

**WORTHY AND WILLING TO SUFFER FOR CHRIST**  
**(SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2017)**

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Scripture: 10 Commandments; Acts 5:33-42

**Introduction**

It is estimated that more Christians died for their faith and the name of Christ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than the previous centuries combined.

I don't know how such a calculation was made, though I don't have reason to doubt it either.

We should consider the great spread of the gospel in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Additionally, we know that there has been a significant growth in world population.

We also recognize that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were billions of people who lived under the tyranny of communism, Islam, and other oppressive regimes.

It is certainly the case that most Christians in the west for the past several centuries have not suffered greatly or died for their faith.

And probably most Christians even in oppressive places have not died for their faith.

What will we face in the next 10 or 20 years?

Likely, most will not suffer in extreme ways like beatings, torture, or imprisonment, though we may be called to face less severe forms, be they economic or social.

Certainly one of the great challenges we still face is not just seeking our own comfort and happiness, but the kingdom of Christ.

Our text, though not directly relatable, is given for your encouragement, direction, and even challenge.

**In light of Christ's sacrifice and victory, may you be counted worthy and willing to suffer for Him.**

We will focus our attention on Acts 5:33-42 in two parts – vv. 33-39 and vv. 40-42.

**1. GOD USES A RESPECTED, WISE MAN TO GIVE FOOLISH ADVICE, VV. 33-39**

As we continue in Acts 5 with verse 33, we recall that we are in the midst of a trial.

The 12 apostles were called to stand before the highest religious and political body in Israel, the Sanhedrin, made of approximately 70 men.

Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had been members of the Sanhedrin. I don't know how long they would have been able to keep their position after they buried Jesus.

I mentioned last week that even though the 12 apostles were on trial, there is a sense where they were the ones bringing judgment upon the religious leadership of Israel.

Look again at verses 29-32.

**Acts 5:29** But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. **30** The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. **31** Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. **32** And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is* the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

You are all guilty. And there are two sets of witnesses.

We, the apostles, serve as witnesses. Even more, the Holy Spirit is a witness of all these things.

Well, we can understand why most Sanhedrin members were furious after hearing Peter's words.

The Greek word used by Luke expresses anger and revenge, hence their determination to kill the apostles.

Could they have gotten away with putting them to death?

Under Rome they did not have the legal power to carry out an execution, but because it was not a time for one of the religious feasts, the Roman procurator would have been out of town.<sup>1</sup>

And so, the Sanhedrin may well have been able to get away with murdering the 12 apostles for their witness.

They would have justified it by charging them with blasphemy and treason.

Let me emphasize again a very important point that we see throughout the book of Acts.

The Church of Jesus Christ was established, protected, and multiplied not because of man's wisdom or power, but as God determined.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 336.

The very fact that the church in the New Covenant was established in Jerusalem points to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this critical moment, where the 12 apostles could have been murdered, the Lord used a Pharisee to turn the council from their plans.

Verse 34 states that one in the council stood up. The verb stood up is the same verb used in verse 17 where the high priest rose up.

The man who stood up to speak was a Pharisee named Gamaliel.

He is described in two ways by Luke – a teacher of the law and one held in respect by the people.

From Acts 22:3 we learn that Paul had been a student of Gamaliel.

**Acts 22:3** “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.

From other sources, we learn that Gamaliel had been a student of another famous rabbi, Hillel, a more liberal leader of the Pharisees.

Some sources say that Gamaliel was in fact Hillel’s grandson, while others call into question whether they were part of the same family.<sup>2</sup>

Gamaliel’s son, Simon or Simeon, succeeded him as one of the key leaders in Israel and died in the Roman invasion of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

Gamaliel began by cautioning the rest of the Sanhedrin from their plan to put to death the apostles.

Be careful, think about your plan.

Why?

Gamaliel shared two accounts of people who tried to lead political rebellions, gathered followers, and then came to nothing.

The two accounts are those of Theudas and Judas of Galilee.

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<sup>2</sup> See the comments of MacArthur in contrast to Keener.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 42156.

Now because the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus talks about another man named Theudas whose activities took place in about AD 44, there are some who question what Luke has written.

Well, we have no reason to doubt the testimony of Scripture here and it is not our main interest to determine how Josephus lines up with Scripture at this point.

For a time, Theudas gathered about 400 men to follow him, but he was killed and his movement died with him.

In similar fashion, Gamaliel briefly recounts a similar attempt by Judas of Galilee who led a tax revolt in about the year A.D. 6. The Romans took action against Judas, though he did give birth to other revolutionaries known as Zealots.

Judas' sons would be part of the later Jewish revolt and would be both crucified.<sup>4</sup>

Again for a time, Judas was successful in gathering followers, but after his death, his movement died out.

For Gamaliel, the Sanhedrin should not worry about taking action based on these two examples.

If the church and the work of the apostles were simply the work of man, it would eventually come to nothing.

However, if the apostles were truly doing the work of God, then you won't be able to stop it and even more you don't want to be found out as those fighting against God.

Gamaliel was a respected and very knowledgeable man. What should we think of his advice?

There are several things that can be said.

My initial point was that God used this wise man to give from the perspective of the Sanhedrin very foolish advice.

Releasing the apostles and letting them carry out their work was not a good thing for the Jewish leadership.

Second, we should lament that Gamaliel, one who no doubt had a vast knowledge of the OT Scriptures, was devoid of understanding how the Scriptures point to Jesus Christ.

Gamaliel was not moved by all the signs of God's power.

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<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 337.

He certainly had heard either directly or indirectly the message that the apostles had been preaching.

And yet for him, the growth of the early church is compared at least in part to failed political rebellions.

Third, Gamaliel is of course correct in saying that if the apostles represent the work of God, then you won't be able to stop what is taking place and you don't want to be found fighting against God.

But sadly, Gamaliel, from what we know continued to fight against God.

Fourth, the advice of Gamaliel certainly should not be understood as a template for dealing with doctrinal errors or other problems that local churches and the church as a whole must face.

If there is error that must be corrected, we certainly should not take the attitude of saying, well, if it is of man it will come to nothing.

Those who are entrusted with warning and dealing with error must take appropriate action, not just sit back and watch.

So although we should be thankful for God's Providence in using Gamaliel to help protect the apostles, let us not find in his words direction for how we must contend for the truth and seek to live before God as a local church.

John Calvin wrote:

We must rather mark what God commands us to do, and he will have us to restrain wickedness. To this end hath he appointed magistrates, and armed them with the sword; to this end hath he set elders over his Church, to bring the froward in order, and that they may not suffer sin licentiously to rage without punishment. Therefore it is gathered amiss that we must refrain from punishing, because God is sufficient of himself to take away evils.

## **2. THE APOSTLES REJOICED TO SUFFER SHAME FOR THE NAME OF CHRIST, vv. 40-42**

In God's Providence, the rest of the Sanhedrin accepted the counsel of Gamaliel.

They were persuaded by his illustrations and his conclusion.

The Sanhedrin was not quite finished with the apostles. We see from verse 40 that two things were done after they were called back before the Sanhedrin.

First, the apostles were beaten.

The Greek word used means to flay, but is properly translated as beaten.

Though we cannot be dogmatic about the details of the beating the apostles received, most likely each of the 12 apostles was beaten with a triple strip of leather.

Two blows would be delivered to your bare back and then one to the chest.

This cycle would be repeated another 12 times, for a total of 39 lashes, since Biblical law placed the limit at 40 according to Deut. 25:3.

According to Acts 12:19, Paul used to administer these beatings.

In 2 Cor. 11:24, Paul says that five times he was beaten in this same method – forty stripes minus one.

Another three times, Paul was beaten with rods, a Roman punishment.

It is with no exaggeration that Paul said in Gal. 6:17,

**Gal. 6:17** From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps some of you remember from just about 23 years ago, May 5, 1994, when an American named Michael Fay, was given the punishment of caning in Singapore for his acts of vandalism.

Because of pressure from Bill Clinton, the president of Singapore reduced the strokes Fay received from 6 to 4.<sup>5</sup>

The apostles were given a very cruel beating, which in some cases could kill, and then they were commanded to stop speaking in the name of Jesus.

Amazingly the apostles were set free, even though they never agreed to the command they were given.

No doubt in pain and with lasting wounds, the apostles left the assembly of the Sanhedrin.

Without trying to minimize the pain that they endured, Luke emphasizes that what dominated their response was that of joy.

The verb translated as rejoicing is a common verb in the NT, speaking of being full of joy.

They were full of joy because they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

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<sup>5</sup> See Wikipedia article on Michael Fay.

The verb to suffer shame most often is translated as dishonor in the NT.

**Rom. 1:24** Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,

To be beaten at the command of the Sanhedrin was to experience a punishment that truly was shameful.

In this case, the shame they endured in their bodies was because of the name of Jesus Christ.

We might tend to think that when we are truly serving Christ, everything will go well.

Lack of suffering is sometimes taken to mean that we are doing well.

Now certainly some suffering is because of our own sin and foolishness, but perhaps in some cases we don't suffer not because we are doing well but rather we are not focused on serving the Lord.

We will consider more what it means to be counted worthy to suffer shame for His name, but first let us consider the wonderful conclusion of verse 42.

Peter speaking for the all the apostles had boldly declared, we must obey God rather than men.

And this exactly what we see after they were commanded to not speak in the name of Jesus.

The apostles continued to teach and evangelize in the name of Jesus the Messiah.

They did not do this secretly but openly in the temple, most likely in Solomon's porch.

We have a beautiful example of ministry from verse 42 – it was on the large scale in the temple and perhaps on a more individual or at least a smaller scale in houses.

They taught the people but they also looked to evangelize the lost.

The word preach in verse 42 is where we get our verb evangelize.

I don't know that verse 42 is given simply as a summary of the ministry of a local church but at least in terms of teaching and evangelizing it gives a beautiful picture of what we should strive for.

**In light of Christ's sacrifice and victory, may you be counted worthy and willing to suffer for Him.**

## CONCLUSION

What does it mean to be counted worthy to suffer for Christ?

Ephesians 1:6 says that for all true believers we have been made accepted in the Beloved.

**Eph. 1:6** to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

If you are in Christ according to God's sovereign grace, then you have been made accepted in Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son.

What could be greater than this?

So no one makes himself worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

If you think about it, how ridiculous would it be for anyone to think, I in my own merit or according to my own holiness or obedience have earned the right to suffer for Christ.

If you truly have been purchased by the blood Jesus Christ, then you not only have been accepted in Christ but you are now called to suffer for the sake of Christ.

All believers must be willing to suffer shame for the name of Christ.

Now we recognize that in God's Providence, we will not all suffer in the same way and certainly not all to death.

As I have mentioned before, God's ways are not always predictable.

Why did John Hus and William Tyndale both die in cruel ways and yet John Calvin and Martin Luther died of natural causes?

It is not that Hus and Tyndale were more worthy to die or that Calvin and Luther tried to avoid suffering for Christ.

Now, it is certainly the case that as believers we do not always live as we should.

There are some believers who live either far too much for themselves or simply to please men.

And lest we start thinking of names of people who fit this description, we must first confess our own hypocrisy and failure first.

Our response to this chapter and the testimony of the suffering of the apostles should be one of thankfulness and humility.

We first give thanks that we have a Savior who is also our king!

We have a Savior who gave himself for us; we who are totally undeserving.

We also give thanks that the apostles, part of the great foundation for the church, were men who all lived and suffered for the sake of Christ.

They were not perfect men as the NT makes clear.

Some like Peter would make some very foolish decisions.

They did not always live according to the gospel, but by God's grace this was the general pattern of their lives.

We respond also in humility.

We have not yet been tested to the point of shedding blood.

We know that we still often fail our Lord in many ways including how we treat others.

But may we say, Lord, if you called me to endure great hardship, suffering, or even death for the sake of the name of Christ, may I be willing.

### **Final Preparation for Communion**

#### **Prayer**

Hymn 364

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

