

Bible Study 18 – Acts 5:17-21 – Opposition intensifies!

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” 21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

1. The apostles are arrested for love’s sake: But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

a) The apostles are arrested for daring to defy the authorities’ order prohibiting their mission and ministry... The authorities have already commanded them not to teach and so act in Jesus’ name and had threatened penal consequences for defiance... These were after all the same authorities that had conspired against Jesus and condemned him to death, convincing the mob and Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor that Jesus was a rebel and a threat to the status quo...

b) The apostles are arrested for declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ... Christ is their message, ministry, and mission. They called people to believe on Christ, to receive and rest in Christ, to hear and heed Christ, to imitate Christ, to follow Christ. Jesus is Lord was the summation of their doctrine and doing...

c) The apostles are arrested for doing good works in the name of Jesus Christ... who is our Helper and Healer who restores health and harmony to self and to our relationship with God and others. It was the love of Christ that compelled them to so act for others good.

2. The apostles are to be arraigned (again) before the council: But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

a) The High Priest and Sadducean Party initiate the action... The High Priest like an archbishop, moderator, patriarch, or pope-like figure, was head of the Council, or Sanhedrin as it was called, which exercised both spiritual and temporal authority over the capital and throughout the nation under Roman overlordship. And they enjoyed a near monopoly in the religious realm, although there were significant theological differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees as we will see in the coming weeks and months.

b) The High Priest and religious authorities were impelled to act on account of their jealousy... This jealousy incorporates zeal for their own office and order, as well as their peculiar doctrine or dogmas... Their pride has been stirred by the apostles' ministry and the success thereof... They were envious of the apostles' popularity... They were resentful that the church was growing in Jerusalem and further afield – and on their watch! They were the quintessential 'virtue signallers' or hypocrites of their day as the Lord Jesus had made all too clear in chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel. Because what he applied to the Pharisees and Scribes was equally applicable to the Sadducees.

c) The apostles are incarcerated in a public prison to await trial. And I wonder how often during ordeals such as this one the apostles and other members of the early church recounted the words of the Lord Jesus who had told them: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said 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. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me (Jn.15:18-21).

In our day, the church tends to move with the world but in the apostles' day the church moved the world! Indeed, as we shall see, it turned the world upside down!

Peter, no doubt reflecting on his personal experience as a regular victim of persecution for love's sake would later write: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" 19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good (1Pt.4:12-19).

Interestingly, Peter, John and possibly the other apostles, were placed in a public prison which would have given them opportunity to continue proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. The apostles are rescued by an angel and receive heavenly instruction:

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”

a) A heaven-sent mediator came to the apostles’ rescue. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. While contemporary liberal scholarship tends to demythologise passages like this one and therefore posits the view that a sympathetic warden or Christian friend managed to secure the key and let the apostles go, St Luke, the author of Acts, evidently conveys a different meaning. Luke points to the supernatural hand of God in the sending of an angel to free the apostles. The word ‘angel’ quite literally means messenger and so...

b) A heaven-sent messenger came to the apostles with instructions to continue their mission... “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The messenger exercised a delegated authority. He conveyed God’s word to the apostles. They were to return to the Temple where they were to continue to proclaim the Way, the Truth and the Life.

c) The heavenly message centred on the church’s Master who reigns from his Father’s side in heaven: all the words of this Life.” The Lord Jesus Christ is life. To know him is to enter into life – and to have it abundantly and everlastingly.

4. The apostles adhere to their divine mission: And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

a) The apostles responded obediently... They obeyed God rather than men...

b) The apostles returned to the Temple at daybreak... And so, at the earliest opportunity they returned to the Temple despite the prohibition and threats of the Council...

c) The apostles relayed the good news to the people... They continued to preach Christ and him crucified to the people coming up to the Temple for worship...

Questions

1. What or who is the ultimate authority in and over our lives?

2. Is Jesus Christ at the heart of our ministry and mission?

3. Should we move with the world or seek to move the world?

4. How should we react to vociferous opposition to the Christian message?

5. Should we demythologise the Bible to make it more palatable to our contemporaries?