

Lesson 6 9 September, 2018

The Apostles Delivered From Prison

Lesson Scope: Acts 5:17-42

References in brackets refer to Acts 5 unless otherwise specified

Lesson Focus

While the apostles were busy ministering to the needs of those who came to them, the Jewish leaders could not help but notice. The miracles that God worked through the apostles proved true the message of the resurrection. This seemed to convict the guilty consciences of the leaders, compelling them to persecute the apostles.

How does this second persecution compare to the first described in chapter 4? Both grew out of the Jewish leaders' jealousy. In chapter 4, we see that Peter and John spent the night in prison; here an angel miraculously delivered the apostles. The Jewish leaders commanded the apostles not to speak in Jesus' name (4:18), and here they were disobeying that command. On both occasions, the apostles refused to cave in to the pressure, appealing to God's higher authority.

The gates of hell shall never prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. Men may oppose her message and abuse her messengers, but the Gospel will never be silenced.

Not one of us has the promise of peace and prosperity for tomorrow. We need to stress the fact that God could call us to suffer for our faith; we need to live with that possibility in mind. Therefore, we must be living in victory over sin and in close fellowship with our power source, our heavenly Father. Standing firm through the tests and pressures of affluence and worldliness will prepare us for whatever could come. The focus of this lesson is not on man's inner strength that gets him through tough times, but on God's almighty power that enables a faithful Christian to overcome.

Lesson Aim: To reveal God's power on behalf of His faithful messengers.

Theme Verse: Psalm 27:1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Lesson Text

Delivered From Prison

Acts 5:17-23

¹⁷ (KJV) Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, ¹⁸ And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison. ¹⁹ But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, ²⁰ Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. ²¹ And when they heard *that*, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, ²³ Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within.

Empowered to Testify

Acts 5:25-32

²⁵ (KJV) Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. ²⁶ Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. ²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council: and the high priest asked them, ²⁸ Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. ²⁹ Then Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. ³¹ Him hath God exalted with his right hand *to be* a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are his witnesses of these things; and *so is* also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Spared From Death

Acts 5:33-35

³³ (KJV) When they heard *that*, they were cut *to the heart*, and took counsel to slay them. ³⁴ Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; ³⁵ And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.

Acts 5:38-42

³⁸ (KJV) And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: ³⁹ But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. ⁴⁰ And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. ⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

Questions for Study

Delivered From Prison

1. What caused the indignation in 5:17?
2. What does 5:21 reveal about the apostles?
3. List ways God manifested His power. How does this encourage us?

Empowered to Testify

4. What does the accusation “Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine” tell us about the apostles’ efforts?
5. Was the last accusation in 5:28 true? How was Peter’s testimony a good answer?
6. What are some ways that we ought to obey God rather than men?
7. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in witnessing?

Spared From Death

8. What was likely the motive behind Gamaliel’s defense of the apostles?
9. What caused the apostles’ joy?

Analysing the Passage

The sect of the Sadducees (5:17) was especially indignant because they refused to believe in any resurrection, let alone that of Jesus. In contrast, Gamaliel, a Pharisee, believed in the resurrection. This may partly explain his willingness to oppose the high priest and the Sadducees.

All the words of this life (5:20) likely refers to the central message of the Gospel, that of spiritual life through the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

The council and senate (5:21) was the Sanhedrin, the seventy-member Jewish supreme court of justice.

Straitly and command (5:28) are translated from forms of the same Greek word. The high priest demanded, “Did not we, commanding, command you . . . ?” This was an idiom, common in the Septuagint, to make an emphatic expression.

Peter’s reply to the high priest covered three main points. First, God’s authority surpasses any human authority (5:29). Second, Jesus’ resurrection vindicates His claim to be the Messiah (5:31). Third, the witness of the poured out Holy Spirit (as prophesied in many Old Testament prophecies) confirms the truth of our witness (5:32).

God used Gamaliel, a Pharisee, to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Gamaliel was a man of reputation and power. His apparent concern for fair judgement was instrumental in quelling the conflict brought about by the apostles declaring the truths of the Gospel.

Principles and Applications Delivered From Prison

1. God does not shield His messengers from all suffering (5: 7-18).

We can expect persecution because the message we share convicts the consciences of the ungodly. As society deviates from the Word of God, and the Christian remains firmly grounded in it, friction will increase. yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).

2. God works through angels to protect and encourage believers (5:19-21). “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14). Although we may not see them or even realize it, we have all been aided by these heavenly beings.

3. Despite opposition, God's faithful messengers boldly proclaim truth by divine power (5:21,25). Our Anabaptist forefathers faced intense opposition, yet they were not afraid to speak out for Christ, even if it meant being captured. God's work for every child of His is spreading the Gospel. Does our burden for the lost overcome our fear of men?

Empowered to Testify

4. God enables His people to respond to opposition in a non-resistant spirit (5:26). We strive to follow Christ's perfect example. "Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

5. Faithful messengers choose "to obey God rather than men" without compromise (5:29). Obedience to God is not the easiest decision when it runs counter to those around us, but it is the only way that brings Christian joy (John 13:17). The consequences of disobedience help us choose obedience because "every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). If it were illegal to talk about Jesus, would I still witness to others? Can I tell others that I love a life of obedience to Christ?

6. God helps His faithful messengers to respond wisely to charges brought against them (5:29-32). "But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you" (Matthew 10:19-20). This ability does not come through a casual knowledge of God's Word. It takes diligent study and daily meditation so that we are familiar with the Scriptures that God can help us remember at the right times.

Spared From Death

7. God uses those in influential positions to restrain evil intentions of wicked men (5:34-35, 38-40). When Joseph's brothers spoke of killing him God used Reuben to speak up for Joseph and spare his life. God can use even ungodly men in powerful positions to stop evil and make a way for His people.

8. Through God's power the faithful rejoice in the midst of suffering (5:41). It is not possible in our own strength to have inner joy, peace, and a forgiving spirit in the face of physical and verbal abuse. With God, all things are possible and we can rejoice even when others mistreat us. Do we love to identify with our suffering Saviour? Am I happy

to tell others that I am a Christian, and that God controls what comes in to my life? Can we rejoice if someone sues us and we must pay for something that was not our fault?

9. God's power motivates zeal and perseverance in proclaiming the Gospel (5:42). Did the apostles become weary in the work of the Lord? Very likely, but they ceased not! God is able and waiting to give us the strength we need to do His work but first we must ask. Sometimes we face discouragement in our witnessing and feel as though no one wants to hear our message. But remember, it is not our message but God's. He promises that His Word will not return to Him void. We often do not see the results of our labour; but as we do what we can, God will bless us for faithfulness.

Important Teachings

1. God does not shield His messengers from all suffering (5:17-18).
2. God works through angels to protect and encourage believers (5:19-21).
3. Despite opposition, God's faithful messengers boldly proclaim truth by divine power (5:21,25).
4. God enables His people to respond to opposition in a non-resistant spirit (5:26).
5. Faithful messengers choose "to obey God rather than men" without compromise (5:29).
6. God helps His faithful messengers to respond wisely to charges brought against them (5:29-32).
7. God uses those in influential positions to restrain evil intentions of wicked men (5:34-35, 38-40).
8. Through God's power, the faithful rejoice in the midst of suffering (5:41).
9. God's power motivates zeal and perseverance in proclaiming the Gospel (5:42).

Answers to Questions

1. What caused the indignation in 5:17?

The healing of the sick and all the attention the apostles received made the high priest and those with him jealous. This likely reminded them of Jesus and His ministry, which pricked their consciences. They saw peo-

ple responding to the Gospel and feared that they would lose their power and the reverence of the people.

2. What does 5:21 reveal about the apostles?

They did not let the fear of the council keep them from speaking for God. They went early the day after their release—they did not need a full night of sleep or a day to rest and recover from their imprisonment.

They did not question God as to what He was doing, telling them to jump back into the fire after they had been rescued. Obviously they had a greater desire to please God than to please self.

3. List ways God manifested His power: How does this encourage us?

An angel came by night, opened the prison doors, and brought the apostles out. The unknowing guards were amazed to find the empty cells securely locked! The fact that these escaped prisoners were in public view, teaching, when they might have felt like hiding or fleeing for their lives, showed God's power at work.

We can rest in the fact that God knows our enemies' intent to destroy us and can choose to protect us or allow us to suffer. He knows what will best fulfill His purpose for our lives and bring honour and glory to His name. He will give us the strength we need in the hour of trial, for it is not our message we promote, but His.

4. What does the accusation "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine" tell us about the apostles' efforts?

They were not afraid to make the doctrine of Christ personal. Their lives displayed evidence of practicing what they preached. Filling Jerusalem with their teaching meant they had been diligent in spreading the Word and reaching many souls. There was no question as to where their identity was.

5. Was the last accusation in 5:28 true? How was Peter's testimony a good answer?

No. The Jewish people had already brought "this man's blood" upon themselves (Matthew 27:25). First, Peter pointed out by whose authority they were teaching and thus disobeying the Jewish council's orders. He pointed them to God and His workings to bring repentance and forgiveness to Israel.

He did not try to set the high priest straight on these false accusations, but simply explained what their duty was as witnesses of Christ. He did

not say, “We are right and you are wrong,” but said that God gives the Holy Ghost to those who obey Him.

6. What are some ways that we ought to obey God rather than men?

Man says, “Be prepared for the worst. Insure everything!” But God says, “It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man” (Psalm 118:8).

Man says, “Accept same-gender unions. Some are born this way.” But God calls such unions an abomination. (See Leviticus 18:22; 20:13.)

Man says, “Corporal punishment is child abuse and creates violent tendencies in children.” But God says, “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15). “He that spareth his rod hateth his son” (Proverbs 13:24).

Man says, “This world has evolved over billions of years.” But God says, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

7. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in witnessing?

He carries teaching and preaching into the conscience and bears witness to the truth of the message. He gives believers a power not of themselves. When faced with witnessing opportunities, He can give boldness and Words to say.

8. What was likely the motive behind Gamaliel’s defense of the apostles?

He likely spoke from a desire to spare further conflict and to appeal for sensibleness. He did not claim or deny that the apostles were right, but he made it clear that God’s purposes cannot be stopped. God used Gamaliel’s influence and abilities to save the apostles’ lives.

9. What caused the apostles’ joy?

They rejoiced to suffer shame for Christ. They were grateful that they had something worth being beaten for: having their names in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Now they could be free to do what they loved best: telling more souls what Christ meant to them. God had spared their lives.

Summarizing the Lesson

That Will Not Fail

Oh, for a faith that will not fail,
Though hard the test or fierce the gale;
A burning flame within my soul,
Completely under His control,
That cannot be extinguished by
Adversity or storm clouds nigh;
A faith that's strong enough to stand
When others mock the Lord's command;
That will not hesitate to say
The words that God requires today,
Nor leave the path of truth and right
To gain approval in man's sight;
That is not silenced by the threat
Of pain or torture to be met,
And does not flinch beneath the blow
Of persecution here below,
Remembering that death will be
An open door that leads to Thee!
—Ada Wine

Research Guide

1. Study 2 Timothy 2:1-3, 12.
2. Read Jesus' encouraging words to His disciples regarding the things they would face (Matthew 10:16-42).