



God's Work Will Prevail

Acts 5:33-42

1. Seventy Angry Men (verse 33)
2. One Honorable Man (verses 34-40)
3. Twelve Happy Men (verses 41-42)

The Bible is full of promises. We know and cherish these promises.

These promises come from all over the Bible. The LORD says, "Fear not, for I am with you" (Isaiah 41:10). Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5). John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). These are but a few of dozens and dozens of Bible promises that I could share with you this morning.

One of the greatest promises that has come to us as a church in all the Bible comes in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus says, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That's a promise that Jesus has kept. From the day that he was crucified, purchasing our souls for his kingdom, to today, as he continues his redemptive work throughout the world, Jesus has been doing just this. He has been building his church.

He has been building his church in his time and in his way. It isn't always how we would want. It isn't always according to our time table. But Jesus is building his church. On that promise, we can rest. That's the backdrop promise of our text this morning, Acts 5:33-42.

In our text, we see the church at one of those moments when its life was tenuous. Things were going well. Things were going really well. Thousands of people had repented of their sin and trusted in Jesus. The church was unified. The church was loving toward one another. They were giving to meet needs. They were praying. The apostles were doing amazing miracles! The people were amazed at all that the Lord was doing in their midst.

However, the religious leaders had arrested the leaders of the church, the apostles (Acts 5:18) and had put them on trial. In our minds and plans, this is not how the church should always go. Jesus ought to build his church, with success upon success upon success. But Jesus often uses trouble to advance his church as well, like in our text this morning.

There was a real danger that the apostles would be killed for their unauthorized teaching in the name of Jesus. This same council had put Jesus to death. The disciples were threatened by the same verdict. And if they were all put to death, there could be serious consequences for the church. But we can rest on the promise of Jesus, that he is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

The title of my message this morning is "God's Work Will Prevail." People may try to stop the work of God, but in the end, it will always prevail. That's the main point of what we will see in our text.

Our text begins in verse 33 with the verdict of the court. If you remember, last week, we looked at the trial of the apostles. When court was convened, the religious rulers in power put forth their case (in verse 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 were charging the apostles with disobeying their previous command, "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). But they were. They were filling Jerusalem with this teaching, which is why the apostles were brought in for this trial. To this accusation, Peter and the apostles gave their defense:

Acts 5:29-32

We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Essentially, they said, "You are right. We have disobeyed your orders to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. We have filled Jerusalem with the message of Jesus. We hold you accountable for his death, because you killed him. And the reason we have continued to preach so, is because we are obeying God." To this response, the religious counsel was furious! We read this in verse 33 (which begins our text).

Acts 5:33-42

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 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. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 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. 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. 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; 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, 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. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Our first point comes in verse 33. We see ...

1. Seventy Angry Men (verse 33)

Seventy is the number of men who were on the counsel of the Sanhedrin. Their anger is described in verse 33, ...

Acts 5:33

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

Literally, they were "sawn in two." That is, they were ripped deep in their heart. Their heart was stirring with rage! They wanted nothing more than destroy the disciples right there on the spot. The only other time this Greek word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 7:54, after Stephen's sermon, before the same counsel, the same response of anger flairs up. And they stoned Stephen to death. But know this, whether the counsel would have killed the apostles or not, these seventy men cannot overthrow the work of God. God's work will prevail.

The question here comes, "Why were they so angry? Well, it gets back to why anyone is angry. Do you know why people get angry? People get angry when they want something, but can't get it. But they know, that if they raise their voice or make threats or display some physical intimidation, they just might get what they want.

When a father doesn't get something he wants from his children, he raises the heat, hoping to overpower his children into doing what he says. When a husband doesn't get something he wants from his wife, he raises the heat, hoping to intimidate his wife into submission. When a boss doesn't get something he wants from his subordinates, he raises the heat, hoping to create fear to drive his workers to work harder to please him and give him what he wants.

When people get angry, it's a desire problem. They want what they want, and they want it bad! Over the course of time, they have learned that raising the voice and inciting fear upon others, is useful for them to get what they want. That's why people get angry. That's why people get "enraged." That's why you get angry. You want something. You think that by showing forth your strength, you can get it.

It's no different here with these religious leaders. They wanted something. But these disciples stood in their way of getting it. So, they became angry at them. What did they want? They wanted religious power. They didn't want anyone to get in the way of their influence. But these disciples were gaining influence in Jerusalem. Many of those who used to attend the temple, listening to the Jewish Rabbis, were now listening to the apostles preach about Jesus. As a result, they were losing their religious power and influence. And they hated it, because they were jealous of their power. That's why they arrested the apostles in the first place. "Filled with jealousy, they arrested the apostles and put them in public prison" (Acts 5:17-18). As the trial bore on, they saw that the apostles weren't budging. So, those on the council "were enraged" (Acts 5:33).

Their anger wasn't something that just came on at this moment. It has been building for a long time. It had been building ever since Jesus walked on the scene and performed his many miracles. Jesus drew great crowds, who followed after him. Those on the council did everything that they could to destroy him! They tried to argue with him. They tried to catch him in sin. They tried to trap him in his own words. But nothing worked. Instead, the crowds followed him all the more.

Finally, they convinced one of his followers to betray him. They brought Jesus through an unjust trial and crucified him as a common criminal. But even that wasn't enough. They knew that Jesus had taught that he would rise from the dead. So they appointed a guard to secure the tomb "lest his disciples go and steal [the body of Jesus] and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead'" (Matthew 27:64). But that didn't work, because Jesus did rise from the dead, despite the security at the tomb. So, they bribed the guards to tell the story anyway of how "His disciples came by night and stole away [the body of Jesus] while they were asleep" (Matthew 28:13). But that didn't work either, because Jesus did rise from the dead and he really did appear before the apostles, who went forth and proclaimed his resurrection everywhere in Jerusalem. The religious leaders tried to stop them once from preaching, (Acts 4). But that didn't work. And now, in super-frustration, and rage, they wanted to see the apostles put to death to end this nightmare!

As I researched a bit about this text in Acts, I noticed a movie that had something to teach us. So, I watched it with my family on Friday evening. I commend it to you. It's entitled, "12 Angry Men." It was produced in 1957. It stars Henry Fonda.

Like our text this morning, this film takes us into the courts, into the deliberation room. The film tells the story of a jury of twelve white men who "deliberate the case of an 18-year-old impoverished [Puerto Rican] youth accused of stabbing his father to death. The judge instructs [these men] that if there is any reasonable doubt, the jurors are to return a verdict of not guilty; if found guilty, the defendant will receive a death sentence. The verdict must be unanimous."^[1] The vast amount of the movie takes place in the room where the jury debates whether or not this youth is guilty or not.

Initially, the evidence seems convincing: the boy was guilty. A woman in an apartment next door testified that she saw through her window the defendant stab his father. A man from the downstairs apartment testified that he heard an argument upstairs and that the defendant threatened to kill his father. Soon after, he heard the father's body hitting the ground. He went to his apartment door, only to see the

defendant run away. The boy had a violent past and had recently purchased a switchblade of the same type as was found at the murder scene, but claimed he lost it. The knife that was found at the scene had been cleaned of fingerprints, a sign of a coverup.

After a quick summary of the case, they decided to take a secret ballot vote: guilty or not guilty. Eleven of the jurors thought the boy to be guilty. But one juror voted "not guilty." At this point, the jurors erupted in anger. They could not fathom that anyone could consider this boy to be not guilty.

All in all, the movie is a great study in anger. Over the course of their deliberation, each man demonstrates his anger in a unique way. Juror 7 is anxious to use his tickets to the baseball game that night. He wants to get out of there fast. He becomes angry with any delay in the deliberations. Juror 4 demonstrates his anger toward juror 2, when he reveals that he is ruled by his feelings and not with logic about the facts of the case. Juror 11 gets angry with Juror 7 when he demonstrates his lack of integrity in some things he says. Juror 10 demonstrates his prejudice toward the minority boy with an angry rant about the how terrible "they" are, who live in the slums, who don't value the life of anyone. Juror 3 is angry with his own son, with whom he hasn't spoken for several years. His anger is turned upon the accused youth.

The movie is a great study in anger. But it is also a great study in how the minds of people can be persuaded. Because, at that initial vote, all of the jurors thought the boy to be guilty. All, that is, except for one juror, Juror 8. Now, it's not so much that the Juror thought he was not guilty. It's just that he wasn't persuaded "beyond a reasonable doubt."

He begins to give some reasons why he has some doubt. And this one man, as he shares some of his doubt, some of the jurors see that the case isn't quite as air-tight as it first appeared. One by one, others jurors begin to have a "reasonable doubt" as well. One by one, they change their verdicts from "guilty" to "not guilty." Eventually, the entire jury is persuaded that there is enough doubt in the case, that the boy cannot be guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt."

This is exactly what we see in our text this morning. We see one man's testimony persuade the entire jury of angry men to change their course. He changes them not so much in declaring the apostles innocent, as in giving enough doubt as to their intended actions. This comes through the testimony of one man, who changes the opinions of the seventy angry men of the council. My second point is this:

2. One Honorable Man (verses 34-40)

He is introduced for us in verse 34.

Acts 5:34

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.

Gamaliel was a well respected Rabbi in Israel at this time. He was the grandson of the famous, Hillel, "founder of Israel's strongest school of religion."^[2] His title was "Rabban," higher than that of "Rabbi," which was only given to the most respected Jewish leaders. He taught the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3), he may have actually been present at this trial (see also Acts 7:58).

Luke simply describes Gamaliel as one who was "held in honor by all the people" (verse 34). As I have said, he was "an honorable man." He counseled caution.

Acts 5:35

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

Then, Gamaliel brings up two men, who were in a situation a bit similar to that of the apostles: Theudas and Judas the Galilean.

Acts 5:36-37

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. 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.

Now, we know nothing about Theudas, apart from what Gamaliel shares here in verse 36. Here's what we are told: Theudas was a man who thought he was great. He perceived something wrong in the society. Perhaps it was a political. Perhaps it was religious. He began to talk about it and teach others about his views. Soon, he gained a following. Some 400 united with him in his cause. Then, he was killed. His movement quickly died out.

Now, we know a little bit more historically about Judas the Galilean. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us about his story. He rose up in protest to a census that was taken by the Romans. This census was a different census than the census mentioned in Luke, chapter 2, but it meant the same thing: when you count the population, you have an accountable tax base. Many Jews hated this Roman taxation. You see in the gospels how much they hated the Roman government and the taxes they paid to them. That's why tax collectors were of the most despised of society. Anyway, this Judas of Galilee became the main leader in defiance of the government. We can only imagine the crowds and the rallies in defiance of Rome. But, like Theudas, he was also killed. Josephus tells us that he was killed by Roman forces. Those following after him were scattered.

Now, having given these two examples, Gamaliel continues on with his advice about what to do with the apostles. He advised the counsel to laissez-faire. That is, hands-off, let-it-play-out.

Acts 5:38-39

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

It is from this paragraph that I get the title of my message this morning, "God's Work Will Prevail." Essentially, Gamaliel advises the counsel to "let the apostles alone." His reasoning is simple. If the plan is of man, it will fail, just like the revolts of Theudas and Judas. They both failed. But if the plan is of God, you cannot overthrow them, because, "God's Work Will Prevail."

Now, his advice is half-true. The first half of his advice is not true. The second half of his advice is true.

Regarding the first half, there are many movements that have not been of God, but haven't failed. For example, the major religions of the world: Islam and Hinduism. They are not from God. But they haven't failed. They have billions of people who follow after their ideologies. Furthermore, you can look to the many cults that haven't failed: Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses are two examples. They are not from God. But they haven't failed. They have millions of people who follow after their ideologies.

Now, the second half of Gamaliel's counsel is spot-on: "if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:39). That is, "God's Work Will Prevail." Gamaliel said this because he knew the Old Testament very well. Consider the following verses that speak of how God's kingdom will not fail:

Psalm 115:3

Our God is in the heaven;
He does all that he pleases.

Daniel 4:34

God's dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

Isaiah 46:9-10

I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose.'

When the Jews thought that they were doing the very thing to squash the revolution led by Jesus by killing him, we read in Psalm 2, "He who sits in the heavens laughs." They thought that they could thwart the plan of God. But they didn't. Instead, God affirms, "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill" (Psalm 2:6). There was no way that this Jewish counsel was going to thwart the plans of God. Gamaliel knew it well. And we read in verse 39, ...

Acts 5:39

So they took his advice,

Now, what is interesting here is that Gamaliel's advice was simply one of doubt. He did not assert that the apostles were leading a man-made movement. Nor did he assert that the apostles were from God. He simply placed doubt in their mind. This was just like Juror 8 in "12 Angry Men," who just wasn't sure. Gamaliel just placed enough doubt in the minds of the Sanhedrin that they decided not to kill the apostles. Perhaps this doubt he placed in their minds helped some of the priests later to become obedient to the faith, as they slowly thought about all that was going on before them (see Acts 6:7).

Well, in their doubt, they decided to beat the apostles, and then release them.

Acts 5:40

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.

This beating was most probably in accordance with the law and according to custom, that is, forty stripes save one. So picture the apostles, taken out one by one, stripped of their garment above the waist, and tied to a pillar. Once secured, a man takes a whip or a stick or a rod and begins beating them on their backs. <Bam> <Bam> <Bam>

As a result of the beating, the apostles would leave with bloody backs, welts and open wounds would cause great pain. Sleeping that night would not be a pleasant experience. The idea of the pain is that the disciples would be deterred from speaking any more in the name of Jesus. But this didn't happen. Look at verse 41 and 42.

Acts 5:41-42

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Instead of downcast and beaten men, who went away sorrowful, we see ...

3. Twelve Happy Men (verses 41-42)

Particularly, the text tells us here that they were "rejoicing!" They weren't rejoicing in the suffering, like a masochist, who derives some sordid pleasure in the pain. This wasn't the joy of the apostles. Rather, they were rejoicing in that they were sharing in the suffering of Christ. Christ was dishonored by being beaten and shamed. Now these disciples have joined in their master's shame!

When Paul said in Galatians 6:17 that "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." He was certainly talking about the scars he received from being beaten for the sake of Jesus. These scars were honor scars, like the men and women of the military, who return home with battle wounds. Any American would show them proudly! So also the scars of Christ.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned Richard Wurmbrand in my message. He was imprisoned and tortured in Romania in the 1950's and 1960's.^[3] When Richard Wurmbrand came to America, he gave testimony of the torture that he received at the hands of the Romanian government to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. At one point during his testimony, he was asked to show his scars. So, he took off his shirt and showed some of the scars he had from the beatings he received. Of the scars, Richard Wurmbrand later said, ...

An underground worker must know, ... that he belongs to the body of Christ. He belongs to a body that has been flogged for nearly 2,000 years. It has always been flogged, not only on Golgotha, but under the Roman emperors and by so many persecutions. It had been flogged under the Nazis and had been flogged in Russia for over seventy years. When converted I have consciously become part of a body that is a flogged body; a mocked body; a body spat upon; and one crowned with a crown of thorns, with nails driven into the hands and feet."^[4]

These disciples had now received their scars! As a result, they were happy! They had heard the words of Jesus: "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). At this moment, they were like Jesus. Suffering shame for his name!

Did you know that there is joy in persecution? Richard Wurmbrand describes of the persecution:

It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners, as it is in captive nations today. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their terms. It was a deal: we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching; they were happy beating us--so everyone was happy.

The following scene happened more times than I can remember. A brother was preaching to the other prisoners when the guards suddenly burst in, surprising him halfway through a phrase. They hauled him down the corridor to their 'beating room.' After what seemed an endless beating, they brought him back and threw him--bloody and bruised--on the prison floor. Slowly, he picked up his battered body, painfully straightened his clothing and said, 'Now, brethren, where did I leave off when I was interrupted?' He continued his gospel message!

I have seen beautiful things!

Sometimes the preachers were laymen, simple men inspired by the Holy Spirit who often preached beautifully. All of their heart was in their words, for to preach under such punitive circumstances was no trifling matter. Then the guards would come and take the preacher out and beat him half to death.^[5]

Wurmbrand continues on to speak about the joy he often felt in prison.

When I look back on my fourteen years in prison, it was occasionally a very happy time. Other prisoners and even the guards very often wondered at how happy Christians could be under the most terrible circumstances. We could not be prevented from sensing, although we were beaten for this. I imagine that nightingales, too, would sing, even if they knew that after finishing they would be killed for it. Christians in prison danced for joy."^[6]

It wasn't the masochistic joy of pain to the body. It was the joy of confirmation that you are one of Christ's disciples! In so doing, they shared in the joy that Jesus promised.

Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

As they were beaten, they were reminded that they were connected with the godly men of old, who had been persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Rather than hindering their preaching, it stirred them on all the more.

Acts 5:42

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

These apostles didn't let up. Every day they continued their preaching. They preached in the temple. They preached house to house, wherever they were. They went all around. The Sanhedrin simply was not going to shut these guys up. Not warnings (Acts 4). Not beatings (Acts 5). Not even death is enough to stop the movement (as we shall see in Acts 7).

By way of final application, I simply have one question for you: what do you fear in talking with others about Jesus? Do you fear persecution? In our country, this is not likely. Do you fear rejection? It will probably happen. But if ever you are rejected for the sake of Christ, I promise that you will have some heavenly joy. So, do you want joy? Then talk to others about Jesus. Be his witness!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 21, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Angry_Men_\(1957_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Angry_Men_(1957_film)).

[2] C. S. Lovett, Acts: Personal New Testament Commentary, p. 101.

[3] Steve Brandon, "Speak the Words of Life," a sermon on Acts 5:17-21, preached February 7, 2021. See <http://sermons.rvbc.cc/sermons/2021-006>.

[4] <https://beggarlybeloved.wordpress.com/tag/scars/>.

[5] Richard Wurmbrand, Tortured for Christ, p. 41.

[6] Ibid, p. 57.