

Acts

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. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Pattern of Persecution

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Acts 5:17-42

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Introduction:

Good morning! With advent behind us, we will be returning now to our series in the book of Acts. To that end, I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 5.

If you decided to jump into the 1-year RMM plan, then you already spent this week reviewing the first four chapters. For the rest of you, I want to provide a very brief “on-ramp.”

Chapters 1-3 describe the birthday, and the first days of the New Testament church. There, we find a people who are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are devoted to the Apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers, and they are bold in their witness. You come out of chapter three thinking that heaven has come to earth!

But, beginning in chapter 4, the temperature begins to shift. The church faces their first taste of persecution. In chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira serve as a reminder that scandal and hypocrisy are going to be an ongoing part of our story. We’re not in heaven yet.

And yet, the church presses on! In the face of threats, and scandals, the gospel is proclaimed, and the church grows! The jealous religious and political leaders watch on with contempt, and we find their response in our passage for this morning. Now, admittedly, we’re taking a “big bite” this morning, but you should notice that there is a great deal of overlap between this story of persecution and the story that we read in chapter 4. That repetition will afford us an opportunity to

pull back a bit and to consider the story more broadly. Look with me now to Acts 5:17-42. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

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.²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside."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. ²⁵ And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people."²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ 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."²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:17-42 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, we're going to pull up from this text and make some big picture observations, but before we can do that we need to make sure that we're seeing what we're meant to see in this story.

Luke highlights here that the religious leaders in Jerusalem are full of jealousy. They're jealous because their power is slipping. They're jealous because this new movement won't stay down. And, it's becoming more and more clear with each passing day that this new movement is not simply Judaism 2.0! BIG CHANGES are happening!

The presence of God which used to be reserved for the holy of holies is now being experienced in the lives of the followers of Jesus. The old priesthood is serving within the inner courts, but God has transformed his people into a KINGDOM of PRIESTS and their ministry is stretching to the outer courts, and even overflowing into the streets! Demons are being cast out! The sick are being healed! Lost men and women are being brought into relationship with the Living God! People are flocking from neighbouring communities to meet with God – *but they're not rushing to the temple* – they're rushing to the Jesus followers!

And the priests and the rulers – those who were leaders under the old covenant – are jealous.

They arrest the Apostles. Again. They leave them to spend a night in jail. Again. They did this already in chapter 4. They assemble the most powerful leaders in Jerusalem the following morning to once and for all put an end to the nonsense. They were ready to KILL the Apostles until one of their leaders – Gamaliel – interjected and spoke better than he knew. Look again at verse 38:

So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ **but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!** (Acts 5:38-39a ESV)

Now, Gamaliel was no sympathizer of the Christians. He was just a seasoned veteran who knew that fads and movements typically collapsed as quickly as they arose. He advised his colleagues to simply ignore the troublemakers because God stands on the side of the truth.

And he was right, but not in the way that he anticipated. God gave His blessing to those who aligned themselves with His Son, and everything changed. The old temple is no longer the place where we meet with God. The old priests no longer serve as the mediators between God and man. Judaism has rejected the Messiah. The old wineskin has burst! God is doing something new! This developing theme will shape the rest of the book of Acts and we will have a great deal more to say about it later. But today, I want to focus on the persecution that came about as a result.

Luke put this story right next to the story in chapter 4 – even though the events are strikingly similar – because he wants us to recognize a new developing pattern: The pattern of persecution.

The Pattern of Persecution

In preparation for this sermon, I sat down with my Bible on Tuesday and read again through the Book of Acts, this time making a note of every chapter that includes persecution. The church is persecuted in chapters 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, and then every chapter from 16-28. I counted 17 distinct and serious attacks. Luke means for us to come away from this book with the understanding that the story of the New Testament church is a story of *ongoing persecution*. If you're not seeing that when you read the New Testament, then you're reading with rose coloured glasses. This is the pattern of our story, and we shouldn't be surprised by that. Jesus told his disciples:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.¹⁷ Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues,¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... and **you will be hated by all** for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:16-18,22 ESV)

It's so important that we wrap our hearts and minds around this. You and I need to recognize that this cultural moment that we are living in – this reprieve from the wrath of the world – is both RARE and TEMPORARY. The tide will turn. The temperature will rise. And, at that time, we will understand what Jesus meant when he taught us that the call to follow him is a call to take up the cross.

Do we believe that? Are we prepared? Luke recorded this pattern to serve as an example – and perhaps, in our context – as a wakeup call. So, let’s lean in and learn. First, Luke wants us to see:

1. The cause of persecution

When Peter and John were arrested in chapter 4, do you remember what the Sanhedrin prohibited? They commanded the Apostles to stop speaking about Jesus. And Peter responded:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19b-20 ESV)

True to his word, Peter and the rest of the Apostles carried on with their preaching the very next day. We don’t know how much time elapsed between the scene in Acts 4 and our scene this morning, but it likely wasn’t much more than a week. They were arrested again, and the Sanhedrin fumed:

“**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.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “**We must obey God rather than men.** (Acts 5:28-29 ESV)

That right there – that declaration of an authority that *supersedes* the authority of the Sanhedrin – is the reason why the church in Jerusalem came under persecution. And it’s the reason why EVERY church will inevitably come under persecution.

Every leader – every government – every king whose name is not Jesus – is tainted in one shape or form by sin. And that means, there will inevitably come a day when the rulers who are over us will make a demand that we cannot obey as followers of Jesus. A demand like:

You must celebrate this sin.

You must not share your gospel.

You must edit your Bible to fit with our cultural convictions.

In that moment, we will need to say “no.” And that will provoke a response. Persecution is initiated when authorities collide and, brothers and sisters, if you are paying any attention at all then you can see that we are on course for a MASSIVE collision. The day is fast upon us when we will be forced to clearly declare a side – and that declaration will come at a great cost.

It could come in the form of fines. It could come in the form of public humiliation and scrutiny. It could come in the form of imprisonment as we see here.

Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church in China was sentenced to 9 years in prison for refusing to submit to his government’s demand that he distort the gospel. In advance of his arrest, he wrote:

"I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that **there is an authority higher than their authority**, and that there is a freedom that they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.”¹

That’s the crux of the issue. Persecution begins when authorities collide, and that collision is fast approaching. So, how do we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead? That leads to the second lesson we learn in this passage:

2. The preparation for persecution

I was struck by the fact that the preparation that we see modelled in the book of Acts is not the preparation that we would instinctively gravitate towards. Flip back a page in your Bible Acts 4:23-24. What did the Apostles do when they were first confronted with the oncoming persecution? We read:

¹ <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/read-pastor-wang-yis-powerful-letter-to-authorities-written-15-months-before-9-year-sentence/> Accessed January 5, 2023.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, **they lifted their voices together to God** (Acts 4:23-24a ESV)

Following the first episode of persecution, the church responded – not with a petition or a protest – but with a prayer meeting! They strengthened their faith as they declared together that God is in control. They lifted up their concerns, and they pleaded with the Lord for the boldness to carry on with their assignment even in the midst of adversity. And God answered their prayers! Luke intends for us to see that the boldness we see here in chapter 5 is the answer to the prayer request in chapter 4.

And this wasn't a one-time response! Flip ahead to the episode of persecution in chapter 12. Look at verse 5:

So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church**. (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Once again, the church's response to persecution was to come together in corporate prayer. Verse 12 tells us that many were praying late into the night! They knew where their help came from, and they were faithful in asking for it!

And we see this again in chapter 16 where Paul and Silas are now imprisoned. Look at verse 25:

About midnight **Paul and Silas were praying** and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25 ESV)

The people IN prison are praying, and the people OUTSIDE of prison are praying. This is the consistent pattern. So, how do we prepare for persecution? We learn how to pray! And – more specifically – we learn how to pray TOGETHER!

Now, someone will want to object: “Surely there's more that we must do to prepare, pastor! Are you saying that there's no place for peaceful protest? Are you saying we shouldn't raise up

Christian lawyers and politicians so as to be salt and light in the culture? Are you saying that we shouldn't set aside savings for potential legal fees?"

No. I'm not saying that. There are many wise things that we should be considering in the years and decades ahead. Absolutely.

But here's what I AM saying: As the New Testament authors prepare us for the trials that lie ahead, they don't say a lick about savings or politics, but they DO consistently and emphatically point us to the necessity of prayer. Therefore, if you find yourself filled with passion for politics and reform, but you can't remember the last time that you've stepped foot into a corporate prayer meeting, then I can tell you with biblical authority that your priorities are out of order! We need to learn this lesson! The battle before us is a spiritual fight! And it will be spiritually won!

Some of you need this challenge, so listen closely and decide if it's you. I know that you're busy with your job, and I know that you feel like you can't afford to fit one more thing into your life, but I need you to see that – with the road that lies ahead – you can't afford NOT to pray. You need to learn how to pray in community. We've tried the early morning meeting to accommodate you. We've tried the evening meeting. We've tried the Sunday morning before church meeting. We've tried the ZOOM meeting. So, this is me asking: What do we need to put in place to equip and mobilize you for corporate prayer? Tell me what will work, and I'm in. Because, if I'm reading the book of Acts correctly, we cannot be the church who enters a season of persecution without first learning to pray.

The lessons that we've learned thus far should be triggering an alarm in your heart, and that's appropriate. But that alarm should not be anxiety because, the next thing we see in this pattern is:

3. The limitation of persecution

The Sanhedrin assembled and slowly took their seats of honor as they mixed and mingled with one another. With great pomp and prestige, they motioned for the guard to collect their lowly prisoners. But the guard came back empty handed because:

during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out (Acts 5:19 ESV)

With all of their power and influence – with their prison and their guards – they couldn't keep the Apostles in prison for a SECOND longer than God had ordained. We will see it again when the prison doors miraculously open in chapter 12! And then again in chapter 16!

Here's the lesson: Sometimes we will feel powerless. Sometimes we will feel like the authorities who are over us are free to do whatever they please. But they are NOT! We see here that GOD HOLDS THE KEYS! He can open the prison door whenever He so pleases!

Yet, we also need to wrestle with the fact that, sometimes, He leaves the prison door shut. In Acts 21, the Apostle Paul is imprisoned, and when the book of Acts ends 7 chapters later, Paul is still behind those bars.

As I meditated on our passage for this week, I found myself returning again and again to this detail. I could have written the whole sermon around this question: Why is it that some prison doors open, while others remain shut? Why is it that – as we pray for the persecuted church – some believers are released and go on to see revival, while others are beheaded?

From our limited vantage point, it's often hard for us to make sense of what God is up to.

Through his imprisonment, Paul was given the opportunity to share the gospel with inmates, guards and politicians that he never would have spoken with otherwise. Through his imprisonment, this tenaciously productive brother was slowed down to a halt, and he used that time to write Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus! Praise God that the prison door didn't swing open in Paul's case!

The lesson here – and it is an enormously important lesson – is that over and above whoever may be administering our persecution there is a God who is sovereign over it all. He is the Creator and

Sustainer of everyone and everything. He is eternal, infinite, and unchangeable in His power and perfection, goodness and glory, wisdom, justice and truth. Nothing happens except through Him and by His will. All persecution is limited by the hand of our sovereign God. He is in control.

Therefore:

do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

Finally, and most jarringly, this story teaches us about:

4. The privilege of persecution

Now, I want to qualify that before I go any further. I'm NOT saying that we should go out looking for a beating. In 1 Peter we are warned that, sometimes, we invite persecution upon ourselves by behaving like jerks, and no good comes from that. And, neither am I saying that we should go out looking for righteous suffering – as if we should look longingly at the persecuted church and say, “I wish that was us.” No! Even the Apostle Paul said:

Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—**except for these chains.** (Acts 26:29 ESV)

Paul rejoiced in his persecution because he identified God's goodness in it, but he certainly didn't want people to misunderstand him as glorifying prison.

Persecution is awful and difficult. And yet, as we see in this story, it is a tremendous privilege.

Upon receiving a beating at the hands of the Sanhedrin – a beating that would have likely included 39 lashes – just one short of a death sentence – we read:

Then they left the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.**⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:41-42 ESV)

They rejoiced! They would have been in agony! Their robes would have been bloodied! But, with arms draped over whomever was helping them to walk away from the council, they gave thanks.

And that tells me that these disciples were paying attention when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember what Jesus said:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² **Rejoice and be glad**, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12 ESV)

Do you want to be able to rejoice in the midst of persecution? Do you want to be able to sing through the storm of adversity? You can ONLY live this out if you deep-down-in-the-fibre-of-your-being BELIEVE the gloriously good news of the gospel!

Jesus took your sin and paid for it on the cross. He has opened the door for everyone who repents and believes in him to join him in glory. Eternal life in the presence of God in the new heavens and the new earth is YOURS! Life is short and eternity is LONG and people who believe that respond differently to persecution.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted.” Why? “Because YOURS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN!”

Jesus said, “Rejoice and be glad when others revile you on my account.” Why?

“Because GREAT IS YOUR REWARD IN HEAVEN!”

You can only live this out if you believe that you possess a treasure that no earthly trial can touch!

But, if you don't, then you will find that your heart guards the comforts and the pleasures of this world like a dog guards it's dinner dish. Anytime your comfort or your pleasure is threatened you will lash out and bear your teeth.

Do you want to find out if you are more committed to treasure in heaven than you are to treasure on earth? Then watch and assess how you respond whenever your earthly treasure is threatened. Your money. Your freedom. Your health. Your family. Do you give yourself permission to sin? Do you grumble and complain? Do you punch back? G. Campbell Morgan is right when he writes:

The Church's gravest danger has never been created by opposition. When she has been opposed and persecuted she has been pure and strong. Never until she was patronized did she become weak.²

I want to conclude with a word to the discouraged. If you're anything like me, perhaps you walk away from a story like this wondering, "God, will I really have the kind of faith that can stand when that day comes? I don't think I have what it takes..."

If that's you, I don't want to let you off the hook entirely. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is revealing to you that you have some weaknesses that need to be bolstered. Perhaps you need to join that prayer meeting. Perhaps you need to repent for making an idol of the things of this world. But, having done all of that, you may still fear that you are not ready. Corrie Ten Boom was a woman who demonstrated what it is to rejoice in persecution, but when she was a girl she feared that she didn't possess the strength. Her father gave her advice that I'd like to leave you with this morning:

"Father sat down on the edge of the narrow bed. "Corrie," he began gently, "when you and I go to Amsterdam-when do I give you your ticket?"

I sniffed a few times, considering this.

"Why, just before we get on the train."

"Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things, too.

Don't run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need-just in time."³

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 165.

³ As cited in: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/492554-father-sat-down-on-the-edge-of-the-narrow-bed> Accessed January 6, 2023.

Prepare. Pray. But then, rest in the knowledge that your heavenly Father will give you what you need when you need it. In chapter 4, the Apostles recognized that they needed to plead with God for boldness. Let's follow their example right now.