

Acts 5:12,17-32 Many signs and wonders were done among the people through the hands of the apostles. With one mind, they all continued meeting in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹⁷The high priest rose up, along with his associates (that is, the party of the Sadducees), because they were filled with envy. ¹⁸They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, brought them out, and said, ²⁰"Go, stand in the temple and keep on telling the people the whole message about this life."...²⁷After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked them, ²⁸"Did we not give you strict orders not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood down on us!" ²⁹But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you arrested and killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹God exalted him to his right hand as Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. ³²We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

The second lesson for today is the beginning of the Revelation of St. John. Through a series of visions God enabled him to see what things would be like for the Church from the time of Jesus' ascension until his return. Those visions are troubling, to put it mildly. But God did not give them to us to scare us to death or to have us hide in an underground bunker somewhere. We have proof of that in the first chapter.

John sees **"one like a son of man."** That's Jesus. He's pictured with white hair, blazing eyes, feet like bronze in a furnace, and his face shining like the sun. All of those are pictures of his holiness. He is the one who is in control of everything. He is standing among seven lampstands and he has seven stars in his hand. Those seven lampstands represent the churches and the stars are the pastors of those churches. So every day our Savior is very near to his people, just like he promised. I am one of those stars in his hand too.

This text for today shows some of the earliest attempts by people to bring the Christian church on earth to a screeching halt. But our Savior stands among us just like he was back then. The Church will face problems, that is for sure, but nothing can stop the message of the Gospel. Nothing. We Are Witnesses so expect opposition but also expect blessings.

The earliest history of the Christian church starting on Pentecost was very positive. They enjoyed a good reputation with the people, even those who weren't believers. They're numbers were growing. They numbered about 120 on Easter but by this text that had swelled to roughly 5,000. God blessed them with his Word, with unity, and with his love. Sadly, things were getting more difficult.

Jesus warned his disciples during Holy Week, **"But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name's sake."** In this part of Acts, we see these words being fulfilled. In Acts 4 Peter and John were imprisoned because they healed a man and told him about Jesus. In this text all of the twelve apostles are thrown into prison together.

This wasn't done by the Romans. This was done by the Sadducees, one of the Jewish religious groups. The high priest was always a Sadducee. They were the ones who took the lead in persecuting Jesus and securing a death sentence against him. They thought that they had taken care of him once and for all. But now this Jesus movement had only gotten bigger and bigger.

We will face opposition too. Full stop. It will just come in different ways. What happened to the Apostles cannot happen to us. It is against the Constitution itself to throw us into prison for talking about Jesus. Take a moment today to thank God for that blessing and realize just how unusual that is in the world today and over the course of history. He really has set it up for the Gospel to spread quickly here.

But opposition will be there nonetheless. Human beings are so different in so many different ways, but they are 100% the same in one very terrible way. Every human being is born with a sinful nature. That makes us spiritually dead. On our own we can't hear the Word, can't understand it, can't believe it. So that is the number one challenge to the Church. Every human being is automatically hostile.

For me the worst opposition comes from a place I'd just as soon not talk about. It comes from myself. Sometimes it will be like it was last weekend. My body succumbed to COVID so on Easter of all days. I couldn't be with you. Even on Friday when I was writing this, it was keeping my brain foggy enough to make it a struggle. My own sinful nature doesn't want me to talk about Jesus. It's not a good time. They're having a bad day. They're not going to listen anyway. Anything to keep me from being a witness.

It is important to know that there will be opposition. Then we won't be shocked when it comes. But it is just as important to know what people will be opposed to. Basically it will be the two main teachings of the

Bible—the Law and the Gospel. We might expect that people wouldn't like the Law. Who likes to be told what to do? Opposition to the Gospel is more surprising to us, but that's actually where the hatred will come out.

The high priest in this text complained to the disciples, **"Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood down on us!"** So apparently denial of reality is not a modern invention. The disciples didn't have to make the Sanhedrin guilty of killing Jesus. They did it themselves! They bribed witnesses. They threatened to start a riot in Jerusalem to get Pilate to condemn him. They stood at the cross and mocked him as he died.

Because they clearly didn't understand yet, Peter told them, **"³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you arrested and killed by hanging him on a cross."** Peter was basically saying, "You aren't fighting against us. You are fighting against God. You fought against his plan of salvation and now you keep doing it." The high priest was not accustomed to being addressed in that way.

So no one likes being told they're wrong, so we can see why the Law would make them uncomfortable at best. But why would anyone hate the message of the Gospel? Peter summarizes it here when he says, **"³¹God exalted him to his right hand as Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins."** God sent Jesus into the world to win forgiveness for everyone. What's not to love?

Well, if I believe that message that means that I need to confess a few things about myself. I need to confess that I am a sinner who needs a Savior. I need to confess that I am powerless on my own to get myself in God's good graces. We don't like to say that. It almost sounds unAmerican, right? The American spirit is that you can do anything you want to, you can be anything that you want to be if only you set your mind to it.

That's a great attitude when it comes to earthly things, but it is a worthless attitude when it comes to spiritual things. The high priest put his confidence in the fact that he is the high priest. Who were these Galilean fishermen to tell him anything? People say the same thing today. Who are you to tell me anything? Me? I'm nobody. This isn't my idea. This isn't my message. I'm bringing you a message from God himself because he loves you that much. Please listen, for your own good.

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Jesus told his disciples on Maundy Thursday, **"I have told you these things, so that you may have peace in me. In this world you are going to have trouble. But be courageous! I have overcome the world."** We see in this text some ways that our Savior empowered the disciples to be his faithful witnesses. Luke tells us, **"Many signs and wonders were done among the people through the hands of the apostles."**

Remember that at this point in history, not as much as one single syllable of the New Testament had been written yet. Today we can compare what someone is teaching to it to determine if they are telling the truth or not. They couldn't do that back then. So God enabled them to perform these miraculous signs as proof of his presence with them. Once the New Testament was complete, those signs faded away because they weren't needed.

After the Sanhedrin had the disciples thrown into prison, God carried out the quietest jailbreak in human history. An angel appeared and caused all the doors to open. He told them, **"Go, stand in the temple and keep on telling the people the whole message about this life."** You can see how much the disciples had changed since Easter evening. They didn't hide behind locked doors again. The very next day they were in the most public place imaginable, telling the good news about Jesus.

None of us are apostles like they were. That is a technical term to refer to those closest followers of Jesus who learned from him during his ministry and then were sent out into the world. Nevertheless, God has given all of his people the privilege of being his witnesses to the world. Jesus was talking to us too when he gave the Great Commission before he ascended into heaven.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you." These words are not directed just to pastors and teachers but to all of God's people.

God gave you all the training you need to be his witnesses. Through Holy Baptism he created faith in your heart and gave you the blessings that Jesus won for you on the cross. God has spoken to you in his Word so you know him too. Granted, some of us will be more comfortable talking to people than others, but that isn't the important part. The important part is the message itself. That's all we need.

Peter reminds us that we never go alone. Our Triune God is right there with us, **"³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you arrested and killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹God exalted him to his**

right hand as Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. ³²We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

God the Father has been planning for our salvation from before the creation of the world. On Holy Week we saw how that plan was carried out perfectly. If he took care of that, then he certainly can and will be with us and bless us as his witnesses. Jesus himself promised, **"And surely I am with you always until the end of the age."** When we go out as his witnesses, our Savior, our big brother, is by our side every step of the way.

Peter says that the Holy Spirit is a witness right along with us. So we never have to worry that we can't speak powerfully enough or if we aren't as good at it as somebody else. It's not our message. We don't make it powerful. The message is powerful in and of itself. It's like a lion. You don't have to defend a lion. You just release it and let it do its thing. It's the same way with the Word.

Our motivation for doing all of this is because we know what our Savior has done for us. Peter says that we have repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That's the same message that John the Baptist preached, **"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!"** The only difference is that John was pointing ahead to Jesus. We are pointing back to him. That was Jesus' message as well, **"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near."**

Remember what it means to repent. It's a change of heart that God works in us through the Word and Sacraments. It literally pictures someone walking in one direction and then turning around and coming back in the opposite direction. We can do that because we know that Christ has paid for all of our sins on the cross. The word translated "forgiveness" literally means to send away. Through Jesus' blood God has sent our sins away as far as the east is from the west.

Everywhere you look, people need Jesus. They are crushed with guilt, but the only advice people can give them is, "Pretend it doesn't exist!" Yeah, that'll work. Only in Christ is it taken away. Their personal lives are in shambles because of their own bad decisions or the decisions of others. The one true God wants to be their perfect Father and welcome them into the best family ever. They are scared of what the future holds and who can blame them? Knowing our almighty, loving God is in control makes every day brighter.

We Are Witnesses so expect opposition but also expect blessings. When we look at texts like this one we see that our lives really aren't that different from believers in the past. We all face challenges from within and without, but the same God lives and rules over everything for us. The same God who strengthened and blessed them is here now and will do the exact same for us.