

In the verses we are going to look at this evening we see the church continuing to grow as the apostles continue to preach Jesus and perform miracles and we see a continuation and escalation of persecution. Much of what Luke describes here we have seen before. I will try to focus on the aspects of this passage that are unique to it. Verses 12-16 emphasize the miracles that the apostles performed. The description reminds us of Jesus and the miracles that he performed with the crowds flocking to him. And that connection makes sense because the book of Acts is about the continuing ministry of Jesus from heaven through the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of the miracles was to confirm the truth of the apostle's message. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter had referred to Jesus as "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst...." In 2 Corinthians 12:12 Paul speaks of the miracles that he did in a similar way. "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works." These signs and wonders perform the same function for us as they did for those who witnessed them. They confirm that the apostles were truly sent by Jesus and that their message was the message that he had sent them to preach.

The signs and wonders also functioned as signs of the renewal of all things that is God's mission through Jesus. They point forward to the time when all sickness and suffering will be over due to the saving work of Jesus Christ in conquering sin and death.

Now one of the odd things in this description of the miracles of the apostles is that people were positioning their sick loved ones along Peter's path so that "at least his shadow might fall on some of them." It's interesting that we only read of this here. It's an odd reference that is not repeated. There is something similar in Paul's story told later on in the book of Acts. In Acts 19:11-12 we read, "And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them." Again we only read of that here and nowhere else. One commentator says about this, "There is always a strange unknown quality about God's healing." (Wright, p. 85).

I think that this points to God's freedom to work how and when he wills. God is free to perform a miracle in a certain situation by Peter's shadow falling upon someone or by a handkerchief that Paul had touched and then never use that method again as far as we know. We do know that these odd ways of healing people appear only once and then never again.

We don't read of Jesus' healing anyone through his shadow or through a handkerchief although we do read of people being healed by touching the hem of his garment. By in none of these cases did God use this method regularly. It's very unlikely that Peter's shadow always healed people. I doubt that Peter could turn that power off and on. And God does not feel the need to explain to us why he would in a few instances heal through Peter's shadow or a handkerchief and then never again as far as we know.

The point I think is that God works when and where he pleases and there is an unpredictability to much of what he does. Jesus makes this point in John 3:8 when he says of the Holy Spirit and his work of the new birth, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." The words, "The wind blows where it wishes" emphasizes the freedom with which the Holy Spirit works. There is something mysterious about the wind and there is something mysterious about the work of the Holy Spirit in causing people to be born again. Many people hear the gospel, but not all who hear the gospel are born again. As God said to Moses in Exodus 33:19, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

There are so many things like this. Why does God heal one person and not heal another? Why does God allow one person to get an incurable disease and die young and another person live to a ripe old age? Why does God save one person and not another? There are so many questions like this. Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." God is free in who he heals and how he heals. He is free in who he saves and how he saves. Paul speaks of this in Romans 11:33 when he says of God, "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways."

And this strange story of God healing people when Peter's shadow fell upon them in this one instance is just one illustration of God's inscrutable ways.

But there is an other side to this because there are also ways in which God is predictable, and that is where he has made promises. God maintains his freedom to heal whom he will and save whom he will, but there is a sense in which he voluntarily gives up his freedom when he makes promises. And because of that we can be certain that if we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus we will be saved. God is not free to reject those who repent and believe in Jesus because he has made promises to save those who do so. By making promises God has placed himself under obligation to save those who turn to him in faith.

We cannot count on God to act in a certain way where he has not made promises, but we can count on him utterly to keep his promises. When God says, "Whoever believes in [Jesus] should not perish but have eternal life," he has made a commitment that we can be absolutely sure he will keep. And that is the glorious flip side to God's mysterious ways in so many areas. God does not promise us an easy life on this earth. He maintains his freedom to give us sickness or health or riches or poverty or suffering or relative ease. He maintains his freedom to save his elect and pass by the rest.

But he has committed himself to save those who turn to him, repent and believe. He has committed himself to working everything together for our good in the light of eternity.

There is another part of this first section that I want to focus on for a moment. Luke describes the apostles and others meeting in Solomon's Portico which was a part of the temple where people could gather. Verse 13 says, "None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem." Verse 14. "And more than ever

believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” These verses show different responses to the apostles and their message.

Verse 13 is interesting and instructive. “None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.” So there were people who thought well of the apostles. They were not like the authorities who were trying to get the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus and his resurrection. They even thought well of the apostles. And yet they dared not join the circle of believers. One of the things that was keeping them from joining the followers of Jesus was fear. They “dared not join them.” And this is contrasted with “believers [who] were added to the Lord.”

The text does not say why some people did not dare to join the church, but there is so much about persecution in these early chapters of Acts, that it is likely that they were afraid to be associated with Jesus because he was crucified and the apostles because the authorities had commanded them to stop teaching and preaching about Jesus.

Just to be a member of the church involves receiving some degree of hatred and disdain from the world. How much we actually experience of that depends on the time and place where we live. In the time described in the early part of Acts, there was the fresh memory of Jesus’ crucifixion and the opposition against the apostles by the authorities. In the case of these people described as not daring to join themselves to the community of the followers of Jesus, there was enough of a threat to ordinary believers that some who were attracted to the gospel were not willing to be identified with the followers of Jesus and the apostles.

One of the basic costs of following Jesus is to be publicly identified with the church of Jesus Christ. In our case, so far in our experience, that cost has not been very high, but it is there and it is getting higher. More and more the church that is faithful to Scripture is considered to be bigoted, intolerant, hateful, and backwards. The church and its teachings are not often portrayed in a positive way in the media. To be a Christian today is to be publicly identified with an institution that is ridiculed and despised. To share in that is one of the basic costs of following Jesus. And there may still be people who are unwilling to pay even that basic cost. There may be people from the world who have some attraction to Jesus and the gospel, but who are not willing to actually join the church because of an unwillingness to be associated with a people who are despised and hated by so many people in our society.

But this passage makes it clear that that being part of the church is a requirement for true believers in Jesus. The text speaks of believers as those who were “added to the Lord.” It’s clear that this means that they were added to the number of believers. They were baptized and added to the church. The Bible does not envision a believer in Jesus who is not added to the church. It can speak of salvation in terms of being added to the believers. It’s one of the ways that we confess Christ before men. We are publicly identified with Jesus and his church. And that will involve belonging to a people who are often despised and vilified.

This is one of the reasons that church membership is important. There are many reasons that church membership is important, but one of them is that we publicly identify with the people of God. And in this passage Luke points to some in his day who did not dare to join the followers of Jesus.

One other point from this first section is that many people were being saved. “Verse 14, “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” Now this is different from our experience and the experience of many churches through the ages. We tend to see covenant children coming to faith as they are nurtured in the gospel and a small number of people from the world being converted here and there. This is no doubt due in part to our sinful lack of zeal in bringing the gospel to others, but it is also in part because of the sovereignty of God in outpouring of his Spirit.

There are times and places in the history of the church when the Holy Spirit is poured out in an unusually powerful way and believers are more on fire for the gospel and the preaching of the gospel is unusually blessed so that large numbers of people are saved. This phenomenon is sometimes called a revival. That word is sometimes used of something that man produces, but what I am talking about comes about through prayer and is a sovereign unusual outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This is something we should pray for. We can be grateful for God’s steady work of building his church through the salvation of covenant children and whenever a person who is lost comes to faith and joins the church. And we should continue to be involved in and support the mission of the church when the number being saved is not large. But at the same time, a passage like this should encourage us to pray for more – for an outpouring of God’s spirit so that we are revived and our zeal for the spread of the gospel is renewed and for a large number of sinners to be saved by grace and added to the church. The fact that God has done such things in the past encourages us to pray that he might bring revival again.

We move now to the second part of our text which is Luke’s account of the apostles arrested and freed. So leaders of the Jews had forbidden Peter and the apostles to preach about Jesus and his resurrection. And Peter and the rest of the apostles had ignored that prohibition. The verses we have just looked at, 5:12-16, describe the apostles doing signs and wonders, preaching in the temple with many people being healed and added to the church. So what was happening was the opposite of what the Jewish leaders wanted to happen. They had killed Jesus because they wanted to stop him from gathering a large number of followers. They had commanded the apostles to stop preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead, because they had wanted to stop them from gathering a large number of followers. But the apostles were continuing to preach publicly and the number of converts to Jesus was increasing rapidly.

So the high priest and his fellow leaders arrested the apostles and put them in prison. But an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison and set the apostle’s free and told them “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The next day the Jewish leaders came together and sent officers to bring them from the prison They found the doors locked, the guards in place, but the apostles were

not there. When the officers came back to the council meeting and told the councilors that the apostles were not in prison, someone else entered the room and said, "Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." So the captain with his officers went to the temple and brought the apostles before the council meeting.

The high priest told them, "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." And that is when Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men" and proceeded to take the opportunity to preach Jesus to the high priest and his buddies.

Now what is clear from this passage is that obeying God rather than man in this situation meant preaching about Jesus even though the authorities had told the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus. In this case the apostle's had a specific word from the angel who had gotten them out of prison. "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."

Now what is interesting about this instance is that the apostle's were specifically told to preach publicly in the temple after the authorities had commanded them not to. It raises the question whether every Christian is called to be as bold and provocative as the apostles were in this situation. Was there something unique in this situation that the apostles were in or is it permissible for believers to witness to the gospel in less public ways in situations where they have been prohibited from preaching. For instance does this mean that all believers in Iran must be preaching the gospel wherever they go even though they know that it will cost them their lives? Is what the apostles did here the only way to be faithful to the church's calling to be witnesses for Jesus?

I think that we can safely say that Luke's purpose in telling this story is not to say that all believers must always be as "in your face" as the apostles were in this situation. What we have here is descriptive not prescriptive. These are examples not commandments. Certainly Luke is holding up the apostles in a positive way in their Spirit-given boldness to preach the gospel in the face of the prohibitions of the authorities, but that does not mean that he is saying to all Christians everywhere, "This is what you must always do in every situation."

Here you have the apostle's almost asking to be arrested. But there are other examples in Scripture where believers flee or hide to avoid being arrested and punished by the authorities. There is the example of Paul. Shortly after he was converted, he began preaching in Damascus and because of that the Jews were plotting to kill him. But Paul hid and in the night his Christian friends helped him escape the city by lowering him over the wall in the basket.

Something similar happened in Thessalonica. Paul preached there. People were saved. The Jews formed a mob, but Paul was hidden and then sent away by night so he could go and preach in another place. What we see in these examples is Paul taking risks in order to preach the gospel and he certainly was arrested and

beaten and imprisoned and finally martyred, but he did try to avoid being arrested or beaten by a mob by fleeing the scene so he could continue his preaching somewhere else.

One other example is Acts 8:1-4 where church members were being arrested and thrown in prison. This happened before Saul was converted and became Paul, and he was involved going from house to house and dragging men and women to prison. What those who were not arrested did was flee. The text says that they were “all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” and it also says that “those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” So here you have church members fleeing persecution, but at the same time they are described as “preaching the word” as fled to different places.

In applying the persecution described in the book of Acts, we need to understand that there has been a wide range in the severity of persecution in the history of the church just as there is a wide range in the severity of persecution in our time as well. We do have Paul’s teaching in 2 Timothy 3:12 where he writes, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” But the definition of persecution in the Bible ranges from martyrdom on the one hand to being mocked and scorned on the other. There is no question that there have been many faithful believers in NT times until today who have may have been scorned by some of the ungodly people around them but have not experienced more than that in terms of persecution.

This story of the apostles boldly refusing to stop preaching Jesus and then after they were beaten “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” is meant to show us how the Holy Spirit gave great courage and zeal to the apostles so that the gospel continued to be preached and the church continued to grow in spite of the opposition against it. Stories like this are meant to inspire us but also to convict us of the weakness of our love for Christ and passion for the spread of the gospel.

We can be thankful that we still have religious freedom and that most of us have experienced very little in the way of persecution. But at the same time, when we read of the courage and zeal of the apostles in this story, most of us must confess that we are far behind them in courage and zeal. If we were more like them, we probably would experience more opposition from the world depending on our circumstances, but even apart from persecution the kind of zeal that we see displayed by the apostles in this passage would make us more passionate for missions and prayer for the kingdom and everyday witness and giving. The zeal of the apostles in this story exposes the weakness of our zeal and passion for the kingdom. It is a call to repentance for us – a call to seek first the kingdom of God – a call to love Jesus with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves.

But at the same time this should not drive us to despair. We must remember that the gospel the apostles were so passionate to preach is the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus, we can live with joy and hope because we are not accepted because of our works but because of Jesus’ life and death in our place. There is a wide range among true believers as far as sanctification is concerned. And we have the great comfort and encouragement that Jesus does not break the bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick. (Matthew 12:20)

But at the same time, those who are forgiven and accepted in Christ, will be constantly repenting. The gospel calls us to repentance and the Holy Spirit enables both repentance and faith and so a true believer cannot be satisfied with their level of zeal and passion for Jesus and the gospel. Jesus continues to call us to repentance. The word of God calls us to grow towards maturity in Christ. And one of the ways that it does so is through examples of believers are more advanced than we are – like the apostles in this passage. Not every believer in their day was as zealous as they were. But their example and their preaching they called believers to strive to grow in zeal and in love and in passion for Christ.

It is easy to be discouraged if we read of the apostles in this passage and are reminded of how unlike them we are. And we should be convicted. But that should drive us to Christ again for forgiveness, but also for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that we might grow to be more like them – more like Christ. They were not able to do what they did in their own strength. They were enabled by the Holy Spirit and that same Holy Spirit dwells in us if we are trusting in Christ and by his power and all the other resources that God has given us for growth, we can make progress.

So let us look at the zeal of the apostles in this passage and be inspired. The story of their courage is given to us not to discourage us but to encourage us because the same Jesus who strengthened them by his Spirit will also grant growth to us.