



## MORE THAN CONQUERORS

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 5:12-42

Ninth Message

Gary Vanderet

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The book of Acts is the meeting ground for two historic forces: the risen, living Lord working through his people to build his church, and the forces of darkness trying to dismantle it.

Once again we encounter Satan's first method for destroying the church, which is through persecution. This comes in two waves. In the first, Peter and John were arrested and tried before the Sanhedrin. They were warned not to speak of or teach in the name of Jesus, but their resilience and boldness was evident in their response: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). We will see that same resiliency again in our study this morning, as Satan launches his second wave of attack.

Most Californians know something about waves. Growing up in Southern California, I, like some of you, enjoyed many summer days in the ocean. Early on I learned that when a huge breaker suddenly rose threateningly above me, the only thing to do was dive right into the wave. If a surfer failed to do that, he was in for a roller coaster ride back to shore, taking in a lot of water and rubbing his skin raw on the sand. The one who dived right in, however, quickly found himself on the other side of the wave, floating and ready to go again. You don't have to be a great swimmer to navigate these waves. You just have to know a few simple skills, and soon you are happily riding the watery mountains.

This metaphor applies very well to our text, as Satan attempts to destroy the church with his second wave of physical attack.<sup>1</sup> But, just as with the failed first attempt, the church comes through his attack victoriously, more buoyant and alive than ever. Though we may never face such overt persecution we will certainly not entirely escape the world's oppression.

**The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits,**

**and all of them were healed.** (Acts 5:12-16, NIV)

This is another of Luke's summary descriptions of life in the early church. These Spirit-filled believers loved one another in practical ways, with the result that they had a powerful witness to the world. After the apostles had been jailed and released the first time, they prayed to the sovereign Lord, "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (4:30). Here is the answer to that prayer, in the extraordinary signs that God gave to authenticate the message. Many of these miracles seem to have taken place in Solomon's Colonnade, the cedar-covered area at the Eastern end of the outer court of the temple. There, where Peter preached his second sermon, was where the believers met together.

These believers' love for one another, their boldness in speaking about Jesus, and in God's power to heal and also to judge, causes two contrasting reactions. On the one hand, "no one else" (i.e., non-Christians) "dared join them even though they were highly regarded by the people." They preferred to remain aloof. On the other hand, "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." Some people were scared and stayed away, while others were attracted to their faith.

These two attitudes are always evident when the Spirit is present. As John Stott puts it, "The presence of the living God, whether manifest through preaching or miracles or both, is alarming to some, and appealing to others."<sup>2</sup> In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle says that Christians are a "fragrance of Christ" (2 Cor 2:15). Christians emit a sweetness, an aroma that is the fragrance of the Lord Jesus himself. They leave behind an unforgettable fragrance, a winsomeness of grace, a loving peaceful, gentle spirit. They have courage to stand with strength and beauty against attacks.

Now the effects of that fragrance are two-fold. Paul continues: "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life" (2 Cor 2:16). Christians smell very good to some, but not to others. As we continue to grow and emit the fragrance of Christ, some who detect that fragrance will be drawn to the life that is in us. Others, however, will be totally turned off. They will dismiss us as losers who need a religious crutch.

This will happen on campus, in the workplace, or in your neighborhood. You are trying to be a gentle, loving witness for Christ, but people make cruel jokes about you and want nothing to do with you. That may even be true in your own home. Your non-Christian spouse may be turned off, not because you have done something that is offensive, but simply because you love your Lord and respond to him.

So Christians leave an unforgettable impact: people either love you or hate you. But they are never the same after knowing you, because you leave behind that fragrance of Christ. That is what was occurring here in Acts.

It was probably in the midst of one of these powerful meetings that the first wave of persecution hits. Earlier it was the healing of the congenitally crippled man that motivated the first attack. Now this apostolic healing crusade provokes the second attack by the authorities.

**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." (5:17-20)**

The temple police rush in and put all twelve apostles in jail. The Jewish leaders are angered by the failure of the first assault on the apostles, and troubled to find they had ignored the court's prohibition and threats. But Luke uncovers their real motive. They weren't trying to stop any heretical doctrine or defend the people; they were simply jealous, resentful of the apostle's popularity, and trying to protect their own reputation and prestige. This had nothing to do with God's honor.

It is not only Peter and John who are jailed this time, but most if not all of the apostles. And this wouldn't be the last occasion, either. The first time they spent the night in jail; this time they are divinely delivered. Luke doesn't say whether God put the jailers into a deep sleep or made the apostles invisible, but they are delivered through an angelic intervention. There is some divine humor here, because the Sadducees didn't believe in angels.

What an encouragement this must have been, a further confirmation to the apostles that God was *Despotes, Sovereign Lord*. (4:24). God could deliver them from the world's attacks whenever he thought it appropriate. No matter what happens, God is in control. He doesn't have to go through a bail bondsman. He simply sends an angel. He can even send an earthquake, as he did with Paul and Silas at Philippi.

Along with the divine deliverance comes a commission. The angel commands them to stand in the temple courts and publicly proclaim the "full message of this new life" (literally, "all the words of this life"). What a beautiful description of the good news! So they refused

to comply with the Sanhedrin, who had told them not to preach, in order to comply with the angel, who told them to speak the full message of this new life. They knew that their deliverance from prison was not for their personal comfort but to advance the kingdom.

**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.**

**Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." (5:21-25)**

This fast-paced account reads like an old Keystone Cops comedy, with rapid changes of scenery and characters running into one another. Luke exposes the powerlessness of the authorities to silence the church's message. Ignorant of the angelic liberation, the full Sanhedrin convenes. Solemn faced and dressed in their gorgeous robes, they convene the court and routinely summon the defendants.

But they are mortified to find that the apostles are no longer in prison. Their agents discover guarded and locked, but empty cells. While they are trying to figure out what to do next, someone reports, "It's not going to be hard to find them. They are preaching in the Temple Courts, the same place where they were the last time you tried to arrest them." The Sanhedrin are perplexed. They are trying to stop the miracles, but their actions are only creating more!

They spring into action.

**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." (5:26-**

This time the captain of the temple guard himself goes to re-arrest the apostles. It is a bit ironic that the ones who wanted to stone them for blaspheming are now afraid they themselves might be stoned by the people. The ones with all the power and authority are frightened and perplexed.

Addressing the apostles, the high priest all but confesses their powerlessness in light of God's purposes. In spite of their warnings and threats, the apostles had successfully filled Jerusalem with their teaching, and in the opinion of the Sanhedrin, were determined to fasten on them the guilt of "this man's blood." This is also somewhat ironic, because at the trial of Jesus, this was the very thing the Sanhedrin had willingly taken upon themselves. Pilate had said: "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!" And they had answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

The apostles' response, under the leadership of Peter, takes the form of a brief sermon. They are not frightened at all; they are utterly fearless. They don't defend themselves in any way, nor do they try to soothe the guilt of the Jewish leaders. They are not diplomats, but ambassadors. They respond, "We must obey God rather than men." This is the principle of civil disobedience. The Scriptures preach submission to authority and government. Human government was established by God to maintain law and order and justice, and therefore has a rightful place in the world. Without government, society would fall into chaos.

But government is not the ultimate authority. There is a higher authority: God himself. When any government asks us to do something contrary to an explicit command of Scripture, then we must obey God rather than man, and humbly and graciously face the consequences. This is the basis for civil disobedience. But we are never to rebel against the principle of authority, or attack government *per se*, or its right to punish evildoers. If we disobey, we must do so respectfully, and be willing to take the consequences. When the apostles were arrested they offered no resistance. They could have created a lot of problems but they didn't.

Having stated that they must obey God, Peter launches into a mini-sermon about what God has done. The content of his message follows the pattern that we have already seen. He begins with a statement about the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord. This is the familiar refrain that he has made several times already: "You killed him, but God raised him. You rejected him, but God vindicated him."

The third element that Peter mentions is the ascension: "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel." From his position of honor and power Jesus is able to grant repentance and forgiveness to Israel. As William Larking writes, "It is very appropriate to proclaim the salvation blessings to the ones

whose ancestors received the promise...It is as if Peter is saying, 'We don't have any vendetta against you. If you would listen to the good news, you would find the answer to your guilt.'"<sup>3</sup> And the final element is the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to God's obedient people.

God raised Jesus from the dead, exalted him as Savior, and gave the Holy Spirit to his obedient people. "We are witnesses of these things," says Peter. "Because we were eyewitnesses, we have to be mouth-witnesses. We have to bear witness to what we saw."

What freedom and power they had! It is the same freedom and power that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had when they stood before Nebuchadnezzar and declared: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:16-18).

How did these apostles gain this marvelous freedom and power? Through obedience, says Peter. Notice that the mini-sermon begins and ends with a reference to obeying God. That is the source of spiritual power. Kent Hughes writes, "The witnessing power of the Holy Spirit is released through obedience to God, to his word, to the inner voice of his guidance."<sup>4</sup> His witness is made through us.

Is there any area in your life in which you are refusing to do what you know God wants of you? Are you turning down opportunities to share your faith because of fear of rejection or appearing foolish, or any other reason? We can't know the power of the Spirit if we are stubbornly resisting his voice. But when we submit to the Spirit's voice, we have a liberty that cannot be touched by any human action.

The apostles' boldness and apparent defiance of the authority of the Sanhedrin does not sit well with these rulers.

**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.” (5:33-39)**

Peter’s words are more than they can handle. Their jealousy and frustration, compounded with their guilt, explode in a fury. Luke says they were “furious” (literally, cut through, sawn through). Were it not for the intervention of Gamaliel, they probably would have fulfilled their desire right there and executed the apostles. Gamaliel, a well-respected Pharisee, a man of wisdom and moderation, was a grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel. He was given the honored title of Rabban, “our teacher” (plural of rabbi). Saul of Tarsus, who would later become the apostle Paul, was one of his pupils.

Gamaliel’s behavior reflects his reputation for wisdom and moderation. He has the apostles removed so that the Sanhedrin can go into a closed session. He restrains their anger, appealing for caution, urging a hands-off, wait-and-see policy. He backs up his reasoning with two contemporary examples of failed revolutionary movements. Gamaliel’s logic, presumably, is that just as these movements died with the death of the leader, Christianity too will die out if its leader is really dead.

His speech persuades them. They call the apostles in and have them flogged. Then they order them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles leave 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 (Acts 5:40-42).

The Sanhedrin back away from their desire to have the apostles executed. Instead they have them “flogged,” a general term for beating or thrashing. They probably received the famous “forty lashes minus one.” One by one their backs are bloodied and their flesh torn. But each of them experience supernatural joy, “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” This is an oxymoron. They took the disgrace as a sign of their worth, so they felt honored by the dishonor: the honor to be dishonored, the grace to be disgraced. They were doing what Jesus had told them to do in the Sermon on the Mount: “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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:10-12).

The devil has not given up on his attempts to destroy the church by force. Even today, especially in some Hindu and Moslem countries, the church suffers severe persecution. We know nothing of this kind of trial. Let me urge you to pray for persecuted believers.

But let me also say that we don’t need to worry about the church’s survival. Adversity only brings advance. Tertullian boldly proclaimed to the rulers of the Roman Empire: “Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust...The more you mow us down, the more we grow.”<sup>5</sup>

Persecution will only refine the church; it will not destroy it. Paul told the Philippian church, and us as well, “it has been granted to us, not only to believe in him, but to suffer for his sake.” Suffering is an essential part of our Christian life.

Facing persecution, the apostles were buoyant, resilient, liberated and victorious. Have waves of oppression overwhelmed you so much that you are no longer sharing the message of this new life? There is no joy, no buoyancy in your life. You need to be set free and know again the liberty that God gives his children. You need to take your stand to obey God rather than man, and speak the message of life. When you do this you will feel the waves, but they will only take you into deeper water.

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1. I am indebted to Kent Hughes for this metaphor in his book, *Acts, The Church Afire* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996), 83-84.
2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 113.
3. William J. Larking Jr., *Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 94.
4. Hughes, *Acts*, 89.
5. Stott, *Acts*, 119.