

Courage under Fire (Acts 5:17-42, c.f. John 15:18-16:4)



Jesus told His disciples the world will hate them because they hated Him. His word came true very quickly. For the second time, the apostles are thrown into prison for preaching Jesus. Throughout church history, Christians have suffered under persecution somewhere in the world. They were imprisoned, beaten, mistreated, and murdered all over the world.

The apostles had four opportunities to run to safety. They turned it down each time.

1. The apostles were warned not to preach or do anything in Jesus' name (5:17-18, c.f. 4:17ff).

- A. They could have stopped preaching Jesus. They could even have left Jerusalem. But after they prayed, they simply went on preaching and teaching in Jesus' name in the temple. They knew they would get in trouble with the authorities. The apostle's influence was spreading rapidly around Jerusalem (v12-16), and the Sadducees (collaborators with the Romans) headed up by the high priest 'rose up' against them (v17). Tension was rising and the battle line was drawn quickly. The early church faced internal threats - Ananias and Saphira filled with Satan, and external threat – the Jewish authority filled with great indignation. But the Christians stood the pressure, 'filled' with the Holy Spirit and power from within. This is the nature of the spiritual battle every Christian faces soon after the 'honeymoon period' after they get saved.
- B. Why were the Sadducees filled with 'indignation'? 'zeLOS' – jealousy and envy. The 1st murder in history was fuelled by jealousy - Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-8). It was also responsible for the worst murder in history – of Jesus Christ. These Sadducees were the official religious leaders in Israel, but within weeks the people of Jerusalem were abandoning Judaism and turning to these twelve unlearned fishermen! We very rarely admit to feeling jealous. When people feel jealous, they often provide a façade, a 'dignified reason' why they must be so cruel, intolerant, and unreasonable. The official reason for the apostles' arrest was 'maintaining the social order' and 'defending the true faith - Judaism'.

This time they arrested not just Peter and John, but all the twelve apostles and threw them into public prison (5:19). It is now the clash of the opposing authorities in the land. Sanhedrin cannot back down now.

2. Then suddenly the angel of the Lord came into the prison at night to let them out (5:19-20).

This is the first of the three angel events amid prison scenes in the book of Acts. (Pet 12:6-11; Paul and Silas Acts 16:26-27). Each time the doors open, and the chains fall off!

- A. Having gotten the apostles out of prison, the angel shut the door behind them and locked it securely. How humorous! And what happened to the prison guard? Maybe they were put to sleep or blind temporarily. The apostles must have been stunned. 'Are we in a dream?' Suddenly they were outside the prison cell and free! How encouraging that God was in complete control.
- B. The angel told them, '*Go back, and stand ('take a stand') in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.' (5:20) They were outside the prison without chains. They were free to run and avoid further trouble, but they did not take that opportunity. They went straight back to the temple and preached the following day early in the morning. For the past 2000 years, many authorities assumed they were the highest authority in the land and persecuted the Christians. But they could stop the spread of the gospel because they are dealing with the invisible armies of heaven. Angels are at work in the spread of the gospel. The church just went marching forward preaching the gospel, even over their dead bodies.*
- C. What did the angel tell the apostles to preach? The words of life. Not religion nor theology, but the words of life, 'zoe' – eternal life. Later Apostle Paul said, 'The word of God is not bound' (2 Tim 2:9). Though he was in chains, the word of God could never be bound - something the authorities were going to learn soon.

3. Now the early next morning the court is assembled, but the prison cell was empty (5:21-26).

- A. The Sadducees were full of confidence as they ordered the Galilean apostles to be brought to the court from the prison, 'How will I teach them a lesson they will not forget?' However, the prison guards came back confused. The apostles were gone, yet the prison door was still locked, and the chains were there too!

'How did they get out? Where did they escape to? Why were the guards not harmed? How come there is no casualty?' Now the guards are in trouble for losing their prisoners. Strike 1 against their confidence.

- B. Somebody came into the court, huffing and puffing, *'They are still preaching and teaching in the temple right now!'* (5:25) Instead of running away, the apostles hit the Jewish headquarter again! Strike 2 against their confidence.

'Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves against and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and His Anointed, saying, 'Let us break their bonds in pieces and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision.' (Ps 2:1-4)

God was having a good belly laugh in heaven with the angels as the rulers are struggling to break free from chains.

- C. The captain went with the officers to bring the apostles from the temple. But this time they had to be very polite because the angry crowd was ready to stone them (5:26). It was 'more of an escort than an arrest.' Strike 3 against their confidence.

The apostles had real power to harm the officers had they wanted to. They could have turned them over to the crowd, but they submitted to the arrest and stood before the court to be tried again by the jealous authorities. The angel set them free, but they walked back into the court of their adversaries.

4. The court scene where apostles stand before the authorities the second time (5:27-32).

- A. The apostles were charged with (i) disobeying authority, i.e., the former order not to speak in Jesus's name. Note their frustrated admission of the apostle's effectiveness, 'And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine.'; (ii) Trying to pin the crime of Jesus' murder on them (5:28). They still refused to mention Jesus' name. Have they forgotten, *'His blood be on us and on our children'* (Matt 27:25)?
- B. The apostles' response (Peter's 4th speech): (i) 'We ought to obey God rather than men.' (5:29 c.f. 4:19) In most situations, we can obey both God and men's authority. But when we cannot we have to say, *'Here I stand, I can do no other. So, help me, God.'* (Martin Luther); (ii) 'You have murdered Him and dishonoured Him by hanging Him on a tree.' *'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'* (c.f. Gal 3:13 c.f. Deut 21:22-23); (iii) 'But the God of our fathers has exalted Jesus by raising Him to His right hand (position of authority) as the 'Prince' (c.f. Jer 30:21) and 'Saviour'. This is the first time this title is used of Jesus; (iv) to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. Jesus' power to forgive sins had been vehemently resisted (Luke 5:20-24); (v) We are witnesses of these things. (Gk. 'martyr', martyr) They were God's mouthpiece to bear witness to the Spirit's voice (Jn 15:26-27; 16:8-11); (vi) The second witness is the 'Holy Spirit.' The miracle of their escape was the Spirit's work and evidence confirming the truth of their message; (vii) The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey Him. The Sadducees too can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they repent and turn to God. 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.' (c.f. Jn 6:29)
- C. The apostles had four opportunities to recant and deny their faith. (i) They were threatened, but they didn't refrain from preaching. (ii) They were set free from prison, but they didn't retreat and run away. (iii) They did not resist the arrest when they had the power to do so and avoid the court. (iv) They were accused of the crime of preaching in Jesus' name, and they did not recant.

We could say that these apostles were foolhardy, lacking common sense or wisdom, 'If you keep going this way you will be dead.' James died, and the rest followed except for Apostle John. They died violent deaths.

5. The Sanhedrin's Response (5:33-40)

- A. *'When they heard this, they were 'furious' and plotted to kill them.'* (5:33) (i) 'diaprio' means sown through or cut up; (ii) Peter's speech infuriated them so much that they wanted to kill the apostles. But the Sanhedrin had no authority to carry out capital punishment, especially for religious reasons. Who is the lawless one now?
- B. Gamaliel called for a timeout in court (6:34-39): 'Rabban Gamaliel' ('Our teacher') was a very popular Pharisee with a great following. He was a pacifist and a peacemaker. His father was Simon ben Hillel, who

pioneered a liberal branch of Judaism called 'Hillel'. As a Pharisee, Gamaliel believed in the angels, the supernatural work of God, and the resurrection.

He said, *'Be very careful about these men. Remember the two Jewish sects which came to nothing: Theudas and Judas (6 AD, on taxation Luke 2:1). If this is of man's origin, you don't have to do anything. It will just lose steam and fizzle out in time. So just give it a bit of time. You have nothing to lose.'* History proves that when leaders were removed their movement fizzled out. The Christians' leader, Jesus, was already killed. Romans did the dirty work for them. *'However, if this is a true move of God, you cannot resist Him and win.'*

(i) Never had he uttered a truer word. For the past 2000 years the gospel continued to be preached and the church is still growing. It cannot be stamped out. (ii) Gamaliel's advice provided temporary relief to the church which they took full advantage of.

- C. Was Gamaliel a good man? His advice was used by God, but Gamaliel did not come to the Messiah. He believed in the miracles, angels, and the resurrection. He even advised the Jews not to touch the apostles. He was so close to the word of life, yet so far from it, *'I am not against these Christian, but I am not going to commit, I will just wait out.'* But Gamaliel taught a brilliant and passionate young student named Saul, who took a stand for what he believed. He was not at all tolerant toward Christians. but he was chosen by God to take the gospel further than any other man before him. Doors of opportunity are not open forever.

6. [The Apostle's Response \(5:40-42\)](#)

- A. The court came to a formal decision. (i) Don't kill the apostles but teach them a lesson by beating them, the most they could do within the limits of their authority; (ii) Give them time to naturally die out.

This was the first time Christians suffered physically for their faith, 39 stripes minus 1. People were known to die from these beatings. (C.f. 1 Cor 11:24)

- B. *'They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.'* (5:41) The prayer of a persecuted church, *'Lord, why are You allowing them to suffer for You and not us?'* Joy is one word that is mentioned often among the persecuted Christians. Paul said, *'From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'* (Gal 6:17)
- C. What did they do next? Did they catch the first bus out of town? No, *'And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.'* (5:42)

There was only one difference between the apostles Gamaliel. Both believed in angels, resurrection, supernatural works of God, and the same Old Testament Scriptures. The only difference: the apostles received Jesus Christ as their Messiah and God. Gamaliel did not. It will be so again at the end of the age.