

"The Second Wave of Persecution"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Text: Acts 5:12-42

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IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are traveling through the book of Acts – the book of the Bible that records what happened to the Church after Jesus rose from the dead. We have seen how the Risen Lord Jesus continues to direct his church, meeting with his disciples and teaching them for 40 days after he rose from the dead. He then sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preaches about Jesus' death and resurrection, and 3000 people are baptized and become followers of Jesus. The church meets together, studies the apostle's teachings, prays, celebrates Holy Communion and cares for each other in a very generous manner. God then does a great miracle through Peter and John in the name of Jesus and once again Peter is able to tell about Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead. The church grows to over 5000 believers but Peter and John are put in prison by the Jewish leadership and then are commanded not to speak or preach in Jesus' name any longer. This was the first recorded persecution of Jesus' followers. The church began to pray for God to give them the courage and the boldness to continue to speak in Jesus name despite the threats of the authorities. Last week we heard how God protected his young church from hypocrisy by taking the lives Ananias and Sapphira and exposing their lies. A godly fear fell over the church.

The story continues today in Acts 5:12-16, "The apostles performed many miraculous 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 evil spirits, and all of them were healed." The apostles of Jesus were the clear leaders of Jesus' church in Jerusalem. And God was blessing their work... we are told that many miraculous

sings and wonders were being done by the Apostles. Just as it was with Jesus – now the Apostles were becoming very well known because of the miracles and healings. People were coming to be healed and they would also hear about Jesus. The sick, the demon possessed, all were being healed through the mighty name of Jesus. The church is growing each day as more and more people believe in Jesus. And the reputation of the followers of Jesus is described as 'highly regarded by the people.' They were meeting publicly in the temple for all to see and hear.

But opposition to the church of Jesus was also growing.... Acts 5: 17-18 reads, "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."_The Jewish Religious Leadership, the same leadership that had handed Jesus over to be crucified, was now persecuting the followers of Jesus for the second time. The Apostles who are teaching and doing miracles in Jesus' name are rounded up, arrested, and put in the public jail. It seems as though the plan was to remove those teaching and doing miracles so that the church would simply disperse and die.

Acts 5: 19-26 tells us what happened next... "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 the full message of 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." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. 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."

You can't fight against God. If you kill his son – he raises Him from the dead. If you imprison his followers – he breaks them out. How do you compete with that? If this weren't so serious it would be humorous. Jesus sends an angel to break his apostles out of jail. And they are given orders to go right back to the temple and start preaching and teaching again.

Meanwhile the entire Jewish leadership – a group called the Sanhedrin - is summoned by the high priest to discuss the apostles of Jesus and question them. The full assembly of the elders of Israel was summoned to this meeting so we can understand just how important it was. But when they commanded that the prisoners be brought before them, there were told that there had been a miraculous escape. The doors of the prison were locked, the guards were standing watch outside – but every one of the prisoners had vanished into thin air – or so it seemed.

While they puzzled about this, someone ran into the chambers and brook the news... "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." Who says God doesn't have a sense of humour? Which of us here wouldn't have given a few bucks to see the faces of those leaders? Even more important. Notice that our gracious God has done a miraculous sign so that even these hard hearted leaders might repent and believe. At this the captain of the guard went out and peacefully escorted the apostles back to the court to be questioned by the Sanhedrin. But we are told this was done without incident because the guards were afraid of the reaction of the people.

The story continues... (Acts 5:27-28) "Having brought the apostles, they made them 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." Ironically this particular group was completely guilty of handing Jesus over to be crucified and securing his death with the Roman governor. Yet they don't seem to want to admit it or take responsibility for it. Acts 5:29-32 continues, "Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

A number of points here we can learn from... First: We must obey God rather than men. As a church God has told us to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This we must do regardless of what any authority demands of us. Second point: The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob raised Jesus from the dead. The same God who spoke to Moses. The same God in whose temple we are doing miracles in the name of Jesus. After you had Jesus crucified – God raised him from the dead. Third point: God also exalted Jesus to his right hand and he

is now prince and Saviour giving repentance and forgiveness to his people. Forth point: We are witnesses of these things and so is God's Spirit. Peter's intention is to win them to faith in Jesus. Jesus died on the cross to pay for all sins. Even the sins of those who had a hand in his crucifixion. God loves these men and wants them in his family.

Acts 5:33-39 continues, "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. Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. 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."

Many on the Sanhedrin wanted to put the apostles to death. Kill them, disperse the followers and the movement of Jesus will die. But Gamaliel's counsel wins the day. He gives two examples of charismatic leaders who were killed and his followers eventually died out. He believes that if the apostles of Jesus are just left alone, and their activity was not of God – it will fail. It is Gamaliel's final word that causes us to lean over and raise our eyebrows... "If it is from God..." There are genuine miracles going on here... healings, demons cast out, this unexplainable prison break out... This is looking more and more like God's work – not mans.

Acts 5:40-42 tells us what happened, "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. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." The apostles were whipped 39 times with a rod across their backs and warned again not to speak in the name of Jesus. In Matthew 5:11-12 Jesus said to these same men, "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." And rejoice they did... because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for

Jesus' name. God chose us to suffer for the sake of his Son. God chose us to suffer for the sake of the mission of salvation. Is there a greater calling? A greater honor?