

The Persecution Escalates

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, July 21st, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. Well, it's good to be back with you this morning, and you'll notice that we've left the stage lights off this morning.

I think it's warm enough in here with our current heat wave that we don't need to cook ourselves with hot stage lights as well as everything else. So hopefully you can see and everything's good.

I want to personally take a moment to thank Paul Hay for pinch-hitting or pinch-preaching, preach-hitting for me over the past few weeks. I'm very blessed to have such a gifted and godly man serve with me in the pulpit that God has called me to in this place.

So I'm sure you enjoyed Paul's sermons on Sonship, and there will be a few more in that series in the weeks ahead. So we're picking up this morning in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, as you know, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. This morning we'll be looking at Acts 5, 17-42. But I want to set the stage a little bit first by looking quickly at Acts 5, 12-16.

[1 : 12] So you can open your Bible or pick up a Bible from the pew in front of you or just listen. Acts 5, 12-16. So let's look at what it says there.

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 dared 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 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.

Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed. So we hear there that following the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, that we looked at a few weeks ago, perhaps you remember that, the apostles were busy.

They were performing signs and wonders in Jesus' name, and people were being healed. So this was an active and very public ministry. It was drawing interest and attention, and lots of people were taking notice.

[2 : 27] And while this was all going on, the early church was continuing to grow. Our focus passage for this morning is Acts 5, 17-42. So let's hear that now.

And again, you can turn to your Bible, in your Bibles, Acts 5, 17-42, or listen as I read. 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. 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 jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.

[3 : 38] 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. 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, When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

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.

[5 : 03] Then he addressed the Sanhedrin. Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago, Thutis appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about 400 men rallied to him.

He was killed and all his followers were dispersed, and it came to nothing. 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. 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 disgrace for the name.

[6 : 11] 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. Our sermon this morning is titled, The Persecution Escalates, and we've just heard the events and context.

So let's dig into this together. A few weeks ago now, we took a close look at where the persecution of the church started. As we considered Acts 4, we recognized that the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had become, as scripture says, greatly disturbed by the apostles' teaching about Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.

And as you may remember, we considered at that time that the leaders made threats against Peter and John. They warned them to stop what they were doing, but that was about all the early persecution amounted to, really.

Some scolding, a few finger wags, and a, well, don't let this happen again kind of approach. But do you remember how the apostles responded to those early threats?

Well, they turned to the church community and the whole group. Turned to God in prayer. The church community prayed for fellowship and boldness, and the Holy Spirit responded big time, as you remember we looked at a few weeks ago.

[7 : 29] The Holy Spirit strengthened them to continue their work, the work that God had called them to. So the growth of the early church attracted attention and persecution.

We learn from scripture that as the church grew, the persecution escalates. We've heard this morning that as Peter and the apostles continued to preach and heal people, their reputations and recognition grew, and the Sadducees were filled with jealousy.

They felt they deserved the attention that the apostles were receiving. So the high priest and some of the Sadducees who were with him, scripture says, so does this mean they were part of his group?

Did they believe the same perspectives on things that he did? Maybe both. But he had, this group had the apostles arrested and put into, scripture says, public jail in the NIV translation.

So there was no special treatment here. We often will, occasionally we'll hear about someone being brought up on charges and convicted. And so they're put into what is often known as general population.

[8 : 38] So they're not put into solitary confinement. They're not given special treatment. So they're just lumped in with common criminals, with the average people who have done all sorts of different things that they've been convicted of.

So they're grouped in, the apostles were grouped in with everybody that was the bad guys, were the criminals. So does that sound familiar at all to you? What about Jesus?

So was Jesus as guilty as the two men with whom he was tried and crucified? We would say no. And yet he was given, Jesus was given no special treatment.

He was treated the same as criminals with whom he was tried and crucified. But we learned that in this case, this sentence didn't last very long at all, because an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the prison doors and brought the apostles out.

God responded immediately and took care of this situation. And then the angel tasks them with something specific, with preaching about what has happened and continuing to share the gospel of Jesus in a public place in the temple.

[9 : 47] And then we learned that the apostles and Peter did this the first thing the next morning. They did it right away. They didn't hesitate. And so I have to chuckle at the suggestion of what comes next, because the religious leaders are up early in the next morning too, and they head to the prison to collect the apostles, presumably to continue persecuting them, prosecuting them.

And they obviously have no idea what has happened until they discover the apostles aren't in jail anymore. The doors are still locked, but the cells are empty.

What a shock. That would be a total shock. The high priests and the members of the Sanhedrin are really scratching their collective heads, wondering what will happen next. What happened in the first place?

When someone comes to report to them that the apostles are in the temple courts, teaching the people again. So the captain and the officers of the temple guard go to gather the apostles again, and we read that they're very careful as they do this.

Scripture outlines it for us. They were concerned that the crowd would stone them for what they were about to do. So there is a level of awareness, a level of passion in this group of people who are listening to the preaching and teaching of Peter and the apostles, and are worried that the level of passion these followers are experiencing could turn into something serious, some stoning of the people from the Sanhedrin who come to get the apostles.

[11 : 27] So the high priest calls the apostles, and he confronts them. Why are they doing what they were told not to do? It feels like a toddler or a teenager, right?

You give rules, you expect them to be followed, and yet right away the opposite happens. So when you tell someone not to do something, and they do it anyway, it's annoying, right?

It can be very annoying. So not only that, the high priest suggests that the apostles are basically trying to pin Jesus' death on them through what they are saying. And actually, that would be fairly accurate, right?

They would have borne responsibility for what happened to Jesus. So never at a loss for words, Peter and the apostles responded boldly. They remind the religious leaders that they are accountable, first of all, to God.

They are not accountable to men. And Peter even squeezes in a little gospel message in there with Jesus' death and resurrection and exaltation. Peter never misses an opportunity to share the gospel.

[12 : 32] And he declares that he and the apostles and the Holy Spirit have been called to be witnesses to these events of Jesus' death and resurrection and exaltation.

That recognizing and being witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah, as the Son of God. So Peter even reminds them that God calls all people who obey him to bear witness to these events, these events that comprise the story of the gospel.

And of course, how did the religious leaders feel about all this? They loved it, didn't they? They're very excited, very happy, right on board. Well, not actually.

We read that they were furious at what Peter had said. First of all, Peter is standing up there defying them from defying what they had told, what they, the directive they had given to Peter and the apostles.

He's saying, no, I won't listen. And they wanted to have them killed. The Sanhedrin wanted to have Peter and the apostles killed. But fortunately, we read in this account that an esteemed member of the council named Gamaliel asked to speak.

[13 : 43] And then the apostles, when Gamaliel asked for this, the apostles were dismissed from their appearance before the Sanhedrin, the council, while this presentation from Gamaliel happened.

So Gamaliel, not a common name in the Bible. Maybe it was a common name at the time. We don't know. We never hear about him again. We have never heard his name before.

And yet, we learn a lot about him in Acts 5, verse 34. So what do we learn there? Well, first of all, it tells us that he is a Pharisee.

He is a teacher of the law. So he's well-versed in the law and the law of Moses and God's law and all of these things that he's very well-educated.

He's recognized as an authority. He's honored by, Scripture tells us, he's respected by all the people. They know him. They know his reputation.

[14 : 43] And he clearly holds some influence as well because it is Gamaliel's command that ultimately has the apostles put outside. So he stands up, says he wants to speak.

He gives some direction to the council guards and things like that. And they respond and they do what he says.

So they remove the apostles from this audience. So what does Gamaliel say to his colleagues? Well, we learn about that in Acts 5, verses 35 to 39.

So you can flip to that. Gamaliel encourages the council to be very cautious about what they do to and with the apostles. He's very clear that they need to be cautious.

So as we read this morning, he relates the story of a man named Thutis, which sounds like then it sounds like Thutis and the, as scripture says, he claimed to, quote, be somebody.

[15 : 41] So what does that mean? Did Thutis claim to be a Messiah of sorts? Did he claim to be a prophet of the Lord? Did he claim to be a follower of Jesus or have learned from Jesus?

We don't know. Scripture doesn't say. But it does say that he was a going concern. So people were aware of him. It also says he had about 400 followers, which is not a small group.

So that's a potential there. Thutis was executed, we learn, and his followers were dispersed without any issues. So right away, that feels like a who kind of moment, right?

It feels like perhaps a dodged bullet or a lucky, a lucky thing happened there. So it's almost as though Gamaliel is warning the leaders that they have been lucky so far because he reminds them that another man named Judas the Galilean also had a group of followers, that he led in a revolt, which is even more of an escalation than Thutis and his group.

But after Judas was killed, his followers also disbanded without incident. So Gamaliel is essentially getting it across that they've been lucky so far and they better not push their luck.

[16 : 59] So as I was reading this this week, as I was preparing this sermon, I got thinking, does Gamaliel somehow think that Peter and Jesus' other apostles are somehow different?

Somehow different from Thutis? Somehow different from Jesus or other people who have led revolts or been a concern? Does he somehow feel like they're different and that this would go badly?

So we don't know that for sure. We don't know what he's thinking here, but he definitely advises caution. We know that. So we know that even though he was a member of the religious leadership at the time who were against Jesus, Nicodemus, who was a member of the council, recognized and acknowledged Jesus for who he was.

So the question here is, was Gamaliel sensing or recognizing the same thing about Jesus and his followers? Did he think that Peter and Jesus' other apostles were somehow different from average rebels?

Or even more than that, had Gamaliel himself come to follow Jesus in some way? Nicodemus did. Were his actions, Gamaliel's actions, out of a desire to somehow protect the apostles?

[18 : 19] To protect the message of Jesus from being quenched or put out? Scripture doesn't make that clear. But I believe these are fair things to consider.

So whatever his motivation, ultimately Gamaliel advises the council to leave the apostles alone. But despite his best efforts, the apostles weren't released with only a warning this time.

And Acts 5 verse 40 is a bit odd in that way. Right after Gamaliel finishes his speech, we read his speech persuaded them. So we read those words and think, whew, maybe there's a bit of sigh of relief there.

There's a sense that the apostles will be released again without incident. But then immediately in that same verse, we read, they, the council, called the apostles in and had them flogged.

Ugh. So then we learn that the council restates the original directive that the apostles are not to speak in the name of Jesus. And then they're released.

[19 : 23] So their punishment, their persecution escalates with a flogging. They are reminded again, okay, we told you once, we're telling you again, do not speak in the name of Jesus.

And then they're released. So having been given even more harsh punishment for repeat offense, defying the directory, the directives of the council the first time, the apostles must have had second thoughts, right?

Maybe this gave them pause to consider that what Jesus had asked of them was maybe just too hard. Maybe not something else they wanted to do. Maybe they could pray and say, Lord, please give us another task.

What you've asked of us is too much. So maybe they were at least a bit discouraged or thought twice about following that calling that Jesus had given them.

Maybe the personal cost of following Jesus was just too difficult. Maybe they felt like they could just as easily leave that work for someone else.

[20 : 27] No. So how did the apostles react then? Well, we read in Acts 5 verse 41 that after being arrested and jailed, after being accused and humiliated and beaten, the apostles and Peter left the Sanhedrin rejoicing, rejoicing.

So how does that make any sense at all, given what has just happened to them? Well, it's because the apostles recognized that everything they were facing, every personal humiliation or struggle they were having to endure was, as we read in our passage this morning, for the name.

Everything that they were going through, every trial, every tribulation, every persecution, every struggle was for the sake of Jesus. So they also recognized that their suffering was coming from being, Scripture says, counted worthy.

So they were being counted worthy that their persecution, the challenge, the struggle, was showing them that they were being considered worthy of the calling that God had given them.

So what a humbling perspective for them to have had in the middle of everything that was going on. Acts 5 verse 42 says, Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they, the apostles, never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

[21 : 54] So despite being threatened and even beaten for what they were doing, the apostles would not betray or abandon their calling from God.

We've recognized this morning that from threats to beatings, the persecution escalates against the early church. But despite this, the apostles serve as such an amazing example of how we can respond to persecution.

We can respond with joy. Scripture has so many encouraging messages about being joyful in the face of persecution. Luke 6 verses 22 and 23 tells us, So human nature and human pride is to be hurt, hurt, or even hurt each or hurt other people back when we feel that we've been hated, or excluded, or insulted, or rejected.

Perhaps you can relate to that. Our reaction is not to be joyful and thankful in that persecution or that insult or that rejection. When things happen to us that are negative, we tend to have a negative response.

But when those things happen, when negative things happen to us, if our hearts and motives and actions are focused on Jesus, we can rejoice.

[23 : 40] That's a different message, right? Romans 5 verses 1 to 4 says, Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces perseverance.

Perseverance, character, and character, hope. 1 Peter 2.19 says, For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering, because they are conscious of God.

1 Peter 3.14 says, But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats. Do not be frightened.

1 Peter 4.14 says, If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed. For the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

[24 : 52] James 1 verses 2 to 4 says, Consider it pure joy, pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. So, my friends, do you, do we, glory in our suffering?

Whatever that might look like for you, do you glory in it? Do you ask God to show you what you can learn in and from and through it? Do you ask Him for the strength to carry on?

Do you ask Him for the strength to carry on in and through it? When you're seeking after God and focused on doing His will through our words, when we are, through our words and our thoughts and our actions, we can rejoice, as the Peter and the apostles did.

We can rejoice when we face persecution or suffering, when we're focused on and seeking after God. And, my friends, most important of all, God is not blind to our suffering.

[26 : 07] He grieves with us. He is all too familiar with suffering and pain and human struggle, thanks to Jesus. God isn't blind to our commitment to seeking His plan and His path for our lives.

He will reward that. Having been reminded this morning of the witness and example of the apostles, and then how we can learn from them, let's close our time together this morning with the words of Hebrews 12, verses 1 to 3, which says, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.

For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

My brothers and sisters, my dear friends, let's turn our eyes upon Jesus. Amen.