**Unstoppable**

**Acts 5:17-42 (ESV)**

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We’re in Acts chapter 5. We will be reading from verse 17 through the end. We’re in our series *God on the Move* from the book of Acts, and talking about how Jesus was on the move through the Holy Spirit in the early church and continues on the move now. We’ve seen how He has been working powerfully in the church. The church is facing threats. Last time, we considered the threat of sin within, yet there is still growth. Another threat comes from suffering on the outside, and that’s what we consider today, starting in verse 17 of chapter 5.

***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.*

*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.*

***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.* ***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.* ***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.*

It was a field trip to the beach. That’s where the king took his servants, so the story goes. It was all to prove a point. He urged them to follow him to the shoreline and bring along his throne. They placed it at the edge of the water. He sat down and in his most kingly voice, issued a mighty command that the water not wet his feet and robes and halt! As you might expect, the water ever so slowly refused to obey. The tide rolled in, unwilling to yield an inch to his command. Clearly, it followed the lead of a higher power. And that was precisely his point. According to one source, here’s what he said. “Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth and sea obey by eternal laws.”

What this king knew far too few come to realize. It’s this exact point that has troubled so many in authority throughout the ages. They believe that they have the power to stop movements that are driven forward by God. Whether it’s the incoming tide, the onrushing hurricane, or the multiplying virus, human authorities somehow tend to believe that they can call the shots. Well, these natural rhythms are one thing. To be sure, we’re well within God’s favor to do our best to work good for each other in this world despite the fact that we’re under a curse. But there are also supernatural movements, ways in which God is working out His sovereign plan through history. Fighting against these are as vain an effort as trying to command the tides. We see ruler after ruler throughout the Bible, get obliterated when they try to get in the way of God’s plan. Truly, He is unstoppable!

In a world like our own, the question we should ask is how should we react when we see God on the move? Are there any clear indications for what He is doing in the world? Well, of all the guesses we might make about this event or that, there is one reality. It’s the most important and overarching reality that we do know and we know it with absolute certainty. God is on a divine mission, a plan He is determined to advance. It’s a plan centered around His Son, Jesus, the Christ, and His message of salvation. The promise that He made to save sinners from His wrath through this sacrificial death and the life giving resurrection to all who trust in Him and follow His lead, united to Him by faith. Of all the conjectures that we might suppose about life, this is one thing we never need doubt. God is on the move through His church, according to His Word, with a Gospel mission that is absolutely unstoppable.

When Jesus’ followers asked Him about the future, about what’s going to happen, in private, in Matthew 24, He said many things. He said hard things, of which we’re somewhat familiar in ways. It built towards verse 14.

**Matthew 24:14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

This gospel will be proclaimed. It’s a clear mission of proclaiming this message. This message is God on the move. We find Him all throughout the pages of Scripture and the book of Acts, and this passage with a simple truth that when God is on the move, the safest option is to follow His lead, otherwise, we need to get out of the way or we will be destroyed. We follow His lead.

What does it look like to follow the lead of God on this Gospel mission He is advancing? What kind of commitments does it require of us? We’ll try to work our way through this text. I’ll draw out seven. Maybe one might stand out to you more than another. But there are seven commitments that I think will help us to enjoy the blessings found only by those joined to God and the movement that He is advancing across the world, the mission of the Gospel. Seven commitments that follow God’s lead:

**Get Ready—The Hostility We Will Face (5:17-18)**

The section begins in verses 17-18 with an arrest. After all the good that was done, the growth in the church,

***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.*

This is all of the apostles at this point. There are fierce challenges to the Gospel mission. There is hostility. Hostility is someone who fights against you. It is antagonistic effort against you. We see hostility through power struggles in the world around us. We see it within corporations. We see it through opposing political parties. We see it in various kingdoms and regimes. And very often, opposition escalates with whatever weapons it has at its disposal to enforce its will; whether it’s mental, emotional, verbal, physical, legal. Of all the conflicts throughout the years, the one constant division has always been between God’s rejecters and His followers. Hostility against God’s followers has taken many forms throughout the years. It’s a challenge that every follower of Jesus should be prepared to encounter. We are called to get ready.

One example that stands out is from about 400 years ago. There was a pastor in England who was preaching the Gospel. The political climate changes and it becomes illegal to preach in public without a license. He fails to comply with the demands. He is arrested, imprisoned, and he has a family. He has a pregnant wife. He has an eleven year old daughter named Mary, who was blind. He has a seven year old daughter, Betsy, and five year old and three year old sons, Johnny and Thomas. He had no way to make money for the family in prison. Those who owed him money would not pay while he was in jail. All he had to do to be released was just surrender and agree to stop preaching in public.

When Pastor Ritch preached through the book of Acts several years ago, he recalled this example and reminded of when his wife and his eleven year old blind daughter Mary came to visit him. His wife said, “Yield not John, for we will beg from door to door before you will yield for our sakes. Do not do what you feel to be wrong in the sight of God.” And here is what was said of his blind daughter, Mary. John said, “But what of my Mary? What will my Mary do if her father has to die for the Truth?” She said, “Do, father? Why, I will love thee all the more and I will pray for them that will kill you, and I’ll come as I may to be with thee. Oh, father, I shall look upon thy dear face in Heaven. How I strive to picture thee, but I should like to see you as you really are. When I feel your warm breath upon my cheek and rest in your arms, I feel I fear nothing and want nothing. But Oh, father, my mother taught me that out art Christ’s servant and I am proud that out art called to suffer while the great ones deny the Lord.”

It’s a precious picture in this little cell. Yet, we consider what cruel hostility has brought this about. Are we ready for that kind of hostility? The Scriptures call us to get ready to face these kinds of challenges and difficulties. Look at the kinds of threats that we may encounter. I’ll touch on three. You can see first, where they come from, where this hostility arises. These opponents can be powerful in terms of their connections. You see the challengers, the source of opposition in verse 17.

***17*** *But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees),*

This is influential authority and his accompanied supporters. It is influence in a movement that was more of an establishment, this ruling class. They are able to bring a lot of power to whatever they desire to come about. The Sadducees kind of were in opposition to the Pharisees. Pharisees believed in supernatural things like angels and spirits and life after death; Sadducees, not so much. They enjoyed the traditions of religion but not the substance. They often were at odds, but they were able to unite against one common enemy, Jesus and His followers. So here, the Sadducees are the ones who are initiating this threat. They are powerful in their connections. They are influencers. They are well-dressed. They are well-groomed. They are well-outfitted with whatever the latest technology and influences would have been. They were powerful in their connections. But you see not only that, they are also sinful in their motivations. Why this hostility rises is because of jealousy.

*and filled with jealousy*

If you look back, there were signs and wonders being done. People were believing. It was the movement, the reputation, the growth. All of this had caused them to be overcome by jealousy. That was what they wanted. They wanted that esteem for themselves. They were sinful in their motivations. It’s the kind of jealousy by which Satan fell, about which Cain murdered Abel, about which the rulers crucified Jesus. It’s the same seed of jealousy that takes root in many a heart and home. Few masks are as effective as a disguise for envy as religious piety. “We’re doing this for God.” For all the pretense, the nice clothes, influential endorsements, the public prominence, they were driven by plain old jealousy that can be dressed up as all sorts of alternative explanations. But it will never be appeased until it gets what it wants. That’s a formidable challenge to fight against. Not only powerful and not only sinful, but their actions are forceful, even legal. You can see these challenges coming against them.

***18****they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.*

Even though God is in control, even though Jesus reigns on high, He allows for a time, for sinful leaders to take sinful actions. All will be made right one day but here on earth, according to the wisdom of God, He allows leaders to persecute His followers with unjust actions that are forceful and at times are listed as legal. These persecutions are real. They’re painful. They’re actual. They have consequences. They bring suffering and even death. But they’re not the last word. Some of the most lasting and influential messages of God come from times of suffering or isolation or exile or in the cell of a prison. As Christians, we need to be prepared but not discouraged about these forms of suffering because often through persecution, the kingdom advances. It doesn’t mean the suffering isn’t real, but it does give meaning to that suffering.

One meaning is that we’re not alone. When Saul persecuted the church, Jesus said, “Why are you persecuting me?” He is with us not only as our Savior, but also, within the body of Christ, we don’t suffer alone. Hebrews 13:3 would tell us that we remember those in prison and are mistreated since we’re also in the body; together in this suffering. God’s gospel mission will always face hostility. It will take the form of powerful connections, sinful emotions, forceful actions. Hostility will strike, so we need to get ready. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 10. He warned us about this. Verses 32-39 are clear, maybe summarized in verse 38.

**Matthew 10:38-39** And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Paul, a follower and fellow sufferer who had persecuted the church himself would later say

**2 Timothy 3:12** Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

It’s a simple expectation. Get ready! They opposed Jesus throughout His ministry, all the way until in a jealous rage, they murdered Him. There was no negotiation, no escape, no recourse. This was the plan of God. The right thing sometimes means hard things. But difficulty does not mean defeat. Sometimes the very suffering we endure is the fire that forges, the steel that advances the kingdom in ways we can never imagine.

That man who was in prison had a friend who was desperately trying to pull strings for his release. It was in vain for years. In the end, finally, John Bunyan was eventually let go. He came out of prison with a manuscript of a work that he had been writing for a while. His friend, John Owen, connected him with a publisher and then set *Pilgrim’s* *Progress* into the world to do more powerful work that he could have imagined. We don’t need to be afraid, but we do need to be ready.

We also need to beware any ministry philosophy that guarantees sure wins, sure outcomes, safety and convincing others. Beware the kind of Christianity that we offer to people to try to make it more palatable, watering down the reality of hostility such that they won’t be able to stomach the true version later on. We can tell ourselves opposition won’t actually be powerful in the connections, but they may be. We can say, “They’ll be reasonable in their motivations.” They may not be. We can say, “They won’t be forceful in their actions.” No, they may be. We must be ready.

**Speak Up—The Duty We Must Uphold (5:19-21)**

We speak up in obedience to the duty God’s Gospel mission commands. This is the duty we must uphold. In verses 19-21 we move from the arrest to the release. Here, this deliverance highlights the clear charge that we’re called to obey on this mission.

***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*

This duty is our responsibility. Soldiers have a duty to defend. Doctors have a duty to do no harm. Parents have a duty to care for their children. Christians have a duty to speak up and tell people about Jesus. You can imagine a soldier that is captured and then locked away in his cell, along with other fellow soldiers in accompanying cells. Then one day, a commanding officer rescues them and then gives them a universal key and says, “You are now charged to go and to set others free.” You can’t imagine that this soldier would slip away and ignore that duty, to live his own life. He has the key. He’s been commanded to go and set captives free.

People are locked in the chains of sin and death. The Gospel is the power of God to salvation. The call for us is not merely to be set free, but we’re set free with a responsibility, a duty to speak up and to share that message with others. It’s a charge to be obeyed. This charge, in one sense, it seems very ordinary and natural. But in another sense, it’s supernatural. You can see some features that show how supernatural it is here in this situation. You see how it’s enabled. It’s supernaturally empowered by this angel who comes. The apostles seem like they’re off duty. They’re locked up. They’re silenced. But the angel says, “Nope! You are on duty!” He opened up the doors and said, “Come on out.” God empowers His people to speak whenever and however He wants.

Now, later on there will be times when the apostles or others are not set out of prison. God works through different means. But here, He chooses to work through an angel. And it might be because the Sadducees themselves didn’t believe in angels. Sometimes God just likes to use a bit of irony to drive the point home. Here, right under their very noses, He uses an angel to divinely empower this supernatural work of speaking up.

Now, this command is also given directly from God. It’s supernatural in its source. It’s supernaturally commanded. The angel speaks on God’s behalf here and gives this command. “Go, stand, speak.” The idea is get out there. Stand your ground. Take your stand. Keep talking. Speak up. It’s supernaturally empowered, commanded, and it’s supernaturally focused. Here’s what the charge is about, the essence of the charge, the message itself.

*speak to the people all the words of this Life.”*

Speak the full message. “Life” is conveying this idea of salvation, eternal life. You tell all the words. Don’t reshape it. Don’t water it down. Don’t leave some of it home because it’s offensive. You’re not to sugarcoat it and avoid hard concepts. No, if this Gospel is not clear enough to offend sinners, it cannot be clear enough to rescue them. Tell them all the words of this Life; the palatable ones and the unpalatable ones. Share the Gospel message. False teachers often reveal themselves and betray themselves not just by what they say, but by what they don’t. He says to tell all the words. The focus is on God and who He is and what He has done.

Now, you also can note just the simplicity of the method by which this command is obeyed. The command is to speak up. That’s the method. This proclamation, for it to be effective in any way, is supernaturally dependent on God to accomplish a work because all they’re doing is just talking.

***21*** *And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.*

They’re dependent on God for the miracle of the angel, for the opening of the jail. You can think that God could choose to work in some more special ways, some vision for everyone or some heavenly microphone. No, what He wants to do is just Sunday School. Send them out there and go talk about the message. We realize that at the end of the day, they’re completely dependent upon God’s supernatural work to do what He does and transform the world. The whole idea is to reinforce the reality that this message and mission is all about God. It’s empowered by Him, commanded from Him, focused about Him, and dependent upon Him. It’s about God. Speaking up is a supernatural charge. It seems so ordinary and yet it is so supernatural. Hostility will strike, but duty calls and following God means speaking up. Romans 10 says it so clearly.

**Romans 10:13-15** For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

Jesus said,

**Matthew 4:19** And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

He sent us to go and to make disciples. He told us in Acts chapter 1 “you will be my witnesses.” He is with us to the end of the age. We’re witnesses to the end of the earth. This is the call to go and speak up. We hold this key of rescue. We cannot keep it to ourselves. Even though the method appears ordinary, it’s anything but. Paul would say

**Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,

This is a supernatural thing that we would bring. We don’t think, “No, it’s doable on my own.” It’s not! We need God. Don’t think, “It’s flexible for me to decide how much to share.” No, it’s not. It’s focused on God. Don’t think, “It’s special and so something visibly amazing or miraculous has to appear. It’s not just through talking.” No, it’s very ordinary, and yet it’s God-enabling. Where are we hesitating? I’ll ask this and pause for a moment. Who would God bring to your mind? To whom must we speak up?

**Stay Alert—The Folly We Should Beware (5:21-28)**

Stay alert because of the folly that God’s mission will expose. We see opposition arises, deliverance occurs, shock abounds and exposes the shameful ignorance; the folly that’s at work here in the leaders. This is a folly that we should stay alert to even in ourselves.

Folly is a foolishness or a lack of good sense. It is bad ideas lived out. It’s often an action that is pointless or harmful that someone doesn’t perceive in the moment, but realizes after the fact. It’s sort of an illusion of overconfidence. It’s like that little kid with the pretend steering wheel attached to the car thinking, “I’ve got this. I’m doing this.” Then all of a sudden, at some point they realize, “I’m not in control.” Or like the younger sibling that grabs the remote control and then thinks they’re in control, but then realizes, “I’m not deciding what happens on the screen. It’s just an illusion.” If you truly believe that you’re in control, your folly will eventually be exposed to yourself and to those around you. In children, it’s comedic, but in adults, it’s tragic.

Far too often, adults fail to stay alert and we’re lulled into a deluded presumption that we are supreme in directing outcomes. You see that kind of delusion on full display and the folly exposed in the Sadducees here in verses 21-28. You see some ignorant presumptions that we should also beware. First is the centrality that their ignorance presumes. They think, “I’m at the center of what’s going on here.” You can see that.

*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.*

Here they are at court, ready to go. They think they’re the main event and center stage for the day. They don’t realize that they’re actually a side act at this point. You can see the competence that their ignorance presumes. They think they know what’s happening. They’re like, “Okay. Here’s what’s going to go. We’re coming into the court.” Then the depth of their ignorance is exposed. “Go get the guys and bring them here.” They have no idea that

***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.”*

They come back and they kind of explain that everything is the way it was. There are just no prisoners.

***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.*

Their folly is being exposed even more. Their presumptions are incorrect and it’s going to be further exposed. You can see the control that they presume, still. They’re told

***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.* ***27*** *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council.*

They’re still feigning as if they’re in control. Not only that, the most shocking moment is that in their folly, they presume correctness. They still think that they’re right, that they know what should be happening. They’ve been wrong about everything to this point. Here they are. They think that they’re right.

*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.”*

They’re so sure, that they’re holding them in contempt of court. Their folly is exposed and they don’t even realize it. They’re not alert to this illusion. They aren’t actually interested in justice. They’re so committed to their stubborn ignorance that they’re suppressing the truth, here. They won’t even mention the man’s name. They say, “This man; His blood.” They can’t even say it. The folly of opposing God will be exposed and God calls us to stay alert. Why are they so committed and settled into this folly? Well, I think power, riches, status, education. These things can be a great deception in this life when we grab hold of them in place of God. They lure us into a false sense of security and importance. This is the sort of delusion that Jesus warns us to stay alert against. He warned of this hypocrisy in Luke 12. He warned of those who were in charge and how what seemed to be the case on the outside was not always what was actually going on. He warned them

**Luke 12:4-5** “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear; fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

He warns about standing strong for Him. He warns about how the Holy Spirit will empower His people to speak in these times of persecution. He warns against a love of money.

**Luke 12:15** And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

He tells a story of someone who trusted in His possessions. God says in the story,

**Luke 12:20-21** But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

This is the delusion that they had succumbed to. It’s the folly. “I have control. I know what’s going on. I’m making what’s going on. I know what should be going on.” They were not alert to what was happening because of the lies whispering within. “Look at my influence and my followers. Look at how secure my system and plans are. I can make others do what I want. I’m so passionate about this. How could I be wrong?” It’s the folly of the illusion. Stay alert because these whisperers are within our own hearts. God is on the move. To follow His lead means we get ready. We speak up. We stay alert.

**Stand Firm—The Authority We Can Claim (5:29-33)**

Stand firm in the authority that this Gospel mission possesses. There is an arrest, a release. There is a surprise, and now a standoff. Confrontation ignites and it shows us the kind of courageous stand that sometimes we have to take. We have to stand firm. In verses 29-33 you see the stand and the response. You see the stand for the authority of God.

Authority is the right and the power to give orders, to make decisions and force obedience. It is being in charge. Children know well the authority of their parents. Students know the authority of the principal. Drivers know the authority of the state. Attorneys know the authority of the court. Soldiers know the authority of the military. But Christians know an authority higher than these. All these possess an authority given to them from above, to be used appropriately. But there is only one ultimate authority and that is God.

There is a common example that is cited of someone taking a stand. Martin Luther, who was a sinner like the rest of us, but was forced to a point of commitment about his convictions about what the Bible taught. He was threatened. He was pressured to recant in front of leaders and onlookers. He was pressured into a straightforward yes or no answer. Recant! He said, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures by clear reason,” he said, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

Those are the words of a man who realizes he might be on death’s door. We realize that the kind of resolve it takes to make that kind of stand involves a readiness and a conviction about our own sin, our need for Jesus, and our commitment to follow Him. There are a lot of things that would corrupt our readiness to make a stand like that. Many have! But there are some deeply held beliefs, some convictions that would empower that kind of courage. Here are three to consider. First, consider the ruler we revere. It’s a conviction about who is in charge, our authority. Look at the motivation we can have.

***29*** *But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.*

It’s not just a statement. It’s a declaration. This is the ruler we revere. We’re not taking a stand out of spite, out of selfishness or reckless defiance. This is simple obedience to God. Now, the question is, are they correct in their understanding of what God wants? They revere this ruler, but here, we come to the truth they proclaim. We see not only who is in charge, but what they believe, the message they stand on. You can look at this message and some of the claims that they make. They begin with a life resurrected.

***30*** *The God of our fathers raised Jesus,*

It’s a miracle of resurrection they cite. This is the same God that the Pharisees would appeal to. It is this God who has raised the person of contention, the one they refused to name. Jesus; they’re not afraid to say. They speak of a life resurrected and also then that brings forward a sin committed. They highlight the wrongdoing and they say the reason why He had to be raised was because

*whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.*

He was murdered! They boldly stated the blame for who it was. Surely many of these were those in the crowd of Matthew 27:25 who cried out

**Matthew 27:25** And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”

They recognized this sin had been committed. It’s a shameful, cursed, degrading way of Him being hung on a tree. And here, the courtroom seems to flip. Those who were on the judge side now find themselves as the ones on trial, accused and indicted. A life resurrected, a sin committed, third, a king exalted. This one whom you killed is raised and exalted.

***31*** *God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior,*

Now He reigns on high in the position of honor, power and authority. A verse that comes to mind is

**Psalm 110:1** The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

This is the same Jesus that Stephen will see at the right hand of God in Acts 7:55. This is the leader who has authority to rule. Also, He’s the Savior come to rescue. In that precious rescue, we see the gift granted. He is exalted now

*to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*

All of this, the miracle of His crucifixion and resurrection, He is giving a gift. It’s the gift of salvation. It’s stated in a two-fold sense here. It’s to give repentance and forgiveness, that you would change your mind and see and agree with God and turn from your sin and find yourself forgiven of sin. It’s the most important and blessed gift that could ever be given through this Savior. And they claim a role that they’ve been assigned.

***32*** *And we are witnesses to these things,*

“We must testify to what we’ve seen and heard.” So here, they make this claim. They understand this role and also there is a help given. Not only are they witnesses, but they indicate a Helper in verse 32.

*and so is the Holy Spirit,*

God Himself is a witness.

*whom God has given to those who obey him.”*

There is an emphasis on their solid conviction above all that they were compelled to obey God. A life resurrected, a sin committed, a king exalted, a gift granted, a role assigned, a help given. This was the truth they proclaimed because of the God they revered. Conviction about this God and about this truth helps us to stand firm. But there is a third conviction that can help us, which is the reaction that we can expect.

***33*** *When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.*

If the fear of God is our motivation for standing, the truth of God is the message upon which we stand. A rejection of God is the measure we stand against. There will be people who reject and who are enraged. In Acts 7:54 there is another time when they are cut to the quick. They are enraged. They are provoked to murderous intent. In this reaction, if we consider Jesus, it should be no surprise. He said

**John 15:20** Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

Understanding that prepares us ahead of time for the opposition we will face. Conviction about the ruler we revere, the truth we believe, the reaction we can expect. The point being, God’s authority supersedes all others. If we’re to follow His lead, it means taking a stand when His rule is challenged. Daniel had to do this when he was ordered not to pray. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah when ordered to worship the false idol, these among others stood firm in the face of persecution and they did not flinch. All throughout the Bible we see examples, summarized in Hebrews 11. We see witnesses ultimately that point towards the chosen one. The Son of God who came, took on flesh, obeyed perfectly to the great hatred of all men, He was murdered. But not only was He murdered, He faced God’s wrath in our place.

When we trust God in hard situations and face the fire, we’re never alone. He never leaves us. Jesus trusted His Father. He took the cup, submitted and yielded, facing the wrath not of man, but of God. He faced this wrath so that we would never have to. Because of that, we can stand firm. We’re never abandoned when we trust God. We have a conviction about who is really in charge no matter who seems to be calling the shots. We have a conviction about what we should believe no matter what other people are asserting. We have a conviction about what we should expect no matter how much we would want to hope that it will always work out. On the authority of God, we can stand firm.

Now this verse and this issue has been a lightning rod over the last year, when it comes to conflict between orders from man and the commands of God. I believe that it has not been easy to work out appropriate responses and applications in light of all the confusion. But we have sought to do the best that we can. We continue to do the best that we can. But the simple fact is that there is a time when a church is called to stand firm for God. We need wisdom, discernment and help from God’s Spirit to know how to do it not in our flesh, but at the right time and in the right way. There are passages that help us with how, and that we’ve wrestled through. In Titus chapter 3, we’re called to be submissive. We’re called to be obedient, prepared, respectful, peaceable, gentle, courteous. There is a challenge with how we do this, but we seek to do it in a way that pleases God.

But there are times, to be sure. It’s happening around the world in various places where there is a line that gets crossed. That line is ever present. We need to pray for each other and for our leaders as we approach it, to please God in how we work these things out. Praise God that we’ve been given the freedom to worship! We have guidelines to consider, but to be clear, we’ve not had to work through violating orders the same as some other states and countries have. Special provision remains granted to religious worship services. But as we consider these kinds of challenges, many brothers and sisters around the world face these kinds of legitimate questions. Even when it comes to the question of gathering, and even some brothers and sisters who are online wrestling through this very question, what does it look like to please God?

There is a question of how long. How long does a church remain ungathered before the tide carries someone out of reach? How many weeks does it take before an alcoholic habit takes over? How long before parents are gripped with such frustration and anger that they begin lashing out at their children, to lasting consequence? How long before pornography becomes too appealing to resist? How long before deception becomes a way of life? How long before anxiety and loneliness grip a depressed soul so strongly that they will never return? How long before doubt and discouragement poison our hearts against people and we lose hope of ever restoring friendships? How long before marriages are so soured in the house, past the point of recovery? These dangers are not imagined. They are real. They are dangers faced by our very church family. There is much talk of lives at stake, and often, too little talk of souls at stake. The question is not whether we will need to stand firm, but when and how. We ask, are we ready? Following God’s lead demands it. Praise God for all of those situations. There is hope and that hope is found in the gospel mission of Jesus Christ. May we stand firm for it. Get ready! Speak up! Stay alert! Stand Firm!

**Take Note—The Apathy We Will Encounter (5:34-40)**

There is a surprising move in the story, here. Their arrest, the release, the surprise, the standoff, and now we get a theory. This Pharisee named Gamaliel stands up and he issues sort of an argument. We’ll call it one of apathy. By apathy, we mean an indifference, a lack of concern, a flippant disregard for any real consideration. It’s when someone is so overconfident that they don’t take seriously something else. In this case, the reality of Christianity is a genuine threat to them. He is overconfident and dismisses it.

There are a few famous predictions, some examples that are somewhat humorous, about absurdly inaccurate dismissals or apathy towards legitimate challenges. The president of Michigan Savings Bank advised Henry Ford not to invest in Ford Motor Company,” saying, “The horse is here to stay. The automobile is only a novelty, a fad.” In a Western Union internal memo, someone wrote, “The telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.” In 1962, a Decca Records executive tells the band manager of a new group, “We don’t like your boys’ sound. Groups are out; four-piece groups with guitars particularly, are finished. The Beatles have no future in show business.” In 1977, the president of a certain digital corporation said at a World Future Society meeting, “There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home.” In 1995, there was a Newsweek article that claimed the internet was a passing fad. “No online database will replace your daily newspaper.” In 2007, one CEO said, “There is no chance that the Iphone is going to get any significant market share.” These and other claims like them are these profound statements of dismissal, of apathy. These false predictions said, “This movement is not going to have a lasting future. It poses no threat.” These are cases that should cause us to sit up and take note.

We see something similar in Gamaliel here. He has an apathy towards this movement of Christ, a dismissal of it. And it shows how blind we can become. You see him. He is a surprising and ironic advocate. Gamaliel’s party is that of the Pharisees, so he’s usually not a friend of the Sadducees, but he has a position of influence.

***34*** *But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law*

We’ll learn later in Acts 22:3, he’s actually the teacher of Saul. His prominence is on display

*held in honor by all the people,*

Here’s the play.

*stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.*

He’s an unexpected and ironic advocate who offers some unexpected advice. Here is his warning.

***35*** *And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.*

Later in verse 38,

***38*** *So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone,*

He’s trying to take the path of moderation. “Hey, guys. Let’s just let them be.” His advice is to do nothing because he believes it will come to nothing. He is an unexpected source, this advocate, with an unexpected message, his advice. Here is his unexpected reasoning. It’s some logic that he offers. He brings up two historical examples that betray his belief that Jesus is a nobody. This is a no big deal, inconsequential movement. It’ll die out.

***36*** *For before these days Theudas*

This was a common name. There is a confusion. Sometimes scholars will think that this is a confusion by Luke about a later Theudas that is mentioned by Josephus. No, this is an earlier Theudas. Likely, it’s a common name. This guy

*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.*

No big deal! Another guy, Judas the Galilean; you know how these zealots are rising up.

***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.*

No big deal! He’s building towards a simple principle at the end of verse 38.

*for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail;*

That seems to be the expectation. “We can just dismiss it.” Now, what’s interesting, ironically, is he drives his point home by warning

***39****but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”*

The irony here is thick because he seems to assume the opposite. He’s not one to follow Jesus. He doesn’t change his view on these things. He takes this path of moderation and appeases the Saduccees with just enough truth and warning that they decide to take his advice.

*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.*

They decide, “Okay, we’ll live in indifference. Maybe we’ll use just a little violent intimidation, but at the most we’ll have indifference, apathy.” Now, this moderation will not continue. The attack will grow. Persecution will not die out on its own. The idea here is that when it comes to Jesus, there isn’t actually a neutral. We cannot be apathetic. We will encounter people who claim to be apathetic. We will feel in ourselves that we are somewhat apathetic. We’re neutral. It’s okay. We tend to say, “Sin is not that big a deal. Being at church to be a part of the body, to follow the commands of God is not that big a deal. Sharing the Gospel is not that big a deal.” And we get apathetic, indifferent. We realize that we can miss the truth that is right in front of us, even coming from our own mouths. The warning is to take note because there is no neutral zone. Jesus said

**Matthew 12:30** Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

There is no neutral. We must take note and recognize what God is doing and not be lulled into sleep and the blindness that we can be indifferent to the things of God. That is a serious danger. Sixth, and we’ll do these last two quickly.

**Give Praise—The Mystery We Can Respect (5:41)**

There is a mystery here in the end of somehow, how joy and suffering are mixed. It’s a mystery.

***41****Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.*

This mystery is hard to explain. There are some things that are hard to explain, how this blend of joy and suffering come together. But you think about the apostles, how they suffered dishonor here. Not only dishonor, but also painful suffering through being beaten and they have joy because they are considered worthy to suffer for the name. They had watched Jesus be persecuted and many had cowered back in fear. They participated in that. Peter especially cowered away in fear. Here is an opportunity where they actually are able to recognize we are together with Jesus. The togetherness, the union with Christ, the connection with Christ is so important now because we need to be connected with Christ then. Peter understands that. That’s why he says

**1 Peter 4:13** But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Have joy when you suffer because you’re in the name. You’re with the name. You and Jesus are united. There is a mysterious joy that comes with being persecuted for Jesus’ sake. Not for our sin’s sake, and not because we’re being reckless, and not because we’re pursuing some kind of pain for its own sake. No, we are just standing for Jesus. Jesus made it clear in Matthew chapter 5

**Matthew 5:10** “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**Matthew 5:12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The suffering now brings joy because of the hope of joy ahead. We can give praise to God for that. We actually join together with each other in evangelistic efforts. The names that God brought to mind or the faces that God brought to mind, share and pray with someone else and be willing to be bold and even speak to them. You can share in joy even as there are challenges in suffering, even when the suffering means very serious consequences; loss of family relationships, loss of friendships, loss of careers. There are serious consequences even up to loss of life. Yet, there is a mysterious joy because this is not the end and we can give praise to God for how we’re united with Christ. In light of all those things, last, we

**Press On—The Certainty We Can Trust (5:42)**

Here is the certainty of this gospel mission that we can trust. It will advance with certainty.

***42*** *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

This is a certain thing that the Gospel will advance. It’s a certainty that we can trust, that involves the simple communication that we’re faithful to do; to preach and teach and proclaim Christ. And not only just Christ, but that the Christ is Jesus. The Messiah, the Promise, the Chosen One, the Savior, is Jesus. You can see that it’s a continuation, day after day. It’s not one time a year. Not at evangelistic events. Not only on a Sunday. This is every day. It’s circulating in every sphere, public and private, in the temple and house to house. It’s the Gospel non-stop, every day, everywhere. Press on! This is the wave that we can ride all the way into eternity. No matter what persecution comes, God will advance this mission. Very simply, Jesus said

**Luke 19:10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

This is the mission we need to be about for the glory of God. This is the work that we can be a part of. It is unstoppable despite whatever persecution comes. It is proclaiming this Gospel message in the most ordinary of means, but for a God who is ultimately unstoppable.

It’s been a few summers since we’ve had the privilege of spending some time visiting the beach. My kids love to play in the sand. They take those little buckets and little shovels and build their little castles. But time and time again, they build those cities right by the shore. And without fail, the tide comes in and the waves draw near and they start to panic. They start to try to protect their tiny kingdoms. They build these little walls and they start dumping on more sand and they ask dad for help. But there’s nothing I can do.

How many of us have fallen into a panic at some point in the last year? We’re scurrying around, our kingdoms feeling threatened, appealing to some leader, some politician, some policy. Somebody help protect this kingdom. And we forget that this is temporary. We forget that God is on the move. The tide is rolling in, but it is in God’s favor. He’s not failing. Even in hard times, He’s doing exactly what He wants to, exactly as Jesus said. His Gospel mission advances unstoppable, according to His plan. The question is will we follow His lead?