
Signs of Life: Resilience

Acts 5:33-42

July 4, 2026

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Pray for youth camp

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As Christians and Americans, this Independence Day deserves more than casual celebration. It deserves gratitude, reflection, and thoughtfulness. Liberty and prosperity are not merely privileges to enjoy; they are gifts to steward before God.

For 250 years, America has occupied a remarkable place in human history. There are many things that make America a great nation among the nations: unprecedented liberty, shared prosperity, protected opportunity, and extended influence.

French foreign minister Alexis de Tocqueville toured America to observe American life, society, and democracy and published "Democracy in America" in 1836, observed something incredibly telling:

"I sought for the greatness and genius of America... Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." -Alexis de Tocqueville

Proverbs 25:26 - Like a muddied spring or a polluted well are the righteous who give way to the wicked.

I believe great confusion has entered the church on two opposite ends of the spectrum regarding what it means to be a citizen of heaven and a citizen of the USA. I don't say this to stir unnecessary controversy, but because Christians need biblical clarity in a confused culture. It is important for Christians in America to know where to stand when it comes to things like patriotism, nationalism, Christian mission, and ultimate loyalty.

First, I find it tragic that there are many Christians who gladly enjoy the blessings of this nation and its freedoms while refusing to give thanks for or be engaged in the nation that helped secure them. They enjoy, and often take for granted, things like: religious liberty, protected property, ordered law, national stability, financial prosperity, and the freedom to gather, preach, worship, build churches, raise families, and speak truth openly. Yet when they enter the church building, they suddenly act as though gratitude for America, or a desire to see this nation become more righteous, is beneath Christian maturity.

That is not spiritual depth. That is ingratitude and entitlement dressed in the pious language of discernment.

The term “Christian nationalist” has often been used in a derogatory manner, even among professing Christians, to discredit any believer who believes Christians should be engaged in public life, grateful for our national inheritance, concerned for the moral health of the country, or desirous that our laws reflect righteousness rather than rebellion. Of course, there is a form of nationalism Christians must reject. But there is also a form of patriotic cynicism that Christians must reject as well.

I myself have been accused of being a “Christian nationalist,” as if it is somehow anti-Christian to be a follower of Jesus who deeply cares about the national good of the place and people where God has planted him. When I am asked whether I am a Christian nationalist, I usually respond by defining what the term means and what it does not mean.

If by Christian, you mean I believe that Jesus came from heaven to earth to reveal God, died a sacrificial death for the sins of mankind, rose from the grave to conquer death, and offers forgiveness and eternal salvation to all who believe upon Him by faith, then yes, I am a Christian.

If by nationalist, you mean someone who believes that God places people within given borders so that they might seek Him and know Him, and that God calls His people to bless their communities and countries by living righteous lives, loving their neighbors, and seeking the good of the nation where He has placed them, then the accusation does not trouble me.

Washington wrote to his Continental Army, ***“While we are zealously performing the duties of good Citizens and Soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of Religion. To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.”***

But if by Christian, you mean a moralist who believes Christian values alone can save humanity, or that America should force Christianity upon its people as a state religion, then no, I am not that kind of Christian.

And if by nationalist, you mean someone who believes America is the kingdom of God, that a certain political party is the hope of mankind, or that my loyalty to America should be greater than my loyalty to Jesus Christ and His global church, then no, I am not that kind of nationalist.

By the first definition, I wish that more Christians were more concerned about the moral and spiritual environment of the nation in which they live as they were about whether or not they will buy 2 or 3 75” TVs for their house. But in this, we also must be careful to keep our loyalties where they truly belong.

And that leads me to address the other side of the spectrum.

When asked if God was on the side of the Union, President Lincoln responded: ***“Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”***

There are some who have equated the Great Commission with American exceptionalism. There are those who confuse America with the kingdom of God, as though the highest mission of the church is to preserve a national identity rather than proclaim Christ to the world. That is a serious error.

While a national allegiance is honorable, our highest allegiance is not to a flag, a party, a constitution, or a country. Our highest allegiance is to Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. His kingdom is the everlasting kingdom, and His dominion endures far above and beyond every human one.

So church, let us be clear-minded and faithful. We must not idolize America, but neither can we abandon her to darkness while we enjoy the liberties God has allowed us to inherit. To whom much is given, much will be required. Yes, we are citizens of heaven, but that does not imply that we should be useless citizens on earth. God has placed us here, in this generation, in this nation, in these communities, not to retreat into private religion, but to bear public witness.

We should pray for our nation, raise godly families, speak truth with courage, serve our neighbors, sacrifice for freedom, vote with biblical conviction, defend righteousness in the public square, and labor for laws and leaders that restrain evil and promote what is good. Not because America is our savior, but because Jesus is, and America needs Him now more than ever. Not because this nation is the kingdom of God, but because every nation belongs under the authority of the King.

May we love our country without worshiping it, critique our country without despising it, and serve our country without forgetting that our final hope is not in America, but in Christ alone. And until He comes, may the church be found faithful, grateful, courageous, and engaged for the good of this nation and the glory of God.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:33-42 (NKJV) [33] When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. [34] Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. [35] And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. [36] For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. [37] After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. [38] And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; [39] but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.” [40] And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. [41] So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Introduction

The title of the message today is **Signs of Life: Resilience**.

And I was thinking about resilience this week because my 13-year-old son has been mowing the yard. Which means he is slowly discovering one of the great burdens of manhood: ***grass does not care about your schedule.***

ILLUSTRATION

You can mow it down. You can trim it back. You can make the lines look nice. You can stand back and admire your work like, **“There it is. I have conquered the lawn.”**

And then three days later, it looks at you and says, **“We meet again.”**

He was noticing how fast everything keeps growing. You cut it down, and it comes back. You trim the edges, and they stretch out again. You knock it down, and it keeps pushing upward. The yard is resilient. It has life in it, and because it has life in it, it keeps growing.

Now, that is a simple picture, but I think it helps us understand what we are seeing in the book of Acts.

As we have been moving verse by verse through Acts, we have watched the enemies of Christ try to mow down the witness of the church. They threaten the apostles. They arrest them. They command them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. In our passage today, they become furious enough to kill them. They beat them. They warn them again.

But the church keeps growing.

Why? Because there is life in it.

The church is not resilient because Christians are naturally impressive people. The church is resilient because Jesus is alive, the Spirit has been given, and the work belongs to God.

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

You can cut down the witnesses, but you cannot cut off the life of Christ from His church.

You can threaten the messengers, but you cannot bury the message. You can command silence, but you cannot stop resurrection life from pushing up through the soil.

That is what we see in Acts 5:32–42. Human opposition keeps trying to cut down the witness of the church, but the life of Christ keeps rising up in the people of God.

MAIN POINT 1

Human Rage Cannot Restrain God’s Work (33)

SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:33 (NKJV) [33] When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.

First, human rage cannot stop God's work.

Now do not miss what they had just heard. Peter had not preached a vague sermon nor had he offered a soft religious reflection. He had declared plainly that the God of their fathers raised up Jesus, the very Jesus they had murdered by hanging on a tree. But Peter did not stop with their guilt. He also preached the mercy of God. He said this Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of God as Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

That means the message that enraged them was also the message that could have saved them.

Their problem was not that they misunderstood Peter. Their problem was that they understood him too well. The message coming to them was that Jesus was alive, they were guilty, and God had overruled their verdict. The One they **condemned** had been **enthroned**. And now they had to decide what to do with the truth.

APPLICATION

That is always what the Word of God does. It brings the heart to a point of decision. In Acts 2, the people heard the gospel, were cut to the heart, and cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" But here in Acts 5, these rulers are also cut to the heart, and instead of crying out for mercy, they begin plotting murder.

QUOTE

— Boice

“Since they were unable to contend with the disciples on the level of truth, they resorted to naked authority and force. First, threats. Second, a beating. Ultimately, death.”

Conviction is a mercy; God's way of seeking to reach those in need of His truth and forgiveness, but a hardened heart can turn mercy into murder. The wound of Peter's message was meant to heal them, but instead, they chose to hate the hand that held the scalpel.

And yet, as furious as they were, they could not stop what God was doing. They could rage. They could plot. They could threaten. Eventually, they could beat the apostles. But they could not overthrow the risen Christ or silence the witness of His servants.

Psalm 2 asks,

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 2:1-3 (NKJV) [1] Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? [2] The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, [3] “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

The answer is not because their *rage is powerful*, but because their *rebellion is foolish*. The kings of the earth take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, but God is not pacing heaven in anxiety. **He who sits in the heavens laughs.** Human rage may look terrifying on earth, but from heaven it looks temporary, foolish, and doomed. The disciples, with a heavenly perspective, are able to see past the foolish raging to the heart of what’s happening.

APPLICATION

Church, we need to remember this. Opposition is not evidence that God’s work is failing! Sometimes it is evidence that the truth is convicting and that the Spirit is moving. Jesus told His disciples, **“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.”**

No, we should not become reckless, cruel, or needlessly offensive. But neither should we become shocked when truth produces hostility. ***It is a weak church that chooses what to speak and what not to speak based on how it might affect its likability. We must speak from God-centered conviction and humble boldness; I’ll say it like this:***

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

The church must tell the truth with tears in her eyes and steel in her spine.

We do not preach Christ because the world gives us permission. We preach Christ because He is risen, He is exalted, He is Savior, and He is worthy. We preach Christ because He is the only hope for those who are lost and taken captive by sin and death.

Human rage cannot stop God’s work. Yes, it can seek to intimidate God’s workers, but in the end, it’s sad. The same truth can produce either repentance or rage depending on the soil it finds. Those who choose to raise their fists or fury against God’s truth today will sadly find themselves on the receiving end of God’s fury when they stand before His judgment.

But God does not only rule over the **rage** of men. He also rules over the **reasoning** of men. In verse 33, the council wants to kill the apostles. But beginning in verse 34, God uses the counsel of one respected Pharisee to restrain the bloodlust of the room. This brings us to the second truth: human counsel still serves God’s plan.

MAIN POINT 2

Human Counsel Still Serves God's Plan (34-39)

SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:34-39 (NKJV) [34] Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. [35] And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. [36] For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. [37] After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. [38] And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; [39] but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God."

Who was this man who speaks and others listen?

A Pharisee.

This matters because the Sadducees dominated the priestly leadership and were especially threatened by the apostles' preaching of resurrection. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, angels, and spirits, so Gamaliel may have been less instinctively hostile to the apostles' claims than the Sadducean leadership.

A teacher of the law.

He was not merely a politician. He was a recognized rabbinic authority. Later in Acts, Paul says he was "brought up... at the feet of Gamaliel," trained "according to the strictness of our fathers' law" (Acts 22:3). So the man who restrained the council here later becomes known as the teacher of Saul of Tarsus.

Held in respect by all the people.

This explains why the room listened. In a chamber full of fury, Gamaliel had enough moral and religious weight to slow the mob down. History tells us that he was from the Hillel family line, with a respected rabbinic tradition. The Mishnah records the sentiment of how respected Gamaliel was in regard to the Jewish law:

QUOTE

“Since Rabban Gamaliel the elder died there has been no more reverence for the law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.”

Gamaliel then gives two examples from their recent Jewish history.

First, he mentions Theudas. Verse 36 says Theudas rose up, *“claiming to be somebody,”* and about four hundred men joined him. Josephus also writes of this man in his records of Jewish history. But Theudas was killed, his followers were scattered, and the whole movement came to nothing. Josephus says Roman forces attacked, killed or captured many, and beheaded Theudas. After that, it didn't take long for all his zealous followers to scatter.

Then Gamaliel mentions Judas the Galilean. Judas the Galilean led resistance connected to the census under Quirinius. Josephus also discusses Judas and connects him with opposition to Roman taxation and the rise of a revolutionary “fourth philosophy,” which later fed the spirit of Jewish revolt against Rome. Judas became a revolutionary voice of resistance, but he also died, and his followers were dispersed.

So Gamaliel's point is simple: “We have seen movements rise and fall before. A charismatic leader gathers a crowd. He makes bold claims. People follow. Then he dies, the followers scatter, and the movement disappears.”

Perhaps he assumed it would be the same with these followers of Jesus. But that is exactly where Christianity is different.

Theudas died, and his followers scattered. Judas died, and his followers scattered. Jesus died, and His followers scattered too. ***But then Jesus rose from the dead and gave his followers undeniable evidence that instilled within them a commitment and willingness to both live and die for Christ.***

That is why this movement did not collapse. It was not held together by human enthusiasm, political zeal, or the memory of a dead teacher. It was carried forward by eyewitnesses of the risen Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God.

Every other movement Gamaliel named ended when the leader died. Christianity began when its Leader rose.

Gamaliel understood something on the other end... if this is of God (it doesn't imply that he thought it was), you can't fight it. So either let it die out, or let God do what He wants to do, but fighting it won't help us on either front.

Gamaliel's counsel is fascinating because Luke does not require us to know everything about Gamaliel's motives in order to see everything about God's providence.

- Was Gamaliel beginning to wonder if this movement really was from God? Perhaps.
- Was he offering a politically cautious answer to keep the council from acting rashly in front of the people? Possibly.
- But either way, the larger point is clear: ***while the council is deliberating, God is governing.***

The apostles are not spared because Gamaliel is sovereign. They are spared because God is sovereign, and in this moment God uses the counsel of a respected Pharisee to restrain the rage of hostile men. The court may debate, the council may deliberate, and religious leaders may calculate, but the counsel of the Lord stands forever.

APPLICATION

1. God is not dependent on favorable people to accomplish His will.

Sometimes God uses friends. Sometimes He uses enemies. Sometimes He uses people who are only half-right. Sometimes He uses people who are trying to avoid controversy. The church does not survive because the world is fair. The church survives because Christ is faithful.

2. Caution about Christ is not the same as commitment to Christ.

Gamaliel is cautious. The apostles are committed. Gamaliel says, "If this is of God, you cannot overthrow it." The apostles say, "We must obey God rather than men." Those are not the same.

3. God's work does not need human permission to continue.

The Sanhedrin can debate what to do with the apostles, but they cannot decide what God will do through the apostles. Human counsel can be used by God, but it cannot govern God.

4. People are stubbornly willing to fight against God.

Gamaliel says, "We may find ourselves fighting against God..." but this doesn't seem to faze the Sanhedrin from continuing in the days to come to continue fighting against God when this group doesn't scatter, but rather grows.

The tragedy is that humanity is on a mission to fight against God: at the tower of Babel, in the tribulation period, at the final battle after the kingdom age, and right here and now.

But God's providence did not mean the apostles avoided all pain. This time they were spared from death, but they were not spared from suffering. The council could not kill them, but they could still beat them. And this brings us to the third truth: ***human punishment cannot silence God's witnesses.***

MAIN POINT 3

Human Punishment Cannot Silence God's Witness (40-42)

SCRIPTURE

Acts 5:40-42 (NKJV) [40] And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. [41] So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jes as the Christ.

This is a challenging yet encouraging finality to this event because it begins with suffering, but it ends in rejoicing, which teaches us a powerful lesson about serving the Lord: Joy does not come through the absence of suffering, but in the presence of Jesus amid our suffering.

Third, human punishment cannot silence God's witnesses.

Verse 40 says, "And when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go."

That word "beaten" should not be quickly overlooked. It means "to remove the skin." This was not a mild warning or a religious slap on the wrist. These men were physically punished, publicly humiliated, and deliberately shamed. The council could not refute their witness, so they tried to intimidate the witnesses.

That is often what happens when truth cannot be answered. When men cannot overthrow the truth, they try to threaten the truth-tellers.

But verse 41 is stunning: "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."

Notice the three things they do after receiving this beating and rebuke:

1. **They departed**
2. **They rejoiced**
3. **The continued**

They did not leave bitter. They did not leave defeated. They did not leave strategizing how to make the message less offensive. ***They left rejoicing.***

They weren't rejoicing because pain is pleasant or because suffering is enjoyable. Not because Christians pretend wounds do not hurt. They rejoiced because the shame and the pain they endured tied them more closely to the Savior who had borne shame for them.

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 3:10 (NKJV) [10] that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,

The council saw their suffering as disgrace. Heaven saw it as honor.

Jesus had already taught them this. **“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you... Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”** The apostles rejoiced in Acts 5 because they believed what Jesus preached in Matthew 5.

Counted worthy: The disciples didn't see this as a punishment to avoid in the future; they saw it as a reward earned for being faithful to the truth; being faithful to Jesus.

- **When we suffer persecution, mocking, slander, or physical consequences of following and preaching Jesus, we could see it as a shame (those people see me worthy of shame). Or, we could see it as a reward (God saw me worthy of suffering for Him). This gives us endurance and perseverance, knowing that we are living for the approval of God, not man.**

And notice the phrase: “for His name.” They were commanded not to speak in His name. They suffered shame for His name. Then they continued preaching Jesus as the Christ.

The issue was the name of Jesus.

They could have avoided the beating by avoiding the name. They could have kept religious language. They could have spoken about God in general. They could have encouraged moral improvement, community values, and spiritual reflection. But the offense was not generic religion. The offense was Jesus: crucified, risen, exalted, Prince and Savior.

And verse 42 tells us that the punishment failed.

“Daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

The council commanded silence, but the apostles continued daily.

QUOTE

The lashes that were meant to silence them became another reason for them to preach all the louder.

APPLICATION

Church, we need this kind of courage again. Most of us have never been beaten for the name of Jesus. But many of us have been silent because we were afraid of being disliked. We do not always need a council to command our silence. Fear does it. Comfort does it. Respectability does it. The desire to be accepted does it. The fear of being misunderstood does it.

But if the apostles would not stop speaking after being beaten, we must ask why we are so easily silenced by being disliked.

We do not seek suffering. We seek Christ. But when suffering comes because we belong to Christ, do we count it shameful to bear His name and wear His truth?

The world can wound Christ's witnesses, but it cannot make Christ unworthy. It can punish the messenger, but it cannot chain the Word. It can command silence, but it cannot change the commission.

So like the apostles, we must keep teaching, keep preaching, and keep bearing witness. Publicly and privately. In the community and from house to house. When it is welcomed and when it is opposed. When it is easy and when it costs us.

QUOTE

— Spurgeon

“Now, I charge every Christian here to be speaking boldly in Christ's name, according as he has opportunity, and especially to take care of this tendency of our flesh to be afraid; which leads practically to endeavours to get off easily and to save ourselves from trouble. Fear not; be brave for Christ. Live bravely for him who died lovingly for you.”