

Jesus Extends His Community through External Opposition

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

Acts 5:17-42

Kenwood Baptist Church

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TEXT: Acts 5:17-42

We continue this morning our spring New Testament series on the Book of Acts, the series we are calling the *Acts of the Exalted Jesus*. If there's really one great truth I want us all to be



gripped by this whole spring, it is simply that Jesus Christ is alive: He has been raised from the dead; He is active in the world today; He is the central Actor in every text of Scripture; and He is the great Actor in our lives as well. Last Sunday, we looked at how Jesus creates a holy community of people belonging to Himself and the world. This morning, we look at the Exalted Jesus as He

extends His kingdom even further. He extends His Kingdom through an unlikely avenue, through external opposition. We are people often weak of heart, with trembling knees, and when we face opposition, we buckle or crumble. Yet, Jesus Christ uses external opposition to cause His Kingdom to grow. It grows both in the hearts of His followers as they become bolder, and it grows in the society, as we will see. As we look at the remarkable story in this text before us, we want to look at four ways Jesus is acting powerfully. This will lead us in the end to two questions and two challenges.

We saw last week, in Acts 5:15-16, that the popularity of the early Christian movement and of the early followers of Jesus was growing, that the people regarded them highly, and great crowds were gathering. They were meeting in the public space of the temple courts, and people were coming to listen to them and being healed. In the wake of this swelling popularity, the power structures of the first century world were threatened. As Jesus' Word goes out, often the people who hold power in this world are threatened by it and they react against it. We see this in Acts 5:17:

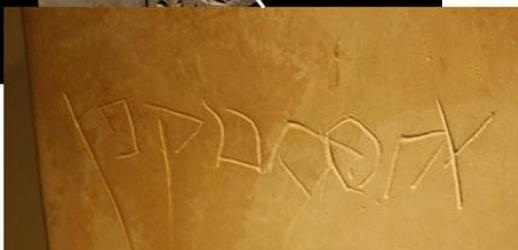
“Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with zeal.”

Some translations say that the high priest and his associates, members of the Sadducees, the aristocratic leadership of the first century, were filled with *jealousy*, but the word here is actually *zeal*, a religious fervor that grips them. It is not a professional jealousy; it is a zeal for God that is consuming them, and they are distressed at the increase in popularity of the preaching of Jesus. The high priest of this time is a man named Caiaphas, Joseph Caiaphas, son of Annas. We know from the Gospels that he was high priest from the year A.D. 18 to 36. Just a few years ago, some construction workers in Israel were building a new neighborhood in North Talpiot, and when you work in Israel, or you plan a new development, as you clear ground, you usually find something. So the bulldozers cleared out the new neighborhood and the construction workers blew off the top of a first century tomb. They did what any first century construction worker in Israel would do: stop and call the Antiquities Department. They came, and inside this first century tomb there were 12 ossuaries with the bones from first century people. The most elaborate of these is this one, a very ornate limestone ossuary. Don't be deceived by the picture. This is an ornate box that is, in reality, about one foot by two feet. This one, the most elaborate, has a beautiful design. The artists among us would say, “Wow, that’s a really neat carving,” while the scholar types among us will rotate this ossuary to the



side,
because

it is a lot more interesting from the side. The side of the ossuary has inscribed in it in Aramaic whose bones these are. The remarkable thing about it is that the bones are identified as the bones of Joseph, son of Caiaphas. This is the Caiaphas of the New Testament. Inside this ossuary there were the bones of a 60-year-old man together with two infants and two daughters. The bones were taken out and reburied on the Mount of Olives. Although this is the Caiaphas of the New Testament, at this point in the narrative he is still alive, so step back from the ossuary now and go back into the narrative. Caiaphas and his companions of the Sadducees were increasingly hostile to the preaching of Jesus. In Acts 4, they had told the followers of Jesus to stop speaking in the Name of Jesus, Now, as they



“Joseph son of Caiaphas.”

they had told the followers of Jesus to stop speaking in the Name of Jesus, Now, as they

continue to preach, they take them and throw them in the public jail. Their preaching about the resurrection was particularly upsetting to the Sadducees who did not believe in a bodily resurrection. Oftentimes people who are aristocratic tend to be conservative, and so the Sadducees were. They were threatened by this preaching in the Name of Jesus, and so they arrested the followers of Christ and put them in jail. Their intention was that they would be tried the next day and punished. The narrative takes a turn unexpectedly to Caiaphas, and as we read, the story is told so well.

The first act of Jesus in this text is to send His angel. In Acts 5:18-19 we read:

“They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.”

Some of you this morning don't believe in angels, and this will make this text really difficult for you, but the Lord says in His Word that He has 10,000 times 10,000 angels to do His bidding. Adoniram Judson, the first missionary from the United States, experienced something similar to this when he was placed in prison in France. His first missionary activity was almost snuffed out, and God sent an angel into the prison, wrapped his cloak around Judson, and walked him out of the French prison. God is still doing these things. The angel comes and leads them out. Not only does he leave them out, but he restates the great commission to the followers of Christ in Acts 5:20:

“Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people all about this new life.”

He doesn't just release them, but he re-commissions them, so we're absolutely clear that the task before us is not just our personal liberty. The task before us is the constraining commission of Jesus Christ to be released from prison so that we can go and tell the people. The phrase the angel uses is an allusion to what Peter says in John 6:68:

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

The followers of Christ do what they should do in their obedience to Christ. They go at daybreak and enter the temple courts. They are not released for their own personal safety, but they go back into this very public space. The temple court of Jerusalem was the largest public space in the first century world and could accommodate 200,000 people on the Temple Mount. They don't just hide in the corner; they go right back to this very public place in the shadow of the temple that the Sadducees are in charge of. They don't just go stand there; they go and they begin to teach. They go right back to the portico structure of Solomon's colonnade and they teach. Remember the words of Jesus: “Go, make disciples, baptize them and teach them teach them. Teach them, not just *about* Me, teach them to *obey* Me.” We don't want more knowledge about Christ. We want more teaching that leads to obedience.

They are released, and the scene then shifts back to the Sanhedrin, the great Council, the religious court of the first century. The high priest and his associates arrive in the morning. They call together the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders, and they send to the jail for the apostles to be summoned. The atmosphere is a sense of confidence: "We will deal with these of people who disobeyed our teaching, our instructions not to teach anymore the Name of Christ." They issue the command to go get those men and bring them here. They send the servants to the prison, and they come back empty-handed. Can you imagine the awkwardness of giving a report like this to your boss who has told you to go do something? How would you explain that? We read in Acts 5:23 that they said:

"We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

The jail was securely locked; everything was in safety and the guards were standing at the doors. Everything was fine. The guards opened up the doors, and then came the awkward moment: as they opened the door, there was no one in the cell! The religious leadership of the nation hears this report, and Luke tells us in Acts 5:24:

"On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what this might lead to."

The NIV says they were *puzzled*, but the word Luke uses is that *they were at a total loss*. They were at a loss, and they were at a loss specifically as to what this would mean. They were devout people, and this type of behavior is not normal. This situation is unusual, and they began to ask themselves what the meaning of this is, what the significance of this is. They didn't have long to deliberate, because someone in the group finished the awkward moment. Isn't it great when you have an awkward moment in your family, you have an awkward moment during the holidays, you have an awkward moment at a big executive meeting in your business and you are at a total loss and don't know what to do next, and someone just breaks the silence? So it is here. This man is not named, but he is the great breaker of this awkward silence. He says in Acts 5:25:

"Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."

What do you do then? The religious leaders send for the apostles. They are amazed; they are concerned. They take the apostles, but Luke is careful to stress in Acts 5:26:

"They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them."

They did not use force because of the great popularity of the apostles among the people. People were coming from hundreds of miles away, bringing people, and they are being healed, demonic powers are being broken in people's lives. So, the religious leadership takes them, not with force because they feared that the people would stone them, not stone the apostles, but

that they would stone the religious leaders. This happens sometimes in Israel. Alexander Jannaeus, who was high priest a couple generations before Jesus, got up to officiate at one of the major festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles, and he was so inexperienced in his role that he blew the liturgy. He actually did the liturgy a wrong way, and people were so upset that they grabbed stones and they pelted him in the temple. It was probably not a religious execution of the leadership, but more of a harassment and pelting. It was sort of like how the Sheriff of Nottingham gets pelted in *Robin Hood* after doing violence to the people.

The apostles are brought in and they are made to answer for themselves. We read in Acts 5:28:

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this Name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.”

I would love to hear people say that about us. That is Acts 1:8 being fulfilled, isn't it? *“You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.”* The leadership confesses the obedience of Christ's followers, that they filled the city. Could that be said about us: “You filled Cincinnati with the teachings of Christ; you have filled the surrounding community with the words of Christ”? Notice that the religious leaders refused to name the Name of Jesus. They just call Him this *'name,'* this *'man.'* They can't bear to name the Name.

Then we see the second great act of Jesus. Not only does He send His angel to rescue, but now Jesus, exalted in power, gives tremendous boldness and courage to His followers. We have been praying already this morning for all of you, that you would be filled with the same courage and boldness. Before the leadership of his nation, Peter does not hesitate to reply. In his first sentence, he says in Acts 5:29:

“We must obey God rather than men!”

Peter goes on to say in Acts 5:30:

“The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead--whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross.”

Peter names the Name the first chance he can. This is all about Jesus, after all, and everything stands or falls on whether Jesus is actually alive or not. He is alive, raised from the dead, and Peter says in Acts 5:31:

“God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.”

There, again, is the key truth of this whole series, *Acts of the Exalted Jesus Christ*. He is exalted at the right hand of the Father, living today. Peter says in Acts 5:32:

“We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

He uses a word in both Acts 5:29 and in verse 32. The word he uses is translated as *obedience*. It is a word that means *persuaded of the highest authority*. Are you persuaded this morning that the highest authority in the land is that of Jesus Christ? I want us to be persuaded of this, because it will change how we relate to our society. It will make us bolder, more sure, more willing. Jesus breathes on His followers a great boldness. The response is not pleasant; the response is an escalation of conflict. Luke tells us in Acts 5:33:

“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.”

They didn't respond the way a group will later in Acts by saying: “Tell me more.” No, Luke tells us that they were *cut in half*. Have you ever had someone speak words to you that made you so angry that you felt like you were being sawed in half? I can only imagine that that is really angry. They were furious and wanted to kill them. We've moved beyond rebuke; we've moved beyond jail; we've moved beyond physical punishment to say: “I so can't stand what you're saying that I want to do physical violence and snuff your life out.”

We then see the third act of Jesus in this text. In this hostile scene where the apostles are facing execution, Jesus intervenes again, and He brings advocacy from an unexpected source, a member of the Council. The Sanhedrin is comprised of half Sadducees and half Pharisees. A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a respected teacher, stands up in the middle of this assembly. He commands the apostles to be put outside for a while so they can have some private deliberations. Some people have wondered how Luke knows about this private conversation if the apostles had been put out. The reason he knows about this is Gamaliel's most famous student was (Saul who became) the apostle Paul. It is very probable that Paul himself was present in this scene. Gamaliel stands up. He was known as a moderate, unlike his student Paul. Sometimes students can be more zealous than their teachers. Gamaliel was a moderate. His most famous lines in rabbinic literature, when he was given the opportunity to speak, are his three proverbial maximums in the Mishnah. He says: “Number one, make disciples; number two, avoid doubt; and number three, don't tithe over guesswork.” He was respected and admired. He was one of the leading sages of the day. His instructions are wise and balanced. Make disciples. We can embrace that. Be sure of what you're doing, and then don't tithe without being sure. He was a man of balance and wisdom, and he speaks as a sage of the first century would. He takes two examples from history known to the community to make a very compelling argument for leniency in this case. We see the first example in Acts 5:36:

“Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.”

In case you are rusty on your first century history, let me remind you. Sometimes we get so immersed in our contemporary moment that becomes irrelevant within 24 hours, that, for many of us, our whole lives are spinning around this huge wheel of a waste of time. This is part of the curse of our moment in history. People did know who Theudas was. Josephus tells us Theudas was a messianic pretender. Josephus tells us that Theudas came and promised the people that he would split the River Jordan and that he would lead the people in triumph and destroy the Romans. The Romans got word of this, and they don't really like people going out in the wilderness and saying, "Gather around us and we will destroy you," so they sent a cohort out to Theudas and his 400 men. Josephus says that the governor sent out a troupe of horsemen against them. They fell upon them, slew them, took many alive, but they did to Theudas what they usually do to commanders of oppositions. They took Theudas alive and sliced his head off and carried it in triumph to Jerusalem. So, instead of Theudas' coming to Jerusalem, it's just his head that comes to Jerusalem, and the 400 followers of Theudas just scatter, and Gamaliel says it came to nothing.

In the second example, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census. This is a census in A.D. 6 when the Romans began to tax Israel directly. Judas led people in a revolt against this occupying power. This is the second census after the census we read about in the nativity of Jesus, but this Judas gathered a group of people around him and said that this taxation was like slavery. He didn't use the word 'no taxation without representation,' but he would have been sympathetic. He said that this is a precedent and we need to assert our liberty. Josephus said that the people who receive the truth with pleasure, his expression for the gullible, gathered around him and the Romans responded with force. Judas is killed and his followers are scattered. He came to nothing.

The implied logic in the third case, that of Jesus, is the same. We have these first three stages before us. Jesus did appear. We know that Jesus walked this earth; He is not a figure of myth and legend. We know He appeared, and we know that He did claim to be someone. There is not a chapter in the Gospel narratives that lacks the claim of Jesus to be the Messianic King, the Son of God. We know that Jesus indeed gathered a group of followers around Him, 12 at the beginning reconstituting the tribes of Israel. This fanned out into 70, and now, in just the past few weeks in the narrative of Acts, 10,000 people believe. There is a band of followers. Gamaliel would have been amazed if he had known that in just a short 2000 years from this conversation there would be two billion people following Jesus. The third step in Gamaliel's argument also has come to pass. Jesus was killed. He was handed over; He was betrayed; and He was nailed to a cross. He was not substituted at the last minute, as Muslims claim, by another who looked like Him. He did not swoon on the cross, as some liberal scholarship claims that Jesus just appeared to die. No one survives the Roman crucifixion. He was killed; He was

laid in a tomb, and the fourth stage of Gamaliel's argument lies open before his hearers and us today. He claimed to be someone; He gathered a group of followers; He was killed; and what next? Gamaliel doesn't know what happened next. Some sources of early Christian tradition say Gamaliel became a believer later. We don't know this for sure, but what he doesn't know is that Jesus was raised. What he does know is that if this is of God, it cannot be stopped, and he persuaded them.

The fourth act of Jesus in this text is that Jesus then strengthens the resolve of His followers to serve Him. They called in the apostles to have them beaten. This is the synagogue discipline that Paul says he received five times. This was so severe that first century sources say sometimes people died from the flogging. Church discipline is a censure, a rebuke. We don't exercise corporal punishment today; our society can't handle that. In the first century, if you were rebuked publicly in a serious way by the community, then you were struck 39 times. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:24:

"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one."

Five times his community said we cannot tolerate what you're saying. They are beaten with these 39 blows, and they do something that you can do only if you are filled with the Spirit of God: they left rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering dishonor for the Name of Christ. There's that Name. They left rejoicing because they had experienced what we read in Matthew 5:11-12:

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Then we read in Acts 5:42:

"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."

What is the Good News that we possess? The Good News is that the Messiah is Jesus, and this is a source of joy, an ending, unshakable joy. We face pressure, increasingly so, and I think this will only get worse in the near-term. There will be pressure to hide our identity as a Christian; pressure to not name the Name of Jesus around us. We have a joy that the world seeks and longs for. It's a joy found only in knowing Christ. It's a joy born of suffering and faithful proclamation and Jesus' extending the Kingdom despite this.

One of my favorite global Christian leaders is a Sri Lankan pastor named Ajith Fernando. He is the director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka where the exclusiveness of Jesus is so threatening. In a Hindu context where 330 million gods are worshiped, adding another is no problem. But,

the great problem is saying *only Jesus*. Fernando describes when a Hindu scholar once asked Stanley Jones, a missionary: “What has Christianity to offer that our religion does not?” The missionary’s reply was just two words, simply and profoundly: “Jesus Christ.” That is what we have, knowing Christ. The Sri Lankan leader said: “When we come to Jesus, we enter into a relationship with the truth. This is firm ground. This is what people are thirsting for in this confusing age. What a joy to discover this truth. It gives us a foundation on which to build our lives. It gives us great security, a springboard to lasting joy. Recognizing Jesus as the Truth is an experience unmatched with other faiths. The Creator of this world has indeed presented the complete solution to the human predicament. Jesus Christ is supreme; He is unique; He is absolute. So, we have the audacity in this pluralistic age to say that Jesus, as He is portrayed in the Bible, is not only unique but supreme. He is our message to the world.”

Two questions:

First question: What has Jesus already asked you to do that you are not currently doing? In this text, Jesus asks things of His followers, and His followers obey. Jesus has spoken to us already a number of things. What has He already asked you to do that you are neglecting?

Second question: Where have you buckled under the wrong pressure of obeying man rather than obeying God? Where have you crumbled under the weight of our world and said to yourself: “I’ll obey people above obeying God”?

Two challenges:

Challenge number one: Let Jesus use the pressure of society and social opposition. Let Him use that to anchor your resolve to name Him. Let Him take that pressure. Pressure turns coal into diamonds. We are kind of like lumps of coal, and under the pressure of society and Jesus’ powerful hand, that pressure seems like it is crushing us. Then Jesus pulls back His powerful hands and the dust clears away and there is a diamond there.

Challenge number two: Be patient as you trust the Exalted Jesus to extend His Kingdom anyway, even among those who at first seem so opposed. He brings help from an unexpected source in this text, and those it seems are so against us may become the greatest followers. We will see that in Paul in just few chapters.

This Jesus is worth serving. He is alive, exalted, and Paul, present at that moment, hearing this deliberation, would later speak. He would later tell us, on the other side of his own conversion, that he received from the Lord what he also delivers to us.

Communion:

The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread and broke it, and He said: "This is My body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." He took the cup after the supper and said: "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." He is alive, and returning, and at work in the world. Let's prepare our hearts for this table.

Lord God, we praise You. We praise You for who You are. Jesus, you are amazing. You are at work so powerfully in this passage, so powerfully in the world. Draw us into Your story that we might live with great zeal for You. Lord, we ask for Your forgiveness now, specifically where we have buckled and concealed our identity and You. We pray that You would forgive us for our cowardice and make us bold. Use the pressures we face to cause the diamond of the Gospel to shine brightly in our generation. We worship You, slain Lamb of God. Hallelujah!

Amen