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Scripture Text: Acts 5:17-42

Sermon Title: *Persecution*

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Persecution

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 5:17-42 as we continue our series of sermons from The Acts of the Apostles, or what we are learning to call “The Acts of the Risen Jesus through the Church, Empowered by the Holy Spirit.”

Last Sunday we noted that, just as the Holy Spirit was act work through the church, Satan also became active in an attempt to counter the work of God’s Spirit through the powerful and expanding new church. The danger we noted last Sunday in the first verses of chapter five was the threat from within the church, with the pride, greed and deception of Ananias and Sapphira. Realizing the danger that hypocrisy posed to this infant church, Peter announced God’s judgment, which fell immediately upon this rebellious couple. Following that severe judgment, that resulted in the death of this Ananias and Sapphira, fear came upon the church and even upon outsiders, who dared not join this group out of motives for personal gain (5:13). Yet, the favor of God rested upon this obedient people and God added to their numbers those who were being truly converted. This Spiritually blessed and empowered church continued to grow with God’s abundant blessings upon them, as evidenced by signs and wonders (5:12-16).

Today we will note the hostility of Satan against the church from the outside. Again, we will note that outside threats do not weaken the church, but rather will serve to strengthen a church that is trusting in God and is faithful to the Great Commission of Christ to the church. We noted a few Sundays ago the threats that were leveled by the ruling Sanhedrin (high court of the Jews) against Peter and John. But these invincible Christians were not intimidated by the threats against them and averred that they could not help speaking about the risen Jesus and his good news of salvation (4:20). And when Peter and John reported to the church about the threats against them the church went to prayer for them to receive a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit, who would give them continuing boldness in proclaiming the good news of Jesus (4:29f).

Now today we note the first actual persecution of the church. And what is important for us to understand is how God used this experience of persecution to advance the gospel and further strengthen his witnesses.

Follow as I read **Acts 5: 17-42**.

Michael Green quotes someone named FR Maltby who “used to say that Jesus promised his disciples three things. They would be absurdly happy, completely fearless, and in constant trouble” (page 185, *Acts for Today: First Century Christianity for Twentieth Century Christians*, by Michael Green). I’ve done a search and was unable to identify FR Maltby, but whoever he is, he seems to be commenting on our text for today. This is the picture we have of these apostles, these followers of Jesus who were leading the church in Jerusalem in its missionary advance that was becoming a serious threat to the religious control of the Jewish high court. We find these joyful witnesses in some serious trouble with the authorities; yet this trouble and persecution fails to daunt or to discourage them in their task of spreading the good news about Jesus.

In preaching this passage of Scripture about the persecution that broke out against the earliest church I have serious reservations. I admit that I am such a stranger to this kind of persecution that I feel like an outsider in a sense trying to report about something about which I have had very little firsthand experience. Also, I have such regard for these faithful apostles that I sense I am standing on holy ground and I must be careful to do justice to this passage of Scripture. Thus, as I preach to you I am preaching as a witness to these who have experienced persecution firsthand. And some of you here today, especially those of you from countries where Christians are possibly an oppressed minority, have experienced persecution and thus have much that you could teach me.

So, my intent this morning is to lead us to examine the Word of God, which will not lead us astray, as we examine the subject of persecution and how the oppression of followers of Christ should regard and respond to persecution. Hopefully we will be prepared to respond to it when it comes to us and we will be both fearless and happy, as Maltby said Jesus promised we would be.

As we look at our text we notice first that, as with these apostles, persecution...

➤ **Is optional for us (verses 17-32)**

As we will note in our text, persecution is a choice. The apostles made the choice to accept persecution when they committed themselves to follow, serve and confess Jesus as Lord and Master. We will understand that persecution is optional when we understand, first...

- *The cause of persecution*

Our text tells us that the members of the religious high court “were filled with jealousy” (verse 17) upon seeing how this new movement of followers of Jesus of Nazareth was attracting such attention by preaching, witnessing and performing miracles of healing; and thus the Christian movement was growing at an alarming rate (verses 12-16). To be jealous is to fear losing something to another and also is to wish that the rival person or party might lose what they are gaining at your expense. The leaders of traditional Jewish religion were seeing their influence slip away from the people who were joining up with this new “Jesus movement.” They were now seeking to strike a blow against this threatening movement to stop it in its tracks.

In addition to being dupes of Satan and members of his kingdom of darkness, those today who persecute the church see the Christian gospel and faith as a threat to their way of life and their control upon others. This is why nations still today refuse religious freedom. The good news of Jesus teaches people a new way of life, brings them under a new allegiance and gives them a new set of values and perspective on life. The Sadducees in particular were upset by the Christian movement because they represented an accommodation to the Roman occupying government and these followers of Christ were a threat to their alliance by upsetting the status quo by their higher loyalty to their Lord Jesus.

And now these followers of Jesus were facing...

- *The choice of persecution*

Notice with me that the apostles who were persecuted made this choice, to obey God rather than men (verse 29). Already Peter and John had told this high court, which had issued them a warning to stop their witnessing about Jesus, that they could not help speaking about what they had seen and heard (4:20). Next we see this high court arresting them and the other apostles (5:17f). An angel appeared to them that night, miraculously opened the doors of the jail and then told them to get right back to preaching “the full message of this new life” (5:20).

Now here again we see the choice before the apostles, which was to obey the angel and face further trouble or simply disappear and retreat from this threat and live a secretly “Christian life.” As we see, they chose to obey God rather than man, and were thus arrested again by the angry officials. These apostles had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry and remembered that he had told them that just as he suffered persecution so they would also. Because the world hated him the world would hate his followers also. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:18-20). The Apostle Paul would later relate about his own persecutions and sufferings, noting that “the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact,” he adds, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Only those of us who take our Christian discipleship seriously will ever have to be worried about persecution. Those who are professing Christians only because it’s socially popular, personally advantageous or good for business with the world will not suffer persecution. When and if persecution of Christians takes place in the Western World there will be a purifying of the church because, just as we see in Acts 5:13, nominal Christians will be afraid to join a spiritually powerful church because it will also be a persecuted church. Those who follow the way of the cross, living a godly life of courageous testimony for Jesus Christ, can expect persecution from a world that is hostile to the message of the cross and the risen Savior.

As one commentator remarked, Luke seems to enjoy reporting this humorous incident of the high court arresting the apostles, then reconvening session the next morning to decide what to do to these miscreants, only to discover they mysteriously had escaped through locked prison bars and guards, only to resume their prohibited preaching in the temple courts. The high court and law enforcement look like a bunch of Keystone Cops, while the apostles look like the real authorities in control of the situation. Angrily, the high court reminded the apostles of their violation of their gag order, to which Peter and the others replied, “We must obey God rather than men!” (verse 29, and see I Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, page 116).

As has been pointed out, this verse has been used as a proof-text by willful popes, who defied secular powers of state, and no doubt has been used by many who defy the authority of government (See John B Polhill, *Acts: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC, page 169). We understand that Scripture teaches the need to “render to Caesar (i.e. government) the things that are Caesar’s and also to submit to government authorities as far as possible (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7). Only when we face the choice of having to compromise in our obedience to Jesus as Lord are we justified in civil disobedience.

But, as with these apostles, the time may well come for us to make the choice of persecution in order to faithfully follow the Lord Jesus. And we see also...

- *The consequences of persecution avoidance and acceptance*

The apostles were prepared to accept the consequences of persecution. I imagine that they could not help but think that they might be subjected to the same fate as their Lord—execution by the cruel death of a cross. In fact, they were facing charges that were similar to the ones for which Jesus was crucified and they remembered the warning of Jesus that “No servant is greater than his master” and that they would experience similar hatred from the world (John 15:20).

The only option to persecution acceptance is persecution avoidance, which is...

- ✓ Denial

No doubt Peter also remembered how that, when Jesus was being tried, he had denied his Lord, despite having been warned (Luke 22:31-34; 54-62). Now Peter, restored by the risen Lord and filled with his Spirit, is determined to never again avoid persecution by denying his Lord (John 21:15-19).

The fact remains for us today that our only option to persecution acceptance is persecution avoidance, which is to deny our Lord Jesus. Jesus, in a passage about warnings and encouragements, makes it clear that if we fear the hostile world more than we fear God, we will in fact deny him, and whoever disowns him before men, Jesus says, will be “disowned before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8f).

When we fail to identify ourselves as followers of Jesus, and chose instead to conceal our identity by compromising with the world and living by its standards, we deny Jesus. It’s the way to avoid persecution because the life of blending in with the world and remaining silent instead of speaking up for Jesus is the life that pleases Satan and his fallen world empire. And the sad truth is that there are millions of professing Christians whose lives are no different from the world around them and who would remain silent in the face of ungodliness and indifferent to opposition and challenges to the kingdom of God.

But persecution acceptance is the way of...

- ✓ Witness

If we would join the risen Jesus in his work of kingdom advancement we will be his witnesses in the midst of a hostile world, but yet a world that needs to hear the saving message of Jesus. Those who are willing to accept persecution have an overriding zeal to share the life-changing message of Jesus.

The word translated “jealousy” that filled the high court can also be translated “zeal.” The religious leaders had zeal, a determination to stamp out the Christian movement (See Polhill, above citation, page 165). But the apostles had an even greater zeal to glorify God by serving with Jesus in the advancement of the kingdom through transformed lives.

Notice how the members of the high court accused the apostles of trying to condemn them for the death of Jesus. “You’re trying to get us killed for killing your master!” seemed to be what they were saying (verse 28). But Peter’s reply was to explain to them the way of life and salvation through repentance and forgiveness, saying “We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (verses 31f). Peter was not trying to get his enemies condemned but rather he was trying to get them saved! (See Polhill, page 169, above citation).

The reason we accept persecution is not because we are masochists or have some sort of “martyr complex.” We should have great zeal to see God’s kingdom grow through the transformation of lives. Thus, we join Jesus in his kingdom work of sharing the good news by life and by our words, which are empowered by his Spirit. As Jesus says, “the Holy Spirit will teach (us)” what to say at the moment we are called to witness for him (Luke 12:11f). Persecution is optional and is a choice we gladly make if we have this zeal for Jesus and for joining him in his work of rescuing sinners, including our enemies.

Not only is it optional but persecution...

➤ **Is futile for the Enemy and his kingdom (verses 33-40)**

The high court of the Sanhedrin responded to the good news with even greater hostility and furor, wanting to put Peter and the apostles to death. But once again we see the contrast between the evil intent of God’s enemies and his sovereign power over his enemies. Note first...

- *The intent of the Enemy and his kingdom*

The intent of Satan and his dupes is to destroy the work of the kingdom of God. At first they try to arrest the apostles, and having failed at that, they try to destroy them altogether. Make no mistake about it, Satan, though given the fatal death blow at Calvary, is still alive and kicking. He knows his days are numbered and he’s doing everything possible to try to nullify the advancement of the kingdom of God and the spread of the message of Jesus. That’s true regarding the work of the church in general and your life in particular.

Last Sunday we noted how that Satan’s most effective strategy in attacking the church is to try to get at it from within, as with the sinful hypocrisy of Ananias and

Sapphira (5:1-11). And he will try to get at your life and mine from within and he will do all he can to destroy us by enticing us to live by the flesh instead of the Spirit and to venture about unprotected by the armor of God (See Galatians 5:16-25 and Ephesians 6:10-20). Just because he has lost the battle for our eternal soul does not mean he will not try to destroy our joy, testimony and effectiveness in the Kingdom of God.

Of course he also will attack us from without and try to intimidate us into taking the path of least resistance compromise and of denying the Lord altogether. The evil indeed took some strong measures to try to force the apostles into submission, beginning with the threat of death.

But here we see...

- *The sovereignty of God and his triumphant purposes*

Just as the high court was prepared to issue a death sentence to the apostles, a respected Pharisee (the side of the “aisle” in the court that seemed less hostile to the followers of Christ and even shared some of their views about the supernatural kingdom of God) named Gamaliel spoke up in behalf of the apostles. This grandson of the moderate Rabbi Hillel and teacher of Saul of Tarsus (who obviously didn’t share his moderate views about the followers of Jesus!) advised the high court to let this movement led by the apostles run its course (Lewis Foster, *NIV Study Bible* notes). Gamaliel cited a couple of radical “fly-by-night” movements that stirred excitement but like a flash in the pan soon fizzled out. Then he noted what probably belied his own convictions, that if this movement led by the apostles is of God then nothing on earth can stop it. I think he for one surmised that this movement was of God and he for one didn’t want to risk fighting against God (verses 34-39).

In this intervention by Gamaliel we see the sovereign hand of God at work. God has even Satan on a tether and will allow him to go only so far. Of course we know that at times, even in *The Acts of the Apostles* (as with the killing of Stephen and James in 7:54ff and 12:2), God’s deliverance does not preclude mortal death. Some indeed are called to witness unto death, a fate which happened eventually to many if not most of these apostles. But as for now, God would deliver these apostles until their assignment on earth was completed.

Satan and his dupes, the high court of the Jews, did their best to deter the apostolic witness, but their efforts were futile. Though futile, they were severe. After Gamaliel’s sage advice the court decided to spare their lives but also administer a whipping they would not forget. They ordered a flogging, which was a severe whipping that in some cases resulted in death. This cruel punishment required the victims to strip off their upper clothing and kneel before the administrator, who lashed them 39 times (one less than 40 was a cruel “safeguard” for giving more than bearable) with a “tripled strap of calf hide,” that

cut into the flesh on the back and chest of the victims. But even from this cruel beating the apostles emerged triumphantly over this futility.

And in fact we see from our text that persecution...

➤ **Is *beneficial* to the Kingdom of God (verses 41-42)**

Rather than deterring and discouraging these disciples, the high court saw these apostles rise up from this brutal and humiliating beating with an amazing response. Let's not suppose that while they were being beaten almost to unconsciousness that they were feeling joy. Hebrews speaks of how God uses hardship to discipline and strengthen us. In one of the great understatements of the Bible we read, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

But, as they climbed back up on their feet, these disciples knew the benefit of...

- *The increase of our joy*

The disciples left the council of the Sanhedrin, "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (verse 41). Maybe for us, who have been spared from such suffering and persecution, this is difficult for us to understand. Joy is not an emotion, but rather a discipline. It wasn't the fact that their backs and chests had been whipped raw that they rejoiced. They weren't masochists, but they knew the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they would be, in the words of FR Matlby, "absurdly happy." But the kind of happiness that they experienced was not the kind that depends on fortuitous circumstances. It was the deep joy that comes from sensing the pleasure of God in us and his full presence with us.

This joy that increases with persecution for Jesus' sake is the blessedness that Jesus promised in his beatitudes:

"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" (Matthew 5:10-12).

John Piper, whose ministry emphasizes "Christian hedonism," which he defines as our calling to enjoy God and bask in the pleasures of knowing God in an intimate relationship, notes that these apostles who had just been beaten were

“the most indomitably happy people in the world” (See his sermon at <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper/03-10-91.htm>).

Their joy and our lasting, indomitable joy resides...

✓ In our fellowship with Christ

These disciples probably remembered how their Lord was also scourged with whips before he was forced to carry his cross of crucifixion (John 19:1). They knew something of what Paul referred to as “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings,” for which Paul longed, and which he knew would conform him more to the likeness of his dying Savior (Philippians 3:10). These apostles knew something of what Paul meant by filling up in his flesh “what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). Christ is still suffering for others through his followers, who participate in the fellowship of his sufferings.

As early church father, John Chrysostom said, these apostles delighted more in their sufferings than in what we regard as the good things of life. And then he added, “If someone loves Christ, he understands what I am saying” (pages 68f, *Acts: New Testament volume V, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*).

This joy in suffering is possible by the presence of Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit. As Peter himself later wrote, Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial that you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Thus, these apostles could rejoice because in their suffering they experienced the presence of Jesus in a deeper way and were thus filled with a depth of joy that none other can know. And our text tells us that there was an increase in joy...

✓ In the honor of sharing the dishonor of Christ

The Message paraphrases verse 41 as saying “The apostles went out of the high council overjoyed because they had been given *the honor of being dishonored* on account of the Name” (italics mine). These apostles were learning to glory in the cross of Christ Jesus, by which they were being weaned from the world (Galatians 6:14). The purpose of this humiliating beating was to shame the apostles, and such a humiliating punishment usually was effective in this “shame-honor oriented society” (See Darrell L Bock, page 252, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*). But because they were suffering out of

obedience to Jesus and in the name of Jesus (as his representatives, for the sake of the Name), they were honored.

As one has noted, these apostles “rejoiced because the earthly dishonor was to them actually a high honor. Consequently, the beating did not discourage evangelistic activity; it only propelled it forward with greater intensity (v. 42). This understanding of honor is why some Christians in the early centuries desired martyrdom and many rejoiced in it, though they may not have desired it. When Ignatius of Antioch in Syria was martyred around A.D. 107, he prayed, ‘I thank you, Lord and Master, that you have deemed to honor me by making complete my love for you in that you have bound me with chains of iron to your apostle Paul’ (quoted by Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*, page 223).

This joy in being selected for the honor of martyrdom is not confined to the first and ancient churches. People like the late Iranian Christian leader, Mehdi Dibaj, who was put to death after nine years in prison, wrote shortly before his execution in 1994, “How sweet it will be if one day my life will be sacrificed for him (Jesus Christ)” (see Fernando, above citation).

Thus suffering is beneficial because of...

- *The strengthening of our perseverance*

Notice the last verse of our text, which shows the outcome of persecution as being exactly the opposite of the intent of the persecutors. They had arrested the apostles in an attempt to stop the spread of this Jesus movement (verses 17f). But now we see the outcome in verse 42 was an evermore persistent and determined group of apostles, who “never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

John Stott noted that “The devil has never given up the attempt to destroy the church by force. Under Nero (AD 54-68) Christians were imprisoned and executed, including probably Paul and Peter. Domitian (AD 81-96) oppressed Christians who refused to pay him the divine honors he demanded; under him John was exiled to Patmos. Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180), believing that Christianity was dangerous and immoral, turned a blind eye to severe local outbreaks of mob violence. Then in the third century what had so far been sporadic became systematic. Under Decius (AD 249-251) thousands died, including Fabian, Bishop of Rome, for refusing to sacrifice to the imperial name. The last persecuting emperor before the conversion of Constantine was Diocletian (AD 284-305). He issued four edicts which were intended to stamp out Christianity altogether. He ordered churches to be burned, Scriptures to be confiscated, clergy to be tortured and Christian civil servants to be deprived of their citizenship and, if stubbornly unrepentant, executed.” Stott, whose quote is from the late 1980’s, notes that in some Hindu and Muslim countries, “the church is often harassed.” We know that in many parts of the world, the church is

severely persecuted. “But,” Stott continues, “we not fear for its (the church’s) survival. Tertullian, addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire, cried out: ‘Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust...The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians.’ Or, as Bishop Festo Kivengere said in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda: ‘Without bleeding the church fails to bless.’” Stott concludes, “Persecution will refine the church, but not destroy it. If it leads to prayer and praise, to an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God and of solidarity with Christ in his sufferings, then—however painful—it may even be welcome” (page 119, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: the Message of Acts*).

The persecuted church is a pure church, with no “hangers on” who would dare to join up (5:13). Just as Jesus’ cross appeared to be defeat and was transformed to the greatest triumph the world has ever known, so the church that suffers for Jesus and with Jesus will be triumphant in him.

Conclusion:

I think we can safely agree with FR Maltby that these disciples, at least, were absurdly happy and fearless in the midst of their persecution, which was to continue throughout their lives on earth. Most of the apostles were indeed martyrs, not just in the original sense of the Greek word that meant simply “witness.” They were martyrs in the sense we have come to associate with that word—those who witness unto death. Most gave their lives at the hands of their persecutors and they gave them willingly as their final act of witness for their Lord. And we can assume that, as horrible as their deaths may have been, they were joyful to the very end. And they have been ever since and will be evermore in the joyful presence of the Lord.

Last week Nancy and I were watching CNN international news on television and noticed a by-line that said a man in northern Australia had rescued his wife from a crocodile. Nancy asked me if I would do that for her. “I think so, I said. I hope I would! But I don’t think she was convinced (I looked this incident up on the Internet and noted this man indeed jumped on the back of the 8 foot crocodile that had his wife in its grip, and the croc then swam away and the man rescued his wife, both of them with no life-threatening injuries). None of us can say what we would do in the face of persecution or danger of any kind. But we need to seek the grace and fullness of God’s Spirit that would enable us to be faithful witnesses, even unto suffering and death.

None of us knows what the future holds for us. I had an associate pastor, who was an elderly gentleman serving as our pastor to the hospitalized and homebound people in our former church. Jesse suffered from Parkinson’s disease and with a tremor in his voice he would assure the aged, the sick and the

suffering, “We don’t know what tomorrow holds, but we know who holds tomorrow.” We indeed don’t know what kind of circumstances we might face in this country or in your home country. Some of you here today are from Zimbabwe, and I don’t need to remind you of the turmoil in your country, for example. Many of us here today may find ourselves in places of overt persecution and our calling is that we respond faithfully and victoriously, as did these in the earliest church. Each one of us, Paul says, will face some kind of persecution if we live godly and faithful lives (2 Timothy 3:12). Your godliness and Christ-like spirit and your faithful witness will bring some opposition and resistance in the workplace, the classroom and the community.

My prayer is that when persecution comes our faith will emerge refined and proven genuine from the fire (1 Peter 1:7) and that we will prove to be true martyrs, faithful witnesses, whatever the cost.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What were the reasons behind the persecution of the apostles? What are some causes behind the persecution of Christians today?
2. Paul indicates that persecution is unavoidable for the godly (2 Timothy 3:12). Thus, how can we avoid persecution? But what is the cost of avoiding persecution?
3. What should be the motive behind anyone who might be persecuted as a follower of Jesus?
4. What does the sovereignty of God tell us about the limitation and the outcome of persecution?
5. What was the reason for the joy these apostles experienced following their being flogged?
6. Why is suffering for Jesus to be regarded as an honor?
7. What should be the result of our suffering for Jesus? What effect should persecution have upon our continuing witness?

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