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

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 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. 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. 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; 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, 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. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

In vs. 17 Luke reports that the high priest (Caiaphas) and his political party (the Sadducees) were filled with jealousy…so much so that they arrest the apostles and place them in a public prison. Why are these powerful Jewish leaders jealous, and why do they arrest the apostles? Remember that the High Priest and his cronies had strictly forbidden the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus Christ in 4:18. However, according to Acts 4:31 and thus far in Acts 5, not only had the disciples disregarded the threats of the Sanhedrin and continued to preach in the name of Jesus, now they are also healing and casting out evil spirits in the name of Jesus as well. In fact, Luke reports in vs. 16 that many people have been streaming into the temple courts from surrounding towns and villages to bring their sick to the apostles in hopes that they will be healed. We also learned last week that the people of Jerusalem held the apostles in high esteem because of all the people who were experiencing healing and relief through the power these men demonstrated through the work of the Holy Spirit. And remember…they were preaching and ministering to these crowds of people in the temple courts…within plain view of the authorities who had threatened them.

So…we kind of knew this was coming, right? You simply cannot defy the authorities and hope to get away with it. I think it’s reasonable to assume that the apostles knew this was coming as well…it was only a matter of time.

Luke specifically mentions that the apostles were thrown into a public prison. In other words, we should picture their place of incarceration as being visible from the street. The High Priest wants to make a statement to the citizens of Jerusalem: this is what happens when you defy the authorities and proclaim the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Let this be a lesson for anyone who would think to disobey our direct orders.

Apparently, however, the authority of the High Priest was overruled by a much Higher Power! According to vs. 19, an angel of the Lord appears that night and delivers the apostles out of the prison. The text says the angel opened the doors of the prison and brought them out, but apparently the guards who were certainly posted nearby saw nothing.

The angel gives marching orders to the apostles, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”
What we have here is a clear case of Christian civil disobedience. When the law of the land, or the prevailing culture, stands in complete contrast to God’s imperative command, the Christian is to respectfully disobey the authorities and obey God. To make that point exceptionally clear, God has now provided two supernatural signs. The first was a powerful trembling of the earth when the church prayed for boldness to share Christ after they had been initially threatened by the Sanhedrin. We read in 4:31 that at that moment of when the earth shook they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. That was the first instance of Christian civil disobedience. Then, here again, just in case the apostles might have been feeling guilty about disobeying the Supreme Court of Israel, God sends an angel to make clear that civil disobedience is the order of the day, and they have God’s blessing and instruction to go disobey the earthly authorities again by preaching the words of LIFE in the temple courts.

Now, make no mistake: Christianity is not, by nature, a faith that is cavalier and defiant against the authorities. In fact, in Romans chapter 13 Paul specifically states that the Christian community should make every effort to live peacefully and cooperatively with the law of the land, and whenever possible, to submit to the governing authorities, for the Christian should assume that those in the positions of authority have been “instituted by God.” Paul insists that the Christians should pay their taxes and live good, upright lives in accordance with the law and in submission to those entrusted by God to enforce the law.

However…should those in the place of authority stand directly opposed to the preaching and ministry of Jesus Christ, we see here in Acts 4–5 that God states in no uncertain terms, “Overruled!” In such cases, the Jesus followers are to continue the work of the ministry, even if it means getting arrested, incarcerated, beaten…or as we will see…martyred.

In this instance, God miraculously delivers the apostles out of prison so that they can resume their ministry the very next morning, which is exactly what they do according to 5:21…they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

As we return to the story, Luke reports that High Priests, completely unaware of the angelic jailbreak, call all of the most influential leaders together for another “trial” that is to take place that morning. However, when those sent to retrieve the apostles get to the prison, they discover that the doors are locked, the guards are at their posts, but the prisoners are gone! Luke says that when the chief priests heard this report, they were greatly perplexed…I suspect that’s a significant understatement! It’s one thing to find that the prisoners broke out of prison, it’s quite another to find the prison completely locked down, guards doing their work, and yet discover that 12 men have simply vanished.

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If we were watching a movie, this is one of those moments we enjoy so much…when the bad guys are befuddled…when the powerbrokers suddenly look like idiots. And that scene only gets a bit funnier when some unknown person rushes in exclaiming, “Look! The men whom YOU put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

I find this whole story fascinating and bit hilarious. I mean, think about it: surely some of those esteemed council members now gathered for the trial walked right past Solomon’s Portico where the apostles would have been standing in clear sight that morning, preaching about Jesus. It’s almost as though the angel of the Lord hid the apostles from their eyes…just like what apparently took place the night before when the angel of the Lord led the apostles out right underneath the noses of the guards.

Whatever the case may be, it’s a humorous scene for us to imagine as the captain of the Temple guard with his officers rush out of the courtroom and into the temple court only to discover that the apostles are all standing there in plain sight, preaching about Jesus and healing the sick…again.

And, judging by Luke’s description, we should assume that the word is out all over town that the Apostles are back in business. Huge crowds have gathered, everyone is talking about how bizarre it is that the apostles were all publicly locked away last night, and now they are right back here in the temple courts as though nothing had happened. Clearly there is so much energy and enthusiasm surrounding the apostles that the captain and his officers are concerned that any use of force might lead to them getting stoned by the crowd.

Luke reports that the captain and the officers brought them, but not by force. Which means that the apostles went willingly when asked…they didn’t resist arrest in the least. Remember: Christian civil disobedience does not mean resisting arrest. Civil disobedience for Christ means doing God’s will even though you most certainly will get arrested.

As we return to our story in vs. 27 we find the apostles standing before the High Priest and the council of assembled leaders, and the high priest says, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

Notice a few things. First, note the concession that the word about Jesus has spread throughout the entire city of Jerusalem. Remember, Jesus stated in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem”…check! Jesus said it, and it happened, and the historical confirmation of their effective witness comes not from the disciples, but from the opponents of Jesus themselves.
Notice also for a moment how the chief priests are furious that the apostles are “blaming” THEM, the Sanhedrin, for the death of Christ…as though somehow the Sanhedrin had nothing to do with it! We get the sense here that the Sanhedrin has been attempting to distance themselves from the crucifixion of Jesus. They’ve been working the spin…blaming the crucifixion of Christ on the Romans, as if the Romans had unilaterally arrested Jesus and crucified him for treason. When, in fact, we all know…the whole city of Jerusalem knew…that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate publicly declared Jesus to be innocent! Notice that the Chief Priests and the powerbrokers of the day have a very short memory when it comes to the facts and their own sin. Their history has conveniently become a bit blurry…they’re managing their guilt by spinning a web of lies. Does that sound like any presidential candidates we know? How many times have we seen people in power assume their lies are of little consequence because of their positions of power and esteem? And how often do those in power seek to squash “truth tellers” who threaten their positions of influence by revealing their lies?

Look, not much has changed about human nature in the past 2000 years. People in power create policy to protect themselves and to reinforce the cultural lies, and those who oppose them by speaking the truth in the name of Jesus become public enemy number one.

In other words, the apostles are not getting into trouble for telling a lie, they are getting in trouble for telling the truth that exposes the lie! And that, my friends, is the number one function of civil disobedience.

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white person on Dec. 1, 1955, her civil disobedience revealed the lie that white people are somehow superior to black people. It was a cultural lie that had led to the formation of policies and oppressive practices in this very country, and it took a truth teller…a follower of Jesus…lots of them in fact…to reveal the lie of racism and lead a country to repentance and to change. That change is still in progress, and apparently there’s a long way to go to finally root out the lie of white supremacy and racism, but thank God that Rosa Parks and so many other Jesus followers…both white and black…were willing to suffer arrest, scorn, violence, imprisonment, and even death to glorify Christ and the biblical truth that all human beings are image bearers of the same God. All are sinners, yet all people of all colors and nationalities are those whom Jesus loved enough to suffer a Roman cross. Civil disobedience is often necessary to flesh out a pernicious lie, and that paves the way to declare what is ultimately true according to God’s eternal law.

As we return to our story, the Apostle Peter replies to the charges of the council, defending their civil disobedience with these words, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom YOU killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are
witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

I’m not going to spend a lot of time on Peter’s mini-sermon here because we’ve seen similar words used in several different contexts already. Let me simply point out a few things: 1) The Christian is bound to obey God rather than men. Now…those two realities are not always mutually exclusive, and we all know that. Many laws of the land uphold God’s law or the intent of God’s law. However, should the laws of men counter or contradict the law of God, the Christian’s allegiance is clear: we must obey God rather than those men or the laws they have imposed. 2) Civil disobedience may be necessary because people need to know about Jesus…He is the exalted Leader and Savior…He is God’s answer to sin and our coming judgment. Jesus is the one who leads us to repentance and the forgiveness of sin. Without Jesus, humanity has no hope. We must bear witness, regardless of man’s laws. By the way, those points are just as relevant now as they were 2000 years ago.

Now…Peter has spoken the truth, and he has made a solid case. But such truth and logic only infuriates the powerbrokers all the more. Luke states that the chief priests and leaders become enraged and begin to speak of killing the apostles right there on the spot. However, before they act on their anger, the most respected Pharisee in the city, and one of the most well thought of leaders on the council, a man named Gamaliel, gives orders for the apostles to be taken out of the room so that there might be some thoughtful conversation amongst the leaders. We get the idea that Gamaliel is a very level headed, older, mature thinker. He intercedes at just the right moment before things get out of hand.

We pick up with his comments in vs. 35ff: “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 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. 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. 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; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

Gamaliel is an unbeliever. He’s also intelligent, and like most intelligent people, he applies excellent logic. Other leaders and movements had drawn great attention in Israel prior to Jesus of Nazareth. However, when those leaders were killed and the followers scattered, the movements died…proving that those movements were driven by the ambitions of men, not the mighty providence of God. Gamaliel’s logic is spot on. Man-made movements don’t last. Empires crumble. Hitler dies and so does Nazi Germany. However…God movements endure. So is Christianity a God-movement? You be the judge. In the past 2000 years, Christianity has
exploded with growth and remains the world’s largest religion with some 2.3 billion followers. Since such records have been kept, the Holy Bible is the number one best-selling book in the world according to the Guinness Book of World Records. I could go on and on, but it doesn’t take a scholar to note that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the persecution of his followers did not bring an end to the movement called Christianity. Logically then, according to Gamaliel, we should conclude that such a movement is of God. Which is to say, that if one stands opposed to the ministry of Jesus Christ, one stands opposed to God. And that’s not good…that ends badly.

Apparently that bit of logic made an impact on the Sanhedrin, because Luke reports that the council took his advice. So instead of killing the apostles, they have them flogged…likely 39 lashes with a brutal whip. Then they charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and they released the apostles out of their custody.

Now…getting 39 lashes across your back and chest is not a little thing. In some instances those floggings would kill people, so please do not belittle the suffering of the apostles here at the end of Acts 5. This would have been a brutal beating for their civil disobedience…for causing the authorities of the land to lose face in front of the watching crowds.

Such beatings in a traditional honor culture would be the source of great shame. But did those beatings shame or deter the apostles? No.

Luke reports, “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

Take a moment and let that picture sink in for a bit. Now…keep in mind that the apostles didn’t have the New Testament. They didn’t have 2000 years of church history to draw upon. They did not have the benefit of seeing how Christianity spread throughout the world, how it endured in China after being outlawed by Communism, how it prospers even now in Iran when the cost of advancing Christianity is still imprisonment or death. These were first generation believers…where did all that courage come from?

1) First, the apostles had a personal relationship with Jesus. These men did not suffer persecution because they agreed with doctrine; they endured persecution because first and foremost, they had been with Jesus.

2) The apostles knew that their message contained the words of LIFE. Life...real life...the life God intended for human beings...was born out of the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and the empty tomb. To withhold the message out of fear or self-preservation is to withhold Life from those who are perishing.
3) The Apostles were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to bear witness under fire, just as Jesus promised He would.

4) The Apostles knew that following Jesus would be costly. Jesus had prepared them well. The persecution did not catch them off guard, nor did it disillusion their concept about what being a Christian is all about.

I pray that we will take these lessons to heart. In the days to come, we who believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be labeled, lied about, and left out. We will be called “religious nuts,” and it will be assumed that we are ignorant, unsophisticated freaks who oppose common sense and cultural truths. Laws and policies will likely forbid us from speaking in the name of Jesus.

When that day comes, many of you will think the world is coming to an end, but can you see that it has always been so? Listen: we are fighting a battle for human souls that began long ago. So put on the full armor of God and wade in. Warriors are not surprised when the bullets fly…that’s what happens in a war.

Remember that we have been entrusted with the good news that leads to life. People need the LORD. Jesus loves every person and died for every person, so He must be made known to every person. That’s our job.

Remember that we are truth tellers. We have been commissioned to tell the truth no matter the cost. Telling the truth that reveals the lies of those in power will get us into trouble. OK, but that’s the path we’ve been called to walk. That’s the hard and narrow road Jesus talked about. Go into Christianity with your eyes open, and none of that comes as a surprise.

And listen: no matter how hard following Jesus might be, never forget: God wins! Our King reigns. Our Judge trumps the Supreme Court. Our Lord holds the keys to every jail cell. He has authority over all authorities. His law trumps every law of man. Though we may suffer in the short term, our suffering will not be in vain. In fact, we should count it an honor to suffer for the Name. No one can take away our joy that is in Jesus Christ our Lord, so let us not back down, give in, give up or shut up. As Paul writes, “We must press on toward the goal…we must finish the race.”

I hope you will be encouraged this morning as we remember the witness and testimony of the apostles. Thanks to their boldness, their courage, and their obedience, we have these stories to strengthen our faith in the midst of difficult times. Generations from now, think of those who will be grateful for your stories of boldness, courage, and endurance for the glory of Christ.
Go now and bear witness…proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ…engage in civil disobedience when necessary…until the whole world hears! Let’s pray.