



A POWERFUL PERSECUTION • Persecution

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Acts 5:17-42

In Acts 5, the intensity of the opposition to the gospel continues to mount. Even as more and more people believe the gospel, there is a parallel growth of hatred toward Jesus' followers. The persecution began in the last chapter with Peter and John's first imprisonment, and here continues with another imprisonment and the first beating of Jesus' followers. The story of the first martyr begins in the next chapter. The extraordinary thing is that Jesus' followers aren't hindered in the least by the persecution. Rather, filled with the Spirit, they continue to boldly preach the gospel with no regard for the wrath of their opposition.

Starting in verse 17, Luke gives a very brief, almost off-handed report of an extraordinary event. The apostles were thrown in jail again, but during the night they were miraculously led out of jail by an angel. The doors remained locked, and the guards were still in their places, but the apostles were gone! God didn't bring an end to persecution, but His unmistakable intervention in the midst of it must have been a great comfort to the believers as they suffered. Clearly, God knew their circumstances and could do absolutely anything He wished. The believers were willing to suffer, knowing that a sovereign God oversaw everything.

Immediately after escaping from jail, the apostles went back to the temple courts and continued to "tell the people the full message of this new life." They did this in response to a command given in verse 20. In that regard, it made sense. But, under normal circumstances, you'd expect someone who escaped from jail to get as far from that jail as possible and avoid attracting attention. Instead, the apostles went to the most public place, loudly doing the very thing that got them arrested in the first place. They had no fear of men, but a compulsion to make the gospel known. The Sanhedrin (the supreme Jewish court) observed this in frustration when they said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." Peter replied, "We must obey God rather than men." And, in his next breath, he again summarized the gospel for them!

The court was at a loss as to what to do, and (briefly) heeded the advice of the leading Jewish teacher, Gamaliel to stop the vain persecution. He had argued that if this movement were not of God, it would die and amount to nothing; but, if it is of God, then no persecution could stop it. Persuaded, they flogged the apostles, once again ordered them to stop teaching about Jesus, and let them go.

What's the Big Idea?

This study is about persecution, and bearing up under it joyfully. Despite the myriad of things against them, the apostles preached the gospel unflinchingly. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do the same.

What's the Problem?

We often have a wrong perspective on suffering, seeing it as the judgment of God and a thing to be avoided at all costs. When we yield to this we miss out on a measure of joy that can only come by suffering for Christ.





Again, the apostles did something totally counter to our natural impulses – they left rejoicing that they were able to suffer for Jesus. Being flogged is a wretched affair. They would have been whipped across the back 39 times. Yet, there is no mention of them questioning God in this, or complaining. Rather, they were excited and praising God that they were counted worthy to suffer. And, they continued to preach the gospel. Day in and day out, they told all who would listen that Jesus loved them and would forgive them.

In this, we need to see that there is joy in suffering for the gospel, whatever form that suffering takes. Rather than shrink from it, we should embrace it, and boldly preach the gospel. Otherwise, there is a joy that we'll never know. What must it be like to put it all on the line for Jesus, suffer disgrace, and be found worthy? Peter, in his first epistle commented on this, saying, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial 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." (1 Peter 4:12,13) Peter knew from experience that there is a sweetness to suffering, when we suffer for doing good. Preach the gospel in season and out of season.

What's Our Response?

Please help your group identify the forms of persecution you seek to avoid. Pray for boldness and grace to face them and be a courageous witness for Christ.

What Are the Questions?

Acts 5:17-42

LAUNCH

When in your life have you experienced the most physical pain? What happened? How did you take it?

EXPLORE

Read Acts 5:17-42.

1. What has been going on to arouse the jealousy of the Jewish leaders?
2. Their jealousy leads them to arrest and imprison the apostles. Then, in verse 19, Luke says something totally bizarre. Do you think it really happened?
3. What would you do if you escaped from jail? What did they do? Why?
4. When the Jewish leaders discovered the apostles were preaching again right in the temple courts, the passage says that, "they were puzzled, wondering what would come of this." Were they puzzled because the apostles escaped, or because they were preaching again?
5. In verse 30, when Peter is being questioned, he not only defends preaching, but he again preaches the gospel to his accusers! Read what Peter says, then share how you might have summarized the gospel in this situation.
6. The Jewish leaders are enraged and want to kill him, but are persuaded not to do so. How? What do you think of this reasoning?
7. In verse 40, the apostles are beaten, and in verse 41, they leave rejoicing. Why? How?
8. What does it mean to be considered "worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name?" Why would this be an honor?
9. When was a time you suffered disgrace for the sake of the Name?
10. From the study of Acts thus far, as the disciples' preaching grew in intensity, what other things intensified? How are they all related?

APPLY

11. Why do you think God intervened in their imprisonment, but allowed the beating to happen? Would you question God's goodness in that? Why didn't the apostles?
12. What have you experienced from Christ that would motivate joy in persecution?
13. What hinders you from sharing the gospel?
14. What are you missing out on when you yield to that pressure?
15. What would it take for your joy in the gospel to more closely match the apostles'?

What Are the Answers?

1. More preaching, miracles, and the growth of the early church aroused the jealousy of the Jewish leaders.
2. Let people discuss this and grapple with something so incredible. But yes, it happened.
3. Allow the group to discuss. The natural thing would be search for a safe place to hide. They threw caution to the wind and obeyed the order to preach.
4. Discuss the topic. It could be either or both.
5. Give the group time to think of how they would present the gospel. Share your answers.
6. Gamaliel argues that if this is not of God, it will fail. If it is of God, nothing can stop it.
7. They rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer disgrace for Jesus. They had come to value things very differently than the world does.
8. Because Christ suffered and died for us it is a special privilege to suffer for Him.
9. Allow the group to discuss.
10. Persecution, jealousy, prayer, and community were heightened with the spread of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel brings out the intensity of the Christian life and spiritual battle.
11. God can and does sovereignly protect His children, but that does not mean immunity from persecution or suffering. In fact, we are told in Scripture to expect both.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. We miss out on the joy of obedience, and the opportunities to influence people's eternities.
15. You want to help your group see that the dynamic experience of being loved, forgiven and delighted in by Jesus is the only thing that can really fuel this sort of response to suffering.

Memorize

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial 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.

1 Peter 4:12-13