

Lord, consider the threats of the nations, and grant that your servants may speak, hear, believe, and obey your word with all boldness while you stretch out your hand for healing, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.ⁱ

That prayer was based on the church's prayer in Acts 4 after they heard how Israel's leaders mistreated Peter and John and forbade them from preaching Jesus. Facing persecution, the church begged God to consider these threats and to help them proclaim the Gospel boldly, as he continued to perform miracles in Jesus' name. Their first concern was that the very things that caused their persecution might continue. God heard them, and "the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly."ⁱⁱ We learn a few things about the Gospel as we see how the Lord continued to answer that prayer.

1) The Gospel is not hindered by sin. This passage follows the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. They conspired to deceive, Peter exposed their sin, and the Lord killed them. Then "great fear came upon the entire church" and everyone else who heard about it.ⁱⁱⁱ Imagine how that event could have impacted both the church and the unbelieving community.

Believers may have shrunk back from gathering. Church leaders might have decided to hold back a bit on signs and wonders. But that is *not* what happened. Instead, "many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles." They continued to perform miracles publicly and regularly. They didn't slow down; they sped up! And the believers? "They were all together in Solomon's Colonnade."^{iv} "Great fear" didn't hinder gathering; it encouraged it!

What about the unbelievers? Previously, they joined them at Solomon's Colonnade to hear about Jesus. Now, "no one else [no unbelievers] dared to join them, but the people spoke well of them." Though they respected them, they were afraid to be publicly identified with the Christians. We might think this was a setback for evangelism, but it wasn't. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira stressed the gravity of the Gospel. No one dared join them *unless* they were true believers. "Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers—multitudes of both men and women."^v Evangelism (likely personal) remained effective, and the number of new believers increased steadily.

The multitude grew so large that the apostles apparently couldn't get around to healing all the sick. So "they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them. In addition, a multitude came together from the towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed."^{vi} The fame of Jesus had increased and spread.

Peter's exposure of Ananias and Sapphira's sin—and the Lord's punishment—did not result in a timid church. Nor did it hinder the Gospel. It solidified the church, increased the seriousness with which the world took the Gospel, and brought new believers into the church.

Don't be afraid to be honest about scandalous sin in the Christian community. Don't fear addressing it publicly and head-on. That is an area where churches, denominations, and ministries have failed too often. We hear of missionary kids abused as children by missionaries

or in boarding schools, only to have it covered up. They were told, “You can’t say anything. We would have to leave. If we leave, no one will tell these people about Jesus. You don’t want them to go to hell, do you?”

Allegations of grave sin are brought to leadership, only to be met with, “There must be some misunderstanding. We all know him! He’s one of the greatest Christians I know. He’s not an abuser.” So nothing is done, perhaps until dozens or hundreds more are harmed. Or, when scandalous sin *is* found, it’s hushed up. “We can’t alert people to this! Members would be upset. They might stop giving or leave. How would we staff programs or pay for this infrastructure? It would ruin outreach!”

In such cases, the core concern is what the exposure of sin among professing believers might do to the cause of the gospel. The gospel does not need your protection. The vulnerable need your protection. Children need your protection. *Jesus* does *not* need your protection. The Gospel exists to deal forthrightly with sin! Sin doesn’t threaten the Gospel; the Gospel threatens sin! On the cross, Jesus canceled sin and destroyed it. Jesus reigns; so we can face sin without fear.

A church honest about scandalous sin and wolves in sheep's clothing is not a hindrance to the Gospel. It is evidence of a kingdom that stands in stark contrast to the world. Unlike the world, the church says, “We know about evil—and we know what to do with it. We are not surprised or threatened by it. We address it head-on because Christ conquered it. We renounce, rebuke, repent of, and remove sin out of love for Jesus and our neighbor.” That speaks of an unshakable kingdom.

2) The Gospel is not hindered by persecution. The leaders of Israel noticed the growing influence of the church. Instead of being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” they “were filled with jealousy.” They were the educated, credentialed experts in the Law and esteemed leaders of Israel. But these uneducated fishermen with no credentials were expounding the scriptures on the temple grounds, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah, and performing signs. *And people followed them!* The Sadducees became jealous, fearing that these commoners might steal their audience, influence, power, and respect.

So, they had them arrested and put in jail to await trial. But the sword of the Spirit is not bound by the sword of the state. That night, an angel opened the jail doors. He commanded them to go stand in the temple and proclaim the life found in Christ. They obeyed God’s command.

The next day, the high priest “convened the Sanhedrin—the full council of the Israelites.” The Sanhedrin was “the supreme council in Jerusalem which act[ed] as a judicial court, as the political link to the Roman governor, and as the guardian of public order.”^{vii} This is persecution by the *government* (and not merely by “religious leaders”). Rome *occupied* Israel, but Israel was still a nation with its own government. The Sanhedrin constituted the highest governing body in Israel.

They convened to hear the charges against the apostles, render a verdict, and decide a sentence. But a servant reported they found the jail locked, guarded, and *empty!* As they wondered about it, they learned, “The men you put in jail are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” So, the commander went and brought them back peaceably for fear of the people.

The High Priest demanded, “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”^{viii} The apostles had blatantly disobeyed their instructions, filling the city with the Gospel. That’s a problem because the Gospel taught that Jesus was both innocent and executed. It was Israel’s leaders that demanded the execution! That would make them guilty of murder.

The apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people.” The basic matter on trial was who the highest level of government is for an Israelite—Jesus or the Sanhedrin? The God they obey is “the God of our ancestors.” The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is Yahweh! So Peter claims that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God’s promises to Israel. It is the Sanhedrin that is out of step with God.

“The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging him on a tree. God exalted this man to his right hand as ruler and Savior.” That is a challenge. “*You* murdered Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. *You*, condemning Jesus to death on a tree, declared him cursed. But God, exalting Jesus to his right hand, declared him ruler and Savior.” Peter denies the authority of the court because God declared that the authority of Jesus supersedes them.

But Peter also offered grace. Jesus is “Savior.” (In the Old Testament, Yahweh is Israel’s Savior. So, Peter equates Jesus with God. In one chapter, Peter refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each individually as God.) God made Jesus Savior “to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Peter is offering the Gospel to his persecutors. The crucified, risen, and ascended Messiah offers *them*—his murderers—the opportunity to repent and be forgiven.

The Law of Moses required every fact to be established by two or three witnesses. So, Peter appeals to witnesses to the truth about Jesus. “We are witnesses of these things” — eyewitnesses to his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. “And so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” These signs and wonders were evidence that the Messiah gave his Spirit, the promise of Abraham, to believers. They could receive him too if they obeyed God by believing the Gospel.

State persecution did not hinder the Gospel. The government could not stop the Gospel by command or by imprisonment. Even when they tried the apostles in court, the trial itself became a setting for the Gospel to be proclaimed! Here’s an application: Obey Jesus. He is the King of kings.

If you aren’t a believer, you are in rebellion against the highest authority in the universe. As rebels, we deserve eternal execution. But Jesus died for sinners and rose again so that we might live. In Christ, God offers repentance and forgiveness of sin. Surrender to this glorious, gracious King.

As believers, we must remember what government we surrender to. We are alien residents. America is not our homeland; the Kingdom of Christ in our nation. Our citizenship is not on earth; it is in heaven. The church is not a branch of the government; it is an embassy of the Kingdom. We are not American statesmen; we are ambassadors representing the Messiah and his interests. We are not a state militia; we are soldiers of Christ, explicitly forbidden from becoming entangled in the affairs of the world. The church is neither organized by nor under the authority of the Constitution of the United States of America; the Law of Christ governs us.

We are neither Republicans nor Democrats; we are Christians who promote the platform of the Risen Lord. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other."^{ix} We cannot pledge our allegiance to America and to the Kingdom of Christ.

We must always obey Jesus, even if the government forbids it. Our statement of faith says, "Church and state should be separate." In matters of faith and practice, the state has no authority over the church. It may not tell us what to believe, how to worship, or prevent us from evangelizing.

3) The Gospel is unstoppable. When they heard the apostles, the Sanhedrin was "enraged and wanted to kill them."^x Before they could, they were interrupted. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a teacher of the Law. He was taught by Hillel (one of the greatest rabbis of all time) and respected by everyone.^{xi} Gamaliel begged them to give care to what they were about to do, appealing to recent history. He mentions two events in which leaders rose and gathered a following. Once the leaders died, the followers scattered. "So in the present case, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone." "Their leader was only recently executed. They'll likely go away on their own." "For if this plan or this work is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God."^{xii} Gamaliel speaks better than he knows. They are fighting against God; they will not be able to overthrow the church. So, they brought the apostles back, flogged them, ordered them "not to speak in the name of Jesus."

How did the apostles respond? "They went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name."^{xiii} Jesus taught:

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.^{xiv}

So, they obeyed Jesus! They rejoiced! God "counted them worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name!" Persecution is a sign that one is worthy of being identified with God and his Kingdom. Believers are those of whom the world is not worthy; God is not ashamed to be called their God.

The apostles obeyed Jesus by rejoicing and by preaching the Gospel. The Sanhedrin forbade them to speak in Jesus' name. Yet, "every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."^{xv}

The Gospel is unstoppable. We should follow them in living as though we have received an unshakable kingdom truth. Jesus never promised we would get to keep our property. He said to give it away and follow him. Jesus never promised an earthly government to guard our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He promised that as history unfolds, these would be taken away.

When you believe that the government is persecuting the church in some way, ask yourself: Do I respond in obedience, rejoicing and being glad that I have treasure in heaven? Or do I respond with fear, anger, slander, suspicion, division, and the like? When the world sees divisive, angry, or fearful Christians raging about how the government is coming to take our

wealth, it proves which kingdom our treasure is really stored in. They don't see the joy of people who have an inheritance in heaven that human schemes can't touch. So how should we respond when persecution comes?

Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.^{xvi}

As Martin Luther put it:

That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever!

Lord, as you did in the church in Jerusalem, do today—shake this place, fill us all with your Holy Spirit, and cause us to begin speaking the Gospel boldly. In Jesus' name. Amen.

ⁱ Based on Acts 4:24-30

ⁱⁱ Acts 4:31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 5:11

^{iv} Acts 5:12.

^v Acts 5:14.

^{vi} Acts 5:15-16.

^{vii} Anthony J. Saldarini, "Sanhedrin," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 976.

^{viii} Acts 5:28.

^{ix} Mt 6:24 (CSB)

^x Acts 5:33 (CSB)

^{xi} Conrad Gempf, "Acts," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1076.

^{xii} Acts 5:38-39 (CSB)

^{xiii} Acts 5:41 (CSB)

^{xiv} Mt 5:10-12 (ESV)

^{xv} Acts 5:42 (CSB)

^{xvi} Heb 10:32-34 (ESV)