confusion and emotion. God had shaped his character to see matters clearly, to use his common sense, and to think in a balanced manner. He brought a new perspective and offered a new idea. And the result was that Gamaliel was a blessing to everyone. How can you be a Gamaliel in your school, at your place of work, and in your home in the coming week?

III. A Cause for Rejoicing.

The Council accepted Gamaliel's suggestion. They called the apostles in, had them flogged, and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore. The flogging was presumably the same punishment the Lord Jesus received before His crucifixion.

How did the apostles react? The text tells us they left the Sanhedrin rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus. Though their backs were bleeding, their lips were praising God, and they rejoiced that they had the honor to be dishonored and the grace to be disgraced, all for Christ.

Perhaps the disciples remembered the very words of Jesus as they left the Sanhedrin that day when three years before He said to them in the Sermon on the Mount, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Mt. 5:10-12).

In this passage we see the rising tide of persecution against the early church. It reminds us that Satan has never given up his attempt to destroy the Church by force. Throughout the centuries, Christians have met persecution. From Nero to Diocletian, the first three centuries after Christ were marked by a systematic attempt to snuff out Christianity by Roman emperors. Christians were arrested and executed on a regular basis. It wasn't until Constantine proclaimed Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire in 323 AD after his sudden conversion that the persecution ended. However, the favored position of Christianity was short-lived, and persecution resumed in various parts of the world.

And so it has been for the past 20 centuries. Even to this day, especially in Communist, Hindu and Muslim countries, the church continues to be persecuted. I shared with you last week the stories of people in China, North Korea, and Iran and the way it has cost them to be a



follower of Jesus. Persecution is on the rise around the world, and it is estimated that more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than in all the previous 19 centuries combined!

Next Thursday you and I will celebrate Thanksgiving with friends and family. All of our kids and our daughter-in-law are coming to town, and Lorie and I excited to see them. At Thanksgiving we remember our founding fathers and mothers, the Pilgrims, and we will, like they did almost 400 years ago, give thanks for God's abundant provision and celebrate the great freedoms we enjoy in this country, not the least of which is the freedom of religion.

We should never lose sight of the fact that our nation was born out of religious persecution, and the Pilgrims came to this land to flee the opposition they experienced in England and Europe. In 1620 when the Mayflower sailed for America, civil and religious leaders in England had grown increasingly unsympathetic to a sect of Christians called the Puritans, and anyone who failed to worship God in just the way the Anglican Church required was persecuted. For example, around this time there was a man in England who was sentenced to life in prison, his land was confiscated, and his forehead was branded with the initials "S.S.", which stood for "sower of sedition" – simply because he was a Puritan. Most of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower who helped establish Plymouth Colony were Puritans, and the spiritual roots of this nation were formed by people who knew what it was like to be persecuted for their faith. That's one of the reasons freedom of religion was an essential part of the Bill of Rights.

But it appears in America we have forgotten these values of our founding fathers and mothers. Today people seem to think the Bill of Rights grants freedom *from* religion rather than the freedom *of* religion. I said last week I believe that unless renewal comes to this country it will be more difficult for us to live for Christ in the next 20 years than it has been in the last 20 years. Opposition to the Church is mounting in many quarters of our land, and it may cost us more to identify ourselves as followers of Jesus.

The church may lose its tax exempt. We may be prohibited from expressing our faith in the workplace or the public square with the accusation that it is religious harassment, and we may find that our efforts to share our faith with other people will be restricted in the future. Increasingly, the courts are being filled with cases and lawsuits involving disputes over religious freedom in this country.

Persecution will refine the Church, but it will never destroy it. More often than not, persecution leads to deeper prayer, a greater dependence on the sovereignty of God, and a stronger solidarity with Christ in His sufferings. It happened in Acts 5, and it still happens today. We need not fear for the Church's survival. The early Church father, Tertullian, in addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire, said, "Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust.... The more you mow us down, the more we grow, for the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church!"ⁱⁱ

The apostle Paul reminded the Christians in Rome: *"And we know that all things God works together for the good of those who love Him.... If God be for us, who can be against us?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (Rm.8:28,31,35,37-39).*



Conclusion.

How should you and I react when persecution comes our way? Next week when someone in your school, at your office or in your neighborhood belittles your faith, what should you do? **First**, like to apostles, rejoice that you have been counted worthy to share in the sufferings of Jesus. That does not mean we should say, "Bring in on!" or be obnoxious. Rather, quietly know in your heart that you are suffering for the Lord, and this authenticates that you belong to Christ and you are following His example.

Second, commit your way to God in prayer. Look to Him to be your deliverer, and stand with confidence on the sovereignty of God. In addition, we should stand in solidarity with other believers around the world who are suffering for their faith, and we should do all we can to shed light on Christians suffering in the Sudan, North Korea, China, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

Finally, as Jesus urged, we should turn the other cheek. Don't return evil with evil, but return evil with good. Go the extra mile and refuse to give into your anger. Be as Christ in the face of hostility.

Dr. Christy Wilson was a professor of missions at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary when Lorie and I were in school there. He and his wife Betty were missionaries in Afghanistan for many years before being expelled from the country and returning to the States. In 1974, they were ordered out of the country by the Muslim government, and then the authorities decreed that the little church building they had constructed must be destroyed.

When the bulldozers showed up the morning of the scheduled demolition, the members of the church greeted the workers and served them tea and cookies as they leveled the building, as an act of grace! The workers didn't quite know what to do or how to act. By the way, the workers were also ordered to dig down 10 feet below the foundation in destroying the building, because the Muslim government heard there might be an underground church there! They did not understand.

These apostles rose above the difficult circumstances of their lives. Though their backs were bleeding, their lips were praising God, for they had a heavenly perspective on the events of the day. They were waiting in the wings to do the will of God on a moment's notice. Do you and I have that same readiness? Look for a divine appoint for you this next week.

May we be faithful to Christ in our witness for Him as we invite people into God's larger story as we follow Christ together regardless of the cost. Amen.

ⁱ Source unknown.

ⁱⁱ Paraphrased from Tertullian, *Apology*, chapter 50.

