

Introduction

God's timing never ceases to amaze me

When I planned this sermon series from the book of Acts and laid out my preaching schedule for it I had no idea that I would be preaching this sermon during our annual focus on the persecuted church – it never occurred to me

When preaching through a book of the Bible in an expository fashion one simply takes the next section in line and preaches its meaning and message

And in doing so, God often takes the opportunity to marvelously connect things up as he has this week

Two weeks ago when we looked at chapter 4 we saw how Satan tried to stop the apostles from preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus through external persecution

We saw how Peter and John were arrested and held overnight and then commanded to stop speaking in the name of Jesus

We saw how they flatly stated that the Sanhedrin would need to determine for themselves whether it was proper for them to obey men instead of God but that they would continue to preach as they had been – nothing was going to change

And instead of being cowed into silence the church grew even more bold and continued to reach people and make converts to Christianity

Then last week in chapter 5 we saw how Satan changed tactics and tried to harm the church from within as he tempted Ananias and his wife Sapphira to deceive the church

We saw how seriously God takes the matter of integrity within his church as they were both the recipients of a divine death sentence as they dropped dead where they stood

And as the account became known among the people believers and unbelievers alike were filled with reverential awe

I made the statement last week that Satan is tenacious but he lacks originality

He has never stopped his quest to hurt the church and to hamper her mission and he is still using the tactics of persecution from without and damage from within to do his work

I went on the Open Doors USA website and discovered that worldwide each month:

214 Churches and other Christian properties are destroyed

322 Christians are killed

772 other acts of violence such as beatings, abductions, rapes, and arrests are committed against Christians

All because of their faith in Christ

Two weeks ago today 26 men, women, and children lost their lives simply because they were sitting in a church service in Sutherland, TX when a man with atheistic leanings targeted them for death

Thus far we have been spared any serious persecution for our faith but it remains a real threat

As Christ followers we never know when Satan might turn his sights on us for persecution

So we do well to look seriously and studiously at passages like the one before us today as we look to the example of the early church for how to handle persecution if and when it does arrive

I have titled this morning's sermon "Persecution: Take Two" because in **Acts 5:12-42** we see the return of persecution by the Sanhedrin as the apostles are once again arrested and put on trial. Having failed to win any kind of victory with the previous persecution or from the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, Satan amps up the persecution angle and tries again to silence the apostles.

Our passage begins with a summary statement of the **State of the Church**

Then we will see the **Reaction of the Religious Leaders**

And finally the **Response of the Apostles**

If you haven't done so already would you join me in Acts 5 as we begin?

I. The State of the Church

In **verses 12-16** we have the third of three statements that show us the state or condition of the church. In **2:42-47** Luke gave us the first of these statements and we saw the second one last week in **4:32-35**.

A. Business as Usual

The first thing we notice is that in spite of the sin and judgment that has just occurred, the apostles and the church were continuing on with business as usual.

Verse 12 states - Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.

Previously, in **3:11**, we saw Peter and John in Solomon's Portico which was a spacious, covered porch attached to the temple.

This was the scene of Peter's second sermon as recorded by Luke which Peter gave on the occasion of the healing of the man who was lame from birth.

The crowd had followed them there looking for answers regarding the healing and Peter took the opportunity to preach the gospel message to them and this led to Peter and John being arrested and tried before the Sanhedrin the first time.

In spite of the order of the Sanhedrin to cease and desist and in spite of the internal difficulty that the church had just experienced the apostles were continuing with their ministry.

Without a doubt they were continuing to preach that Jesus was the Christ who had been killed by the Jews and that repentance and acceptance of Jesus was the way to reconciliation with God.

And God was continuing to validate their message by doing signs and wonders by their hands just as Peter had revealed was true of Jesus' ministry in his sermon at Pentecost back in **2:22**.

Once again we come to the understanding that Jesus is continuing the ministry he began while on the earth through the apostles.

This is a clear answer to the prayer of the church in **4:29-30**.

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

God's power working through the apostles is irrefutable and becoming well-known.

And as we will see here in just a bit, this frustrates and even infuriates the religious leaders.

But first, Luke records that the apostles and the church had gained the respect of the people.

B. Respect of the People

Let's look at **verses 13-14**

None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

In these verses we see a paradox that still survives today

For some the message of the gospel and the working of God are **appalling** and for others they are **appealing**

And here we see that some of the people are **deterred** from joining with the apostles and the church but others are being **drawn** to them and both are because of the same message and the same miracles

The other factor that had relevance to both sides of this aversion/attraction coin was the demonstrated seriousness concerning the issue of integrity

Whereas the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira led to a perfectly understandable pulling back from the church and caused some to shy away from joining, integrity is generally respected

And we see in **verse 13** that even those who were unwilling to commit to the rigors of the church still "held them in high esteem"

And "multitudes of both men and women" continued to be added to the Lord

The church had the **respect of the people**

C. Miraculous Healings

In **verses 15-16**, Luke details some of the "signs and wonders" God was doing through the apostles

So that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The idea conveyed in verse 15 is without a doubt a little odd

People were bringing out the sick in hopes that Peter's shadow might fall on them with the implication that they would then be healed

Admittedly, this seems to be a little bit out there and the text doesn't actually say that anyone was healed in this way but there seems to be little reason to doubt that God actually healed them through being touched by Peter's shadow

Look with me at **Luke 8:42b-44**

As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased.

Then skipping ahead to **verse 48** we read:

And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

By faith this woman was healed which means she trusted enough to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus' garment and by that action she was indeed healed

That really doesn't seem all that far removed from trusting in Peter's shadow for healing and acting on that trust

I know some of you are probably thinking, “Yeah, well Peter isn’t Jesus” and that’s a fair argument

But jump ahead with me in Acts to **Acts 19:11-12**

Look what it says –

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

Add in the account of the healing of the Centurion’s servant who was healed by Jesus from afar simply because of the faith of the Centurion from **Luke 7** and I don’t see any reason why Peter’s shadow could not be the conduit for rewarding the faith of the people who were seeking healing

In any event, we see in **verse 16** that all those who were brought to the apostles were healed’ Gone were the times reported in the gospel accounts of partial success and occasional failures as the apostles attempted to heal and cast out demons - everyone who comes to the apostles now is healed

Their success resulted in the reputation of the church spreading beyond Jerusalem and with it the expansion of their influence as people were now being drawn from the towns around Jerusalem

It was inevitable that this would happen as word of what God was doing spread

II. The Reaction of the Religious Leaders

Seemingly inevitable also was the **reaction of the religious leaders**

Look with me at **verses 17-18** –

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

Jealousy was the reaction of the high priest and those who were with him – the Sadducees Jealousy is typically an ugly emotion when expressed by mankind and it’s generally destructive **Proverbs 6:34** tells us “Jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge”

The high priest and his minions weren’t jealous for God or for the truth

They were jealous for their own power, position, and popularity

You will remember how we saw last week that the Sadducees were more political than theological

They cared little for finding out what was true they only cared about maintaining the status quo

They were jealous to keep things calm and quiet lest Rome notice and take away their privileged position

Of course in their position they were able to hide behind the façade of zeal for God but their zeal was really a desire for personal gain mixed with false piety

So they were stirred to anger by the apostles’ disregard for their earlier order to stop speaking in the name of Jesus and the apostle’s growing influence merely served to fan the flames of their jealousy and the Sanhedrin once again felt compelled to act

A. Arrest and Release

So they had the apostles arrested and once again threw them into jail for the night intending to deal with them the next day

As Yogi Berra is credited with saying, this had to seem like déjà vu all over again for Peter and John

This time thought it appears the other 10 apostles were in jail right along with them

And that wasn't to be the only difference that marked this incarceration

On the last occasion, Peter and John spent the night in jail and were brought before the Sanhedrin the next morning

This time, though, God sent an angel to release them from their cell or cells during the night

We have to note that there is a little bit of heavenly humor in God sending an angel to effect the release of the apostles because the Sadducees didn't believe in the spirit world yet here was an angel setting their prisoners free –

Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

Luke doesn't tell us the means of the release so we don't know whether the guards were put into a trance or caused to fall asleep or if the apostles were rendered invisible

We're only told that the angel "opened the prison doors and brought them out"

Clearly God can deliver his followers from any situation by any means any time that he desires to do so

But God didn't send his angel to release them for the sake of their personal freedom

They were freed for a purpose and the angel revealed that purpose as soon as they were out of jail

Look at the angel's instructions in **verse 20** –

"Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

The apostles weren't freed simply to be free they were freed so that they could continue to minister

And they were enthusiastic to obey as the first part of **verse 21** reveals

They didn't argue and they didn't procrastinate

They entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach

At a time when the members of the Sanhedrin might well have been rolling over for a few last minutes of shuteye, the apostles were back in the most public of places preaching

They took the earliest opportunity to obey what God had instructed through his angel even as that meant disobeying the Sanhedrin

We often debate the matter of obedience to governmental authority and its limits

In my study I came across a quote from John Stott that I think very clearly explains our responsibility in this area – he writes:

"If the authority concerned misuses its God-given power to command what [God] forbids or to forbid what [God] commands, then the Christian's duty is to disobey the human authority in order to obey God."

And we need to remember that obedience and submission are two different concepts even though submission often includes obedience there are times to disobey but we still must submit as we will see the apostles demonstrate in just a few minutes

Through his angel, God had commanded them to preach in the temple

The apostles understood that they hadn't been set free to run away but to stand and minister

This provides us with a really neat picture of salvation because we too have been set free to serve God

We would do well to determine to be just as eager to do what God gives us to do

B. Trial

You might well chuckle as you picture the scene the next morning as Luke describes it
The last part of verse 21 shows the high priest and all the rest coming together to judge the apostles
It's easy to picture them looking all regal in their finest robes
Perhaps they were even making sure to have their most intimidating scowls on their faces for when the prisoners were brought before them

Anyway, they get themselves all situated and they send the temple officers to retrieve the apostles
Only to have them return and tell them that they were gone!
In fact, they told them that they had found the doors securely locked and the guards standing their posts but when they opened the doors they discovered that they were guarding empty cells!

I just love the reaction of the leaders when they heard the report in **verse 24**
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.

Can't you picture them sitting there stunned?

You can almost hear the gears grinding in their minds as they tried to absorb the news

They were at a loss to explain what had happened to their well-laid plan that had apparently just gone awry

I find it interesting that Luke doesn't report that they wondered about how this thing could have happened – since the Sadducees didn't believe in the spirit-world the thought of an angel would never have entered their calculations

It's likely they suspected that the apostles had a confederate that was a part of the guard or that someone on the guard was at least sympathetic to their cause and had let them go

Of course, that's speculation on my part and Luke reports that they wondered "what this would come to"

They were likely having one of those "Oh, no! Not again!" moments as they remembered Jesus' body had gone missing from the tomb where he had been laid

Without a doubt they had seen this sort of thing not so long before but their pre-conceived notions and their jealousy blinded them to what God was doing right before their very eyes

Then in the midst of their confusion and before they could get their minds around the matter someone came rushing in to tell them (**verse 25**)

"Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people."

I have to believe that might have been the most unsettling news they could have received

The apostles hadn't headed for the hills and they weren't in hiding

The leaders weren't going to have to invent a cover story for the missing apostles because they weren't missing

They were in the temple teaching the people just as they had been doing when they were arrested yesterday –

Clearly they weren't properly impressed with their situation or the importance of the Sanhedrin

So the captain and his officers went to bring them back

But this time they didn't take them by force but asked for them to come along with them willingly

In keeping with what we know about the Sanhedrin Luke says they handled them gently not because they feared God and his stamp of approval on the apostles but because they feared the people

Once again we see the integrity of both groups on display

The apostles were not only faithful to fulfilling their commission but eager to do it precisely as instructed – and then they went quietly, in submission, to answer to the authorities when asked

While the religious elite were careful to preserve their political standing before the people and not to recognize and accept the truth

Having brought them before the gathered Sanhedrin the high priest laid out the charges against them In **verse 28** we see that two charges were brought against the apostles

First, they had ignored the previous injunction to stop speaking in the name of Jesus and had instead “filled Jerusalem” with their teaching

Second, they were attempting to show that the religious leaders were guilty before God of killing the Messiah

Again, neither of these charges had anything to do with determining the truth of the matter but were concerned with protecting the reputation of the Sanhedrin

The religious leaders saw the death of Jesus as the just outcome of a trial that resulted in the death of a heretical blasphemer and insurrectionist

But here were his upstart followers insisting that it was actually the murder of the Messiah

The apostles had openly defied their authority as they continued to preach and teach in Jesus' name and were gaining influence and followers every day

So, blinded by pride and jealousy the religious leaders acted to preserve the status quo

The response of the apostles to the charges was the same as before

But rather than hint at the answer as to where their loyalty should be placed, Peter acts as the spokesman and bluntly states that they “must obey God rather than men” plainly indicating that the Sanhedrin was opposing God

And Peter didn't stop there – once again he laid out the case that the religious leaders were guilty of killing the Messiah in **verses 30-32**

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Most of this we have seen before as Peter lays out the difference between man's treatment of Jesus and God's

Previously Peter spoke of the crucifixion and the use of the Romans as the instrument of murder

And once again he plainly says that the Sanhedrin was responsible for Jesus' death “whom you killed”

But this time he adds the phrase “by hanging him on a tree”

The assembled leaders would have seen this as a very pointed reference to **Deuteronomy 21:22-23**

“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

The religious leaders had conspired to see Jesus crucified thereby placing him under God's curse
But instead of God cursing him he "exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior" as we see in **verse 31**

And once more Peter asserts that he and the other apostles are eyewitnesses to the resurrection and walking testimony to the indwelling Holy Spirit

Peter has been consistent in placing the guilt of the crucifixion on the religious leaders
But he has also been consistent to do so with the desire of bringing about the repentance and salvation of the leaders
He hasn't been interested in merely assigning blame but in trying to show the leaders how they can be absolved of the guilt they carry

Showing the guilt and penalty for sin is a necessary part of presenting the gospel but to stop there only leads to either useless remorse that leaves a person broken without hope
Or to a posture of self-defense that leads to a rejection of the acceptance of guilt and the need for a cure

We must out of necessity show people their sins but we must do so in love and hasten to show them that their sins can be forgiven through repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord

C. Deliberation and Punishment

Peter was faithful to do this in every instance but sadly the response of the Sanhedrin was predictable
In **verse 33** we see that rather than seeing the light the religious leaders saw red and became enraged
The Greek word translated "enraged" has the connotation of being sawn in two

The defense offered by the apostles was a continuation of what they were charged with
There was no backing down regarding their disobedience to the order of the Sanhedrin
And the jealousy of the leaders for their reputation was enough to drive them to want to murder the apostles

The Pragmatism of Gamaliel

The leaders were so angry that the apostles might well have been dragged out of the chamber and stoned on the spot in spite of the political fallout had Gamaliel, a Pharisee of much renown, not stood to speak

In **verses 34-39** we see Gamaliel counsel the leaders not to kill the apostles
Gamaliel was known for his scholarship of the Scriptures as well as for wisdom
And his speech related here is in keeping with his reputation for moderation

We need to understand that Gamaliel is an unbeliever and not a friend of the apostles or of Christianity
He isn't defending the apostles but merely counselling patience and a "wait and see" attitude
His is a pragmatic approach that says if the Christian movement is man-made it will surely fail

And he gives two recent historical examples of failed movements under the leadership of two men named Theudas and Judas

Both of these movements had cropped up and gained a following only to dissolve when the leaders were killed

He is likely placing Jesus in this same category and figures that since Jesus has been killed his followers and the movement will likely disband in short order

However, should it be found to be a movement that is from God it will succeed in spite of any attempts by the Sanhedrin to stop it and they will find themselves on the wrong side of God
Again, it doesn't seem that the fear is so much being on the wrong side but of people knowing that they were opposing God!

Had the Sanhedrin really thought about what Gamaliel was saying they should have been more than a little concerned by the exponential growth of Christianity that was taking place *after* the death of Jesus
But it seems as if the reality of the situation and its implication had also escaped Gamaliel even as he made his argument

The question we have to answer though is whether or not pragmatism is a viable test of validity
We often fall into this same mindset when assessing ministries and plans in the church
But does the apparent success of a thing automatically mean God's endorsement or, conversely, does the apparent failure of a thing imply we have stepped outside of God's will?

Historically, we would have to say that such an idea can't be true
Look at the ministry of Jeremiah for just one example
That man suffered defeat and humiliation all his life even as he was squarely in the center of God's will

We also see examples all around us today

If we were to look at short-term appearances we would come to the conclusion that we need to be more like Benny Hinn or Joel Olsteen as they have enjoyed apparent success in their ministries

In all cases we need to remember that our perspective is limited both in duration and scope

We see only briefly and partially while God sees completely

So we need to look to remain faithful to his Word and realize that apparent success or failure is but one indicator of God's blessing – and one that is easily misread at that

Regardless of its propriety, Gamaliel's advice carried the day and the council called the apostles back and "they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go"

This beating wasn't a spanking but the dreaded "40 stripes minus one" prescribed under Jewish law
This form of flogging was quite severe and the backs of the apostles would have been lacerated and bleeding as a result

It was the most serious punishment that could be handed down short of the death penalty

In fact, it was not unknown for people to die from the shock and trauma of it although those deaths were unintentional

In fact, the apostle Paul indicates in **2 Corinthians 11:24** that he had received this punishment at the hands of the Jewish leaders on five different occasions during his ministry

III. The Response of the Apostles

Given the unjustness and the severity of the beating **the response of the apostles** is noteworthy

A. Rejoicing

First we see in **verse 41** that they were rejoicing

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

They were honored to be found worthy of dishonor for the cause of Christ

I'm not sure about you but their response is very convicting to me

I struggle with having an appropriate response to far less than a bloody beating and I honestly can't say I would respond as they did

B. Perseverance

Then in **verse 42** we see that they persevered

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

They continued to preach and teach just as they had been doing

Nothing had changed and they were just as bold as ever in fulfilling their commission

Again, their response is convicting when I consider how easy it is to cave in the face of resistance

Conclusion

The apostles were committed to the cause of Christ and resilient in carrying out their commission
They were bold in proclaiming the truth even to those who had the power to punish them

Standing for Christ is not always easy and it is sometimes very costly

I don't know if you're like me but I am often in awe when I hear of the bravery of those who are persecuted

I know that God gives grace and power to those who need it when they need it

It would be useless to give that same level of resoluteness to someone when they aren't facing persecution

But it is still amazing to see those who are willing to suffer all manner of punishment, torture, and often death with quiet grace and courage

I want to leave you with video that I found that serves as a profound example of being faithful to the name of Jesus

It has to do with how we handle the Lord's name but it also serves as a great example of being willing to suffer for the name of Jesus

- Video -

What would you endure for the name of Jesus?

I'm certain none of us has been forced into a situation even remotely like Susan's

Most of what we would suffer we suffer already as we imagine hurt feelings or broken relationships should we stand for the Lord and so we procrastinate

Persecution is very real for many of our brothers and sisters so let's remember to pray for them even as we ask God to make us bold for his name, to make us eager to speak in his name, and to give us the grace of endurance should we one day also face persecution for having done so

Let's pray