In June 2015 a young man walked into a church in downtown Charleston, and killed nine people while they were having a prayer service.

More recently, in November 2017, a man attacked a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas and killed 26 people and injured 20 others during a worship service.

We don’t often hear about persecution of Christians, it doesn’t make the headlines very often, and it’s not often that it is right in our backyard. It’s easy to forget about things like that when we live so far from it. But the fact remains that more Christians are persecuted and killed today than at any time in history.

Between 2003 and June 2014, over 1100 Christians had been killed by the Islamic State in persecution against Christians that was declared genocide by the US, Britain, the European Parliament, the UN, and Iraq. It is estimated that around the world over 250 Christians are killed for their faith every month. Persecution is still a very real threat in our world today.

While it remains extremely unlikely that any of us will have to face the choice of standing firm in our beliefs or being killed for them, we will be challenged in our faith. We will experience pushback from our society and culture. The day might even be coming when it will be criminal to teach what is written in the pages of the Bible.

The question that faces us is what will we do when that time comes? What will we do when we are faced with the choice of renouncing our faith, or going to prison? What will we do if we are ever faced with the choice, as so many have been before, of staying true to our faith or losing our life?

The church that we read about in Acts was facing exactly those questions, and today we’re going to see how they responded. Even though Peter and John had already been arrested once and they had been charged not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, that did not stop them from continuing to spread the Gospel.

These were the same people that had arrested and killed Jesus, and yet these men were not afraid of what would happen to them. They knew that they had to continue to speak about what Jesus had done.

**Acts 5:12–16 ESV — 12** Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. **13** None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. **14** And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, **15** so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. **16** The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Luke tells us the people highly esteemed the Apostles. The word he uses there is the word μεγαλύνω (megalyno), which means to cause to be great, or large. It can also mean to glorify, to exalt, or to speak highly of someone. You can hear our prefix mega- in there, which we use when we talk about things that are huge, like mega-churches or lottery tickets.

The apostles were becoming not only famous among the people of Jerusalem, but they were seen as great and good men. People were speaking highly of them, and they were gaining that reputation very quickly.

We have even more miracles here that the Apostles were doing among the people, and we’ll see miracles throughout the book of Acts. These were not miracles done for the sake of the miracles themselves, but so that people could see outpouring of the Spirit of God, so they would know that God was moving and working among them. The point was not the miracles themselves, but that God’s power was on display through these men.

Luke describes all the miracles that happen in his narrative as fact. Most other authors outside the Bible, people like the historian Josephus, would tell stories about miracles like this, but they would add, “it is said that”, or “the story is told that”, or even “on these matters everyone is welcome to his own opinion”.

Luke didn’t do that. He was a highly educated doctor, a man of science, you might say, and he was telling the stories of these miracles like they really happened, not like they were some bedtime story to tell the kids. That’s because Luke carefully investigated what happened, and he knew these things to be fact, they really did happen.

The Apostles were highly esteemed among the people, but not with the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders were the ones who had charged them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, and here they were doing miracles in his name, and gathering more followers than ever.

**Acts 5:17–18 ESV — 17** But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy **18** they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

I want you to see very clearly what the motivations of the Jewish leaders were here. This was the high priest, and the party of the Sadducees. This was the ruling class of the Jewish people, the ones who held all the power in their culture. For the majority of these people, their power was about politics, and financial gain. These men were very wealthy compared to most people during that time, and they wanted to keep both their power and their wealth.

They weren’t opposing the Apostles because of their theological convictions, or because they were convinced they were leading people astray. They opposed and arrested the Apostles because they were jealous.

We all know what jealousy looks like. A good definition of this kind of jealousy is having intense negative feelings over someone else’s achievements or success. Jealousy is wishing that what someone else has accomplished was on your list of accomplishments instead. Wishing that their shiny new car was in your driveway instead of theirs. Wishing that you were sitting in that corner office instead of them. Wishing that someone else’s life was your own.

Their entire motivation here was jealousy. They were jealous of the fact that the Apostles were well loved by the people, that they were highly esteemed by them. They were jealous that they were gaining more followers than ever before. They were jealous because they could see a little bit of their power and a little bit of their wealth slipping away with every person that came to believe in Jesus.

The Jewish leaders were not highly esteemed by the people the way the apostles were. In fact, many of them were hated by the Jewish people, because they had caved to the Romans, and worked with the Romans. They were often seen as traitors by the people they led.

These men were not acting as competent rulers and wise overseers. They were playing King of the Hill, trying to maintain their position and power by any means necessary. So, they threw the Apostles, all the Apostles this time, in prison. But God had other plans for them.

**Acts 5:19–21 ESV — 19** But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, **20** “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” **21** And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach…

The apostles were commanded to go and speak to the people ‘all the words of this Life’. Luke uses the word ζωή (zoe) here, which is a word that means not only the kind of life we have here on earth, but the kind of life that God has, the kind of life that God promises us after we leave this earth. The words of life are those that enable people to receive the salvation that Jesus offers us, and live with him for all eternity. The words of life are, very simply, the message of the Gospel of Jesus. That’s the message the apostles were proclaiming in the Temple that morning.

Imagine the surprise of the Jewish leaders when they sent to the prison the next morning to have the apostles brought before them, and no one was there. They found the prison locked just as it should have been, with the guards standing in their places, but there was no one inside.

**Acts 5:24 ESV — 24** Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to.

That was a problem for the High Priest, because as much power as he had, to lose a bunch of prisoners was a show of weakness and incompetency. It reflected badly on him as the High Priest, because this was his domain, and suddenly he didn’t have control over it anymore.

**Acts 5:25–26 ESV — 25** And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” **26** Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

These men who they had so confidently arrested the day before were out preaching and teaching in the middle of the temple, and the Jewish leaders were afraid. The apostles were popular with the people, and they knew that if they took the apostles by force, if they tried to get rid of them to assert their power, there was a very real possibility that they could have a revolt on their hands.

They were afraid of losing their position, afraid of losing their power. But now it occurred to them that they might just lose their lives in such a revolt as well. So, they handled the Apostles with kid gloves.

**Acts 5:27–28 ESV — 27** And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, **28** saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

The High Priest reminded the Apostles that they had been ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus any longer, which they had completely ignored, and rightly so. They had been effective in preaching about Jesus, because even the High Priest recognized that they had filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

Think about that for a moment. Do you think everyone in La Porte has heard the Gospel clearly proclaimed to them? I’m sure they know the name of Jesus, but how many have no idea what he did for them? There are dozens of churches in La Porte, and yet I’m still not sure we could say that our city is filled with the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus.

How incredible is it that these early Christians, with no technology, no vehicles, no postal service, no real resources of any kind, had reached the entire city of Jerusalem with their teaching. All while being persecuted by the Jewish leaders. If nothing else, that alone should inspire us to be externally focused in our ministry here at Agape. To make sure that our city is filled with the Gospel of Jesus. We should be striving to make that happen any way we can.

Then the Jewish leaders complain that the Apostles are making them look bad because they intend to bring the blood of Jesus upon them. They are determined to make sure people know what happened when Jesus was killed. That phrase, “to bring this man’s blood upon us” means to lay the blame or guilt for someone’s death. And the Jewish leaders were fighting that.

My first reaction when I read that, every time, is, “Well..yeah.” The Jewish leaders were the ones responsible for the death of Jesus. They were the ones who put him on trial, the ones who demanded he be executed, and that’s exactly what the Apostles were teaching.

But recognize that they didn’t do that to be malicious, or as some kind of retaliation. They taught that because it was at the heart of the Gospel story. The Apostles were out there spreading the truth of the Gospel, they didn’t apologize for it, and they didn’t back down.

**Acts 5:29–32 ESV — 29** But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. **30** The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. **31** God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. **32** And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

The Apostles stood firm in their faith in Jesus. They didn’t waiver for a second. They were facing down the men who had orchestrated the murder of Jesus, and they didn’t even flinch. They knew that obeying God was of far more importance than anything that might happen to them here on this earth. So, they stood firm, and they proclaimed the Gospel to those who were trying to stop them. They offered repentance and salvation to the very men who had killed Jesus. And it got thrown back in their faces.

**Acts 5:33 ESV — 33** When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

This is exactly what the disciples were afraid of from the beginning, being subjected to the same treatment that Jesus had been. These men went from being so afraid they wouldn’t leave the locked upper room, to being bold enough to stand before the very men who killed Jesus, yet they spoke the truth no matter what. They were very close to sharing that fate here, but an unlikely man stood up against the crowd, and had some words of wisdom to share.

**Acts 5:34–39 ESV — 34** But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. **35** And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. **…** **38** … in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; **39** but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice,

Gamaliel was one of the leading Pharisees of his day, and Luke tells us that he was held in honor by all the people. That included all the leaders in the council, or Sanhedrin, including the Sadducees. Pharisees and Sadducees were opposed to each other on many different political and theological levels, they didn’t get along. Yet here was a man that all of them respected and honored. We’re probably used to thinking of the Pharisees as the bad guys, but here we see one of those Pharisees stand up against the rest of the Sanhedrin, and protect the Apostles.

Paul tells us Gamaliel was his own teacher, his own rabbi as he was training to become a Pharisee. Paul calls him “rabban” instead of “rabbi”, which was an even higher title of honor, and in fact, he was the first to ever be given that title. Gamaliel was so sought after as a rabbi that being a student of his was a like getting an Ivy League education.

Gamaliel recognized that this was a dangerous situation. He reminded his fellow Jewish leaders of several men who had claimed to be the Messiah, gathered some followers, but ultimately amounted to nothing because they were not of God. He knew that the same thing would happen again if the Apostles were just preaching and teaching of their own design.

But Gamaliel saw something that no one else there that day could see. He saw the chance that just maybe these men were telling the truth. And if they were, that would put the Jewish leaders on exactly the wrong side of God’s plan.

As far as we know, Gamaliel never became a Christian, and he was training Paul, who ended up trying to eradicate the church before he met Jesus. But God used Gamaliel that day before the Jewish leaders to protect and preserve the Apostles so they could continue their work of spreading the Gospel.

He knew that if this were something the Apostles were making up on their own, they would fail, and they wouldn’t have to worry about them anymore. But if these men were speaking the truth, if they really were witnesses to the death and resurrection of the Messiah, if this really was God’s plan, then nothing could stop them.

The same thing that was true of the Apostles is true in the church today as well, we can be assured of that. We must obey God rather than men, no matter what we face. If we try to go it alone without the help of the Holy Spirit, and without following God’s leading, then whatever we accomplish will just pass away. It will just be one more work of man.

But if our mission is of God and we obey and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, nothing on this earth can hold it back, and we cannot fail to spread the Gospel of Jesus.

Have the worship team come back up

If you have never accepted Christ as your Savior

If you are a believer, but have never been baptized

If you are a follower of Jesus looking for a church to belong to