

Jails Could Not Hold Them • Acts 5:17-42

Persecution has always been part of the Christian experience. Roman emperor Nero, who reigned from AD 81-96, was probably the one who started the fire of Rome but he blamed the Christians and he had them imprisoned, thrown to wild animals, burned alive and crucified for his act. Under Nero's persecution Peter and Paul were martyred for Christ. Later in the first century Emperor Domitian persecuted Christians for refusing to worship him as divine. Under his rule the apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos. In the second century Marcus Aurelius refused to protect Christians from civil uprisings. Decius who reigned from AD 249-251 ordered thousands of Christians, including the bishop of Rome, to be killed for not offering sacrifices acknowledging him to be a god. From AD 284-305 Dioclesian tried to eliminate Christianity by ordering church buildings burned, Bibles confiscated, pastors tortured and civil servants stripped of citizenship. Those who refused to recant were executed. Tertullian, the second century North Africa church leader and historian, said, "Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust. . . . The more you mow us down, the more we grow."

But persecution of Christians has not been limited to the Roman Empire of two thousand years ago. Instead, persecution has increased. Historians and statisticians say there were more martyrs for Jesus Christ in the 20th century than in all previous nineteen centuries combined. In the 21st century there is severe persecution in Vietnam, North Korea, the Sudan and many Muslim countries. While Christian commitment may be comfortable for many Americans it is deadly for thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world today.

Persecution is not always torture or execution. An organization called FaithWorks lists degrees of persecution we may face for our faith. Many Christians fall somewhere along this continuum. It begins simply when someone disapproves of your

Christian faith. It progresses to ridicule, pressure to conform, loss of educational opportunities, economic sanctions, shunning, alienation from community, loss of employment and loss of property. From there it begins to rapidly escalate to physical abuse, mob violence, harassment by officials, kidnapping, forced labor, imprisonment, physical torture and finally murder or execution.

Persecution should come as no surprise to followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 15:20, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." That prediction of Jesus began to come true in Acts 5:17-42:

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. 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. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

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Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “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.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. 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. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then

they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 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 Christ.

Imagine somewhere in the world today a small group of severely persecuted Christians meeting in secret and reading this story in Acts 5 as they seek to answer their questions about where God is and what God does when Christians are persecuted.

The Sanhedrin had clearly ordered Peter and John not to teach about Jesus anymore but they deliberately defied the order in an act of civil disobedience. And it wasn’t just Peter and John; the other ten apostles disobeyed as well. So the religious leaders had them all arrested and thrown into jail to face trial the next morning.

During the night an angel came and set them free. When the Sanhedrin convened the next morning they sent for the apostles but to everyone’s surprise they were not there even though the cells were locked and the guards were still at their post.

The Sadducees dominated the Sanhedrin. They didn’t officially believe in miracles so they were surprised by what happened. I think the apostles were surprised, too. They definitely believed in miracles but they weren’t expecting God’s GET OUT OF JAIL FREE card!

So what does all this say about what God does when Christians are persecuted? Does God always send angels to rescue us? No. But God does intervene on our behalf. God is fresh and new and creative. God is powerful and innovative. He uses different approaches that fit different circumstances and different people. But God is always there and always gets involved.

Hawa Ahmed was a university student in North Africa. In her dormitory one day she found a small piece of Christian literature. She read it and decided to become a Christian. Her father was an Emir whom she expected to disinherit her, but she never dreamed her brothers and her father would do what they did. They stripped her naked, tied her to a chair, attached a metal plate to her skin and plugged it

into an electric outlet intending to torture and kill her. She asked to hold a Bible as she died—a wish that was granted. Four times they tried but each time the electricity malfunctioned.

Her family disowned her and threw her out of the house to run naked through the streets. Shaking with fear and humiliation she went to the house of a friend who clothed her. The next day the neighbors asked her friend why she was running through the streets the previous night wearing that beautiful white dress. God not only saved her life but covered her nakedness. She now goes by the name Faith and serves as a full-time Christian evangelist. When persecuted, God intervenes on our behalf.

What should we do when we're caught in the middle? The apostles were set free from jail but they were caught in the middle. The legal leaders ordered them to keep quiet about Jesus but the angel who freed them said, *"Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the full message of this new life."* Christians are often caught between the expectations of God and the expectations of government, religion, family, friends, teachers or employers. What are we to do?

The apostles' decided quickly that their answer was to obey what God asks. At daybreak of the day they got out of jail they defied the court order and returned to the temple colonnade where they taught about Jesus. One central principle to civil disobedience is a willingness to suffer the consequences of defying the law. The apostles decided to obey God's command to evangelize and let the government do whatever it chose to do in retaliation.

January 8, 2006, five young men threatened to kill a Protestant church leader in Turkey's fourth largest city. Kamil Kiroglu was ambushed and beaten so severely that twice he became unconscious. His assailants kept telling him to deny Jesus. Each time he said, "Jesus is Lord!" and they beat him again. Amazingly, he survived and said, "I am praising God, not because he saved me from death, but because he helped me not to deny him in the shadow of death."

Our choice is seldom so clear; maybe it's easier when it's clear. Yet, we constantly must choose between the expectations of God and the expectations of others. The Bible teaches us to obey what God asks.

What do we say when we are questioned? The apostles were re-arrested and appeared before the Sanhedrin for interrogation. The high priest said in Acts 5:28, *"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."* It's interesting that he wouldn't say Jesus' name but referred to "the name" and "this man". The truth was they were guilty of Jesus' blood!

Late one night I watched on C-Span a press training class for new members of Congress. The teacher told them that when a reporter asks a question you don't want to answer just answer whatever question you wish had been asked. I don't think these apostles had C-Span training but they kind of did the same thing. Peter and the other apostles answered the question of why they broke the law but they also talked a lot about Jesus. They used persecution as an opportunity to speak the gospel when they responded in Acts 5:29-32:

We must obey God rather than men!

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

The Sanhedrin were furious when they heard their "Jesus" answer and wanted the men executed right there and then. Suddenly, everything was out of their hands. Nothing they could say or do would make any difference. They were excused from the Sanhedrin as their fate was discussed. They were powerless to determine the outcome.

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What is a Christian supposed to do when there is nothing that you can do? The answer is to let God work through others. In this case it was through Gamaliel, a highly respected rabbi who was the grandson of what may be the most famous Jewish rabbi in the history of Judaism, a man named Hillel. Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin who was greatly respected by both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He urged the Sanhedrin to back off and do nothing. The apostles never could have accomplished this themselves so God did it!

Gamaliel's logic had serious flaws. He compared Jesus to past rebels whose causes were soon forgotten. He argued that evil cannot triumph so just don't worry about it; just do nothing. His logic was flawed but God used his speech to save the leaders of the church. I find great hope and confidence in God that he can even use the mistakes of others to accomplish his purposes.

But what about times when there is no escape? How should we handle suffering? We should rejoice because we are counted worthy to suffer for Christ. That's what the apostles did after they were beaten in Acts 5:41-42:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 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 Christ.

Why would anybody rejoice in severe suffering? Because it was an honor to suffer for Jesus! Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:10-12:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. . . .”

Recently I watched a double amputee veteran of the Iraq War interviewed on TV. He said it was an honor to lose his legs fighting for his country. He was proud to be an amputee. The same was true for the persecuted first century Christians—they rejoiced to suffer for Jesus!

Several years ago Helen Roseveare was a guest speaker at Wooddale Church. She was a British missionary physician to Africa who was kidnapped, beaten raped and nearly executed. She did great good and received great evil in return. Dr. Roseveare later wrote:

God didn't stop the sufferings. He didn't stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for him, with him.

How did that early church change the world? They changed the world because they were willing to go anywhere, do anything and even suffer for Jesus Christ their Lord.

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