

## ACTS 5:27-32

### FIRM BEFORE THE FOE

“When [the guards] had brought [Peter and John before the council], they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 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.’ But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘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 Saviour, 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.’”<sup>1</sup>

Christians increasingly face opposition from those identified with this dying world. The presence of a godly person condemns the unrighteous. The child of God’s inability to condone the sinful proclivities that identify the wicked infuriates the sinner. Sinners not only want to enjoy the fruits of sin, but they also seek approval of all about them that their sinful behaviour is normal. Because they know in their heart that they are sinning against Holy God, they do not want to be reminded of their rebellion.

Had Peter and John but shown proper deference when they were haled before the religious leaders, they would have avoided the antagonism they were facing in our text. Proper deference would have meant that they kept “religion” in its place—which was not in the forefront of life. Nothing much has changed in the past two millennia.

In our modern world, religion must not be permitted to intrude into daily life. The mere thought that one takes his or her faith seriously is a grave violation of social convention. Even the suspicion that one’s faith may dictate choices and actions is sufficient to create grave concern among colleagues and critics, invalidating opinions and negating any good that the righteous person may accomplish. Notice how often the press spoke in alarm at the thought that George Bush actually prayed for wisdom; nobody imagines that the current president prays. Notice in our own nation how the press is gravely concerned that Stephen Harper frequently concludes an address with the words, “God bless Canada.” Faith must not be permitted to have a place in the life of public officials, and within society, the Christian must keep his or her faith concealed.

The doctrine under consideration is commonly known as “religious liberty.” This truth will be a constant desire in the lives of believers who are fully aware of the Lord’s will for their lives. The basis for our study is the interaction of Peter and John with the learned scholars that constituted the Sanhedrin. The Apostles had been haled before that august council. They had been arrested and incarcerated, in the apparent hope that they would be cowed into silence about their faith.

However, God had other plans; His angel freed the servants of God and instructed them to declare the message of life to the residents of the city. They were obedient to the divine injunction; however, they quickly came to the attention of the temple guards, who again took them into custody. Now, standing before the council, they were questioned about their disobedience to the orders of the council, and here we take up the account.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**THE CONTINUING EFFORTS TO OPPRESS THE SAINTS** — “The high priest questioned [the disciples], 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 had anticipated that threats would silence the disciples. If social censure does not silence the faithful, then surely threats will succeed. If threats fail to intimidate believers into silence, then outright persecution will stifle their witness.

I watch with dismay the increasingly intense efforts to coerce compliance with the new social orthodoxy. Under this “new” orthodoxy (which is anything but new), Christians must not notice that certain religions are not merely opposed to the Christian Faith, but that these religious practitioners produce a plethora of preachers of violence, vilification and vituperation who are intent on persecuting those who dare openly practise the Faith of Christ the Lord. Our world is increasingly scarred by violent assaults; and many—if not most—of these violent incidents are religiously motivated. However, we are not to notice this, and we are assuredly not to comment on the obvious facts.

In Australia, two preachers were convicted of “hate speech” by a quasi-judicial tribunal. During a public service of Christian worship they read from the Koran in order to demonstrate the difficulties of reconciling Muslim assertions that Islam is a “religion of peace” with the authoritative basis for Muslim faith and practise. Such an audacious display of common sense is proscribed under the tenets of the new orthodoxy.

An American hero, a four-star general, is prohibited from addressing a prayer breakfast at the United States Military Academy in West Point. An outspoken Christian, unapologetic about his faith, the General is opposed by a strange alliance of atheists and Muslim activists. The military has backed down, apparently cowed by virulent opposition to even the appearance that they could be tolerant toward the Christian Faith. General Boykin was quoted as saying, “I came under attack because there are liberal groups, Islamic groups and atheist groups that want to shut me down because I have been very open about my concerns about the encroachment of Sharia—or Islamic law.”

We live in a world in which self-proclaimed “gender” identity assures protected status for the claimant, while all other views must pay homage to this new orthodoxy. The Bible is quite clear that God created “male and female”; but the new orthodoxy creates other, strange “genders” unknown until today. Within society as a whole and within Christendom in particular, the preaching of the Word must be made subservient to the new sensitivity. It is painfully obvious that these new genders are composed of people with very sensitive feelings, and their feelings can be easily hurt. Consequently, contemporary star chambers (tribunals) must be set up to assuage their hurt feelings.

In British Columbia, a public school teacher is censured by his union for writing a private letter in which he dissents from exalting homosexuality as an “alternative” life-style. A youth pastor in Alberta and the Catholic Bishop of Calgary are threatened with being haled before a “human rights” tribunal for stating their conviction that same-sex unions are proscribed in the Word of God. A printer in Saskatchewan is fined for refusal to print literature promoting moral views that the printer cannot condone. A preacher in Sweden is compelled to defend himself in legal proceedings for daring in the course of a sermon to condemn homosexuality as immoral in biblical teaching. Increasingly, the message being forced on people of conscience is that what you believe is your business, but you may not openly state those convictions.

## RESPONDING TO RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION

Though some religions are protected from ridicule in the entertainment world, the Christian Faith is deemed fair game for caricature. The Faith of Christ the Lord is reduced to a form of entertainment for the unthinking. Shows that would not dream of questioning Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs feel free to try garnering laughs about a menstruating statue of the Mother of Jesus and ridiculing Christian leaders as dolts.

Above all else, the new orthodoxy demands “tolerance,” but the tolerance demanded is apparently a one-way street in this new religion since intolerance of the Christian Faith is de rigueur. However, every aberrant point of view that has been held in check by centuries of accumulated wisdom must be tolerated—even promoted—within society. What is truly at issue is whether sanity will prevail and time-tested freedoms will be honoured. Will the unalienable right of worship according to the dictates of the heart be allowed to continue untrammelled, or will the new orthodoxy supplant reason?

Peter and John were leaders of a religion that was socially unacceptable. The founder of their faith had been executed as a common criminal. Society in general disapproved of the testimony by followers of “the Way” asserting that the impoverished Galilean leader so ignominiously executed had been raised from the dead. Religious leaders in particular were appalled at the declaration that Jesus was alive, especially since they were unable to produce a body—the grave in which He had been buried was empty!

Paul would say of these early Christians, “not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” Instead, he would assert that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-28]. They were social outcasts. They were destitute, afflicted and mistreated. They were condemned as unworthy of polite society, and courageous souls who endeavoured to walk according to the teachings of the Word were considered to be “the scum of the world” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:13]. Since social censure had proved ineffectual in silencing their message of life in the Son of God, it became necessary to ratchet up the pressure.

The intensified pressure was at first restricted to threats. The Book of Acts identifies the threats intended to intimidate the preachers of righteousness into silence. The response of those following the Living Christ was to pray. And what a prayer it was! “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers were gathered together,  
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” [ACTS 4:24-30].

Let me rephrase that prayer in contemporary language. “God, we are in a tight spot. Hear their threats and give us courage to speak boldly. Give us power to do good!” How that prayer shames contemporary Christians who whimper and whine because those opposing the faith say, “Boo!” Prayers such as the one recorded here need to be offered again. We don’t need prayers that whine and beg God to keep us from unpleasantness; we need to seek courage and grace to do what is right and good to the praise of His glory!

When threats failed to silence these men, outright persecution was employed. Followers of the way were jailed. When that effort failed to silence them, they were beaten. Ultimately, some were even killed; and to this day, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Faith. The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians reminds readers of events that were not far removed from their memories when he encouraged them to “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” [HEBREWS 10:32-34].

I fear that we have become addicted to comfort and enamoured of “things.” It is increasingly difficult for me to imagine contemporary Christians with the courage of convictions. In the modern estimate, though outraged by threats, we are unwilling to surrender what we have for the freedom to speak the truth, or to worship in spirit and in truth. These early saints endured hard struggles with sufferings. They were exposed to reproach and affliction—actions that are almost certain to cause the hardiest saint in this day to flee. The early saints willingly stood with those who were ridiculed. They were imprisoned, their property was plundered and they were slaughtered like sheep.

I am humbled whenever I read what my brothers and sisters are called to endure in this wicked world. In Pakistan, I read of women gang-raped while their husbands and fathers are compelled to watch, because the family worships Jesus Christ. In India, Christians are killed with impunity and their property confiscated as believers are hounded out of the region, because of their Faith. Priests and worshippers have been killed in Egypt and in Turkey and in Iraq; the authorities excuse the outrage, ignoring it or saying it was perpetuated by deranged individuals who will be cured by a brief stay in a mental institution. In China, fellow believers are executed so their organs can be harvested and sold to wealthy westerners seeking transplants. Daily reports detail persecution in Viet Nam, in Cambodia, in Indonesia, in Korea, in Mexico and in Nigeria.

We are susceptible to growing weary when we actually resist evil; and the most valiant among us can surrender to despair when the opposition is unrelenting. At such times, we need to understand that God has not promised us ease of life because of our Faith; but instead, He has warned us of hardship and trial because we believe Him. Jeremiah records the query that God Himself posed opposition wearied the prophet.

“If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you,  
how will you compete with horses?  
And if in a safe land you are so trusting,  
what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?”

[JEREMIAH 12:5]

I have often read the words Jesus spoke to His disciples as He was preparing them for His death. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you... All these things they will do to you on account of my name” [JOHN 15:18-21]. Such a message should not be anticipated from modern pulpits.

**OPTIONS FOR RESPONDING TO RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION** — Opposition to the Faith of Christ the Lord is a constant and growing threat in our world. Christians are hated by the inhabitants of this fallen world, and assaults against the faithful are often with the concurrence—if not the active participation—of governments in many instances. How shall the child of God respond to opposition and attempts to silence faith? There are really only four options available for responding to oppression and efforts to silence Christian witness—**monasticism, secularism, cowardice, or godliness.**

**Monasticism** identifies a view that emerged quite early in the history of the Faith. This response says, “God alone is our authority.” The monastic view denies that Caesar has any authority over the individual. Early on, some Christians became convinced that all human government was corrupt; they therefore concluded that they could have nothing to do with any government. So, they moved into the desert, becoming hermits.

Though we see few actual religious hermits today, something akin to monasticism occurs when people try to withdraw from all interaction with the world. Such actions include refusal to participate in selecting government leaders, and in extreme cases even withholding taxes. These saints try to isolate themselves from evil, and pronounce maledictions on anyone seeking a godly interface between church and government.

Christians should neither deny the authority of the state nor assume civil responsibility for themselves. Instead, we believers are to equip ourselves to respond wisely to government usurpation of authority over the soul. Christians must remind government that its authority comes from God. When government schools seek to dictate social and moral standards for our children, Christians must quickly and courageously respond to deny government that role. When government schools insist on ridiculing the Faith, promoting Darwinian speculation as dogma and reducing man to a mere beast, Christians must speak up and resist scientific distortion. When social pressure increases in an attempt to reduce the Faith to a private matter, Christians must not yield for a moment. As governments promote what the Bible clearly condemns, Christians must refuse to concede the battle, instead standing firmly with the truth.

**Secularism** is a second option for responding to the tension between church and state. This position asserts that Caesar prevails and the authority of God is denied. It would appear this option is in the ascendancy today. The prevailing view within society betrays an uneasiness in which mankind does not want to be reminded of responsibility to God, so they deny His existence and try to silence anyone who would speak for God.

The more mankind “fixes” what once was recognised as settled custom, the more disordered society becomes. As one flagrant and contemporary example, consider that throughout the history of the world, marriage has consisted of one man in committed union with one woman. However, modern governments have decided to redefine marriage as one person in relationship to another person, allowing for same sex marriage.

However, if two persons of the same sex are permitted to “marry” one another, why shouldn’t two men and one woman “marry?” Or six women and five men? Or any combination of people? Why should polygamy or polyandry be banned? And if multiple individuals can “marry,” who is to say that it is wrong for children to “marry?” What is to keep pedophilia from being accepted as appropriate, so long as there is what is defined as a “loving relationship?” Or, as in the case of recent accounts out of India, why shouldn’t a girl marry a snake? Or a dog? Can government really ban bestiality once it has stepped into the murky waters of letting people do what feels right?

Once God is removed from the picture, there are no restraints left on mankind. Without the moral restraint arising from the knowledge of God, as was true in the days of the Judges, everyone soon does what is right in his own eyes.

**Cowardice** is a third option for responding to oppression. In this option, people will contend that both God and Caesar have authority, but Caesar is in the dominant position. This was the position of Pilate when Jesus was brought before him. Though he feared offending the gods by surrendering Jesus to His tormentors, Pilate feared Caesar more than he feared God. In the same way, too many professing Christians fear the state more than they fear God. The evidence is seen in their silence in the face of opposition.

Cowards willingly sacrifice their children to governmental indoctrination, or acquiesce to the progressive debasement of their children’s minds as they imbibe the message of MTV. I suppose these parents fear the consequences should they stand firm, or perhaps they simply do not want to be inconvenienced by assuming parental responsibility. Cowards refuse to insist that their children participate in the life of the church because they do not want to be inconvenienced by the whining of their children, or because they really don’t want to answer the petulant pout that “everyone is doing it.” Cowards are silent when colleagues ridicule the Faith, or when a filthy story is told, or when evil is commended; they do not want to be labelled as extreme. Consequently, when the faithful are threatened, cowards maintain their silence because they are already trained in the school of silent acquiescence.

**Godliness** is the fourth option for responding to opposition. This is the biblical position that teaches that both God and Caesar have authority, but insisting that God is in the dominant position. This position requires forethought and demands that one must actually think. This view recognises that government does have legitimate authority, but it realises that the authority of the state is not unlimited. In issues of faith, in matters of morals and ethics, government is not the final arbiter; but rather God must be the final judge of what is right and what is wrong. Government cannot, indeed must not, attempt to compel the soul of any individual to concede moral or ethical truth. Though governments can, and must, address in limited fashion behaviour, it has no right either to compel faith or to dispel faith.

As Christians, we recognise that authority rests with many people. Church elders have authority within the congregation. Parents have authority over their minor children. Employers have authority over the conduct of their employees and over the way in which they conduct their work. The Police have authority to enforce laws. However, Christians realise that no authority is independent of God. Ultimately, those who hold authority must answer to God, and Christians are responsible to remind government of that fact. The Apostles recognised the balance that God had set in place and they sought to maintain that balance.

**A GODLY RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION** — “We must obey God rather than men.” When persecution comes—and persecution has indeed come—how shall the people of God respond? Increasingly, it is evident that persecution of the Christian Faith can be anticipated in the western world and in the Muslim world. The assaults are multi-faceted, and they will intensify for anyone conscientiously seeking to adhere to the Faith. Our Master was persecuted and He was maligned; and according to the accounts we are given in the Word, He did not retaliate nor did He threaten. He had reason to respond to the injustice and He indeed had authority to destroy His tormentors, but, He “continued entrusting Himself to [God] who judges justly” [see **1 PETER 2:23**]. Just so, we are taught to follow His example and to continue entrusting ourselves to God.

A response such as this implies that we have begun entrusting ourselves to God. It means that we are looking to Him for strength and for wisdom, instead of imagining that we are either sufficiently strong or sufficiently wise. Entrusting ourselves to God means that we have determined to act counter-intuitively, rejecting the prevailing views of this fallen world. A response such as that revealed in the Master would be expected of those in whom the Spirit of God dwells since the Master concluded His instruction concerning opposition and persecution with the following statement. “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” [**JOHN 15:26, 27**].

Let’s explore this issue further by thinking of the impact of the presence of God’s Spirit with His people. At the time you became a Christian, the Spirit of God took up residence in your life [**1 CORINTHIANS 6:19; 2 CORINTHIANS 6:16**]. Every Christian has received the Spirit of God—He is present in the life of each believer. Because you are a child of God, your body has been transformed into a Temple for the Holy Spirit. Because He is present, each believer has the desire to honour the Father and to know the will of the Master. In fact, because the Spirit of Christ is in His people, the Apostle says of us that “we have the mind of Christ” [**1 CORINTHIANS 2:16b**]. It should be no surprise, then, that the Word declares that “the Spirit He has caused to live in us yearns jealously” [**JAMES 4:5**].<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit of God longs for the child of God to be godly, so that we will reflect the character of the Father. He seeks to create the image of Christ in us, transforming us through His presence. Because this is true, the child of God wants to “obey God rather than men.” I am not saying that we will always be courageous or that we will always be holy; but I am saying that we have the desire to be holy and, consequently, the desire to be courageous in the face of opposition. We have this desire because we have the Spirit of God dwelling within us as a Divine Counsellor, guiding our thoughts and actions.

The author of the Hebrews Letter addresses the assembly (and not merely the individual members of the assembly) when he encouraged those saints with a stern admonition. He was directed to write these words that stand us in good stead to this day. “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” [**HEBREWS 10:35, 36**]. Standing together, the people of God encourage one another and strengthen one another to be firm before the foe.

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<sup>2</sup> **Holman Christian Standard Bible** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003)

I have no doubt that Peter, or John, could have stood alone before the Sanhedrin; but I am equally certain that each was mutually encouraged by the presence of the other. Their standing together anticipates the encouragement that is given in **HEBREWS 10:22-25**. “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

One individual may stand alone, proving resolute against opposition to the good and against unrighteousness; but when that individual knows that another stands with him sharing the burden of the battle, he draws fresh courage and he is strengthened. Elijah stood alone, but emotional and spiritual fatigue eventually ensured that he would collapse in the face of Jezebel’s threats. Had even one other person openly stood with that godly man, perhaps he would not have yielded as he did to his fears.

When we belong to God, and when we are filled with the Spirit, we will be seized by an inner compulsion to obey God. We will intuitively recognise that yielding to the pleas of those compromising with evil (however attractively those pleas may be framed), can only lead to dishonour and ultimately to death. The ring of truth will not resonate within our soul when wickedness is promoted, though the testimony of the Spirit will yield a sense of growing confidence whenever we hear truth spoken.

When the high priest first began to question the Apostles, Peter did not need to pray to discover what should be said. It is apparent that he had previously prepared himself for this eventuality, and his answer was immediate and his words were terse: “We must obey God.” There is a verse of Scripture that we would do well to memorise. **ROMANS 6:16** declares, “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey?” If Christ Jesus is truly Master of our life, then He merits our full obedience. Should we surrender to the unrighteous demands of mankind—especially in issues of morality or religious devotion—we become slaves of those issuing the dicta.

Many of us succumb to evil because we want to debate it instead of acting decisively. When Joseph was confronted by the salacious appeal of Potiphar’s wife, he fled. He did not try to reason with her wicked designs, but instead, he did the Jewish two-step. Many Christians over-estimate their ability to reason with evil, and consequently, they attempt to “dialogue” with that which does not deserve a second look. God did not call us to debate with evil, but instead He calls us to denounce all that is evil. God has not called us to a palaver with the world about how we should conduct our ministry; instead, He called us to proclaim the message of life.

Peter speaks, but he speaks for all the Apostles. All the Apostles had been arrested [**ACTS 5:18**]; and all the Apostles had been set at liberty by an angel of the Lord [**ACTS 5:19**]. The apostolate had received the divine command to “speak the words of this Life” [**ACTS 5:20**]. Thus, each member of the apostolic band appears to have been arrested. Do not imagine that you can escape if you hold biblical convictions. Though you may not actually speak the words that bring social censure, or threats, or persecution, if you attempt to disown those sentiments, you are offering, as it were, a pinch of incense at the altar of Caesar, you may anticipate sharing in the hardship of the Faith.

## RESPONDING TO RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION

When the Second Continental Congress adopted the American Declaration of Independence, John Hancock urged a unified vote on the document, pleading with the delegates, “We must be unanimous; there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together.” To this plea, Benjamin Franklin wryly replied, “Yes, we must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

Similarly, we would say that whenever any Christian faces censure, threats, or persecution, each Christian is potentially at risk. There is no “safe ground” when the world begins to coerce religious uniformity. Whenever any Christian is threatened, I am threatened. Whenever any Christian is persecuted, I am persecuted. Though Paul testified that within a congregation that “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together” [**1 CORINTHIANS 12:26**], the concept truly applies in an even broader, universal sense.

We live in momentous times when the world watches to see if our Faith is real. Either we play at being Christian, or we are Christian. If we endeavour to be Christian, we must know that the world will not love us. However, my prayer is that among us will be found godly men and women who seek the smile of Heaven as they boldly live out their lives to the glory of the Father and to the praise of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you have shared this service and you have never come to faith in Christ the Lord. Do not expect that you will resist evil in your own strength—you will not. Without the presence of Christ’s Spirit, you cannot long stand against wickedness. Perhaps you have listened to the message and you don’t understand why the Christian cannot compromise just a little bit. If that is your situation, it is likely that you wonder why we cannot compromise just a little because you know nothing of the mastery of Christ the Lord. In that instance, you need to come to faith and to be born again.

This is the call of God for each life. The Word of God is quite clear in declaring, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Apostle continues by citing the Prophet Joel [see **JOEL 2:32**]. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our plea to you. Believe the message of life. Be a Christian. Make a difference by living a life of courage and freedom. Do it and do it today. Amen.