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Acts 5:17-42

Outward Church: Joy in Adversity

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How can we have **joy in adversity**? How can we **experience happiness** when we're also experiencing **setbacks** or even **suffering**? I want to read you the last words in our passage.

Acts 5:40b (NIV) ...They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles, who are the twelve disciples including Peter and John and all the rest, are arrested by those in power in Jerusalem. They tell the apostles not to talk about Jesus anymore, flog them, which means they **whipped** them with **strips of cowhide** as many as **40 times**.¹ How would you respond? I'd run away.

Acts 5:41 (NIV) The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

They walk away with their **chin up**, rejoicing, **happy** for what they suffered for Christ's name. Chances are, most of us aren't going to be **thrown in prison** for Jesus, but you still **face adversity** and **hardship** and it's tempting to **give up on Jesus** when that happens. It's tempting to **abandon faith in Jesus** when things don't go our way, when we **lose a job**, when a **loved one dies** of **covid** or **cancer**, when we **lose our retirement**. It's when we're at our **lowest** that we **need Jesus the most**.

Our passage **first teaches** us about finding **joy in suffering for Jesus**, as we're **sharing** the **gospel**, but I also think it teaches us about finding joy in **whatever we're suffering** as we're simply **living for Christ**. So it gives us **encouragement** for what we might call "**persecution**" but also for what we call "**hardship**." Jesus can give us **joy in any type of adversity**, and especially when we experience adversity **for him**.

Our passage today gives us **hints** and **clues** about how the disciples are **able** to walk away from suffering rejoicing **instead of complaining**. Listening to today's sermon probably won't give you **instantaneous** long-lasting joy, but hopefully it will **encourage** you along your way. Developing joy in adversity is a **journey**. It **takes time**. In our passage today we find **five things we need to experience joy in adversity**:

1. New life in Christ. (v. 20)

The disciples and Peter have **experienced a new way of life** that makes them willing to suffer for Jesus. They are experiencing **success** in their **mission** (Acts 1:8). People are coming to Christ and the high priest and his associates are filled with **jealousy**. They can't stand it that someone might take their **power**. They're probably worried that this **Jewish sect** might bring **God's wrath** down upon them for wandering away from the **Old Testament laws**.² So they arrest them and throw them in jail, but then an angel shows up.

Acts 5:19-20 (NIV) 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

When you get **pregnant**, people want to **know three things**. When's the **due date**? What's the baby's **gender**? And what are you going to **name him or her**? People keep asking us what we're going to name our

little girl, and that's fine, we welcome it, but we're not telling. A **name** somehow tells us about a person. **N.T. Wright** was going to name his daughter "Emily" but when she arrived they named her "**Rosamund**."³ She just didn't look like an **Emily**. I tried to name Elijah "**Lancelot**" but he just didn't look like a Lancelot.

What do people **name** this early movement of believers? They become known as "**the way**" before they become known as "**Christians**" (Acts 9:2; 11:26). Even **before that** the **angel** calls them by a different name right here—"**this life**—tell the people all about 'this life'."⁴ What they're experiencing is so **different** the angel has to describe it as a **new way of life**. This new way and life comes **from Jesus**.

John 14:6 (NIV) Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

If we want to experience joy, we need to have the same "life" the disciples had. We can only have this new life through Jesus Christ, who is "the way and the truth and the life." To have joy we need to have Jesus. If you struggle with **melancholy**, this can be hard. We **shouldn't assume** that if we somehow don't have joy that we don't know Jesus. Scripture tells us **knowing Jesus** is the foundation for **real joy** and **lasting contentment** but learning to experience this joy can **take time**; it's a **journey of faith** (Rom 5:3-5; Phil 4:11; James 1:2-4). *To experience joy in adversity we need new life in Christ.*

The disciples have this life and so they go into the **temple courts**, **likely expecting to suffer**, and begin to tell others about the life they have in Christ. Their **experience** of Christ's life leads to their **sharing his life with others**. The **Sanhedrin**, the **ruling religious body**, sends for the disciples but they're not in the jail. The angel broke them out. Instead, they find them in the temple courts teaching and they go and get them. They don't use force because they're afraid of the people. The people sense they have **something special, life**. They're brought in, questioned, and told not to teach anyone about the life Jesus offers anymore.

Acts 5:28 (NIV) "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

But here's the thing. If you had the **antidote** to COVID-19, to the Coronavirus, would you want to tell others about it? If you and your company had developed the **immunization**, wouldn't you want the **whole world** to know, even if your government told you not to tell? The disciples, have something even better, the **antidote to sin and death, eternal life**, and they're going to tell everyone. *To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ and we need...*

2. Allegiance to God. (v. 29)

We need to be **committed** to God above everyone else. The disciples are.

Acts 5:29 (NIV) Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!

Peter and the apostles are **risking it all**. They are defying the **Chief Priest** and therefore the very **institution** of the **temple** in Jerusalem. The temple was the **social, economic, and political** center of **Israel**. To defy the temple was like defying both your **nation** and your **religion**. The Chief Priest and his associates were doing nothing less than **demanding** the apostles **patriotic** and **religious allegiance** and they **refuse** (Acts 4:19).

They know that they **answer** to a **higher nation, a higher religion, a higher power—God himself**. They have a **divine mandate** to tell others about Jesus and so do we. Their **allegiance** and **loyalty** is to none-other than God. In reality, their **opposition** is **not pushing back** against them but against God. God can **bear the weight**. He is sturdy. It's like **Jesus is a strong man heaving a heavy boulder** (Matt 12:29). Our job is to **trust that he can do it**. We **obey** and **leave the results** up to him.

Where does your **loyalty** lie? Where is your **allegiance**? How we answer that question, whether **nation**, or **family**, or **church**, or **Christ**, will impact our joy. If we have a firm commitment to Christ, even when our **government lets us down**, or our **family** is a **mess**, or our **church** has **problems**, they won't hit us **as hard because we have Christ and he has us** (John 10:28-29). *To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ 2) allegiance to God and...*

3. Belief in the gospel. (v. 30-31)

Peter says that they are going to obey God, not man, and then he explains why:

Acts 5:30-31 (NIV) 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

Did you know the word “**gospel**” means “**good news?**” It's **joyful news**. This **joyful news** is **born out of suffering**. That's right! Suffering. God sent his son into this world to rescue us and instead we **denied him** by **nailed him to a tree**, where he **hung suffering** till he died. We have a **Son of God** who has **experienced** our **pain**, our **hurt**, our **suffering**, our **adversity**. He willingly **bore** it on himself and **died**. But **three days later Jesus rose** from the dead in **complete victory**. He is **alive** and **well**, **ruling** and **reigning** over all of creation. Now he offers the **joy** of **eternal life** to any who will repent and believe in **his name, Jesus**.

The gospel gives us **hope**. It tells us **God cares** about our **hurts** and **pains** and yet has a **greater purpose**. He wants to **work through** our sufferings to further his **goodness** in our world. Jesus can **wrap** his arms around you. He has been there. He has experienced the **worst** of **suffering** and can give you hope. If he can rise again, if you trust him, you will too. *To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ 2) allegiance to God 3) belief in the gospel and...*

4. The Holy Spirit's power. (v. 32, 38-39)

The apostles don't claim that they have what it takes; instead they attribute their strength to the Holy Spirit.

Acts 5:32 (NIV) We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

They have a **greater power** within them, the **Holy Spirit, God himself**. It's through the **Holy Spirit working in our hearts** that **we come to believe in Jesus Christ**. Not only are Peter and the apostles witnesses, so is the Holy Spirit who **affirms** the **truth** of the **resurrection** on our hearts. That means **God gives us the faith to believe**. So **if you doubt** you're **saved**, ask for **more faith** to believe. The Spirit gives us faith. Even the Sanhedrin considers that there **might be something out-of-this-world** about the apostles.

When Peter shares the gospel, the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of religious powers in Jerusalem, want to **tear him apart**. They want to **kill** him right there (v. 33). But one of the best teachers of their day, a **Timothy Keller** type person, get's up and explains why they shouldn't kill them. He tells them of **two revolutions** that **died out** when their **leaders** were **killed**. Then he says this.

Acts 5:38-39 (NIV) Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. 39 But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

If they have the Holy Spirit's power, they will be **unstoppable**. I looked up how long it takes a **train** to stop. I found, “The average freight train is about **1 to 1¼ miles in length (90 to 120 rail cars)**. When it's moving at **55 miles an hour**, it can take a **mile or more** to **stop** after the **locomotive engineer fully applies** the

emergency brake. An **8-car passenger train** moving at **80 miles** an hour needs about **a mile to stop.**” If you’re on that train, it takes a mile for you to stop. It’s not because you are powerful but because **the train is powerful.** When you’re with Christ through the Holy Spirit, it’s not because you are so powerful that nothing can stop you but because God is so powerful **nothing can stop him.**

That’s what we see happen throughout the book of Acts. Despite **hardship** and **trial** and **suffering** the gospel keeps going forward because the apostles are empowered by the Holy Spirit. *To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ 2) allegiance to God 3) belief in the gospel 4) the Holy Spirit’s power and...*

5. Shared suffering. (v. 41)

This takes us back to how we started the sermon.

Acts 5:41 (NIV) The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

If we want to have joy, **we need someone to share our suffering with**, especially for the **name of Jesus.** The disciples don’t go through **pain alone** but **together.** My friend **Joe**, who preached for us a couple weeks back, served in the **Marines** and said there is nothing like the **heat of battle** to **bind you together** with those who go through it with you. I have personally not experienced this, but I have experienced how going on a **long hike** or a **winter camping trip** brings friends closer. This is why we need **partners** in **ministry** and **life.** *We need shared suffering to discover joy.*

Even though we need our **church family** to walk through suffering with us, we actually **don’t** need them to **take away the pain.** For my **Doctorate of Ministry (D.Min)** program we studied how opportunities to suffer help us **gain pain tolerance.** When one family-member is experiencing pain and hurt, it’s so tempting to **rush in** and **rescue them**, but that actually removes **opportunity** for **growth** and an increase in **pain tolerance.** We need to **experience suffering** so that suffering won’t bother us. Edwin Friedman, in *Generation to Generation*, writes (p. 48):

Where members of a family are too quick to spare another pain, the resulting dependency tends to make the other's threshold fall. In addition, he or she will become addicted to having pain relieved through someone else's functioning. Conversely, where family members can begin to increase their threshold for another's pain, the other person's threshold is likely to rise, even though he or she may at first go through "withdrawal" symptoms when the "addiction" is taken away. *Those who focus only on comfort, on relieving pain, or filling another's need, tend to forget that another's need may be not to have their needs fulfilled.* (emphasis added)

When we **steal another’s suffering** by making **everything better**, we’re actually **stealing their joy too.** This is why we need **brothers** and **sisters in Christ** who **don’t have all the answers**, **who can’t make it better**, who will simply **“be” with us in our pain.** In that way, we need “shared suffering.”

To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ 2) allegiance to God 3) belief in the gospel 4) the Holy Spirit’s power and 5) shared suffering.

When God gives us opportunities to suffer, he’s **building up** our **pain tolerance** so we can **know** and **experience joy** no matter our circumstances.⁵ We **can’t bypass** hardship and **go directly to joy.** We might experience **momentary happiness**, but **lasting joy takes time** and **persecution** or **hardship.**

I **struggle** with **feelings** of **melancholy** and **anxiety.** I know **many of us do.** It’s **especially prevalent** right now being **stuck at home** not being able to spend time with friends. **What if Jesus has something for us** in

this suffering and adversity? What if **Jesus** wants to **teach us joy**? What if this time is an **opportunity** to learn joy? Let's **pray** and ask God to give us joy in adversity. *To experience joy in adversity we need 1) new life in Christ 2) allegiance to God 3) belief in the gospel 4) the Holy Spirit's power and 5) shared suffering.*

Romans 15:13 (NIV) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

You and your family or friends can use these group discussion questions to talk through today's sermon and Bible passage. Please use whatever questions you find helpful.

1. How does Jesus' suffering encourage us in our suffering?
2. What sort of adversities are you facing and how might God be teaching you joy in them?
3. Why do you think Jesus identified himself as "the way, the truth, and the life?" Why do you think the angel identifies "this life" with the believers and their witness?
4. To whom or what do you feel loyalty? What does it mean to be loyal to God? How does obedience demonstrate allegiance and loyalty?
5. How does the Holy Spirit help us persevere in hardship? How has the Holy Spirit helped you personally?
6. Have you ever seen God produce joy through trial? Have you experienced it yourself or have you seen it in a friend or family member?
7. Who might the Lord be calling you to encourage as they go through suffering? How can you walk through the suffering with them instead of trying to take it away from them?

End your discussion by praying for what you learned and that the Holy Spirit would help you apply it to your life. Pray that Jesus would use it to further his kingdom and bring our neighbors, friends, and family to him.

- ¹ Arnold, Clinton E. *Acts* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) (p. 43). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ² N.T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12*. Logos Bible Software. p. 90.
- ³ N.T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12*. Logos Bible Software. p. 87.
- ⁴ N.T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12*. Logos Bible Software. p. 87.
- ⁵ Edwin H. Friedman talks about building up pain tolerance in *Generation to Generation*.