

Acts 5:12-42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 5 verses 12 to 42. Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles, and they were all together in Solomon's portico.

None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.

The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. 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.

[1 : 2 0] But when we opened them, we found no one inside. Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priest 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 saviour, 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 honour 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 Thudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him.

[2 : 4 3] 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. At the end of chapter 5 of the book of Acts, following the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles are once more brought before the leaders of the Jews. We discover that the apostles had been meeting together in Solomon's portico. Solomon's portico was already mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 11. The temple was a site where the early church met, and particularly the apostles.

[3 : 55] Solomon's portico was a relatively public place where many people would see them as they came for worship. Within the gospels, we read of Jesus' teaching in the temple on several occasions. In John's gospel, chapter 10, we see that he also taught the Jews in the context of Solomon's portico.

Having a vibrant new sect, drawing great multitudes to them, in the context of the temple, would have been a threat to the authorities. They're performing many signs and wonders, and signs on a greater scale than even Christ himself.

There are many different types of miracles and signs being performed here. There are sick people being healed of various types, exorcisms being performed, and even the shadow of Peter is effective to perform miracles.

While the woman with the issue of blood sought to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, even being touched by the shadow of Peter is enough to heal. In his farewell discourse in the gospel of John, Jesus had promised his disciples that they would perform greater signs than the ones that he had performed, and here we see Jesus' word coming to pass.

That Peter was especially associated with the power to perform these miracles, again suggests that he was seen, and was, the leader of the apostles. None of the rest dared to join them.

[5 : 05] Now, who are the rest? There are a number of different positions that have been put forward. Some see it as the people more generally. They've heard about the events with Ananias and Sapphira, and they are afraid of drawing near, when God is so near to his people.

They know that God is a revealer of hearts, and also that he judges the unholy, and so aware of their sin and their failures, they do not want to come into the light of God's judgment. That is one possibility.

Another possibility is that the people who are gathering together in Solomon's portico were the apostles, more particularly, and the rest were the other disciples. They did not dare to join them, because this was a place of great confrontation, a place from which the authorities might take them and imprison them.

Daryl Bach suggests this particular reading. The apostles are held in high esteem by the people. They are men of character, and clearly men of power as well. The Lord is with them. And so they are recognized as approved by the Lord, by the rest of the people.

And as a result of their public ministry, and the many signs and wonders that they are performing, a great multitude of people convert. Considerable numbers of people, men and women, are joining the church, and the church is growing rapidly.

[6 : 15] This provokes the jealousy of the leaders. The apostles are gaining honour and influence among the crowd. It may only be a few months after Pentecost, but huge numbers have joined the church by this point, probably well over 10,000 people.

It's not surprising that the authorities will be jealous, seeing God's approval of the apostles, the great power that they are wielding, and the influence that they have with the crowd. They wish that they had the same thing, and because they do not, they strike out against the apostles.

The arrest and the subsequent trial of the apostles invites comparisons with the trial that they had after the healing of the lame man in chapter 4. Craig Keener identifies 17 parallels between the accounts of the two chapters.

The parallels invite us to consider not just the similarities, but also the developments in the second account. All of the apostles are now involved. Persecution is ramped up to a greater level.

They are now beaten, not just sent away with a threat. There is also a reference back to the earlier gag order that the apostles had broken. This is the first of a number of prison break stories in the narrative of Acts.

[7 : 21] While these stories can be connected to each other, they should also be connected back to the story of the resurrection. The authorities find an empty cell guarded by soldiers, and they also find an empty tomb.

And there's an angel involved. They enter the temple at daybreak, in the same way as Christ rose early in the morning. Much as Christ disarmed principalities and powers by his resurrection, so the authorities are proved powerless and disarmed by the way that God works with the disciples. Their gag order proves ineffectual. Their threats prove ineffectual. Their sanctions prove ineffectual. A large percentage of the population of the city of Jerusalem has now joined the apostles. And what's more, the apostles and the disciples are undermining their authority by claiming that they are responsible for killing the Messiah himself. There is something of a comedic character to all of this.

God is outwitting his enemies, and doing so in a way that proves them to be utterly powerless to resist. When they hear that the men that they threw into prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people, they send the captain with the officers, seeking to bring them back to stand trial.

[8 : 27] The men that the authorities send are afraid of bringing the apostles in by force. They know that they will be stoned by the people if they do so. The role played by the crowd in the gospel narratives and here in the book of Acts is a very important one.

In Acts, as in the gospels, the crowd is a great concern. The authorities cannot control the crowd. We read of crowds rioting, attempting to kill people, and authorities doing whatever they can to calm the crowds down.

The crowds play an important part in the story of the crucifixion. First of all, the authorities were wary of taking Christ during the feast because of all the crowds that would be present. Then the Jewish authorities whip up the crowd to demand Christ's crucifixion and Pilate, for his part, gives up on trying to bring about justice, giving in to the crowd because he knows that he is powerless to contain them.

The authorities then are sitting on top of a volcano that might blow up at any moment and this new movement is a hugely destabilising influence. Societies are built upon a fragile religious order in this time and the gospel really shakes things up, not just here in Jerusalem, but later on also in the Gentile world.

A lot of this is about maintaining political control in volatile situations and the authorities are very concerned about their own legitimacy. The apostles are accused of intending to bring the blood of Christ upon them, that is, to hold them guilty of crucifying an innocent man.

[9 : 50] In Matthew chapter 27 verses 24 to 25, we also encounter this expression. So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood.

See to it yourselves. And all the people answered, His blood be on us and on our children. The message of the apostles then is undermining the authority of the council and if they aren't careful, they won't be able to rule the people and they will lose many of the privileges that the Romans accord them.

And this isn't just some private teaching of these apostles. They filled all of Jerusalem with their teaching. It is quite likely that 10 to 20% of Jerusalem has converted by this point.

Yet Peter here presents God's gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel and Christ. It will occur as Jesus' blood comes upon them, not in the sense of guilt, but in the sense of covering and cleansing.

The message isn't designed to threaten the nation, nor even to overturn the authority of the rulers, but rather to secure the peace and restoration of Israel. The council remind the apostles that they had been charged not to teach in the name of Jesus.

[11 : 01] But Peter and the other apostles once again respond by saying that they must obey God rather than men. This is not willful rebellion. It's driven by obedience to the Lord. Peter and the apostles immediately respond by summarising the message of Christ.

The God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, raised Jesus, the Messiah that they crucified, and exalted him to his right hand as leader and saviour. In order that through him alone, Israel might receive the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, is the one in whom Israel's story comes to its divinely intended climax. It is easy to think of the early Christians over against Jews as a different movement entirely. But the difference that we're seeing here is a difference within Judaism itself, a fifth group alongside the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots. This is a new way of understanding Israel's story and its destination, a new way of understanding what it means to live out life as Israel,

a new way of thinking about the way that God is going to act and has acted within Israel's history to bring about his kingdom.

The apostles are the appointed witnesses to the Christ, and the Holy Spirit is bearing witness through signs and wonders that are accompanying their message. The council find themselves in a difficult position to rule in their case.

[12 : 18] While the majority may have been minded to use harsher measures, a Pharisee in the council, Gamaliel, stands up and gives a moderating position. Whether his moderating position comes from a more agnostic stance relative to the movement or a more cynical one is not entirely clear.

While the Sadducees seemingly dominated the council, the Pharisees were a minority that could counterbalance them in certain cases. Gamaliel, a Pharisee, was the former teacher of Paul. Later on in the book of Acts, Paul speaks of himself as follows. Gamaliel is also a character that is mentioned outside of the biblical text.

He is spoken of in the Mishnah. He was also a grandson of Hillel, one of the most famous Jewish teachers of the period. Gamaliel mentions people who had stood up and started movements. Thudas and Judas the Galilean had both started rebellions and both of them had come to nothing. Judas the Galilean had resisted the Roman census and tax at the beginning of the first century. However, the movement that he started had not entirely ended. It would end up leading to the great Jewish war of the later 60s AD and the downfall of Jerusalem that followed.

[13 : 36] Gamaliel advises the council not to resist the movement. They should rather wait and see what happens to it. If it is merely of man, it will come to nothing. But if it is of God, nothing will be able to withstand it.

Reading these words of Gamaliel about 2,000 years later, it might well seem that his implicit question has been decisively answered. The apostles are called back in before the council, beaten and then sent away with another gag order.

They leave the council and they rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Christ. We might think back to Christ's words in the Beatitudes in Luke chapter 6, verses 22 to 23.

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets.

Receiving dishonour for the name of Christ is actually a source of great honour. Despite the gag order, they continue to obey God rather than men. Every day in the temple and from house to house, they continue to teach and preach that the Christ, the anointed and awaited Davidic Messiah, is Jesus.

[14 : 49] A question to consider. Within the book of Acts, authorities respond to the mission of the early church in a number of different ways. What would be some of the considerations that would drive the authorities to different sorts of responses to the early church and their message?