

"The Gospel Triumphs in Adversity"

Acts 5:12-42

Ch. 5:12-42 concludes a longer section that began in Ch. 3. After the amazing events of Pentecost Sunday when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles who then miraculously proclaimed the good news about Jesus' death for us and resurrection, the new body of believers increase, mature and meet the needs of the community. It's an exciting time. So far, no opposition. But things are about to change.

In Ch. 3 Peter and John are making their way to the temple for a time of prayer and encounter a man crippled from birth who sits at the Eastern Gate each day begging so he can survive. Peter & John led by the Spirit heal the man and he joins them in the temple courts and gives witness to God's miraculous power. Because of the attention this causes, the religious leaders of Israel arrest Peter and John because the apostles were telling people Jesus was alive and is working through them to perform miracles. Being called before the Sanhedrin council, Peter & John are asked to explain this miracle. Peter boldly credits Jesus as the power behind the miracle, whom they had killed, yet He rose from the dead. The Sanhedrin convene and don't punish them but order them "to speak no longer to anyone in this Name." Peter responds,

Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. ²⁰ For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Instead of being intimidated, the apostles gather and praise God for having been persecuted for Jesus. They pray for more boldness to share Christ. Then we read about how the early church worked in unity together to make sure people's needs are met, a few on occasion even selling homes or land so others needs are met. Barnabas is mentioned by name. Yet Ch. 5 opens with a couple from the church named Ananias and Sapphira who do the same only lie about how much money they got for the land. Somehow, made aware of this lie through the Spirit, Peter confronts both of them separately, who maintain the lie and God puts them to death instantly when they refuse to repent. Something like this makes the news. And God empowers the apostles by enabling them to perform many miracles. We read in 5:12,

¹² The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

In spite of opposition (and more to come) we see the gospel triumphing in the midst of adversity. And it always has, even when it seems to have been defeated or almost silenced down through history. But the gospel succeeds and always will and we can be encouraged today when we experience setbacks and discouragement because the church and gospel are under attack. And they always will be until Jesus returns. Here in the rest of Ch.5 we can be encouraged if our attempts to share the gospel seem unsuccessful or that the world and Satan seem to have the upper hand at the moment. Why can we be encouraged to keep sharing Christ with the lost around us, even though

very few seem to respond? The rest of Ch. 5 gives us at least three reasons why we can be encouraged. The gospel triumphs in adversity ...

Because God Protects the Integrity of His Church **(5:12-16)**

This is why He struck down Ananias and Sapphira because the damage they could have done to the church would have been great had their lie gone undetected. God desires holiness and purity. This is what scared the people, which was accompanied by this surge in miracles. Outside of Pentecost itself, there had only been the one miracle; the healing of the crippled man in Ch.3. But God seems to be empowering the work of the gospel through the apostles as a way of affirming how He protects the integrity of His church. And He does it

By protecting it from external and internal attacks

In Ch. 4 they faced their first external threat when they were arrested and ordered to stop speaking in 'This Name'. Then in Ch. 5 there's an internal attack when two believers try to lie about something good, which they didn't need to. God stresses the holiness and purity that he wants to see by removing them permanently. This scares people as we can see. Some people were keeping their distance, while others were convinced and came to Christ through the apostles teaching and miracles. Clearly the apostles and others refused to be intimidated and continued to preach and teach and now, perform miracles.

Jesus' church is always under attack. Sometimes the attacks are from outside when we are threatened to stop communicating Christ because it offends people. And Jesus said it would. That His own message would bring division even in families because father might accept but mother may not. Or daughter/son accepts Christ and mom/dad don't. And it's hard, but it's His message not ours. And it is God's job to change hearts not ours.

Sometimes Satan uses internal attacks to divide God's people. And he does it through immaturity. It's our lack of spiritual growth and understanding that can cause division. The less we know about God and His Word the greater temptation there is to be misled and confused about God and about believer's intentions. Grow in the grace and knowledge. Grace always results in patient understanding. Listening so as to not pre-judge. Be informed before we making rash conclusions.

God protects the integrity of His church

With the powerful evidence of His presence (vv.13-16)

The sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira put the fear of God in people! But notice God affirms this by more miracles through the apostles themselves. And as we saw a few weeks with Jesus, miracles always provide the opportunity for the message. Miracles attract crowds. People are coming with their sick and demon possessed and we read that they healed all who were brought to them at this time. It's possible Peter's shadow healed people but most likely they held Peter and the others in such high esteem that they thought even if his shadow touches me I could be healed. Not unlike the woman with the bleeding issue who believed she only had to touch Jesus' prayer tassels to be healed. It's more about the people's faith than Peter's shadow.

God protects the integrity of His church through answers to prayer, souls saved, spiritual growth, healed relationships, needs powerfully met and sometimes miracles. When we trust God to

build His church we will see the evidence of His hand. Two passages I constantly remind myself of concerning God's work here (even if I'm not seeing it at the moment) are John 5:17

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

And Is. 55:9-11

⁹ *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,*

¹¹ *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

We can't always see or understand how God is working; we can trust that He is always working.

The miracles attract the attention of the religious leaders again, and so all the apostles are arrested in another attempt to silence the message. But the gospel advances in adversity

Because God Controls the Message of His Church **(5:17-32)**

The arrest is short lived and is somewhat comical in that the guards successfully guard an empty jail and in the morning the Sanhedrin gathers to try the apostles who can't be found. And even when they are, they come agreeably to the court. Notice no one asks them how they got out! The Sadducees didn't believe in angels so it wasn't worth telling.

But the point God was making at this time was,

His Word cannot be chained (vv.17-26; 2 Tim. 2:8-10)

When the apostles are freed by the angel notice he gives them a command from God:

Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

'This new life' means when we place our faith and trust in Jesus He gives us a new life. We are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) expected to throw off the old way of life and put on the new life in Christ, like a change of clothes (Eph. 4:20-24). The messengers of God may be chained occasionally but the Word can't be chained. An imprisoned Paul wrote near the end of his life to Timothy,

⁸ *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*

The apostles are reminded by the Sanhedrin of their order not to preach 'in this name'.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." ²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather

than men! ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

It is ironic that the religious leaders accused the apostles of making them guilty of Jesus’ death when they said so themselves before Pilate in Matt. 27:24

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” ²⁵ All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

But when we’re directly commanded by sinful people not to speak about Jesus, God gives us the authority to disobey and like the disciples we need to

Refuse to be silenced about Jesus (vv.27-32)

This was a direct command by people who thought they had authority over the disciples. That’s why Jesus prefaced the great commission in Matt. 28:19-20 when He told us to go and make disciples of all nations with ‘*All authority under heaven has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples ...*’

This might mean we have to find more creative ways to communicate the gospel. It doesn’t mean we do it arrogantly. The apostles defend their right to share Jesus based on God’s authority and why they need to; because in the gospel God is making forgiveness of sins possible through repentance. So even here they tried one more time to share the gospel with the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin were ‘cut to the heart’ [literally] and they were so angry they wanted to kill the apostles because they were making them look bad. They were jealous that the crowds were following them. They were envious that people were listening to uneducated fishermen rather than educated rich guys. They had controlled religion for so long, they convinced themselves they were God’s spokespersons.

God intervenes at this point through an unbeliever, Gamaliel, a famous Jewish Rabbi under whom Saul/Paul trained as a Pharisee. God’s using Gamaliel that the gospel triumphs in adversity shows us

God is Sovereign over the Opponents of His Church **(5:33-42)**

Gamaliel uses calm and history as way to bring peace to a heated moment. He mentions two people from Israel’s past who tried to lead a rebellion and had a following but when they were put to death the movement died. So Gamaliel reminds us that

All Man-made movements eventually fail (vv.33-38)

“If their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail”. Sometimes evil rules for a long time. This time the apostles would be released from jail. But in Ch. 7 Stephen will be stoned to death. In Ch. 12 James will be put to death for the gospel. Peter himself would eventually be martyred for the gospel. All the apostles died for the gospel. John was left to die on the Island of Patmos but that was after he miraculously survived being dropped in a vat of hot oil, according to tradition.

Ironically, Gamaliel spoke as if he (wrongly) believed that their movement was of God. But by 70 AD with the destruction of the temple. The Sanhedrin and the Pharisees disappeared. So, he was right. Their movement eventually failed. We have to remember these things when we're in the middle of adversity for the gospel.

But God reminds us, using Gamaliel, that ...

Every God-led movement ultimately succeeds (v.39)

But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Another great truth to remember when the gospel is being opposed. It can't be stopped. History shows that the gospel flourishes in persecution. Individual believers die (some are murdered) but the Word carries on through others. Churches may disappear or be destroyed but the universal body of Christ continues. We read in Revelation 19 and Zech. 14 that the entire world will one day be gathered in Jerusalem to destroy once and for all every person of God, but Jesus returns and deals with every opponent of God. Rev. 20 us reminds that every person will one day stand before God, many of whom will be separated from Him and us forever. But we live on with God in the New Jerusalem.

The disciples are released but not after they are flogged. Most likely 39 lashes, a horrific ordeal. Yet they praise God because they were counted worthy for suffering disgrace – an oxymoron from a human perspective. So we are to

Continue God's work even through adversity (vv.40-42)

⁴² *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*

What a great encouragement for all of God's people for all ages. Hang in there. A victory is coming. What you're doing will make an eternal difference. The enemy may seem to have the upper hand temporarily but remember the end of the Bible. Jesus returns victoriously putting an end once and for all to all opposition.

^{1 Cor. 15:58} *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

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at olivet@rideau.net