

February 7, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Speak the Words of Life

Acts 5:17-21

1. The Arrest (verses 17-18)
2. The Escape (verse 19)
3. The Command (verse 20)
4. The Obedience (verse 21)

Richard Wurmbrand (1909-2001) was an amazing man. He grew up as an orphan in Romania and received no religious education as a child. Because of his bitter childhood, he grew up bitter toward religion. He was an atheist, who did not believe in God or Christ. In fact he hated those ideas, believing them to be harmful to people. But his atheism didn't give him peace in his heart. So, this convinced atheist prayed to God like this: "God, I know surely that You do not exist. But if perchance You exist, which I contest, it is not my duty to believe in You; it is your duty to reveal Yourself to me." ^[1] Sure enough, that's exactly what the Lord did.

Through an old carpenter, Wurmbrand heard the words of life. This carpenter explained the gospel to him, how Jesus died for our sins upon the cross, how we need to trust in him for forgiveness. This carpenter gave him a Bible for read these things for himself. Wurmbrand said, "I could barely read [the Bible he gave me]. I could only weep over it, comparing my bad life with the life of Jesus; my impurity with His righteousness; my hatred with His love--and He accepted me as one of His own" (p. 13).

Soon after his conversion, he began training for the ministry. He eventually became a Lutheran pastor. Then, early in his ministry (in 1944 when Wurmbrand was in his early 30's) Soviet forces broke through the Romanian resistance, forcing Romania's king to concede control of the country to the Soviet Union. Over the next few years, the communists exerted their control over all facets of life in Romania. It's hard to be a pastor in a communistic nation.

One time the Communists of Romania convened a congress, with some 4,000 priests, pastors, and ministers of all denominations. These "men of God" appointed Joseph Stalin as honorary president of the congress, the very one who murdering Christians in mass. One by one, these bishops and pastors "arose and declared that communism and Christianity are fundamentally the same and could coexist. One minister after another said words of praise toward communism and assured the new government of the loyalty of the Church" (p. 16).

Richard Wurmbrand's wife, Sebina, had joined him at this congress. When she saw what was happening, she told her husband, "Richard, stand up and wash away this shame from the face of Christ! They are spitting in His face!" Richard replied to Sebina, "If I do so, you lose your husband." She replied, "I don't wish to have a coward as a husband" (p. 15). So, he arose and spoke to the congress, "praising not the murderers of Christians, but Jesus Christ, stating that our loyalty is first do to him" (p. 16).

Richard Wurmbrand's stand for truth wasn't merely for those present. This congress was being broadcast to the whole country. Right there on the rostrum of the Communist Parliament, he proclaimed the message of Christ: that Jesus is Lord, not Stalin or the communist leaders. Wurmbrand knew that he would have to pay for this. But he said, "It was worthwhile" (p. 16). As a result of that speech Wurmbrand became a marked man. The government would follow him and surveil him as he ministered to his congregation, and to those of the underground church.

The day finally came on February 29, 1948, when he was kidnapped by the secret police on his way to church. Two years afterwards, his wife was also imprisoned, and their 9 year-old son, Mihai, was left alone and homeless. This happy family was broken up.

Wurmbrand would end up spending 14 years in prison for preaching the gospel. During his 14 years in prison, he was tortured physically. He suffered psychologically by spending three years of those years in solitary confinement. Further his emotional distress was great, as he was not told where his wife or son was, or how they were doing. He also endured great mental torment, facing years of attempted brainwashing. Over and over for 17 hours a day, he and his fellow prisoners heard the recording:

"Communism is good! Communism is good! Communism is good!
Christianity is stupid! Christianity is stupid! Christianity is stupid!
Give up! Give up! Give up!" (Tortured for Christ, p. 38).

It was all enough to break a man. But Richard Wurmbrand stood strong. It was his faith that kept him. His wife also spent some years in prison, away from her son. She suffered much hardship in prison as well. Yet, she stood firm as well! By God's grace, they were finally released.

In 1965, he and his family were allowed to leave Romania and the persecution they faced behind. He said, "My last deed before leaving was to go to the grave of the colonel who had given the order for my arrest and who had ordered my years of torture. I placed a flower on his grave. By doing this I dedicated myself to bringing the joys of Christ that I have to the Communists who are so empty spiritually. ... I hate the Communist system but I love the men. ... Communists can kill Christians but they cannot kill their love toward even those who killed them" (p. 52).

Soon after their arrival in America, they founded "The Voice of the Martyrs," whose mission is "to defend the human rights of persecuted

Christians.” Richard and Sebina have written several books. “Tortured for Christ” is Richard’s biographical account of his suffering in prison for preaching Christ. “The Pastor’s Wife” is Sabina’s account of her suffering as a Christian (and wife of Richard). They are worthy to be read.

Now, I bring this up, because this is similar to what the apostles will face in our text this morning in Acts, chapter 5. They will be arrested for preaching Jesus. They will be placed in prison. They will stand trial. They will be beaten for the name of Jesus. Yet, this doesn’t stop them. They press on, “teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (Acts 5:42). That’s where we are going in Acts, chapter 5 (that’s where it ends).

So, take your Bibles and open up to Acts, chapter 5. Our text begins in verse 17.

In the context, the church is doing very well. There is great unity in the church (Acts 4:32a). There is great love in the church (Acts 4:32b). Even though, there were some in the church who proved themselves to be greedy and sinful and deceitful, the apostles dealt with the sin. The Lord continued to bless the church. God answered their prayer for boldness (Acts 4:31). He continued to stretch out his hand to heal many (Acts 4:30; 5:12, 15-16). We read in Acts, chapter 5 and verse 14, “More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

That’s the context. So, let’s read our text.

Acts 5:17-21

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

My message this morning is entitled, “Speak the Words of Life,” because, this is exactly what the angel of the Lord commands the apostles to do in verse 20. This angel tells the apostles, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”

Now the circumstances surrounding these words are quite interesting. The apostles weren’t simply “minding their own business” when an angel approached them, like Mary was when Gabriel approached her to tell her that she would have a child. From best that we can tell, she was going about life, perhaps working the field or out for a walk when the angel appeared to her. But this is not the circumstance of the apostles. They had been on quite an adventure. Look at verse 17, ...

Acts 5:17-18

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

This is my first point.

1. The Arrest (verses 17-18)

This isn’t the first time that the apostles were arrested. Back in chapter 4, they were arrested. They were arrested by the same people for the same reason. They were arrested by the religious leaders. By name, that is, “the Sadducees.” These were the people in power. They were not happy. They were in danger of losing their power, as people were believing in Jesus as the Messiah and following after these preachers. We read in verse 17, that these leaders were “filled with jealousy.” They were jealous at the following these apostles were getting. And so, they arrested them and brought them in.

Now, in Acts, chapter 4, it was only Peter and John who were put in prison. But here in verse 18, we read that “they arrested the apostles and put them in public prison.” Now, we don’t know if all twelve apostles were put in arrested and imprisoned. But it seems to be more than simply Peter and John. I would suspect that the Sadducees were seeking to step up their efforts at stopping these men from preaching. So, let’s not simply arrest the leader of the leaders, but let’s bring them all into custody.

Now, they were supposed to spend the night in the “public prison,” but their sentence was commuted by an angel. We see this in verse 19, which is the source of my next point.

2. The Escape (verse 19)

This escape from prison was unlike any prison break that had ever occurred. The apostles weren’t in the public prison, looking for a weakness in the security. They weren’t trying to dig a tunnel underneath the wall. In fact, they may well have been sleeping, when, as verse 19 says, ...

Acts 5:19

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out.

This was a miraculous release from prison. We read later of some more of the detail. We find out that the guards of the prison had no idea that any of the prisoners had escaped. Apparently, the guards were sleeping at the time of the jail break. Further, there was no evidence of any foul play. No holes in the wall. No prison guards hurt. No signs of violence or struggle in any way. In fact, we find out later that the angel had closed the prison door behind him (see verse 23). In verse 20, we read of what the angel told them to do. I’m calling this ...

3. The Command (verse 20)

The angel said, ...

Acts 5:20

"Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

Isn't it interesting what the angel here told them to do. He didn't say, "You are free! Make a run for it!" He didn't say, "Go! Hide yourself." No, instead, he told the apostles to do the exact same thing that brought them to prison in the first place. As one commentator said, "God frees them physically in order to free others spiritually."^[2]

This commentator is picking up on the angel's description of the message they were preaching. They were preaching "the words of this Life." They were preaching life-giving words! From this description is where I get the title of my message this morning: "Speak the Words of Life."

This is the great application of our text this morning. We ought also to go out and "speak the words of life." After all, this is the main application of the book of Acts: "Be My Witnesses." We have seen this slogan over and over and over again. It has been on the screen during the beginning of every sermon I have preached in the book of Acts. It contains the empty tomb in the foreground and modern cities in the background. The book of Acts is calling us to be witnesses of Jesus. The apostles were witnesses in the early church, just after the resurrection. We are called to be witnesses to the modern people.

This terminology comes from chapter 1 and verse 8, when Jesus tells the apostles, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That is, they would bear witness of Jesus, of his death, burial, and resurrection. They saw him being crucified. They saw him dead and buried. They saw him risen from the dead. In fact, that's when they received these words of being his witnesses! They were talking with the risen Christ! He says, "You will go and flood the world with the message that I'm alive and well!"

This is what we have seen the apostles doing throughout the book of Acts. Peter preached in Acts, chapter 2, on the Day of Pentecost, that Jesus, who was crucified, was risen and now is alive and well. Peter preached this to the crowds after the lame man was healed (in chapter 3). Their message was clear. When the religious leaders arrested the apostles for the first time, they said that they were "proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2).

The angel calls this message, "The Words of this Life." Indeed, that's what the gospel is. It's a message about a living Savior, who gives life to those who repent and believe in his name for the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, these are "Wonderful Words of Life."

Sing them over again to me,
Wonderful words of life,
Let me more of their beauty see,
Wonderful words of life;
Words of life and beauty
Teach me faith and duty.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life;
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life.

Christ, the blessed One, gives to all
Wonderful words of life;
Sinner, list to the loving call,
Wonderful words of life;
All so freely given,
Wooing us to heaven.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life;
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life.

Sweetly echoes the Gospel call,
Wonderful words of life;
Offer pardon and peace to all,
Wonderful words of life;
Jesus, only Savior,
Sanctify forever.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life;
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
Wonderful words of life.^[3]

The question, then, comes to you, "Are you speaking the Words of life" to those around you? Are you taking up gospel opportunities? Are you telling others of Jesus? Are you telling your co-workers about Jesus? Are you telling your wayward children about Jesus? Are you telling your friends about the life-giving message about Jesus?

A few weeks ago, I told you of a man I have met playing pool. He is going through some incredibly difficult times. We have been trying to find time to get together and talk with him about what he's going through. (Our texts have been going back and forth). If and when we do connect, my aim is to tell him of the life-giving words about Jesus, that the sorrows that he is facing now can be turned into joy. It's my heart to speak "the words of life" to my friend. That's what the apostles do in verse 21, ...

Acts 5:21

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

I'm simply calling this, ...

4. The Obedience (verse 21)

They followed the command of the angel to "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life" (verse 20). They went to the place the angel told them, the temple. They did exactly what the angel told them to do, to speak to the people. They did it right away. They were in the temple "at daybreak." What a great picture of obedience to speak the truth this is!

I'm sure that there was every pull in their body not to do this! After all, this is the very thing that landed them in jail in the first place. It was their preaching to the people about Jesus! They went out and continued doing the same thing.

I return again to the story of Richard Wurmbrand. Remember, he was imprisoned in 1948, and was tortured in prison. He did get out briefly. Here's what he said, ...

The year 1956 arrived. I had been in prison eight-and-a-half years. I had lost much weight, gained ugly scars, been brutally beaten and kicked, derided, starved, pressured, questioned ad nauseum, threatened, and neglected. None of this had produced the results my captors were seeking. So, in discouragement--and amid protests over my imprisonment--they turned me loose.

I was allowed to return to my old position as pastor from just one week. I preached two sermons. Then they called me in and told me that I could not preach anymore, nor engage in any further religious activity. ... So that was the end of my public ministry.

Probably the authorities believed that I would be afraid to defy them and continue with underground witnessing. That was where they were wrong. Secretly, and with my family's support, I returned to the work I had been doing before.

Again I witnessed to hidden groups of the faithful, coming and going like a ghost under the protection of those who could be trusted. This time I had scars to corroborate my message about the evil of the atheist viewpoint and to encourage faltering souls to trust God and be brave. I directed a secret network of evangelists who helped each other spread the gospel under providentially blinded Communist eyes. After all, if a man can be so blind as to not see the hand of God at work, perhaps he will not see that of an evangelist either.

Eventually, the ceaseless interest of the police in my activities and whereabouts paid off for them. Again I was discovered and imprisoned. For some reason they did not imprison my family this time, perhaps because of all the publicity I had received. I had had eight-and-a-half years of prison and then a couple years of relative freedom. Now I was to be imprisoned for five-and-a-half years more.

My second imprisonment was in many ways worse than the first. I knew well what to expect. My physical condition became very bad almost immediately. But we continued the work of the Underground Church where we could--in Communist prisons.^[4]

When you are convinced of the words of life, you cannot be stopped from speaking. That's the testimony of the apostles in chapter 4. When they were warned by the council "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18), Peter replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

This is why the apostles willingly obeyed the command of the angel. They could not help it! They saw Jesus, risen from the dead! They felt compelled to tell others. A little warning from the authorities wasn't going to stop them, even if they knew that greater consequences would come.

This has always been the testimony of God's people down through the ages. They cannot help but to speak! This was the testimony of John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's progress*. He could not help but to speak! Under threats of persecution, Bunyan did what we have called to do. He boldly preached the word of God to the people of Bedford.

On November 12th, 1660 as Bunyan was praying, he was abruptly interrupted by the local magistrates and arrested.

Bunyan was then given an ultimatum: stop preaching, or go to jail. Bunyan replied that he firmly believed in his calling to preach the gospel and call people to, 'forsake their sins, and close in with Christ, lest [they] miserably perish.'^[5]

In refusing to stop, he spent 12 years in jail. He could have gone free. All he needed to do was to agree to stop preaching. But Bunyan knew that he could never do this. He could not help but to speak.

In some ways, Bunyan was, and all of us ought to be like our dog, Autumn. Our dog is a little fluff-ball of a dog. She loves to sit on a chair in our front living room, and look outside. Normally, she's quite calm. But boy, when she sees a squirrel, (or a rabbit, or people out walking), she cannot help but to bark and bark and bark and bark. If you try to stop her, she keeps barking. The only thing that can stop her is removing her

from the situation. I have often pulled the shades, so that she can't see outside. We have often physically carried her into another room. But if she sees something, she is going to bark.

So, if we have opportunity with others, we ought to be opening our mouths and speaking the words of life. That's what the apostles did. That's what John Bunyan did. If he had opportunity, he was going to preach to others about Jesus. So, the government officials in England kept him away from his people. They kept him in jail. They hoped that removing him from the situation would stop him from barking. But he wouldn't stop. Reasoning with Bunyan was like reasoning with our dog. "Autumn, will you please stop barking at the squirrel?" Do you think that's going to work? It's not!

That's why Bunyan spent 12 years in jail. There was no way to persuade him otherwise. Even the difficulty of his family was not enough to persuade him away from preaching the words of life. Listen to how he described his hardships. He wrote, ...

The parting with my wife and poor children hath oft been to me in this place as the pulling the flesh from my bones ... also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child [Mary], who lay nearer to my heart than all I had besides; O the thoughts of the hardships I thought my blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces. [6]

Yet, the pull of preaching Jesus was greater than the pull of his own family. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Bunyan demonstrated this. It's not that he hated his family. But in refusing to stop preaching about Jesus, because of his love for Christ. It sure looked like he hated his wife and children.

Bunyan wrote a poem in prison that describes his situation well.

I am, indeed in prison now
In body, but my mind
Is free to study Christ, and how
Unto me he is kind.

For though men keep my outward man
Within their locks and bars,
Yet by the faith of Christ I can
Mount higher than the stars.

Their fetters cannot spirits tame,
Nor tie up God from me;
My faith and hope they cannot lame,
Above them I shall be. [7]

Let us "Speak the Words of Life." Be like Richard Wurmbrand, who cannot stop speaking. Be like John Bunyan, who cannot stop speaking. Be like the apostles who said, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Perhaps if we act like this, we will experience some of the same sorts of things the early church experienced.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 7, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, p. 12. Throughout the rest of the text, I will use end notes with page numbers from this book.

[2] Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Acts*, p. 82.

[3] Words by Philip Bliss.

[4] Wurmbrand, pp. 39-41.

[5] Joe Leinen, "John Bunyan, Joy, and Suffering," <https://blog.tms.edu/john-bunyan-joy-suffering>.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.