

Persevering Through Persecution

Acts 5:17-32

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Look around you and find eight people. Go ahead and count until you locate eight individuals. By the time you go to sleep tonight, eight people around the world will have died for their devotion to follow Jesus Christ.

Open Doors just released their World Watch List for 2019...

- More than 260 million Christians – one of every eight believers – experience high levels of persecution.
- A total of 9,488 places of worship were attacked.
- 3,711 Christians were detained without trial, sentenced and imprisoned.
- 2,983 followers of Christ were killed for faith-related reasons.

Here are some recent reports from around the world. I'm grateful to Ken White for gathering some of this information.

- Just this week in Nigeria, a pastor who gave praise to God in a ransom video, was beheaded by Boko Haram because he wouldn't recant his faith.
- In North Korea, which is #1 on persecution lists, Christians are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot. Meeting other Christians for worship is nearly impossible unless it's done in complete secrecy.
- Last year, in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, three churches were bombed, resulting in 29 church members and 14 children being martyred.
- Now China is utilizing a social score system that grades its citizens based on their actions, using surveillance cameras and artificial intelligence to monitor Christians. The government has been shutting down house churches for their refusal to install cameras or to put up a picture of President Xi Jinping at the center of their worship platforms. Incidentally, last month TIME magazine reported in just one Chinese city, there's one surveillance camera for every six citizens – that's 30 times the prevalence in Washington, D.C.
- In Burkina Faso, where Mike and Pam Hillhouse have served, a pastor and several church members have been martyred. BTW, Mike will be speaking here March 7-8.

If you'd like to stay up to date on the persecuted church, one of our Go Team partners, Voice of the Martyrs, has a number of free resources available. Simply go to Sermon Extras on the Edgewood app or on our website. We've also included a link to the ministry of Open Doors.

As we continue our study of the Holy Spirit's actions in the Book of Acts, we come today to another outbreak of persecution against the early church.

Here's how we're going to approach Acts 5:17-32. First, we're going to walk through the passage, so we *learn* it. Then we'll allow the passage to walk through us as we seek to *live* it. We'll start with exposition and end with application.

Last weekend we saw how *Jesus heals our hurts* and now we'll discover *it's always better to obey God*.

Exposition – Learn It

In response to seeing so many sick people experience healing and so many people getting saved, verse 17 says, ***“But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy...”*** Feeling threatened and jealous, the religious leaders stand to their feet and are ready to fight.

It's sad the high priest is worked up because hurting people were being healed. The Sadducees were the religious liberals of the day. They valued rationalism and ritualism and didn't believe in angels or the resurrection. The Sadducees were very wealthy because they controlled all the finances surrounding the temple sacrifices. While the Pharisees were the predominant group that attacked Jesus, the Sadducees take aim at the followers of Christ.

To be ***“filled with jealousy”*** means they were *“wholly affected and boiling with fiery wrath.”* It's true that what fills you will end up controlling you. These leaders were trying to disguise their jealousy as justice. Jealousy is dangerous because it can make us do horrible things. In Mark 15:10 we read Jesus knew ***“it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered Him up.”*** Proverbs 14:30: ***“A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.”***

In verse 18 ***“they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.”*** In the previous chapter they only arrested Peter and John but now all twelve of them are

thrown in the **“public prison.”** This is designed to both embarrass and intimidate the apostles because it’s all done for the public to see.

I love what takes place next according to verse 19: **“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out...”** Angels are messengers of God and appear throughout the pages of Scripture. Later in Acts we’ll see how angels bring messages to an Ethiopian in Acts 8 and to Cornelius in Acts 10. An angel is also involved in freeing Peter from prison in Acts 12. This makes me smile because the Sadducees don’t believe in angels, so God sends one to bring the apostles out of jail.

In verse 20 the message from the angel is a reminder of their mission: **“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”** The first two letters of the gospel are GO. Jesus told them to **“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...”** in Matthew 28:19.

The apostles weren’t to linger in awe of the angel but instead were to take a stand in the temple, which was where people congregated. The temple also represented the old order of sacrifices and rituals, which were replaced when Jesus offered Himself as the full and final sacrifice for our sins. Note the apostles were not to escape and run away but instead were to run toward and explain.

Not surprisingly, according to the first half of verse 21, the apostles exhibit immediate obedience without hesitation or vacillation: **“And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach...”** As soon as the sun was up, they went up to the temple, which was where hundreds of people had gathered for morning sacrifices and for prayers. The phrase, **“began to teach”** indicates they did it *“over and over again.”*

Not having a clue that the apostles had made a jail break, the second half of verse 21 sets the scene: **“Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.”** The Sanhedrin, which was like the Jewish Supreme Court along with the Senate, which was made up of older respected representatives, asked the bailiffs to bring in the prisoners.

Verse 22 describes what happened next: **“But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported.”** The phrase **“did not find”** means they searched everywhere to no avail. It’s like they had vanished into

thin air. I can't imagine what their conversation was like on the way back from the empty jail: *"I'm not going to tell them...you tell them...no, you do it!"*

When they return to the Sanhedrin, they give this report with their knees wobbling in verse 23: ***"We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside."*** The doors were firmly shut and secure and the trained sentinels were stationed at their posts but somehow the prisoners were not present. The idea is the guards had never left and were always standing on high alert.

I wonder how this happened. Did the angel of the Lord use an angelic stun gun on the guards, open the locked doors, let the prisoners out and then locked the prison up again?

Because their theology had no place for the supernatural, according to verse 24, these leaders did not know how to process this news: ***"Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to."*** The phrase ***"greatly perplexed"*** means they were *"at a loss, continually puzzled, and hesitating greatly."* They were perplexed but not persuaded.

To make matters worse, in verse 25 someone came running in with a report in verse 25: ***"Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people."*** Notice this scout can't even say the apostles' names but instead refers to them as *"the men."* The leaders are livid that these men are standing up in the temple and teaching about life in Jesus.

Knowing they had to shut them down, verse 26 tells us what happened next: ***"Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people."*** They knew if they mishandled the situation, the people might turn on them and start throwing rocks at them. The apostles went willingly, showing they were trusting God's sovereignty to give them another gospel opportunity.

When they finally return with the apostles, they set them before the Sanhedrin, which was a group of 71 justices who met in a big courtroom in the temple. It no doubt had to be intimidating.

We read in verses 27-28: ***"...And the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem***

with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." The word for **"question"** is *"interrogate."* The phrase **"strictly charged"** literally means something like this: *"We charged you with a charge" or "We commanded you with a commandment."*

I find it fascinating that they weren't asked *how* they got out of jail. I don't think they wanted to consider the answer because they knew it was a result of supernatural intervention as the jail was "touched by an angel" (see what I did there?).

Don't miss the contempt and disdain they have for Christ – instead of using His name, they refer to Him twice as **"this man."** This is similar to what the authorities said in Acts 4:17: ***"But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."***

In just a matter of weeks the apostles have **"filled"** Jerusalem with the gospel message. This word was used of filling a hollow place, reminding us our lives are empty and hollow until Christ fills them.

It's ironic the religious leaders accuse the apostles of bringing **"this man's blood"** upon them because in Matthew 27:25 we read what the people said in response to Pilate's declaration he was innocent of the blood of Jesus: ***"His blood be on us and on our children!"***

While the apostles are being attacked and interrogated, they experienced the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made in Matthew 10:17-20: ***"Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."***

Instead of shutting down, in verses 29-32, Peter and the apostles speak up and give a courageous and Christ-centered response: ***"We must obey God rather than men."*** The word **"must"** helps us see it's a *"moral necessity."* Because it's in the present tense, it could be translated: *"we are continually under compulsion"* to obey God. This is very similar to what Peter and John said in Acts 4:20: ***"For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."***

In verse 30, Peter doesn't mince any words as he confronts them with their sin: ***"The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree."*** By using the title, ***"God of our fathers,"*** Peter is identifying himself as a fellow Jew with these leaders. Once again, we see how prominent the resurrection is in their preaching when Peter proclaims Jesus was raised from the dead, something the Sadducees denied.

He goes for the spiritual jugular by declaring the religious leaders killed Jesus by ***"hanging Him on a tree."*** This was the ultimate disgrace and would have stirred them to remember Deuteronomy 21:23: ***"Cursed is the man who is hung on a tree."*** This act actually is what provided redemption for us as Galatians 3:13 says, ***"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."***

Verse 31 is filled with a beautiful description of where Christ is, who He is and what He does: ***"God exalted Him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."***

- **Where Christ is.** Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God the Father. The word ***"exalted"*** means He is elevated far above everything and everyone, including the Sanhedrin. The ***"right hand"*** is the position of power and authority. This same group of leaders would have heard Jesus say these words some 50 days earlier in Luke 22:69: ***"But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God."***
- **Who Christ is.** Jesus is both ***"Leader and Savior."*** The title ***"Leader"*** is rich in meaning – it refers to the ***"One who goes first on the path and hence He is the One who blazes the trail."*** Jesus is the pioneer and prince, the ruler and chief, the founder and originator. Hebrews 2:10 refers to Him as the ***"captain of our salvation."***
- **What Christ does.** Notice how even our ability to repent is a gift from God. When we repent, Christ releases us from our sins. This is stated clearly in Acts 3:19: ***"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out."***

In verse 32, Peter comes back to the identity and task of every Christian: ***"And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."*** You and I are called to be witnesses and to give witness to the One who died, rose, ascended, is exalted and is coming again! The apostles are living out Acts 1:8: ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and***

Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Interestingly, the word “*witness*” in Greek is where we get martyr from.

Application – Live It

Now that we’ve walked through the text to *learn it*, let’s allow the text to walk through us so we can *live it out*. Here are six action steps for us to apply.

1. Persevere when persecution comes. It’s really not a question of *if* persecution will come; it’s *when* it comes. Jesus tells us in [John 15:18-20](#) not to be surprised when suffering shows up: *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”*

Peter picks up on this theme in [1 Peter 4:12](#): *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* [2 Timothy 3:12](#) says every Christian is promised persecution: *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*

Recently, Chinese Pastor Wang Yi was sentenced to nine years in prison. His congregation, one of the most prominent unregistered churches in China, was shut down during a series of government raids one month ago. After their pastor was arrested, the church released his Declaration of Faithful Disobedience: *“I firmly believe that Christ has called me to carry out this faithful disobedience through a life of service, under this regime that opposes the gospel and persecutes the church...This is the means by which I preach the gospel, and it is the mystery of the gospel which I preach.”*

Are you prepared for persecution? How will you respond when it comes? Will you keep preaching the mystery of the gospel even when things get messy?

2. Trust God to do the impossible. Jesus said in [Luke 18:27](#): *“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”* Throughout our study in the Book of Acts, we’ve seen how God supernaturally intervened to propel His purposes forward. Are there any prison doors you’re longing for God to open? Do you feel like you’ve hit a dead end? Are you carrying burdens God has not designed for you to carry? Does your marriage feel hopeless? Are you struggling financially?

It's time to trust God to do what only He can do. I'm reminded of [Ephesians 3:20-21](#): ***“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”***

3. Obey God no matter how difficult it is. [1 Samuel 15:22](#) says, ***“To obey is better than sacrifice.”*** [James 1:22](#) tells us that we must both hear and heed the Word of God: ***“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”*** Jesus said it strongly in [John 14:22](#): ***“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word.”*** If we love the Lord, we will live out what He commands.

This week I read a post with a provocative title: *“Don't pursue your dreams. Pursue obedience.”* It's more important to be obedient to God's leading than to follow your own leaning.

The apostles chose to obey God even if it meant being put in prison. In what area of your life do you need to practice immediate obedience? Do you need to step up your gathering? Your growing? Your giving? Your going?

Have you been drifting into disobedience? Is your coasting leading to complacency and compromise? Kat Kalinauskas, who is married to Andrew, and joining Edgewood this weekend, writes a blog called “The Pensive Soul.” She wrote a post this week called, “Being Bold in a Complacent World.” Here's one sentence that really stood out to me: *“Living in America where it's still relatively easy to be a Christian, it can be easy to grow complacent, to take God for granted and forget how much each and every soul needs Jesus.”*

Are you trying to ride the fence about faith? Have you been trying to play both sides, so you're one way here and a totally different person on campus or in the workplace?

Imagine a large group of people. On one side of the group is Jesus. On the other side is Satan. Separating them, running through the group, is a fence. Both Jesus and Satan begin calling to people and one by one each went to either Jesus or Satan.

This went on for quite some time until there was only one man left. He decided to climb the fence and sit on it. Both groups left so the man was all alone. After a few hours Satan came back, looking for something which he appeared to have lost.

The man said, *“Have you lost something?”* Satan looked straight at him and replied, *“No, there you are. Come with me.”*

“But,” said the man, *“I’m sitting on the fence. I choose neither you nor Him.”*

“Well,” said Satan. *“I own the fence.”*

4. Witness wherever you go. One reason the early church experienced so many conversions is because Christians lived on mission. Let’s go back to the command of the angel to **“go, stand and speak.”** This is a present imperative, meaning it’s not optional. Let’s break it down.

- **Scatter.** We must go to the person across the street, we must go to our coworkers and our classmates.
- **Stand.** The word for “stand” means, *“to stand your ground.”* We’re to stand up wherever He puts us. This also means we must live what we say we believe.
- **Speak.** When the opportunity arises, we must put our witness into words and explain the message of life in Jesus.

A popular saying has received quite a bit of traction. While I understand the sentiment, it’s not entirely true. Here it is: *“Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.”* While it’s important to represent the gospel by how we live, using words *is* necessary. I’m reminded of what the Lord said to Paul in [Acts 18:9](#): **“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent.”**

We talk a lot about the importance of living on mission, of taking the opportunities God brings our way. EBC member Rick Huisman had an opportunity come his way recently and I’ve asked him to share it with us.

→ **On Mission: Rick Huisman**

If you’re looking for ways to increase your ability to scatter, stand and speak, Pastor Dan is leading an evangelism elective on Sunday mornings. Also, we make the gospel book Anchor for the Soul available and if you don’t have a pack of invite cards in your purse or wallet, you might want to grab some today.

5. Repent in order to be released from sin. I went back and reread the sermon called, “Repentance Leads to Refreshment” that I preached from [Acts 3:17-26](#). Consider these words: *“Are you ready to repent and receive so you can be*

released from the record of your sins? Only then will you find the refreshment you are searching for and experience the restoration God alone can bring to your life.”

If you're ready to do it now, you could pray something like this:

Lord, I admit I am a sinner and deserve Your just judgment. I repent from trying to follow my own way and now turn to You as the only way. I believe Jesus died in my place on the cross and rose again on the third day and now I receive Him into my life. Please save me from my sins and from Your righteous wrath. I want to be born again so I place all my trust in You and You alone. If there's anything in my life You don't like, please get rid of it. I pray this in the name of Jesus, the One who is both Leader and Savior. Amen.

6. Pray for the persecuted. The number one request from those who are persecuted is for us to pray for them. Check out the Apostle Paul's prayer while he was going through persecution in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-3: ***“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”***

The Sadducees thought they could shut down the spread of the gospel by arresting and jailing the apostles. But every time they tried to intervene and stop it, it just gained more steam. Throughout history there have been rulers and authorities who have tried to extinguish Christianity only to discover their efforts only served to make the gospel spread faster. That's happening all over the world right now. Check out this video.

Closing Video: “China Revival”

Prayer for the Persecuted

New Members