

The Book of Acts

Lesson 9: Persecution and Bold Witness -- Acts 5:12-42

The church is growing, and the city cannot ignore it. Crowds gather in Solomon's portico. The sick are carried into the streets in the hope that even Peter's passing shadow might fall on them. More and more men and women are being added to the Lord. It is a season of power and joy, and to the religious leaders watching from the shadows, it is unbearable. Luke names their motive plainly: they were filled with jealousy.

So they arrest the apostles again and lock them in the public prison. But that night an angel of the Lord opens the doors, leads them out, and gives them a striking command: go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life. Not, go hide. Not, lie low until it blows over. Go back to the very place you were arrested and keep preaching. At daybreak the apostles are right back in the temple, teaching, while the council sends for prisoners who are no longer in their cell.

Hauled before the court again, they hear the charge: we strictly forbade you to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. Peter's reply is the banner over this whole chapter: we must obey God rather than men. And then he preaches Christ to the very men who killed Him, the God of our fathers raised Jesus, exalted Him as Leader and Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins. The council is enraged enough to kill them.

Only the cool counsel of Gamaliel holds them back: if this work is of men, it will collapse on its own; but if it is of God, you will not be able to stop it, and you might find yourselves fighting against God. So they beat the apostles, warn them again, and let them go. And here is the most astonishing thing in the whole account: the apostles leave rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Beaten and bruised, they go right back to teaching and preaching Jesus every day. The gospel cannot be jailed, and joy cannot be beaten out of those who belong to Christ.

Group Discussion: After being arrested, jailed, and beaten, the apostles left the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus (v. 41). What do you make of that response? How can suffering for Christ ever be an occasion for joy?

Personal Reflection: An angel freed the apostles and sent them straight back to the temple to keep preaching, into the very danger they had just escaped (vv. 19-21). When obedience to God feels risky or costly, how do you usually respond? Where is God calling you to obey despite the risk?

Read Acts 5:12-42

Study Questions

1. An angel released the apostles from prison and commanded them to go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life (vv. 19-20). What does God's deliverance and command reveal about His purposes for His persecuted people, and why does Luke call the gospel the words of this Life?
2. The apostles obeyed God's command to keep preaching even though it meant walking straight back into danger (vv. 20-21). When obeying God is risky or costly, do you tend to obey promptly or look for a safer path? Where is God calling you to costly obedience right now?
3. When commanded again to stop preaching, Peter and the apostles answered, we must obey God rather than men (v. 29). Why is this principle the settled conviction of the faithful, and how does it shape the believer's relationship to every other authority?
4. Peter refused to let the threats of powerful men move him to disobey God (vv. 27-29). Where do you feel pressure, from culture, work, friends, or family, to compromise what God has clearly commanded? How can you stand firm with both courage and grace?
5. Peter preached that God exalted Jesus at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins (vv. 30-31). What does it mean that Jesus is both Leader and Savior, and why is it significant that repentance and forgiveness come through Him?
6. Peter presented Jesus as both Leader and Savior, not one without the other (v. 31). Are there ways you want Jesus as your Savior, to forgive and bless you, while resisting Him as your Leader, who directs and commands you? Where does He want to lead you that you have been reluctant to follow?
7. Gamaliel warned the council that if this movement were of men it would fail, but if it were of God, they would not be able to overthrow it, and might even be found opposing God (vv. 33-39). What does this teach about the unstoppable purposes of God, and how should that shape our confidence in the gospel?
8. Gamaliel recognized that no human power can overthrow what God is doing (vv. 38-39). When God's work, or your own faithfulness, seems threatened, ineffective, or slow, how do you respond? What would it look like to trust God's purposes rather than be ruled by anxiety about outcomes?
9. After being beaten and threatened, the apostles left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus, and they kept right on teaching every day (vv. 40-42). What does the New Testament teach about suffering for Christ, and how can the believer come to genuinely rejoice in it?
10. Looking back over this whole account of courage, suffering, and unstoppable witness, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to bolder faithfulness or steadier trust, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 5:10-12, blessing and reward for those persecuted for righteousness; Philippians 1:29, the gift of believing in and suffering for Christ; 1 Peter 4:12-16, not being surprised by fiery trial but rejoicing to share Christ's sufferings; Matthew 16:18, Christ building His church which the gates of Hades will not overcome; Romans 13:1-7, honoring governing authorities in their proper sphere