

An Excellent Way to Endure **Acts 5:17-42**

This morning we are going to find the church in Jerusalem in a similar situation to what we saw two weeks ago – under direct opposition from their government. The first time they faced opposition they were threatened and released, and we saw they responded by gathering together as friends to pray. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God boldly. But because of that, the same people ended up arresting them again, only this time we will see they took their threats one step further. Opposition was escalating and the threat to their lives was increasing. Threats were becoming reality and things could easily get worse. How would they respond this time?

As I thought about what happened to them and what it means for us today, I began to see that there are a number of ways that we as Christians can respond to persecution. We can of course give in and run the other direction, or we can stand firm and continue to do what God has called us to do. But even if we stand firm, there are a number of ways we can do that. We can stand firm and be filled with bitterness and anger because of what we've been through. We can accept the pain as a necessary part of becoming a stronger person. We can actually be somewhat thankful because we realize that the pain is building character and making us a better person.

There's a continuum of response when it comes to persecution and as we see the possibility of persecution growing on the horizon in this country I want to ask us: "How do we want to respond when the day of persecution comes? What kind of church do we want to be?" Even if we stand firm, there is a poor way to do it, or there are better ways. Today I want us to see what I believe is an excellent way to endure. And as I think about the future of our church I believe God's vision for us – his desire for what he wants us to be – is a church that endures well – in an excellent way that brings glory to Christ.

After the shocking incident with Ananias and Sapphira, the church in Jerusalem grew even more rapidly and began to grab the attention of government and religious leaders. But it wasn't the kind of attention they wanted.

Read Acts 5:17-21a.

¹⁷ 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.

So this is arrest number two and it sounds like this was more large scale to include a number of the apostles. And this time they didn't hold them in custody in the temple; they put them in the public prison. But a miracle happened, and they were set free and instructed by the angel to continue to preach in the temple, which they did. He didn't tell them to flee to safety, he told them to go right back to the lion's den. And they obeyed.

Read Acts 5:21b-26.

²¹ ...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.

The whereabouts of the apostles caused quite a stir, and it brings a smile to my face because it's almost like God is toying with the government officials. In the end, the apostles ended up in the same place they would have been, but now it was on someone else's terms. They could have easily escaped but didn't. And they could have refused to go with the officers but didn't. They were appearing before the council and the senate of their own free will and I'm sure that didn't go unnoticed. And I think it's something for us to notice as well. In this situation, they didn't hightail it out of there. They kept doing what God had called them to do in spite of the danger they were in. And they didn't resist when summoned to the

council, even though they could have. I love their faith and their boldness in this situation.

Read Acts 5:27-33.

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.

So the high priest accused them of trying to turn the people against them by preaching about Jesus and accusing them of killing him. And Peter rose up as he had done before to defend their cause, telling them that they had no choice but to obey God rather than men. He didn't mix any words when he told them exactly who Jesus was and what they had done to him. And he didn't shy away from telling them that they weren't going to stop what they were doing. This of course enraged the Council and their response rose to a murderous fury. But then someone stepped in...

Read Acts 5:34-40.

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.

You can see the wisdom of this man. He had seen a few things in his time and if this movement was like the rest, it would come to a quick end. But if they killed these apostles, they would ignite their cause and their followers even more. So he convinced them to leave them alone. This too would soon lose its momentum, and if not, well maybe God was actually in this and they needed to change their minds. It makes me wonder what they thought in the future when Christianity didn't die but continued to grow and flourish.

So they didn't kill them, but they didn't just let them go either. This confrontation would end with a beating. And in that culture that was no little small thing – the regular corrective discipline at that time was a flogging with a maximum limit of “40 lashes minus one.” It doesn't say how many lashes they received or with what kind of instrument, but the beating would have been very painful. Things were getting really bad. Witnessing for Christ and following him was going to cost them. Their persecutors weren't going away, they were still in charge, and next time things could result in execution.

How would you feel if you were in that situation? What would you do? They had options. They could give up and run – get out of the hotbed of Jerusalem. They could have gone up to Galilee where many of them were from and try to start a church there. There would be less persecution to deal with – at least at first. Even if they didn't run they had options – different possibilities of how they could endure. They could have walked out of there, bruised and bleeding, filled with anger and bitterness for what they had gone through, but stubbornly refused to quit preaching. They weren't going down without a fight. They could have breathed a sigh of relief – thankful to still be alive and looked at what had happened as a growing experience – something that would make them stronger and better people. These were all options for them and could be options for our future as well. But I want us to see a more excellent way – the thing they actually did.

Read Acts 5:41-42.

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.

Their response is very surprising. People don't rejoice after being beaten. It doesn't make any sense. Persecution is supposed to shut you down or at least change your mood. You should be angry or scared or something, but not rejoicing. Were they insane? Luke records that they weren't insane, they had a definite reason for rejoicing. They were rejoicing because they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name – worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.

As I look at what happened, my understanding is that these disciples loved Jesus so much, they counted it an honor to suffer for his name. They loved him more than life itself. Jesus had given all of himself to them. He welcomed them to share in his life, he loved them and taught them. He did amazing things with them by his side. He treated them like they mattered. He valued them as beloved friends and brothers. And after the unthinkable happened and he was arrested, brutally flogged, and crucified, they came to understand that he endured that all for them – so that their sins would be forgiven and they would be set free. When he rose from the dead, they were filled with overwhelming joy and he gave them a mission – to tell other people about him so that they too would come to believe. This was a mission they eagerly accepted. And not only that, but they eagerly looked forward to his coming return – he was going to come back again to restore his kingdom and make all things new.

They loved him more than life itself and knew he was coming back for them, and when it came time for them to suffer on account of his name, it didn't matter how bad it hurt. All that mattered is that they had been counted worthy to suffer for him. And because of that, they rejoiced. To suffer for their Savior was an honor that they joyfully received.

In the variety of ways we can respond to persecution, this is the way I think we need to seek. We could respond in other ways and still be faithful, but this is the only way that brings glory to Christ. If we always go into hiding, or become bitter and angry, even if we see the suffering as making us a better person, we won't turn people to Christ. They won't be thinking, "Jesus must be worth it." But if we rejoice, we show them he is, and they at least will take notice.

But how do we do that? I've asked myself that question this week and the conclusion I've come to is the only way that will happen is if we treasure Christ more than life itself. That's what the apostles did. They spent a lot of time with him and realized with clarity and understanding all that he had done for them. And I think we need to do the same today. We need to fan into flame our love for him and our realization of what he's done for us. What can you do to spend time with him to fan into flame that passion for him?

I want to end with a story of one of the disciples that was there that day – Peter's brother, Andrew. As time went on and the church grew, this is the story that was told about Andrew, according to **Foxe's Book of Martyrs...**

According to tradition, Andrew—who was Peter's brother and the first follower of Jesus—preached the gospel in the region North of the Black Sea and in various parts of Greece. His life ended in the Greek city of Patras. He was crucified by Aegeas, the governor of the region at the time.

Andrew was a diligent preacher of the gospel and had brought many people to faith in Christ. When Aegeas the governor heard about this, he came to Patras to put an end to the Christian movement there. To do this, he enforced a legal requirement that everyone worship the Roman gods by making sacrifices to them. Andrew immediately decided to resist Aegeas and went to address him directly.

"It would be wise for someone who judges men," he said, "to know the One who is his Judge—the One who lives in heaven. And once you have known Him, you will worship Him, since He is the One true God. In so doing, this judge of men will turn his mind away from false gods and blind idols."

These words from Andrew angered Aegeas. "Are you the same Andrew that overthrew the temple of the gods?" he demanded. "Are you the same Andrew that goes around persuading men to believe in superstitions which Rome has abolished? I have been commanded to put an end to such teaching."

Andrew replied by saying that it was indeed a fact that the Roman authorities did not understand the truth. "The Son of God came from heaven into the world for man's sake," he said, "He taught us that these idols you honor as gods are not only not gods, but are actually cruel demons. They are enemies to mankind, and they teach people nothing except things which offend God. As a

result, these people fall into all kinds of wickedness, and when they die, they have nothing to offer to God but evil deeds.”

As you might imagine, the governor was not appeased by what Andrew had to say. Instead, he commanded Andrew to quit teaching and preaching these things immediately. If he refused, he would be fastened to the cross at once.

But Andrew did refuse to change his mind and replied to the threat of crucifixion by saying, “I would not preach the honor and glory of the cross if I feared the death of the cross.”

So the sentence of death was pronounced, and Andrew was taken away to be crucified for denying the religion of the Roman gods. Because crucifixion was an especially cruel and painful death, men who faced it often lost their minds from fear. They would frequently faint when they saw the cross. Andrew, however, didn’t even pale. Instead, out of his deep love for Christ, he spoke these words that strike the heart like sparks of fire.

“O cross!” he declared, “O cross most welcome and long anticipated! I come to you with a willing mind, with joy and desire. Since I am a follower and a student of the One who died on you, I have always loved you and sought to embrace you.”

And so Andrew gave his life for the love of Christ.