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July 14, 2024

WORTHY: ACTS 5:29-42

Jesus is honored even when His followers are mistreated.

Focus Attention

Begin by telling the story of persecution presented by Tony Merida in his commentary *Exalting Jesus in Acts*

“This past week... I received an e-mail from one of our missionaries. It says, ‘This past month I had the opportunity to teach and train a number of different groups, one of which was a group of Muslim-background believers [former Muslims who have become Christ-followers]... This is a group of brothers who are regularly leading others to faith in Christ, but have been beaten and persecuted because of it. Hearing their stories was both convicting and encouraging.’ Experiences of suffering like those we read about in Acts 5 continue today. True accounts of faithfulness in spite of it are indeed both convicting and encouraging.” (Exalting, 77)

Discuss: How are such accounts convicting and encouraging?

Introduce the Passage: In last week’s lesson, we saw Satan attack the church from the inside when he filled the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3) and led them to lie to God and the church. In today’s lesson, we will see an attack from outside the church. These attacks will only get worse and eventually culminate in chapter 7 with the death of Stephen. Following the account of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke gives another summary of the Jerusalem church. In this summary, he emphasizes the healing ministry of the Apostles alongside their teaching ministry. Through the holistic ministry of the Apostles, many people came to faith in Christ, and many were healed of physical illness. In verse 17, the religious leadership in Jerusalem responds with jealousy by arresting the apostles and putting them in the “public jail.” The night of their imprisonment was short because the Lord sent an angel to deliver them from the jail. The angel did not deliver them so that they could go home and rest or hide. Instead, their “prison break” was simply a means for them to get back to work. Upon leaving the jail they were directed to “Go and stand in the temple, and tell the people all about this life.” (Acts 5:20)

This is where they were found the next morning by the temple guards, but only after a little confusion on the part of the court set to try them. When the new day broke the Sanhedrin gathered and the first thing on their agenda were the pesky Apostles. However, the jailers instructed to bring the prisoners from jail could not locate the Apostles. While the court and the temple official stood around in bafflement, it was reported that the men had been located in the temple preaching. Verse 26 tells us that

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This is the Aim of the lesson. It drives our discussion and should be the point we drive home throughout the lesson.

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *New American Commentary: Acts* (NAC)
- *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (HNTC)
- *Preaching the Word: Acts* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Christ in Acts* (Exalting)
- *Unstoppable Gospel*, Gregg Matte

A NOTE ON THE LESSON:

This lesson plan will deviate greatly from the one presented in the ETB LG. It will focus on the persecution of the Apostles, the emotional response of the Sanhedrin, the historical & theological response of Gamaliel, and the righteous response by the Apostles.

“God frees them physically in order to free others spiritually.” (Exalting, 82)

Worthy: Acts 5:29-42

“²⁶ Then the commander went with the servants and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them.”

Transition: It was a delicate situation for the temple officials. They did not want the men in the temple preaching. They might have just wanted them gone for good, but they could not use force on the men because they feared the people would revolt against them. They wore satin gloves when they asked the Apostles to come with them. Those gloves became boxing gloves when they got behind closed doors though. The high priest accosts the men before him and asks, “²⁸ “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” Let’s take a moment to understand the situation and see how the Apostles answered them.

1. ANGRY RESPONSE (ACTS 5:29-33)

Read or have someone read Acts 5:29-33

Explain: Let’s begin by understanding the situation.

- First, we see the persecution had expanded. In the prior appearance before the Sanhedrin by Christ’s followers, recorded in Luke 4, only Peter and John were present. This time all the Apostles had been brought in. The reason is found in the question by the High Priest. He asks them, “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name?” when John and Peter first came before the group there were no official charges. However, at the conclusion of that short trial they were instructed “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” (4:18) This time the court has an official complaint against all the Apostles, not just Peter and John. All of them had broken the injunction against preaching in Jesus’ name. It appears that the boldness for which the church prayed in chapter 4 verse 29 had been answered by the Lord. And now the positive peer pressure of other believers had led to an expansion of the preaching ministry.

Discuss: How can partners in the gospel encourage us to become bolder in our witness? How can we exert positive peer pressure that will help expand God’s Kingdom? (In other words, how can we be a good example for others in gospel ministry and evangelism?)—Having other believers join us at work, the sports field, or the church can give us the courage and boldness to speak up and be a good witness. Others provide support and encouragement. We can encourage others in the gospel ministry by sharing stories of our Kingdom efforts. Sharing the “successful” efforts as well as the “failures” can encourage others as they do the work of Kingdom expansion.)

- **Second, we see the persecution has become personal.** Not only were the apostles chastised for breaking the injunction against preaching in Jesus’ name they were rebuked for their continued recitation of the facts related to Jesus’ death. The High Priest continues “Look, you have

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filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." It is ironic because "The truth is, *they* were the ones who said, 'Let him be crucified!' (Matthew 27:22, 23) and 'His blood be on us and on our children!' (Matthew 27:25)." (Preaching, 88) It appears that the leaders are "forgetting" their role in the whole affair. However, their refusal to admit their culpability was not just a ruse to cover over their guilt. They were concerned for their own lives. If it was truly understood that the unrighteous death of the righteous Jesus was laid on them, they too might face death. The persecution of the Apostles was personal for the religious leaders. Nevertheless, Peter did not respond personally or even offer a defense of their actions. Instead, he offered a witness for Jesus. Instead of trying to get them killed, Peter was trying to get them saved (cf. NAC, 169). His response to their question was to simply give them the gospel. "Peter and the apostles take advantage of every *gospel opportunity*. They see confrontation before the council as an occasion to proclaim a summary of the gospel (cf. Luke 21:12-19)." (Exalting, 83)

Discuss: In what ways can we behave like the disciples and take every opportunity both positive and negative to share the gospel?

Transition: Like the disciples, we can act in boldness and share the Truth of Jesus with those around us. We should also note that the disciples did so in a way that was not confrontational or dismissive of the court's authority. They went peaceably with the temple guards, and they spoke the Truth in a bold, non-threatening manner. Nevertheless, the response of the religious leaders was to desire the death penalty (v. 33). Why not, it had worked for them before when silencing critics (like Jesus). This too can remind us that regardless of our demeanor or intentions Christians who speak the Truth will sometimes find an angry response from others. Let's see now the voice of logic in the Sanhedrin.

2. WISE COUNSEL (ACTS 5:34-39)

Read (or have someone read) Acts 5:34-39

Explain: Logic and reason are often missing in our world. Emotions rule the day. That can be true in religious institutions like the church as well. In Gamaliel's remarks to the Sanhedrin, we see a man not ruled by emotions, but one guided through logic and reason. Moreover, the logic and reason he espouses is founded on Scripture. Before we examine his arguments let's learn more about the man himself.

Gamaliel, a Pharisee, was a distinguished member of the high court. He was the grandson of the highly respected Rabbi Hillel. As is Luke's habit, Gamaliel is introduced subtly and would later reappear when one of his students, Saul of Tarsus, enters the narrative. Gamaliel presents two arguments meant to temper the court's emotional response.

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"The high priest's concern about being charged with responsibility for Jesus' 'blood' may have had more significance than appears at first sight. To 'lay someone's blood' on someone is an Old Testament expression for a charge of murder and in accordance with the *ius Talionis* demanded the death of the guilty party. In essence the high priest was saying, 'You are trying to get us killed for responsibility in this man's death' (author's paraphrase)." (NAC, 169)

"Considering that the death penalty had just been suggested, he was implying that this might be a bit rash and bring unfortunate results down on them, particularly given the Christian popularity with the masses." (NAC, 171)

Worthy: Acts 5:29-42

His first argument is Historical in Nature. He reminds the group of previous “insurrectionists.” They, like Jesus, had raised up large followings and they, too, had been dealt with. When these revolutionaries were removed from the scene, their movements dissipated. Gamaliel argued for restraint in dealing with these men because he expected their zeal to diminish over time.

Gamaliel’s second argument is Theologically in Nature and is the more important one. In his argument, he appeals to possibly two texts. First, he appeals to what is called the *Chapters of the Fathers*. This is a rabbinical text that states, “Any assembling together that is for the sake of Heaven shall in the end be established, but any that is not for the sake of Heaven shall not in the end be established.” As a knowledgeable student of the Old Testament, he would also have known Deuteronomy 18:21–22. This passage provides the means by which a person could determine the legitimacy of a prophet.

Read or have someone read Deuteronomy 18:21-22. (²¹You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a message the Lord has not spoken?’ ²²When a prophet speaks in the Lord’s name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.)

Explain: In both of his arguments, Gamaliel urged the court to let the men be. If history has taught the court anything, it is that movements die with their leaders. If they learned anything from Old Testament teachings and their former teachers, it is that the will of God comes to fruition and the actions of men fizzle and die.

Discuss: Gamaliel is trying to slow the train of the court. The emotions of the leadership were leading toward a mass execution of the Apostles. That would not be the logical and reasonable way forward for these political leaders. His words and actions can remind us that extreme emotions can lead to bad outcomes. In what ways can followers of Jesus, today, check their emotions and act in logical and rational ways in difficult times?

Apply: During difficult times or during times of conflict in families, the community, and the church, emotions can sometimes run high. In those times, we should hear Gamaliel’s words. First, we should look to the past and see what we can learn from other instances similar to ours. Second, we should look to the Scriptures and those who teach it. We can ask ourselves, what does the Bible say about situations like this? Scripture can guide us during difficult times. It can remind us of the work of God and the will of God. That is what Gamaliel is reminding the council. He sums it up with a fitting reminder.

Reread Acts 5:39b (“You may even be found fighting against God.”)

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“In any event he enunciated a sound rabbinic principle: [the book Chapters of the Fathers (m. Pirqa Abot) states] “Any assembling together that is for the sake of Heaven shall in the end be established, but any that is not for the sake of Heaven shall not in the end be established.” (NAC, 173)

Worthy: Acts 5:29-42

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Explain: He reminds the men that their emotional response could get the better of them, and their clouded decision-making might get them in a lot of trouble. If this movement really is from the Lord it will continue. If they try and stop it without truly understanding God's will they might find themselves at odds with God.

Apply: The counsel of Gamaliel can be boiled down to patience. The emotions of the men were fast-acting and leading to quick actions. The logic and reason promoted by this teacher was to slow down and wait. Wait to see if this really is what God wants. In our present situation, we are more blessed than Gamaliel. Not only do we have history, the entire Bible, and 2000 years of Christian teachers we also have the Holy Spirit. In difficult times we can appeal to the Lord for His help in discerning the right path forward.

Some in our groups might be facing a tough decision. They might also be facing difficult times in their families or workplaces. Take a moment of silent prayer and allow your group an opportunity to pray and ask the Lord to calm their emotions and guide their minds as they move forward. Close the prayer time by asking the Lord to reveal His will to group members as they move forward in patience.

Transition: The witness provided by the Apostles had angered the religious leaders in the court. Their angry response led them to consider the death penalty for the Apostles. Gamaliel's argument for patience in discerning the will of God was meant to temper their emotions. Luke tells us that "they were persuaded by him." Likewise, believers today should listen to wise counsel.

The court had called the Apostles to account for their actions and the Apostle's steadfast reliance on the Lord angered the leaders. While they listened to Gamaliel's words and refrained from killing the men, the court would not let the Apostles off without punishment. Luke describes what happens next in verses 40-42.

3. GRATEFUL SUFFERING (ACTS 5:40-42)

Read (or have someone read) Acts 5:40-42

Explain: Before we continue, let us consider the previous 24 hours of the Apostles. The Apostles had been arrested and placed in the "public jail." During the night, the Lord had sent an angel to release them. Following his instructions, they again went to preach in the Temple. From there they were again escorted to the court where they proclaimed the gospel. During the arguments of Gamaliel, they were placed in holding. After the court listened to his guidance, the Apostles were again brought before the court. They were again ordered to not preach in Jesus' name. Then for the first time, they faced the physical pain of fulfilled prophecy. They were beaten with rods. Without fanfare, Luke tells the reader that this happened. He does so because he knows that persecution is the normal result of following the Lord. It should be expected.

Persecution should be expected

Read John 15:20-21 (²⁰Remember the word I spoke to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they don't know the one who sent me.)

The world does not know the Lord, and the world does not want to hear the Word of the Lord. Jesus told His disciples that when we tell the world the Truth, we will face persecution.

Persecution should lead to Joy

Read Matthew 5:12 (Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.)

We often talk about growing in Christlikeness or being more like Christ. There is no more apt picture of Christ than the Suffering Servant. While our persecutions pale in comparison to His, our persecution *can* point to His. Kent Hughes tells the story of the Christian Richard Wurmbrand who suffered torture in a Romanian prison. “Chunks of flesh [were ripped] out of him... and for weeks or even months on end no one would speak to him in his tiny cell. Amazingly, during all of that there were times when he was overcome with joy. He would actually stand in his weakened state and dance around his cell, confident that the angels were dancing with him.” (Preaching, 90-91) The joy of the Lord should flow from persecution.

Persecution will lead to a powerful ministry

After the beating, the Apostles did not take a long medical leave. Instead, they continued doing what the Lord instructed. They kept teaching and preaching and Acts 6:1 tells us that the church continued to grow.

Summarize and Transition: The Apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to face persecution. “The Greek word used here (*kataxioó*) involves weighing something to determine its true value... The early Christians were thrilled that Jesus had weighed their faithfulness and given them the privilege of suffering for His name.” (ETB LG, 84) It had been a long 24 hours for the Apostles, and it ended with great joy!

CONCLUDE

Challenge: In our Western world, we do not face suffering like the early church or the church around the world. However, we should not equate our more pleasant situation as too much of a blessing. Those who suffer for Christ have the great honor of witnessing for Christ in a magnificent manner. Gregg Matte shares an account recorded in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*.

“In the winter of AD 320, Emperor Licinius ordered all Roman soldiers to offer a sacrifice to the gods. They renounced any other form of faith, or they received the death penalty.

Forty brave Christian soldiers who served Rome’s elite Twelfth Legion Fulminata (‘the legion armed with lightning’) told their commander what their souls required. They’d gladly lay down their lives for the emperor of Rome—but forced to choose, they’d now lay down their lives for Jesus, the Emperor of Heaven.

On a frozen lake, these soldiers were stripped naked. Then the commander posted guards on the shore and had the guards build a fire and prepare a warm bath. Any of the forty soldiers could save their life, walk off the ice, and enjoy the warmth of the bath; they simply had to renounce Christ.

Deep into the night, as the freezing wind whipped across the ice, the forty Christian men sang hymns and psalms together. Their voices grew weaker. Some faded to silence.

One survivor could still move. He waved to the guards on the shore. ‘I’ll renounce Christ,’ he called out. ‘I’ll sacrifice to the gods. Just let me live.’ He struggled off the ice and toward the fire and the warm bath, leaving his dead and dying companions behind. But then the unthinkable happened.

A Roman guard passed him going the other way. He had seen enough. Thirty-nine men had given their lives courageously, so Jesus must be real. He threw off his clothes and took the man’s place. By morning, he became the fortieth martyr.” (Unstoppable, 135-136)

Let us be convicted and encouraged by such accounts and let us strive to be worthy of such experiences as we seek to honor the Lord and share His gospel message.