

NAME DROPPERS

ACTS 5:21b-42 NOVEMBER 13, 2019

What's the most exciting thing that can happen in the life of a church? By the end of our passage tonight, we're going to see the apostles delighted in a way we haven't seen so far in Luke's account, and it's after being brutally beaten by enemies of the Gospel.

Yes, it's *persecution* that caused significant excitement that day. Acts has already been a non-stop thrill ride of miracles and multitudes and powerful messages changing lives. But it was a *flogging* that got the Apostles worked up in a way that Luke simply hasn't shown us before. It's *true* that the Church, in general, was characterized by joy. It's *obvious* that there would've been a palpable anticipation whenever they gathered. And, it was *clear* that they *were* headed toward a clash with the Jewish religious leaders. The Christians knew this opposition was coming. I don't mean to say that the Apostles were uninterested in any of these other, dramatic things we've been reading about. But Luke characterizes their response to their suffering in a way he hasn't described them before: Cheerful delight.

The whole situation is made more surprising when we realize that the beating could've easily been *avoided*. But the apostles submitted with meekness and boldness. Rather than turn their backs on the name of Jesus, they turned their backs to receive their stripes, sharing with Him in His sufferings.

There are many lessons for us in this story. One is that our spiritual effectiveness and our personal happiness are not dependent on *feeling* good or being comfortable. Another is that our *rights* are not as important as being a part of God's enterprise. A third lesson is that, for the Christian, boldness and meekness are the prescription for effective ministry.

We pick back up in the middle of verse 21. There we read:

Acts 5:21b - When the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin—the full Senate of the sons of Israel—and sent orders to the jail to have them brought.

Washington was all abuzz today with the impeachment proceedings. All the key players got themselves camera ready and situated in their overstuffed leather chairs. Some of those powerful folks were brimming with enthusiasm, others were undoubtedly more reluctant. No one is sure how it's all going to work out yet. The same thing was happening in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin gathered from far and wide to address this issue. We know that there were some men of integrity in the group. Men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. But, unfortunately, the council was *dominated* by jealous, carnal men, who were not above using conspiracy and murder to keep their power.

Acts 5:22-23 - ²² But when the temple police got there, they did not find them in the jail, so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing in front of the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside!”

The way this miracle worked is interesting. We were told, back in verse 19, that the angel “opened the doors of the jail.” Yet, it's clear that none of that was seen by anyone else. In verse 23, the guards are found standing there, in front of locked doors, unaware that the cell was empty.

On a devotional level I think we can be encouraged here. It reminds us that God is often working in ways we don't perceive. He may be opening doors for us or others that we can't see yet.

I also find it interesting that, apparently, no one in the Sanhedrin had come through the temple courtyards or walkways on their way into the Hall of Hewn Stones¹ that morning. The Christians were constantly among the people, sharing the Good news. The Sadducees were not.

Acts 5:24 - ²⁴ As the commander of the temple police and the chief priests heard these things, they were baffled about them, as to what could come of this.

The scene is comical. The commander and chiefs, with all their pomp and power and self-importance have no idea what's going on, where their prisoners are, or what the outcome of such a bewildering series of events might be. It seemed, for a moment, they got all dressed up for nothing.

Acts 5:25 - ²⁵ Someone came and reported to them, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple complex and teaching the people."

Christianity in the book of Acts was *bold*. Their boldness was seen by the Sanhedrin back in chapter 4 when Peter and John were first on trial. The church had prayed for even *more* boldness and received it. In the very *last* verse of the book we'll read that Paul continued to proclaim the kingdom of God with "full boldness." Now, Biblical boldness is not just an *attitude*, it's an *activity*. It's the frank, public preaching of the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what the apostles were doing. They were teaching the people. And that assumes that we have *something of actual importance* to convey. The purpose of Christian ministry is *not* simply to entice or to impress or to tickle an audience. It is to *instruct* people in the truth, that they might live and not die.

Ironically, it should've been the High Priest there in the courts of the temple instructing people.

Malachi 2.7 - The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the Lord.

Despite the fact that there were people in the temple that day, the High Priest didn't seem to be concerned with teaching them or speaking God's message to them. Instead, he and the others were scheming ways to try to regain their clout and influence over the city. In the mean time, God *really did* have a message that He wanted people to hear, and since these *supposed* servants in the Sanhedrin weren't willing to deliver it, the Lord was pleased to send fisherman to preach.

Acts 5:26 - ²⁶ Then the commander went with the temple police and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them.

This may be the most important verse in the entire section. What we just read was that the apostles went with these men *willingly*. It was clear that the hearts of the people were on the side of the accused. It was clear that the power of God was with them. It was clear that jails could not hold them and the powers that be could not intimidate them. In that moment, *they* were the ones in charge. They could've made a scene, stirred up the crowd, stood in protest and refused to go. They could've ignored these police or just went on home. Instead, they willingly walked into the den of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall_of_Hewn_Stones

lions. They went back into the killers' lair. Those who had murdered their Lord and threatened them in no uncertain terms.

In that moment the apostles were maybe never so powerful, able to control the crowds of Jerusalem had they wanted to. But, at the same time, they had perhaps never been as full of the Lord's meekness. They exemplify the faithful remnant prophesied in Zephaniah chapter 3, verse 12:

Zephaniah 3:12 - ¹²I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, And they shall trust in the name of the Lord.

In the Bible, meekness is more powerful than titles or positions or prisons or weapons. The believers here were supernaturally bold, but supernaturally meek. Both together.

Acts 5:27-28 - ²⁷ After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked, ²⁸ "Didn't we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man's blood on us!"

The high priest makes a wonderfully comical statement here: "[You] are determined to bring this Man's blood on us!" *I don't know why!* Maybe because you had Him illegally arrested, illegally tried, illegally beaten and then demanded His crucifixion when Pilate tried to release Him. Or maybe it was when you and the other leaders of Israel shouted out, "*His blood be on us and on our children!!!*" back in Matthew 27.

The High Priest said they had filled Jerusalem with their teaching. What was the message that was filling the city? It was the message that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. That He died and rose again and offers salvation to all who will repent of their sins and turn to Him for forgiveness.

Today the most popular teachings are largely about *self*. 'Your best life now.' How Jesus wants us to be happy and successful and achieve the things *we* want. It's often a *human*-oriented message, rather than a *Christ*-oriented message.

The true Gospel message is able to be preached in Orange County as well as to the middle eastern Christians facing martyrdom. The focus of what we preach must be Jesus Christ and His doctrine. His death and resurrection and His offer of salvation to those trapped in their sin.

Acts 5:29 - ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men.

Peter and the others respond just as they had before. Nothing has changed. His answer is not only *inspiring*, it should be the control principle for our lives. Life is complex and sometimes very difficult to navigate. We all, eventually, find ourselves in situations where we're not exactly sure what to do or how to do it. But, as Christians, we know how to *start*, and it's right here with this controlling principle: We must obey God rather than men. In our relationships, in our trials, in our planning, in our opportunities, this is the starting square. And from there, we seek the Lord and go to His word and wait for the leading of the Spirit to show us our next steps.

Acts 5:30-32 - ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

It's true, Peter had condemned them for their murder of Jesus Christ. That was necessary to diagnose them with the terminal illness of sin. But the message of the Church was not a declaration of war against the Sanhedrin or the nation of Israel or anyone else. We see, once again, the offer of *forgiveness*. God was *yet again* sending a chance to this group of people who had committed the worst sin imaginable: Killing the Son of God! But even now the Lord reached out to save them.

So much of our culture is dominated by an us-vs-them mentality. Whether it's political or religious or in one way or another, there's always a big emphasis on who is on what side and if you're on *that* side you're the enemy and if you want to *not* be my enemy *this* is who you have to be and where you have to stand. Thanks be to God that He does not simply discard His enemies! He pursues them with His grace again and again.

There are a lot of 'thems' in life. It's fine to disagree or to contend, but the thing we always need to remember is that the 'thems' are significant to our Lord. Saul the Pharisee was probably present at this trial, full of hatred toward Jesus and His followers, yet God's heart was full of love toward him.

Acts 5:33-35 - ³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men to be taken outside for a little while. ³⁵ He said to them, "Men of Israel, be careful about what you're going to do to these men.

God used an unbelieving Pharisee to save His apostles. He can do great things in the most amazing ways. If need be, He can feed His people by ravens or put tax money in the mouth of a fish.

What are we to make of Gamaliel and his advice? On the one hand, there's *some* truth in what he'll say. His ultimate point is: You can't win in a fight against God. But, on the other hand, it's clear he *does not* believe. He equates the Christians with two failed revolutionary groups. He, like the others in the council, was overtly ignoring the work of God right in their midst. The miracles could not be denied - so they were simply overlooked! In some part of his heart, Gamaliel *wanted* to know the Lord and follow Him, yet he was unwilling to set aside his own self-righteousness. And so, though he's much less *violent* than the murderous Sadducees, he's no better off in the spiritual sense. All that to say: killers and moral, religious people all need the Gospel just the same.

Acts 5:36-37 - ³⁶ Not long ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about 400 men rallied to him. He was killed, and all his partisans were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After this man, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and attracted a following. That man also perished, and all his partisans were scattered.

Gamaliel makes a couple of false equivalences here. The Church was not a revolutionary group. Plus, his analogy is: "Hey, these other guys had some ideas and raised a ruckus, but once they died, the movement died." But since Jesus had died and rose again, multiplied thousands had been *added* to the group. At this point, the Church was easily 20 times the size of Theudas' group had been. So, while *seemingly* thoughtful, his argument is deeply flawed.

Acts 5:38-39 - ³⁸ And now, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God." So they were persuaded by him.

Gamaliel tried to position himself as neutral. But, when dealing with God, there is no such thing as neutrality. To not be *for* Jesus Christ is to be *against* Him. Gamaliel was being used to protect the lives of the apostles (for now), but he demonstrates that kind of hard-heartedness which does not *reject* God but refuses to *bow* to Jesus Christ.

It says the council was persuaded by him. His advice took murder off the table. But, as for “staying away from these men and leaving them alone,” well, they weren’t *that* persuaded.

Acts 5:40 - ⁴⁰ After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them.

What the apostles suffered here was not only a brutal physical toll, but also a great injustice. The Sanhedrin grants them their freedom, but first metes out a punishment as if they were criminals. And, once again, they’re told to drop the name of Jesus. So much for leaving them alone.

Acts 5:41-42 - ⁴¹ Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name. ⁴² Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

As Christians, we sometimes get bogged own with disappointment that we aren’t recognized for the work that we do. There’s a lot of warning about that sort of mentality in the Bible. But, in our weaker moments, we sometimes think, “Hey, where’s my recognition? I’m *worthy* of some public honoring here.” The Spirit-filled apostles have the exact *opposite* mentality. They’re full of gladness that they were able to receive *dishonor* for the sake of their King. They rejoiced with great excitement. And then they kept at the business of boldly preaching the *Good* news each and every day.

Boldness. Meekness. How can both operate in a life or in a church? We see it here. These are the characteristics when God’s people are full of the Spirit. So, as we go out into the world, we want to go **meekly**. That means we’re willing to lay down our rights or even our lives if that’s how the Lord leads us. It means remembering that we’re not out there to destroy our enemies, but to *rescue* them.

And we’re to go out with real, Biblical **boldness**. Which means publicly preaching the Good news that Jesus is the Messiah. In verse 31, Peter identifies His as the “Savior.” Warren Wiersbe writes:

“The title Savior was not new to the members of the council, for the word was used for physicians (who save people’s lives), philosophers (who solve people’s problems), and statesmen (who save people from danger and war). It was even applied to the Emperor. But only Jesus Christ is the true and living Savior who rescues from sin, death and judgement all who will trust in Him...It was a bold witness.”²

Throughout this text the Sanhedrin keep wondering where it’s all going to end, at least when it came to this new sect, the Church. We know where it ends. It ‘ends’ in Revelation 19 when we return with Jesus when He comes to judge the unbelieving world. Before that, we’re sent on a mission of mercy. Let’s go willingly, meekly and boldly, proclaiming that Jesus is the Savior and rejoicing as we go.

² Warren Wiersbe *Be Dynamic*