

...of Cameroon. We are the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are blessed by how God proclaims the gospel of grace through you. Thank you so much. Indeed, the Lord is at work.

Let's look then together at the book of Acts, Chapter 5, as we see the disciples going where the Lord sent them to go. And that he and they were going to bring the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ on the mountain or in the valley, even in the face of persecution. What exactly is the fuel for the Christian in the midst of persecution and trial, against those who would rise up against the gospel. What is the response of the Christian. It is one of courage, it is one of faithfulness, it is one of boldness with the message of the gospel of Christ. But what powers, what fuels the Christian for that. We learn it from the lips of the disciples---it is Christ, our leader and our Savior. He is the only fuel for the Christian and for the church with the gospel in the face of persecution.

Let's look at Acts Chapter 5. I will begin reading in verse 17 and I will read to verse 42, but in the process of doing so, I will not be going through every verse, but will be covering the majority of this passage, and will be particularly highlighting the central section of the defense that they are giving for why they are preaching Christ. Hear now the word of God.

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. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." 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. 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." 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. And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching 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.

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 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." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 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."

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. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 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. 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. 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!"

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. 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 that the Christ is Jesus.

This is the one word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Come, Lord Jesus. Send your church where you want us to go, whether it be to the mountain or down to the valley. Give us the message of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the living and reigning Christ. Make us a people who have been transformed by this Gospel, who are then fueled by Christ as Leader and Savior, to go where you will send us. Help us, O Lord. Now teach us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As we look at this passage together in these verses, what we're going to do is I'm going to take these verses and see you'll them in your outline---I've split them into three points. First, the disrupting of the status quo in verses 17-26, which I have read. The disciples and the entire apostles---this is no longer just Peter and John who have been called to testimony and to give reason why they are preaching what they are preaching---all the apostles have now been gathered to give an account. Because what they are doing through their work is disrupting the status quo of the leaders of Israel.

Secondly, it is why they were doing it. They were doing this because Jesus is both Leader and Savior. It is that phrase and what it means for the Church of Jesus Christ and what it meant for the apostles that can only lead to what we read in verses 41 and 42, and that is rejoicing in the midst of persecution. May the Lord enable us to see in his Word and give us the power and the strength to not be afraid of man, but to fear the Lord and to go where he will send us with the only word, the gospel of Christ which the church is been given.

Let's look together at his Word. The disrupting of the status quo. So what were the apostles doing that caused so much trouble? What we see is a mounting tension that has been rising for at least a couple of chapters now. The Holy Spirit has come on the apostles and all who were gathered there in that room, numbering about a hundred and twenty, and so they have now been testifying to Jesus Christ and the gospel of Christ. When called to account earlier on, as we looked at a few weeks ago, their testimony was straightforward. They did not harass the leaders. They simply bore truth and bore witness to what they had seen---that Jesus Christ was crucified and was raised on the third day and is now reigning. And this is the gospel that they are preaching. And by the power of the Spirit they are bringing healing.

So what is disrupting and causing so much problem? It's that they are preaching and they are healing. They are doing the work of the Lord. That doesn't seem very interesting, per se. It is because we need to understand the status quo into which they were ministering. Because now not only have Peter and John been called for, all the apostles have. And what we learn just prior to this passage is that the Holy Spirit had so filled Peter and the apostles, that those were seeking healing, all they wanted to do was simply to bring a sick person even into the shadow of Peter's presence as he walked by. And merely the shadow of his presence brought forth healing. The Spirit was on the move. And so began their ministry.

We know that they were preaching daily in the temple courts. They were preaching throughout Jerusalem house to house, which is what they return to at the end of the passage. What was it that they were preaching? Jesus Christ. And what is interesting is it wasn't just Jesus Christ who died on a cross, but Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead. This was a problem for the Jewish leaders. Because their power was all invested in their position. Their position was, and particularly the Sadducees which made up the Sanhedrin.... Who was the Sanhedrin? The Sanhedrin was a group of very holy, righteous Jewish men who were called to make sure that the nation of Israel was following the law of God and that the religious worship at the temple was done so according to the law of God. And so now these men are coming in, and they are preaching---number one, that God sent his Son, that Son was Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, and then he was raised by that Father---and that is the problem. The healing is

simply an outpouring of the Spirit, what God was doing in bringing forth the kingdom through Christ. You see, for the Sanhedrin, they did not believe in resurrection---though some of the Pharisees did, not all Pharisees were a part of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin particularly had a problem with the doctrine of resurrection. So here they are, not only preaching resurrection, they're preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

Listen to what they say. When called forth to account...and isn't it interesting---I was talking with someone between services---isn't it interesting that none of the Sanhedrin ask, oh, by the way, how did you do that whole prison break thing? I would ask that. They don't ask that. So the whole fact that they got out of jail without going through the guards, that doesn't seem to be an issue. What's the issue? They're preaching Christ. That's the issue. They then say these words to the question, we told you not to preach. And this is their answer, verse 278. "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles all answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'

You see, that statement in and of itself was not the problem. All of the Sanhedrin would agree you obey God before you obey man. If man's laws contradict God's laws, then you follow God's ways. That wasn't the issue. It's the next statement. Verse 30. "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree." That sentence is directly opposing so many of the things that the Sanhedrin stood for. Number one: that God spoke through his prophets, and if you say something about God that is not true, according to the book of Deuteronomy you will lose your life. Which is why the Sanhedrin wanted to take the lives of these apostles, because they were claiming in God's name that Jesus was God's Son, whom they crucified, and that God raised from the dead.

But more than that, they say something which particularly would have gotten to the heart of the Sanhedrin's anger. This phrase: 'The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging on a tree,' again, hearkening back to Deuteronomy. Here's what they're saying. This was God's son---whom you crucified, by doing so on a tree---that God of our fathers raised him from the dead. Well, hanging someone on a tree meant not that you were just scorning them, it's that God saw them as cursed. So they're saying: You, the Sanhedrin, you scorned Jesus, you do not see him as God's son. You crucified him on the tree. And when they say that, not only did you scorn him, God scorned him. And oh, guess what, that God of our fathers raised him from the dead. That was blasphemous. That was a one-way ticket to execution. Because the apostles were upsetting the status quo.

But isn't it interesting and isn't it instructive for us, as those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ and live in this country---isn't it interesting in our day so much attention seems to be given to the leaders of our country. Now hang with me for a moment. Notice the apostles did not first go to the Sanhedrin, to the leaders. They only go to the leaders when the leaders' status quo was upset and they call them to account. Where were the apostles? They were in the streets. They were in people's houses. They were ministering to the people in their neighborhoods. They were ministering---may I bring this to the present---they were ministering to the people in their cubicles next to them. They were ministering to the people on the street corners. They were meeting with those who were broken and who were needy with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And only when that upset the status quo of the leaders did they address the leaders.

Now isn't it interesting in our day it often seems a lot of the energy of much of Christendom seems to be focused not on the streets, but on the power brokers in Washington. Hang with me. I recognize that I'm thirty miles north of Washington DC, but I will guess that like me, many of you receive mailings that try to gin up a lot of emotion and a lot of passion among Christians. They say, do you see, Christian, your freedoms are being stamped out. Do you see it? So much passion and energy wants to direct our attention and focus it on the powerbrokers there. What that tells me is that it's very easy for Christians to get swept up in the culture. Watch. When a culture is devolving, when it's losing its moral compass, its

moral center, there is no longer---whether you are a liberal or a conservative---there's no one who now holds the voice of influence. And when there is no longer one voice of influence, where do Americans often turn to pull the last lever of influence? Politics. That's where we turn. Because we think that preaching the old, old story isn't enough.

My friends, may this testimony of the apostles remind us that the church's mightiest sword is not found on Capitol Hill, is not found in the White House, is not found at the Supreme Court. It is found alone in the pages of a very old book. And to administer the gospel of Christ in word and deed with our neighbors---and let me say it is not lost on me that as I look across this room this morning and I see the diverse faces, diverse traditions from around the world all worshiping one God and one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ---you want to disrupt the status quo in the United States? Let the love of God in Christ bring Christians together regardless of color, regardless of tradition, to worship Christ. That will upset the status quo.

But let me say, if you think I'm saying the Christian should not be involved in politics, don't go there. I want to say to you, wherever God has you---whether you are serving at a job at Banana Republic, working at a Starbucks, or working in a diner or working for a defense contractor or working on Capitol Hill or working for someone in the White House---regardless of where God has you---Christian, get involved and engage with what's going on in places like Washington, Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles and Chicago. Get involved with what the world is doing, but do so with the gospel of Christ and where God has gifted you. Let me say that the statistics will bear this out. Presbyterians are the largest percentage of those who have held the vice presidency of the United States, and they're second only to Episcopalians in holding the presidency of the United States. So am I saying that Presbyterian should not be involved in politics? Absolutely not. Go, do so, according to God's calling on your life and his gifting you. But let us not be fooled. A Christian president, a Christian Congress, a Christian Supreme Court will not usher forth the kingdom of God. Only Christ and the gospel of Christ changing one heart at a time. We can do both. Let's not replace the one for the most important.

Secondly, in disrupting the status quo---they bring them before the Sanhedrin, they ask them what they are doing. They proclaim this is what you have done, but they don't stop there. They don't just say, by the way, you're really bad leaders. You crucified my Savior! They don't do that. They give them the gospel. And here is where we learn what gives the boldness to the disciples? What gives it to them? Christ, our Leader and Savior. This is what they say, versus 30. "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him..." [verse 31] ... "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." And after the breath of saying this is what you have done, God in Christ invites you to receive forgiveness of sins by way of repentance. They're preaching the gospel to the leaders.

But in doing so they use this phrase: God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior. First that word 'leader.' That word 'leader' is a Greek word called *archegos*, which literally can be translated as Prince, leader, champion, author, finisher, or foundation, if you will. It appears three times in the New Testament. First is in Acts 3:15 where Peter preaches and he says, "And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name---by faith in his name---has made this man strong, whom you see and know." Speaking about, it's only through Christ that this man was healed. So they use that as this one, author. It's used again in Hebrews Chapter 12, where the a preacher of Hebrews says this: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus [and this is---Pastor Flora, he preached on this just a couple of weeks ago]---looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." Founder, leader, author, champion.

Do we want leaders? Do we want champions? Yes, we do. This word, *archegos*, translated here as leader, often is used by the word that we use as leader but we often mean champion. We love leaders,

do we not. This country loves leaders. But it used to be that we understood leaders as valorous combatants, those who led the fight, those who were champions for the cause. But now we settle for the really great champion athlete, the leader who shows more giftedness and the ability to rise above everybody else and be successful. He's got it together. She's got it all wrapped up. Look at the gifts, look at the abilities. She's made it, he's made it. And in the champion in the place of sports---it's no longer just team, it's that star player who can change everything. But we're also at the same time...we love leaders. We love great champions. But there's also a part of us, too, in our age, who's also quite jaded by the idea of having great leaders and having great champions, are we not? Because when we hear great leaders, we see them doing something great, there's a part of us, living in the United States, that say, yeah, but I wonder how he or she really got there. Who did they step? Who did they cheat? Yeah, I see that great athlete, and as a cyclist, every time I see a guy win a race I now think...performance-enhancing drugs? Baseball players, football players? We love champions. We love leaders. But we're also jaded because we're like, yeah, but how? We hunger for leaders, do we not. We hunger for someone to do something that just stands out from the crowd. We look at it and we say, that's it. That's what brings tears to our eyes.

It happened to me, pathetically, on the Today Show on Friday, I'm not afraid to admit. A high schooler, a senior high schooler, for his senior prom invited his great-grandmother as his date. Because---I don't know if she had a prom back then, but either way, she was not able to go to the prom. He took her with him. They went to her favorite restaurant, Bob Evans. And he had her home by nine. They had video of him, you know, dancing with her. I mean, you know, pretty slow. But you look at that and you go aaaah. That's it! That's it. I'm sitting there and I'm going over to the TV, I'm making sure it's recorded because I want Kate and Caroline to see it. I'm, like, tearing up like a baby. Why? Because in all of us there is a desire to see someone lead. Someone champion. It's in us.

But the problem is our human leaders and human champions fail us. Where do we find the ultimate champion, the ultimate leader? It is Christ, and that is precisely what they meant. He is the author of the faith. He is the one who brings the faith into the presence. He's the one who finishes it. He's the one who has endured the cross of Christ, and that's what he finishes. If all they said was that Jesus was a great leader, that wouldn't be enough. Gamaliel tells us as much. There are two examples of leaders there that prove not to be saviors. You see, if Jesus were just a leader, we're wasting our time. There have been a lot of leaders. But if Jesus is Leader and Savior---now we're cookin'.

So let's talk about the Savior. When he says '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,' you see Jesus as Savior shows us the other side of *archegos*. It's not just that he's a champion who goes forward in battle, who leads---he does this with the old word in the old English in the old Latin stretching all the way back to Greek, teaches us this---the real champion, the real leader is one who goes forward into the fight on behalf of others. Who goes in our place. Who fights a battle we could never wage on our own, and we aren't even worthy to fight. Jesus did that.

What was the fight? Do you see, the word champion in English is the same word where we get the word 'campus.' The word 'campus'---when we think 'campus'---college, seniors, high schools, thinking about going to college, right? We think of campus as being this bucolic place of big trees and oh, isn't that nice. In fact, the first time campus was ever used in English to apply to a college was Princeton University. It's a beautiful place. But that's not the original idea. It was never this nice bucolic environment. The word campus literally means a field of combat. So do you see? A champion, a leader, was one who came off the field of battle---campus. Jesus, as the apostles point us to---he went to a campus that was called Golgotha. Golgotha was not a planned community outside of Jerusalem. It was a hill on which a cross was placed between two thieves, and Jesus went to battle against the devil, death, and sin in our place. Jesus, as the Leader and as Savior, is the Leader and the champion we've always hungered for. He looks at us and says, because of you and for you I go to the field of battle. I will

be cursed by my Father. I will be counted a sin offering. I will take your sin on me. I will pour out my blood and my body for you. And then coming out of the battlefield, out of the tomb, Jesus was raised to life. He is now the resurrected champion, the Savior, you see.

And it is that name that the apostles, looking into the---can you imagine looking into the eyes of the men that you think are getting ready to murder you because you are preaching that they can receive forgiveness? That's what they do. How do they do that? How do we do that? How do we keep from going---these are my freedoms, how dare you! How do we keep from doing that and instead doing---but do you know Jesus? The only way to do that is not to gin up courage in ourselves. It's to look to Christ who is our Savior. He is the source. He is the power in the face of persecution. Just as we have sung this morning, he will send us. He may send us to the mountain, he may send us to the valley. But just as Psalm 23 says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, there he will be with me. The Lord was with the apostles, and that day they were spared. But next week we will learn of Stephen, who will not be.

My friends---I know I'm running overtime, but oh well, here we go. Throughout the history of the Christian church, from this moment---you want to see where Christian persecution began, turn back to the book of Acts and you can draw a straight line from the book of Acts all the way through human history to today, and you can see that the reason why we sit here---we sit here and sing---we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us in the name of Christ, who were persecuted so that we can have a Bible translated into our language. We have those who have gone before who have preached the gospel in places that were not hospitable, that then enabled the gospel to come to the United States and transform many---of which, if you are a believer, you are a descendent and a recipient of the gift of the persecution of Christians throughout the ages.

I've used it before, I will use it again. Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, 1555, being brought to the stake as leaders of Christ's church in the Church of England, because they were preaching the gospel and preaching Christ. They were led---and you can go there today in Oxford and see the spot where they were put to the stake and burned alive. And it was recorded for all posterity these words from Hugh Latimer: "Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, [and play the man;] we shall this day by God's grace light up such a candle in England, as I trust shall never be put out." And when Dr. Ridley saw the flame approaching him he exclaimed, "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. Lord, receive my spirit. Lord, receive my spirit." It was said to be repeated over and over again until his last breath. And then Hugh Latimer did not cease until his last breath, "O Father of heaven, receive my soul. O Father of heaven, receive my soul."

Christian, I say to you, the freedoms which we have are blessed, but they are not guaranteed. We must not be tricked into thinking that persecution is an anomaly. It is indeed for most Christians around the world the norm. In sub-Saharan Africa persecution today has been poured out on the family members of those who've sung with us this morning. There are people who have given their lives this week in places like North Korea and the Middle East. Christian churches have been torn down in China because of Christ. It is the norm. So where do we get the strength? From Christ alone, who has gone before us.

But notice what the disciples do. They respond with rejoicing. And they say, "Then they left the presence of the council (after being whipped), 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 that Jesus is the Christ." They were rejoicing that someone thought them worthy enough because of the name of Christ to be whipped as their Savior was whipped. But did they go about preaching how bad the Sanhedrin was? No. They went out preaching Christ house to house.

So I now give you these words from a much wiser pastor as both an application and a challenge, and

that is John Piper. In one of his many, many books he wrote in the book entitled *The Roots of Endurance*, Where does the Christian gain endurance to stand the test of time against persecution and trial? He said it must begin first by unearthing the unbiblical absolutes of self-protection. He said this, 'I have found myself in conversation with Christians for whom it is simply a given that you do not put yourself or your family at risk. The commitment to safety and comfort is an unquestioned absolute. The demands of being a Christian in the 21st-century will probably prove to be a rude awakening for such Christians. Since many of us have not embraced the Calvary Road voluntarily, God may simply catapult us onto it as he did many of the home-loving saints in Acts Chapter 11, where it says those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word.' And then he surmises, 'Stress and danger for the Christian are normal.'

If our Savior, who is our Leader, went before us, despite us and for us---for the glory of the Father went to that horrible dark place outside of Jerusalem, to the cross for us, and to be raised on the third day---he did not do so to make us fat and happy Christians who are walled off from risk and discomfort because we live in such a beautiful place as this. Please understand, I love Howard County. I love Maryland. It is a beautiful place and this is a beautiful building. But may I not and may you not grow fat and happy and forget that every day the Lord calls each of us to bear the cross. And bearing the cross in word and deed with the gospel of Christ may mean we are greeted, not because of our manner, but because of our message of Jesus Christ.

I will say to you---I cannot say the date and I don't know the future, but I know the history of human life, as many of you do, as you've studied it, as many of you are historians and you love it. You know that the story of human history and civilization is not ongoing victory, but growth-failure-growth-failure. The question is, where is our generation in that trajectory? If we think it is only upwords and better and success, we will not be ready. But if our eyes are on Christ our Savior and our Leader, then we know we can say with love, humility, and compassion: This is the gospel of Christ. Do what you will with me, but with saints of old, you may take my life, but my blood will be as seed, and the church will not falter, it will grow all the more. What is he calling us to? To make his name great in word and deed for his glory and for the building up of his church, because our national citizenship is first and foremost in the kingdom of God, and our Savior is Christ.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you for the patience of my hearers this morning. Father, I am passionate about this because I need your Spirit to awaken my soul, that I---put me the first in line, O Lord, who can so easily become fat and happy. But O Lord, I pray make me ready to testify of Christ whatever comes. And make your people ready wherever you send us, whether it be to the mountains or to the valley---wherever you send us, we will go, but we trust that our Leader and our Savior has gone before us, and if God is for us who can be against us. And now we can proclaim in Christ alone, that in Christ there is now no condemnation for those who are in him. We praise you and we thank you, Lord. Now make us a people courageous and devoted to the gospel. In Jesus' name. Amen.