

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses... **...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.**

(Studies in the book of Acts)

Our Reasonable, Passionate Faith

(Acts 5:12-42)

Study #8

Introduction: What were you thinking?...

I remember the day, a long time ago (I was seventeen), when my father asked me, not without reason, *"What were you thinking?"*

And now you're thinking, *"You had a wise father to have wanted to explore your thought life like that."*

Yes, I did have a wise father. But that was not at all what was going on. Dad asked that question right after I did something while driving his car.

He wasn't really asking me to tell him what I had been thinking. His point was, *"Son, you weren't thinking!"*

He was right, too.

I wouldn't have done what I did while driving (I burned out the clutch in his car...) if I had been thinking, if I had behaved reasonably.

Living reasonably, logically, wisely is crucial to life behind the wheel. Reasonableness is also crucial in our walk with Jesus, as we'll see in our time in the book of Acts today.

Review...

When we catch up with the goings-on of the first church of Jerusalem, fear ruled the day. But it was a good fear. It was ***"the fear of the Lord."***

This reverence for God followed God's judgment on two believers, Ananias and Sapphira, who had [Acts 5:3, 9] ***"lied to the Holy Spirit."***

Unlike other fears, the fear of the Lord is not a fear that paralyzes. The fear of the Lord energizes.

In the aftermath of God's judgment, the believers were filled with energy for God, more aware of His power and of the ugliness of sin than they had been before.

In this setting where there was a great fear / reverence for God, Luke paints a picture of a tremendous movement of God.

Background: The State of the Communion (vv. 12-16)

Specifically, there was a fresh outpouring of God's power. That power was showing itself through miracles, exorcisms, and healings.¹

There was also a powerful sense of Jesus-centered community. And more and more people were being added to the church as they believed in Jesus.

So, showing that God can bring something redemptive and beautiful even out of sin and judgment (like the tragic Ananias-and-Sapphira incident), the church in Jerusalem was doing great.

¹ God's gift of power to the apostles for these miracles opened the door for other believers could speak about Jesus. Remember Acts' pattern: God acts; we speak.

There was highly esteemed leadership, evangelistic effectiveness, and the undeniable presence of the power of God.

As the story continues, we hear a word we've heard before. It pops up with regularity in Acts. It often alerts us to trouble.

Back to Jail for the Apostles (Acts 5:17-25)

This Time, It was ALL the Apostles (5:17-18)

Naming the opposition (v. 17)

Jealous Sadducees

[17] But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy.

These Sadducees have taken center stage before.

They were leaders of the group that had bitterly opposed Jesus. Just a few months earlier, the Sadducees - and others - saw to it that Jesus was handed over to the Romans for crucifixion.

They were also behind the earlier overnight jail sentence for Peter and John. (See Acts 4.)

Luke tells us that they were jealous. That's telling.

The Sadducees had lots of political clout in Jerusalem. Jealousy was what drove their opposition to Jesus. Here, jealousy drove them to oppose the followers of Jesus.

Offended Sadducees

On top of jealousy, I think that they were also offended by Jesus' followers for ignoring their commands.

Remember that when they had released Peter and John from their earlier jail sentence, they commanded them to stop talking about Jesus. (Acts 4:18, 21)

And yet, here were these disciples (Acts 5:12-16), disobeying that command. They were still talking about Jesus. The Sadducees weren't about to stand for that.

When by Jesus' teaching and miracle-working He had horned in on the Sadducees' territory, had invaded their turf, they dealt with Him forcefully and saw to His death.

Here, the apostles were doing the same things, and the Sadducees were prepared to deal with them just as forcefully as they had dealt with Jesus.

A time for action! (v. 18)

[18] They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public prison.

Before, it was just Peter and John. Now, they have rounded up the whole apostolic band. They threw them all in jail together.

I suspect that they intended to keep the apostles in jail longer this time than they had with Peter's and John's earlier one night.

The Sadducees wanted these guys to think about what they were doing. Let them be humiliated in a **"public prison."** (Or what may be more the point, and maybe a better translation, *"They put them in prison - custody - publicly,"* the point being to humiliate them.)

By whatever means, they wanted to convince the apostles that it simply wasn't worth it to keep on talking about and living for Jesus.

God had other plans.

"Catch & Release" Apostles (5:19-21a)

Released (v. 19a)

[19] But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison...

...and, just like that, the apostles found themselves standing outside the jail in the middle of the night.

It required God-sized things to happen for all of this to happen.

- The locked jail door had to be unlocked and then opened.
- The guards had to remain asleep during the jail break.
- The gate had to be closed and locked behind them after they got out.

All of this would be impossible without a miracle from God. Then, the angel who had enabled the jailbreak spoke to the apostles.

Re-commissioned (vv. 19b-20)

[20] “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple area the whole message of this Life.”

Clearly, the angel is commissioning the apostles to go to the temple and evangelize. He was telling them to share the good news about Jesus.

But he described the story they were to tell as **“the whole message of this Life.”**

The message about Jesus is fundamentally a message about a qualitatively superior LIFE, here and there, now and forever. The message is life-giving.

There were people in the temple who were without life.

The apostles were to go and tell them that if they believed in Jesus, a Man who had lived and died and rose again, they would be rescued from a dead life and delivered into a live life - abundant and eternal.

You and I need to remember that the message of Jesus that we are commissioned to share is the anti-death, life-giving message that our friends and family desperately need. It is really GOOD NEWS.

Now, back to the story and to see the point of the release.

We’ve seen that God’s angel went to a lot of trouble to orchestrate the release of the apostles.

We now see that the point of the release was NOT to bring them from jail to safety. It was to thrust them back out on to the front lines of proclamation.

The angel did not escort the apostles to a safe house. He didn’t urge them to take a few days for R&R.

No, he sent them straight from the frying pan of jail into the fire of witness.

That tells me that our Commander-in-Chief (God!) is so committed to the mission of bringing **“the message of this life”** to people who are lost, that He do so even at the expense of those who have already believed.

Now the Lord loves us. There is no question about that. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. (Romans 8:38-39)

But there are many, many people who are not safe and sound in the arms of God. They need to be rescued. And the expeditionary force God has assigned to accomplish that task is us.

That’s God’s plan. Use the saved - who can never be unsaved - to rescue those who are hopelessly and helplessly lost.

Jesus proved His love for you and me by giving His life on the cross. And He is now NOT absolutely committed to our safety, our reputations, our comfort, our wealth, or our health.

Having rescued us from eternal condemnation, He considers our lives expendable in the on-going turf wars on planet earth for the souls of others for whom Christ died.

If there are inconveniences, costs, even casualties along the way, it is worth it. The people you and I know who have never believed in Jesus need Him more than you and I need relief.

That's because God loves them every bit as much as He loves us. He loves them so much that He is willing to send people like apostles and me and you to go tell them the good news.

The thinking behind that plan is eminently reasonable.

This angelic jail break took place ***"during the night."*** Following the apostles' release, there may or there may not have been time for them to have slept a bit, or to have rested.

But as soon as it was light, as soon as it was possible to enter the temple precincts, they went there, just like the angel commanded.

Re-engaged (v. 21a)

[21a] Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple area about daybreak and began to teach.

What do you think was going through the apostles' minds as they walked toward the temple, as they entered the temple itself?

I think that they had to have been thinking about the previous night's time in jail. And they may have feared yet another arrest.

Fear would have been - to use the word, again - reasonable.

But these men knew the fear of the Lord and THAT fear eclipsed their fear of the Sadducees.

So, very reasonably, they spoke right up. On that day at the temple, they taught anyone who would listen about Jesus and ***"the message of this Life."***

While that was going on, Luke turns our attention to another location in Jerusalem where the Sadducees were.

I picture them gloating. They thought that they had finally shut the apostles up.

You can almost read their minds: *"All this fuss about Jesus will soon be over and done with. Now that we have them in jail, they know what they're up against."*

But they weren't in jail. The angel had let them out. Not being aware of that development, the High Priest gave his order.

Found and Lost - and Found! (5:21b-26)

Mission NOT accomplished! (vv. 21b-24)

[21b] Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, that is, all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison for them to be brought.

So, off went the Sanhedrin police to fetch the apostles from jail, who weren't in jail. They reported back...

[23]... "We found the prison locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened up, we found no one inside." [24] Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.²

Now, everybody knew that the apostles weren't in jail. Nobody knew how they had gotten out of jail or where they now were.

From prison to temple (v. 25)

While they were all standing or sitting with questions about where those apostles might be (!), a man rushed in and announced, ***[25]... "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple area and teaching the people!"***

THAT would have been a shock. And a shocked Sanhedrin gave new orders to those officers.

The Romans soldiers, though, would have been more than perturbed since they would have likely been put to death after a jail break.

² F.F. Bruce remarks that the captain of the temple guard would have been *"perturbed,"* as he and his team were responsible for the prisoners' safekeeping.

From temple to court! (v. 26)

[26] Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).³

Now it all comes to a head in a classic confrontation with the apostles standing in front of the Supreme Court of ancient Israel.

Apostles vs. Council, Round 2 (Acts 5:27-40)

The Apostles - Scolded by the Council (5:27-28)

[27] When they had brought them, they had them stand before the Council. The high priest interrogated them, [28] saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this Man's blood upon us."⁴

So, what will the apostles say in response to the Sanhedrin's accusations and threats? We aren't surprised that Simon Peter was the spokesman for the group. He stood up and spoke boldly.

The Apostles - Standing Firm! (5:29-32)

Point 1: "We must obey God rather than man."

[29] But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."⁵

³ Perhaps Luke listed only one of many reasons for the lack of violence in the re-arrest of the apostles. The first part is that the guards were afraid of a riot breaking out among the people, because the apostles were more popular in Jerusalem at this time than the temple guard. But another reason for the peacefulness is that the apostles didn't resist. Their non-resistance speaks powerfully of their trust in God.

⁴ The Council clearly meant that the apostles were trying to pin guilt on them for Jesus' death. They were guilty (humanly speaking) for Jesus' death. But the apostles DID want to see the blood of Jesus cover the Sanhedrin - for forgiveness' sake! They wanted these men who had arrested them - the men responsible for Jesus' death! - protected from the wrath of God by the blood of Jesus.

⁵ See Acts 4:19-20 for a similar response from the apostles in an earlier scene.

How reasonable.

Given that God is, it is thoroughly reasonable that they should have obeyed God rather than any other being. That was Peter's opening line - and he was far from finished.

Just to be sure that the members of the Sanhedrin weren't in the dark about Jesus, he evangelized them.

Point 2: "Hey, listen to this about Jesus!" (vv. 30-32)

[30] "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging Him on a cross. [31] He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. [32] And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."⁶

Amazing. Peter was standing trial for the crime of preaching Jesus - and he preached Jesus to the prosecution. How bold is that?!⁷

And how reasonable it was that Peter should care for the eternal souls of these men? Jesus died for them. Clearly, Jesus loved them.

It was only reasonable that he should also lovingly present the Good News to them so that they, too, might receive the free gift of eternal life by believing in Him.

⁶ Peter says that God gives the Holy Spirit to those who "**obey**" Jesus. Peter didn't mean that the Spirit's presence in a person's life is dependent on their moral goodness. The New Testament often speaks of "*obedience to Jesus*" when urging faith in Him for salvation. We see this in John, where Jesus said, **[6:29] "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."** Also, John 3:36; Romans 1:5, 15:18; 16:26; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Hebrews 5:8-9; 1 Peter 4:7) When someone believes in Jesus for salvation, obeying the command of God to believe, that person receives the Holy Spirit.

⁷ Remember that the church had prayed for boldness / confidence. (Acts 4:29) God was still answering that prayer.

Not surprisingly, but tragically, Peter's words provoked, not acceptance, not faith, but the Council's full fury.

The Apostles - an Unexpected Sponsor (5:33-39)

Conviction and wrath (v. 33)

[33] But when they heard this, they became infuriated and nearly decided to execute them.⁸

They were right on the verge of killing the apostles,⁹ when deliverance arose from an unexpected source.

Just at the moment when it seemed that Peter might have signed the death warrant for the whole group, God brought an advocate to their rescue from within the ranks of the Council itself.

This man pleaded for a policy of moderation -and he did so on the basis of reasonableness.

Listen as a wise man, a Pharisee¹⁰ named Gamaliel, first cleared the room of the apostles, and then counseled the Council.¹¹

Moderation and wisdom from Gamaliel (vv. 34-39)

Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin, but he was not a Sadducee. He was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law, well respected by all the people.¹²

And, while we need to remember that the Pharisees received some of Jesus' harshest rebukes, from a human perspective, here, the apostles owed their lives to this Gamaliel.

He showed wisdom, maturity, and restraint in his words here.

[35] And he said to them, "Men of Israel, be careful as to what you are about to do with these men. [36] "For, some time ago Theudas¹³ appeared, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. [37] "After this man, Judas of Galilee appeared in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he also perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. [38] "And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and leave them alone, for if the source of this plan or movement is men, it will be overthrown; [39] but if the source is God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."

Thankfully, Gamaliel's wisdom prevailed and the Council agreed to hold off killing the apostles.

The Apostles, Lashed, Unleashed (5:40)

[40] They followed his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them.

That is a win, with a twist.

"Yeah, you're right Gamaliel. We should not oppose these guys on the outside chance that they might be speaking the truth. So...let's FLOG THEM and then THREATEN THEM and then let them go."

This "flogging" was not the same beating that Jesus endured before He was crucified.

⁸ See Acts 2:37. Luke used the same word that we here translate "*infuriated*," but there translated, "*pierced to the heart*." The most basic sense of the Greek word was to be "*deeply moved*" by something, either positively or negatively.

⁹ Presumably by stoning, which is what they will do shortly to Stephen. (Acts 7)

¹⁰ Later on, Paul will leverage the tension between Pharisees and Sadducees to his advantage in a highly charged confrontation. (Acts 23:6-10)

¹¹ ***[34] But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.***

¹² Jewish tradition tells us that Gamaliel was a disciple (or, perhaps, the grandson) of the famous Rabbi, Hillel.

¹³ The Jewish historian Josephus mentioned a man named Theudas, a man who persuaded many to follow him to the Jordan, evidently posing as a second Moses who would part the waters and lead the people to freedom from Roman rule. This may or may not have been the same Theudas mentioned by Luke in Acts 5.

That beating was called a “*scourging*” and was administered by the Romans. It was a brutal, gruesome beating.

Still, a “*flogging*” was no light matter. It was the “forty lashes minus one”¹⁴ With a three-stranded length of leather, a Jewish soldier would beat a man about his back and chest.

Luke gives us to understand that thirty-nine painful lashes with a whip were given to each of the apostles.

The hope was that this beating coupled with another tongue-lashing would convince the apostles that, again, it is just not worth it to keep on talking about Jesus.

And with that, our story is almost over. Only one final scene to see. And in that last scene Luke describes something utterly amazing.

In looking at all that we’ve seen this morning some people point to the earlier description of the health of the church as the most inspiring part of today’s Bible passage. And it was wonderful to read about a powerful God, a powerful community, and a powerful Gospel. (5:12-16)

Other readers focus on how God opened prison doors and set the captives free, right under the noses of the temple guards. And I’ll grant that all of that is exciting, too. (5:19-21)

But, for my money you won’t find a greater example of the miracle-working power of God than what we find AFTER the flogging.

Taking it BACK to the Streets (5:41-42)

Shamed, but Not ASHAMED! (5:41)

[41] So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

¹⁴ The Law (Deuteronomy 25:3) required that a fellow Jew not be beaten with more than forty lashes, lest he be humiliated. The Jews of Jesus’ day stopped at thirty-nine lashes in case there might have been a miscounting.

I’ve got to believe that as they walked away from the Council, the words of Jesus were ringing in their ears.

- They must have seen the parallels between the treatment they just got, and the treatment Jesus received.
- They must have remembered the Lord’s warnings about persecutions to come.
- They must have been calling to mind His promises about the blessings that come to those who suffer for Him.

[Matthew 5:10] “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [11] Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

True, they had been shamefully treated. Yes, they had suffered physically and by humiliation and threats. But they knew that God had not abandoned them.

Their understanding of what life was all about, sourced in the words of Jesus, protected them from discouragement. They were honored to be dishonored for Jesus.

And flowing out of their God-honoring attitudes came bold, God-honoring action.

Beaten, but not BROKEN! (v. 42)

[42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and preaching the good news of Jesus as the Christ.

To return to the temple and preach after a beating and in the face of more of the same if they continued may seem to us an act of mad recklessness.

To them, it was the epitome of reasonableness.

Conclusion:

To channel my father, who asked 17-year-old me, *“What were you thinking?”*, let’s ask, *“What were the apostles thinking?”*

Different from my teenaged self, they were definitely thinking.

The apostles looked at all they had been though for Jesus, all they had received from Jesus, and all they had to look forward to because of Jesus - and reasoned that it was all worth it to keep on following Jesus.

They were consumed by a passion greater than their own personal safety and comfort. They didn’t let jail time or beatings derail them from their mission.

They had and millions of our brothers and sisters around the world today have answered the ultimate questions in life - *“What is there that is worth living for?”* Or what is really the same question, *“What is worth dying for.”*

Their answer? Jesus.

Today, given what Jesus has given us in terms of purpose and meaning and joy and hope AND what is in store for us after this life is over, it is only reasonable to conclude that:

- He is the only One worthy of the first place in our hearts.
- He is the only One worthy of our allegiance and commitment.
- He is the only One worth risking it all for.

The apostles invite you and me to join them in wholehearted, passionate commitment to Jesus and to His mission of proclaiming ***“the message of this life”*** and helping others take their next steps with Him.

At the end of the day, such a passionate life is only reasonable.