

May 23, 2021  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Acts  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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## IT IS FUTILE TO OPPOSE GOD

### Acts 5:22-42

The title of our message seems to be a reality that Satan just can't come to grips with. The "anointed cherub," the chief of God's created angelic beings, has been opposed to God since the day he said in his heart, *"I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High"* (Isaiah 14:13-14).

A sad truth is that in many ways it appears that Lucifer, Satan has succeeded in making himself like the Most High and has often won the conflict as he has opposed God. After all, at the very outset of human history Satan succeeded in ruining the perfect creation with sin. He succeeded in getting Adam and Eve kicked out of Eden. He succeeded in getting Cain to kill Abel, and to sink all humanity so deeply in sin that God destroyed the entire human race except for Noah and family. And the saga continues. For all intents and purposes, it really does look like Satan is winning nearly every battle from my vantage point of life.

But I still remember a short but very important promise from God. *"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them [the spirits of antichrist], for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4). If you love Christ, if you are His follower, you have experienced His power in you to successfully fight the powers of sin and Satan. The powers of darkness are able to do only what God allows them to do during this period of human history. The day of judgment is coming when it will be very obvious that it is futile to oppose God.

Even in this life we see many examples of the futility of fighting against God. That truth was manifested abundantly in the early Church. Those early days were replete with miracle after miracle. God provided signs and wonders to call attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the work done in Jesus' name. The honorable man named Gamaliel was exactly right to advise his peers to exercise caution regarding their responses to the Lord's messengers. He was right to say that if this was truly, actually God's work, they would be beating themselves up to resist it.

Such is the work of God in your life and my life. Satan is not the winner. He is not all-powerful. If you are a Christian, God has the desire to make you more and more like Himself. To fight against Him is futile. Better to know Him, learn to trust Him, and submit to His plan for you.

### An Embarrassing Situation (vv.22-26).

Our text begins by telling us how the very important authorities in Jerusalem were greatly perplexed (vv.22-24). They had to face a strange but inexplicable reality. *But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside"* (vv.22-23).

So who were the prisoners they were looking for? It is necessary for us to go back and review the information from our previous study (5:12-21). In the early part of the chapter, we learned how the Lord was doing many mighty works in order to call attention to the gospel (vv.12-16). The religious rulers fell into a jealous rage and arrested the apostles (vv.17-18). We are not sure how many apostles were arrested this time. The previous arrest involved only Peter and John. Well, during the night, God sent one of His angel messengers to release the apostles from prison who also instructed them to go back and preach at the temple (vv.18-20). The apostles obeyed the angel right away and we find them in the temple preaching early in the morning (v.21a).

That brings us back to our text where we found the authorities looking for absent prisoners. They were the representatives of the most important religious leaders in Jerusalem. They were officials

sent to retrieve the prisoners. But the official people had to return to their authorities with bad news. The prison was securely locked. The guards were standing at the doors like nothing had happened. But the imprisoned apostles were not imprisoned – they were gone.

It is pointless for us to try to explain this miracle in human terms. The apostles were not escape artists. They were probably more amazed than the officers who did not see the angel. In some miraculous way the angel delivered the apostles through the locked doors or through the wall or out the ceiling. God can do that whenever He chooses. Our dear persecuted brothers and sisters today know that to be true but still languish in prisons around the world.

That very confusing scenario led to further confusion about what would be. *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 (v.24).* This is such a common situation. Some people were supposed to be in control of circumstances. The captain of the temple was over the temple guard who maintained peace at the temple. He should have known what was going on. Which brings up the question, “If the temple was the house of God, why were armed guards necessary to maintain peace?” The answer to that question is, “Satan, author and stimulant to sin, opposes God at every turn.”

Then there were the chief priests who assigned themselves to keep religion under control. They were fighting (and losing) a very difficult battle at this point. They were convinced that they were responsible to maintain peace with Rome. They thought it was their job to keep Israel in the good graces of the pagan Romans. On one hand, they used all the methods and means of human wisdom to keep especially the people in Jerusalem between the ditches. On the other hand, they tipped their hats to the scribes and Pharisees who were all about the enforcement of religious laws. It was stressful balance to maintain.

And now they were working against supernatural odds. They had no explanation for what was taking place seemingly every day. Regularly some kind of miracle was happening that was beyond the scope of their control. It is so sad that they could not admit that this was God trying to get their attention. God does not regularly produce miracles in our lives, but He does regularly try to get our attention.

In light of the missing preachers, the authorities quickly decided to round up the rule-breakers (vv.25-26). Their decision came in response to someone who pointed out their failure. *And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people” (v.25).* Someone was alert to current events. This person must have walked by Solomon’s porch and recognized the apostles, who reportedly had been jailed. Which is interesting because it seems like before the miracle of tongues at the coming of the Holy Spirit, the apostles just kind of blended in with the crowds. In contrast, it does seem that by this point Peter and John especially were easily recognized.

This someone also knew that the authorities had put the messengers in prison. There is no indication whether the person agreed or disagreed with the authorities. But, as is often the case in this age, the person who Satan can use to trouble Christ’s messengers is usually at hand ready to be used. And this someone also recognized that the apostles were teaching.

Obviously, freedom of religion combined with freedom of speech was about as common in Jerusalem as it is on American university campuses today. Satan is having a heyday. It really seems like opposition to God is at an all-time high in our culture. There is always someone ready to step up and say, “You can’t say that.” Then they organize a protest and shut down the messenger of the gospel.

At least the people who thought they were in charge learned where their wayward prisoners were. But getting them back was going to be an issue because the authorities feared the people. *Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people (v.26).* The powerful authorities in Jerusalem had to be very careful how they handled the situation. They were driven by jealous anger (5:17). But they had to contain their emotions and quietly, peacefully bring the gospel preachers back into custody.

The implication was that the preachers quietly submitted and did not resist arrest. This raises a couple of questions. Why would the people have stoned the authorities? That doesn’t seem like the right response for people who had confessed their sins and been filled with the Holy Spirit. Hopefully, it is doubtful that the new Christians would have rioted. But not everyone in the crowd were Christians.

There is no indication that the multitudes of people being healed and people bringing friends and family to be healed were particularly “God-fearing.” Jesus provided healing for a lot of people who did not believe Him or even thank Him. A riot could have ensued because it looked like the authorities were taking away a good health plan.

Another question might be, “Why would the apostles go peacefully?” Would you? Would I? Jesus had promised that they would be taken before religious and civil authorities. *“And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say” (Luke 12:11).* Jesus had taught them (even by His example) to submit to authorities. They were confident that God was in control and could then accompany the authorities back to the council.

### **A Charge and an Answer (vv.27-33).**

Once the apostles were returned to the council, the man in charge reviewed the rule (vv.27-28). God’s messengers were set before the important man. *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them (v.27).*

Just as Jesus had promised they were brought to the council. This was the council that had condemned Jesus to death and delivered Him up to the Roman authorities to be crucified. That had been probably less than two months earlier. The high priest was a notoriously powerful man, but not a God-fearing man.

Listen to his accusation. He said, *“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” (v.28).* It is true that the authorities had previously strictly charged the apostles to stop teaching **in this name**. Luke told us, *they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (4:18).*

In response to that strict charge, the preachers shared the news with other Christians and then lifted the situation up into the presence of God through prayer. *And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who*

*through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ – for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (4:24-29).*

Having praised God and prayed for God to consider the authorities’ threats, the messengers went back out and, according to their accusers, *filled Jerusalem with this teaching*. Why did the apostles disobey their authorities, and why did they make them feel bad by insinuating that they were responsible for Christ’s death? Well, in the first place, the preachers did not insinuate the leaders’ guilt. They plainly stated that the rulers were guilty of killing God the Son. *“Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well” (Acts 4:10).* And in case the rulers didn’t get it, Peter was about to tell them again (v.30).

Also, Peter was about to explain again why they had to disobey the rulers’ rules. It was all a matter of obeying God’s rules, which Peter and the other messengers explained succinctly. They had to obey God. *But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men” (v.29).* They made it clear that God is THE authority and we must obey God. If that means we must disobey human authority who is in conflict with God – so be it.

So then where is the real conflict? The argument in verses 30-32 identify that. *“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” (vv.30-32).*

Follow the argument. “You killed Jesus (whom we preach) but God raised Him from death” (v.30). “God exalted the risen Jesus to the position of authority to be Leader and Savior” (v.31). “God

exalted Jesus to give repentance to the nation of Israel (if they would confess their sins)” (v.31). “God exalted Jesus to give forgiveness of sins” (v.31). “We are eye-witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, exaltation, repentance and forgiveness of sins” (v.32). “And so is the Holy Spirit who all of us forgiven people possess” (v.32). “Therefore, we must preach this message.”

So why is the same message not important to us? Is it because everyone has already heard? They have not. Is it because too many people reject it? They always have. Is it because authorities forbid us? No. Is it because we don’t have the Holy Spirit? Hmmm.

The important people did not respond well to the messengers’ clear explanation of God’s rule for them. *When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them* (v.33). When the rulers heard Peter’s explanation of the gospel of Jesus, the work of God, they were cut very deeply. The KJV says, “They were cut to the heart” because the basic meaning of the Greek word is “sawn in two.” The word came to describe being very angry. “Enraged” is a good translation. The word only occurs in the New Testament one other time where it describes the reaction of this same council when Stephen also reminded them that they were the ones who killed Jesus.

This time (the event in our text) the rulers were so enraged they wanted to kill the preachers. A few days later when they reacted the same way toward Stephen, they did kill him! How could that happen to God’s servants? Obviously, God is missing in action, unconcerned or unable to control the circumstances. Apparently, Satan and sin do oppose God successfully. Surely it is not God’s will for His redeemed people to suffer attacks by sinners, is it? Actually it is as Paul explained later. *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church* (Colossians 1:24).

### **Sage Advice (vv.34-42).**

Everyone on the council did not fly into a rage at the apostles’ explanation of God’s rule. A respected man gave a very instructive illustration (vv.34-37). He was a teacher of the law and should have been able to identify God’s work. *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* (v.34).

The man was a Pharisee, one who was strict about the laws that supposedly helped people keep God’s law. He was an official teacher of that law like Nicodemus a ruler of the Jews and “the teacher in Israel” as Jesus called him. This man, Gamaliel, was esteemed highly by all the people. He had credibility when he stood up and ordered the dismissal of the preachers. Seems odd he would have so much authority that he (not being high priest) could stand and dismiss the “accused” from the courtroom. But we must remember that God was at work even in this situation with a man who likely was not born again but very religious.

Having gained the council’s attention, the teacher proceeded to give a history lesson. He reminded the esteemed leaders about this guy from the past, Theudas, who claimed to be somebody (v.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”* (v.36). In light of the lack of evidence, we conclude that this Theudas fellow was generally unknown in Roman and Jewish history. According to Gamaliel he had a following of a mere 400, which was very small compared to the size of the Church already. Ultimately, the guy was killed and his revolt ended.

Then there was this other fellow who Gamaliel mentioned, Judas the Galilean who also gained followers (v.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”* (v.37). We do have information about this rebel. He led a revolt against the tax Governor Quirinius ordered (A.D. 6). He died and his followers scattered.

Therefore, the honorable man warned that the council members should be careful based on historical evidence. *And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.”* (v.35). Granted, the two illustrations were just two examples of the many insurrections in Israel the historian Josephus referred to. However, in Gamaliel’s thinking this “Jesus” movement would also die out. Unless, of course, it was the legitimate work of God.

That truth came out when the respected man made the application to current events (vv.38-42). He said, “*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; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!*” (vv.38-39). If it was the work of men, if the uprising was about a failed leader named Jesus, it wouldn’t last. On the other hand, if it really was the work of God as the messengers claimed, no group of mere men would be able to stop it. Worse, you will be found opposing God! That is never successful ultimately.

The council’s response reveals their stubborn hearts against God. *So they took his advice, 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* (vv.41b-40). On one hand, they took Gamaliel’s advice – for the most part. On the other hand, they beat the apostles who were doing the work of God! They threatened them again and told them to stop preaching about Jesus. In doing this, they were opposing God and thinking they could control God’s work! The council members demonstrated how foolish humans who think they are powerful can be.

The messengers’ response was quite different from the council members’ response. *Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ* (vv.41-42). They were rejoicing for the opportunity to fill up the suffering of Christ. They rejoiced to be worthy to suffer for Him who suffered so much for us. And much to the leaders’ chagrin, *They did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ* (v.42).

How much are we like the early messengers of the Church? We are so easily dissuaded and deterred from telling the Good News. We are so easily discouraged while doing God’s work. We are so easily fearful as we look at the circumstances of our sinful world. We so easily forget that God is in control and anyone who opposes Him will ultimately fail. We need lessons like this to remind us to trust God implicitly.