

# Worthy to Suffer

Acts 5:12–42

July 12, 2001

“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 at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” Here is one of those places, again, where scripture teaches us something that runs the opposite of the way we usually think. These gentlemen just took a beating. And yet, these apostles were rejoicing. They were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” And not only dishonor, but outright physical suffering. They took a beating, and they were rejoicing. The question arises as to what they knew that we do not know. It would be one thing to walk away grateful to be alive. We could understand that. But they were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

Part of the good news here is that the apostles were given, and the church has been given, and you and I are given good cause to rejoice even and especially when the world turns against us. You and I have gathered here today to sing God’s praises, not just because life is so good, even though we are grateful for that also, but we have gathered here to sing God’s praises despite the reality that life is hard, despite the diseases that ravage us, despite the terrors that plague us, despite the enemies that attack us, despite the death that awaits us. We have been given good cause to rejoice.

The apostles were rejoicing despite the hard reality of, and in the very face of, persecution for their faith and punishment for their preaching and teaching. And their preaching and teaching was good! I have preached some sermons for which I should have been punished, and taught some classes just the same, but that was not the case here. The apostles were preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ with exceptional courage, boldness, vigor, and results. The apostles were standing together in the temple, publicly naming the name of Jesus Christ, which the authorities had already commanded them not to do. None of the rest of the Christians were brave enough to join them, but there they were, preaching and teaching. And “the people held them in high honor.” Lives were changed. People were healed. “More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.” We have read already of the conversions of three-thousand people and of five-thousand men, so these “more than ever...multitudes” must be tens of thousands.

No wonder the authorities were upset and afraid. The apostles had been given good cause to rejoice, not just in the success of their work, but even more in the underlying reality which gave success to their work. There was a truth there worth suffering for. There was a person there worth dying for. A little beating, a little worldly dishonor, was rightly worn as a badge of honor by these brave servants of Jesus Christ. “And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

There is the key. There is the center of it all. The name for which they were glad to suffer is the name of Jesus Christ. Even as Christ had suffered for them, and us, so were they glad to suffer for him, glad to be counted worthy of such high honor. To suffer for him is to become like him even if in a small way. To suffer for him is to be confirmed in belonging to him and to him alone. In this they rejoiced.

Who is this Jesus Christ? When Peter and the apostles were questioned before the council about their persistence in teaching and preaching him, they had this to say: “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.” That is, they were witnesses to this then, and continue to be so for us today, that Jesus had been crucified, Jesus had been resurrected, and Jesus had been exalted as Savior and Lord of the universe. Of all the people who had ever lived, of all the people who had ever died, God had made this one alive again. This one is different. This one is special. This one is the Son of God. This is the one who makes life worth living. This is the one for whom it is worth living our lives. Jesus is the Christ, our risen Lord and Savior.

First, Jesus is the crucified one. Here is the horror of the cross. Here is the suffering that made their beatings seem mild. Here is the death which prepared them for their own. The people among whom Peter and the apostles were preaching had been responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The authorities bore a special responsibility. But it is not just them. Jesus died for our sins, too. Thus we, too, are responsible for his death even though we were not there. How strange it is that the apostles’ good news, their life changing message, the gospel which has changed the world, starts with the wrongful death, by capital punishment, of the one of whom they speak and for whom they live and die. Jesus was crucified. He was hanged on a tree. And in that moment he, who had done no wrong, took upon himself all the gonewrongness of the world, all the sin and evil of the world, and paid the price for our punishment so that we might be forgiven. The remarkable thing here is that sin, death, and evil did not break him. They assaulted him, but they did not make him sin, they did not make him stop believing, they did not make him stop loving. And so, they were undone. They spent themselves against him. Here was good cause for rejoicing.

Second, Jesus is the crucified one whom God raised from the dead. It is not enough to say that Jesus was crucified. It was a wonderful sacrifice he made there. Although countless other people had been crucified, there had been no deaths like his. And yet, if it had ended there, it would have ended there. Sin, death, and evil would have won. Instead, God vindicated Christ’s sacrifice. God approved of what Jesus had done. God rewarded Christ’s sacrifice and obedience by raising him from the dead to a new and different life, the same person but forever beyond the reach of pain, disease, decay, sin, death, or evil. Many people had died. Only this one had been resurrected. Here was something new and different. Here was good cause for rejoicing. Here was something worth staking one’s life on. But there is more.

Third, Jesus is the crucified and resurrected one whom God has also highly exalted in heaven, making him Savior and Lord of the universe. The good that Christ had done has beneficial effects for others spreading to all whom God chooses. Christ did not die for himself, but for us. Christ did not conquer sin, death, and evil for himself, but for us. Christ was not raised simply for his own benefit, but for ours. And so it is that Jesus is our Savior. Here is good cause for rejoicing. From all that attacks us, from all that corrodes our hearts, souls, and lives, here is the one who saves us. Thanks be to God.

And this Savior is also Lord. The one who saves us saves us for himself. The one who gives himself for us calls us to be his own. We owe our lives to him. We owe our hearts and souls to him. So do we owe to him both faith and obedience. An interesting word is used here. I have been saying “Lord,” which is language to which we are accustomed. The Book of Acts uses

at this point “Leader.” God exalted Jesus as “Leader.” This is one way of saying that our place is as followers. Of all the callings we could have in life, here is the most important one: we are called to be followers of Jesus Christ. This makes sense of our lives. This gives us joy and good hope. This is the life for which we were made. This is good cause for rejoicing.

In the midst of all the noise of our world, in the contest of voices shouting for our allegiance, here is one worth listening to. No wonder Peter and the apostles persisted in teaching and preaching Jesus Christ. “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.”

No wonder the church was growing then. The ministers preached the gospel. The Holy Spirit blessed their efforts. People believed. Their lives were changed. And the church grew by leaps and bounds. That is the way it is supposed to be.

Of course, there was a price to be paid. The ungodly cannot stand the proclamation of the gospel or the growth of the church. They will do everything they can to stop both. But God frustrates their plans. Prisons could not hold these apostles. Councils could not restrain them. Beatings did not slow them down. We have much to learn from them.

First, let us receive the wonderful gift of Jesus Christ. Here is the good cause for rejoicing. And we receive this blessing fresh every day. Yes, we believe in the perseverance of the saints. And yet, this is not a gift which we receive all at once and then we are done with it. This is the bread of life. This is the cup of salvation. This is the breath which sustains us day by day and moment to moment. Receive the gift of Jesus Christ.

Second, let us believe in Jesus Christ. This, too, is a gift, for faith is given by the grace of God. So let us seek this grace from God. Let us grow in faith day by day. Let us carry every thought captive to Jesus Christ. Having received the gift of Jesus Christ, let us give ourselves to him.

Third, let us follow Jesus Christ. Let us follow him into the world. Let us not only believe him in our hearts but also obey him in all our thoughts and actions. This is where it gets hard. Having received the gift of Jesus Christ, having given ourselves to Jesus Christ, now let us march forth bravely and boldly living as he would have us live.

Finally, let us preach and teach Jesus Christ. Let us, as the church, tend to this primary responsibility: we are to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Come what may, we are to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. If they arrest us and beat us, we are to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. If they have not done so yet, if the forces of evil have not yet objected to our ministry, it may be that we are not yet worthy to suffer dishonor, that we have not yet named the name with sufficient strength and clarity to be of any threat to evil, that we have not yet caused enough of a stir to be worth noticing. Just keep preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will not have to look for trouble, and we are not supposed to do so. Just keep preaching and teaching the crucified, resurrected, and exalted Jesus Christ, our Leader and Savior. Lives will be changed. People will be healed. Multitudes will believe. The church will grow. It is the will of God.

And if they do come after us? God grant us the grace to stand firm, so that one day it might be said even of us: “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 at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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