

Bible Study 20 – Acts 5:33-42 – The apostles are released to resume their mission

33 When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

1) The High Priest and Council are incensed by the apostles: When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them (33).

a) The High Priest and Council are enraged by the defiant and courageous response of the apostles – who in unison declared – we must obey God rather than men. The apostles recognised and served a higher authority in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. All authority in heaven and earth is ultimately his. And while courts and councils can err, he is Truth personified and cannot... And he commanded his church to go preach the gospel to every creature....

b) The High Priest and Council are enraged by the success of the apostles' mission. The people were believing their message concerning what God has done for humanity in and through Jesus Christ. And therefore, an increasing number of people exercised repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They welcomed the Good News, accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and were added to the church...

c) The High Priest and Council are so enraged that they want the apostles executed. While strictly speaking, capital punishment was no longer in the remit of the Sanhedrin but was reserved for the Roman Governors or authorities, these upholders of the law were not averse to breaking the law when they saw their

power, and political and religious interests challenged... Such are the ways of the world, sadly...

2. A member of the Council intervenes to diffuse the murderous intentions of the Sanhedrin: But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while (34).

a) Gamaliel was a Pharisee by theological conviction and practice. And he exhibited a rare spirit of wisdom, toleration, and caution, which was sorely lacking among the Sadducean Party in the Council, including the High Priest, and possibly others among his own religious faction. He was the grandson of the renowned and moderate rabbi, Hillel. And he had earned respect and a reputation for his wisdom and learning among the people. Saul of Tarsus whom we will encounter from chapter 9 was one of his pupils.

b) Gamaliel asked for the apostles to be removed from the Council so that the members could consider and confer in private. Not only was this probably the proper protocol but he likely thought that having the apostles removed from the scene would help diffuse the anger of the members against the church's leaders. The Council was acting viscerally and instinctively whereas Gamaliel wants them to exercise their minds or intellects.

c) Gamaliel hoped to persuade the Council to act moderately and to make a measured response...

3. Gamaliel issues a plea for caution and moderation: And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

a) Gamaliel respectfully addresses the Council and urges caution... "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. Gamaliel loved his country and people and sought to serve honourably, dutifully, and with the rule of God's law...

b) Gamaliel cites historical precedents in favour of restraint and moderation. He refers to two cases where potential revolutionary movements dwindled away to nothing after their charismatic leaders were put to death.

Gamaliel believed that the followers of Jesus would similarly soon melt away like snow in the Spring. Without Jesus' presence and leadership, they would soon enough come to nothing. However, censorship, persecution, and martyrdom by contrast would only prolong the apostles' cause! Maybe, the proponents of our contemporary cancel culture could learn a little from his example....

c) Gamaliel therefore makes a plea for moderation. He urges the Council to release the apostles without punishment and to let them speak and act freely -

for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but he cautiously adds, 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" Which is futile – like spitting at a hurricane...

4. The High Priest and Council heed Gamaliel's imploration and release the apostles but only after inflicting a physical beating and issuing a prohibition on proclaiming the gospel: So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

a) Gamaliel's reputation and his convincing argument swayed the Council... So they took his advice... At least, they were willing to remove the death penalty, and free the apostles after physical punishment and prohibition.

b) Consequently, the apostles were beaten – probably with rods on the order of the Council. Such a punishment was not uncommon for minor infractions of the law or for defiance of the powers that be! The Apostle Paul would later declare that he had been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones (2Cor.11:23-25).

c) The apostles were again officially forbidden by the Council from proclaiming Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, as Lord and Saviour... but their diktat would go unheeded for the apostles must obey God rather than men...

5. The apostles rejoiced and resumed their ministry and mission: 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

a) The apostles were glad to suffer for the sake of Jesus and the new life that is offered in him... Maybe the words that Jesus had spoken to them in his sermon on the mount readily came back to comfort and cheer them. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Mt.5:11-12).

b) The apostles far from being deterred by the Council's prohibition intensify their efforts to reach all with the Good News. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

c) The apostles proclaim Jesus as God's anointed and appointed Messiah, the One prophesied and promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. His name is Jesus which literally means God saves. Reminding us that salvation is a gift from God. It is all of grace. He is the Son of God who took our nature to himself when supernaturally conceived and born to the Virgin Mary. He is the God-man. He is the Lord and Saviour of the world.

As the Apostle Peter declared in chapter 4: Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Questions

1. Where is God when his people are suffering persecution? Why does God permit such suffering? Is God actively at work in our world?
2. Why do you think the apostles rejoiced in suffering such dishonour?
3. How do you think the apostles' confidence and conviction in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, comforted and cheered them in the face of state persecution?
4. Does biblical and catholic orthodoxy regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ help or hinder the church's ministry and mission today? What happens to the church if it fails to proclaim Christ crucified and risen?