

### **The irrepressible work of Jesus Christ**

In Acts 5 a man who does not believe in Jesus, Gamaliel, says something that is 100% true. "If a work is from God, you cannot destroy it." Religious leaders in Jerusalem seek to destroy the work of the apostles in the name of Jesus. They seek to silence those who share the gospel of Jesus Christ. They want to silence those who work in the name of Jesus. They hate that name. They don't want to hear about that name anymore. They want to destroy it. Behind them there is Satan and the enemies of the cross, they are doing everything to destroy the work of God. They are doing everything to destroy the work of salvation, the advance of the Kingdom of God. They do everything to put an end to the works of Jesus Christ, by his Spirit, through his disciples. But they fail. They fail because what Gamaliel says is true. "If this work is of God, you cannot destroy it." And in this passage we see the irrepressible work of Jesus Christ. He builds his church, despite all kinds of opposition. Nothing can stop it. No one can stop it. And I believe that today we need to hear that message. We in the church in the western church need to know that nothing and no one can prevent the irrepressible work of Jesus Christ.

We need to know what power is at work. We need to understand the persecution we are facing and we need to know how to persevere in the irrepressible work of Jesus Christ.

**Power** - V 12: "Many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles." Verses 15 and 16 describe how they brought in "sick people and people tormented by unclean spirits; and all were healed." These verses are found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, but isn't this what we read over and over in the Gospels to describe what happened during Jesus' ministry? People came to Jesus, sick people, people possessed of unclean spirits. They came to be healed and Jesus healed them. And now his apostles do the same, by the power of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus. And just as the miracles of Jesus confirmed his person, his authority, his divinity, his message, the miracles here serve to confirm that the apostles' message is true, that it is a powerful message. Miracles confirm, not that the apostles are divine, but that the apostles' message is a divine message. In 2 Corinthians 12:12, the apostle Paul explains that the miracles of the apostles serve to establish the authenticity of their ministry. He said, "The marks of my apostle ministry have been produced in your midst by unflinching perseverance, by signs and wonders." And it is interesting to note the effect that this manifestation of power had on the people. On the one hand, in verse 13, we see that "no one dared to join them." The death of Ananias and Sapphira caused fear. The miracles which manifest the power of God at work, they cause fear. A community where God judges sin, a church where God is clearly at work, scares away superficial people for whom religion is simply a facade. The people of Jerusalem who are just a little curious, they don't feel at all comfortable in a church where they talk about the purity of the church, where they talk about an costly commitment to Jesus. And in the Church of Jesus Christ today, we should welcome everyone warmly. There must always be a welcome for everyone. But it must also be said that non-Christians should feel uncomfortable in the Church of Jesus Christ. They should hear things and see things that disturb them in their mind. They should hear things about themselves, about God that disturb them. The cultural Christian who is not converted will feel ill at ease in a church where the life of discipleship is taken seriously, where repentance, prayer, fellowship are taken seriously, where we seek to grow in faith. The danger in the church is that we change our message because we don't want to embarrass the unbeliever. No! "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for the non-Jews" It is for fear of offending the unbeliever that many churches have stopped preaching the gospel. They have stopped talking about the judgment of God, about hell and everyone is feeling good but no one is hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The word preached has no more power. Of course we are not trying to offend or be disrespectful, but we speak the truth in love. But despite the fact that the manifestation of God's power scares some away, the church of Jesus Christ continues to grow. V14: The multitudes of men and women who believed in the Lord increased more and more. Here is the proof of the activity of the Spirit of God. In a context of persecution, a context of discipline within the church where the terrifying holiness of God is manifested, the irrepressible work of Jesus moves forward with might. God is calling people to himself. The Holy Spirit is convincing, regenerating. The advance of the church of Jesus Christ continues with power.

**Persecution** - Verses 12-16 are so positive. It's so encouraging to see what's going on in the church. And then in verse 17 we see people who send a shiver down the spine: the high priest and the Sadducees. These are the most powerful religious leaders of the day, those who previously told Peter and John not to speak in the name of Jesus again. Acts 4:21: "They threatened them again and released them, without finding a way to punish them."

Luke tells us in verse 17 that they are "filled with jealousy." They can't stand that these apostles, these uneducated men, these Galileans, are so successful, that there are so many people following them. "Here in Jerusalem, in the Temple, the seat of our power. Our power is threatened. Our popularity is under threat. They ignore our authority. If this continues, the whole city of Jerusalem is going to laugh at us!"

And in these verses we see that the persecution escalates but the way Luke describes it shows how futile it is. Luke seems to want to show that the best efforts of the most powerful men are so weak, so futile. What an encouraging message for the early Christians who had to endure persecution at the cruel hands of the Roman Emperors. What an encouraging message for persecuted Christians today. Let's see how Luke explains this.

In verse 18, they lay hands on the apostles and throw them into the public prison. But in the next verse, we immediately see that this is a futile gesture: "During the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison". What an irony. It is the Sadducees who put the apostles in prison, the Sadducees who deny the existence of Angels. And who is it that frees the apostles? It's an angel who doesn't even exist. It reminds us of the story of the little Russian boy who asks his atheist daddy, "Does God know we don't believe in Him?" And then after freeing the apostles, the angel told them to go and do the very thing that the Sadducees told them not to do. V20: "Go, stand in the temple and announce to the people all the words of this Life". Go to the power center of the Sadducees and proclaim life in Jesus Christ. They tell you not to do it. I, come from God, I tell you to do it.

And then in a scene you might imagine in a comedy movie, while the apostles are preaching in the temple, the religious leaders come together thinking that the apostles are still in prison. They believe they are in a position of power. They get together to decide what they are going to do with their "prisoners" and all the while their "prisoners" are in the temple preaching! We can well imagine their anger in verse 25! "The men whom you have thrown into prison stand in the temple and teach the people."

Verse 28 shows that the previous prohibition on preaching in the name of Jesus had no effect on the apostles: "We had expressly forbidden you to teach in that name. And behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching". And we see the terrible hypocrisy of the religious leaders in the second part of verse 28: "You intend to bring this Man's blood upon us." They understood well what the

apostles had preached. Isn't that what Peter told them, "You killed him. You crucified him" But by daring to accuse the apostles of wanting to bring the blood of Jesus on them, they forget, as if by chance, what they had said to Pilate during the trial of Jesus: "Let his blood fall on us and our children!" (Matthew 27.25)

They simply refuse to see what is obvious. They refuse to admit their fault. And they get more and more angry after Peter's answer in verses 29-32. One can imagine that with every sentence of Peter, the Sadducees' rage escalates. "You are only men, says Peter in verse 29, and we obey God!"

In verse 40 they have the apostles flogged. They forbid them to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. This flogging is intended to frighten and intimidate the apostles. But does it work? We can imagine the threats with each stroke of the rod: "Do not speak in his name!" Did it work? Look at verse 42: "Every day," "at the temple" (under the nose of the high priest and the Sadducees) they keep preaching the good news of Christ Jesus. It is a totally futile opposition that does not succeed for a single moment in hindering the advancement of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

And on the one hand, opposition to Jesus' work is almost laughable. But on the other hand, it's so sad. These men who are the religious leaders of the Jews, the religious leaders of the people of God, they don't even take the time to look for explanations, to understand what's going on in front of their eyes. They are so closed, their hearts so hard. How do they explain the miracles? How do they explain the release from prison? How do they explain the courage of the apostles? They don't even ask the question. Could it not be that the apostles are right? Even Gamaliel, "a doctor of the law, esteemed by all the people". Why does he refuse to believe? One commentary reads: "What other proof does he need to be convinced, besides the empty tomb of Jesus and the miracles performed by the apostles? Wouldn't a doctor of the law do research to find the truth, to find a solid explanation?"

And what we see here is what we see every day, people who oppose Jesus Christ, without ever taking the time to find out who he really is, never examining his life, his ministry, his death or resurrection. They reject him without knowing who they are rejecting. They reject the Bible, a book they have never read. They persecute Christians without ever trying to understand them. And the truth is, for a lot of people, it's easier not to think about Jesus. It's easier not to look for answers, easier not to face the truth. They say God doesn't exist because they don't want God to exist. They are afraid of the implications for their life and therefore they deny the truth. They don't want to hand the throne of their lives to King Jesus. It's easier to maintain the status quo. The next time someone persecutes you for your faith, someone laughs at you for your faith, invite them to read the Bible with you. Invite him to come to worship or a Bible study. "Before you reject Jesus, before you laugh at him, come and meet him in the Bible, in the life of his people. Come and study his life, his words, come look at him on the cross and THEN explain why you are rejecting him." The persecution is real, it is sad, but it is futile. It does not prevent the advancement of the work of Jesus.

### **Perseverance.**

Robin has already spoken of persecuted Christians around the world. We read the emails and magazines we receive from Open Doors and often we are struck by the perseverance of persecuted Christians, despite all that they go through. Despite years of violence and injustice, persecuted Christians around the world are able to persevere. And it's the same with the apostles here. They endure violent persecution, relentlessly, and they persevere. How do they do it? What can we say about their perseverance that might help us too to persevere? We could give several reasons. We could speak of the power of the Holy Spirit in them (v32). We could speak of the unity of the apostles. We could talk about how God protects them. But in the time that remains, let's see two things that explain their perseverance:

They persevere in obedience. Put yourself in their shoes in verse 19. An angel brings you out of the prison. What do you want to do? Find a safe house somewhere, far from threats from religious leaders? Keep a low profile for a few days? This is not exactly what the angel told them in verse 20, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people all the words of this Life." In other words, "Keep doing the exact same thing you were thrown in jail for." Go straight back into the lions' den! So what do they do? V21 "After hearing this, they entered the temple in the morning and began to teach". Jesus told them to be his witnesses. The angel of God gives them an order. They are not naive. They know how the religious leaders will react. At the first possible opportunity, they courageously obey and let God take care of the consequences. They put their lives in danger to obey the mandate to make Jesus Christ known. And verses 29 and 32 emphasize their courageous desire to obey God. At the beginning of Peter's answer there is the word "obey" and then at the end of his answer there is the same word: "We must obey God rather than men." "The Holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him." Obey God, obey the mandate given by Jesus, despite threats, whatever the consequences. Who will they obey? God. They persevere because they want to obey God.

And then the second reason and this is the main reason for the perseverance of the apostles and for ours, it is their relationship with Jesus, their love for Jesus. The apostles have just been released from prison. They just have been flogged and with their backs torn open, blood everywhere, in terrible pain, they are filled with joy. They rejoice. Verse 41 tells us why: "rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name". Nothing is more important, more dear, more precious to these men than the name of Jesus, the person of Jesus. They love him with all their hearts. For them, suffering for Jesus is a matter of joy. It's a privilege. And it's a privilege because they can do for Jesus what Jesus did for them. Jesus had suffered for them. Jesus had been threatened for them. Jesus had suffered injustices for them. Jesus had suffered insults for them. Jesus had given his life for them. The religious leaders had tried to shame the apostles. "You should be ashamed of that name" Read the text carefully. Religious leaders can't even bring themselves to say the name of Jesus. They speak of "that name". But instead of being ashamed, the apostles rejoice at being able to suffer insults for the one who went to the cross for them. The apostles rejoice because the name of Jesus is glorified by their suffering. Their suffering brings glory to Jesus. Years later, Peter wrote these words in 1 Peter 4:14: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, and of God, rests upon you . . . but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name." Jesus Christ, the name above all names. Are we ashamed of the name? Are we afraid to speak of this glorious name? Are we afraid of mockery, hostility, hatred? France is becoming more and more hostile to Jesus and his church. Jesus tells us: Go, stand in the temple and proclaim to the people all the words of this Life. We know what's going to happen. Are we ready to suffer for the name of Jesus. We pray, do we not, that God will use us in the work of his Kingdom, in the proclamation of the good news. What if the Lord Jesus said to us: "I am going to use you and I will ask you to suffer, to suffer insults for my name. At school, at work, at home. You are going to suffer injustice. You will be laughed at because of me. But I will be glorified in you. The world will see me in you. The world will see my power at work in you. Thanks to your suffering, the world will know my love, my grace, my salvation. The world will hear of my death, of the resurrection. And in your suffering, you will always have my loving gaze on you. You will always see my eyes, filled with love. In your suffering, when you are at the end of your strength, my hands will carry you, my hands that were pierced for you. My child, you will glorify me, but by your suffering for my name". What would you say to Jesus if he told you that? It is what he is telling you. With our backs torn by the rods of insults and harsh words, with threats that still ring out in our ears, we would look at Jesus and say to him: Your will be done and your name be glorified and may your unstoppable work advance!