

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 5. We're going to begin in verse 17 as we continue together our journey through this good report of the early church.

The book of Acts is the second of two volumes that Luke wrote about the ministry of Jesus that began in the gospel of Luke. He took Jesus' early ministry and took it all the way through the resurrection, and then this book was written afterwards to really show the birth and the growth of the early church. There's about thirty years of history found in these pages. It starts with 120 or so disciples who were saved on Easter evening as Jesus breathed on them His Spirit, opened their understanding to understand the Scriptures. But then He told them to "wait here until you receive power from on high." He made the promise of sending the Holy Spirit to them, upon their lives, a powerful way. And really this is the book that reports how a bunch of ordinary people could be used extraordinarily by the Lord, just by the empowering of His Holy Spirit.

We looked in chapter 1 at the ascension of Jesus; in chapter 2 at Peter being the first one that was allowed to preach on Pentecost, a 45-second message, maybe (if you can read it by yourself) - three thousand people were saved. And then in chapters 3 and 4, we get this detailed accounting of a man that was healed, a lame man. He was over forty years old. He had sat begging at the Temple for many years. There's one of the gates there, the Beautiful Gate. And everyone knew him to have sat there. We mentioned to you that Jesus would have walked by him a lot, and so would a lot of others who went to pray three times a day at the Temple. So 3:00 in the afternoon - prayers, Peter and John heading in to pray - and the Lord just speaks by His Spirit to Peter, and he ministers to this man, and God heals him, which allows him to just cause a big commotion (as you might imagine), running around, leaping, praising the Lord. Couldn't keep him quiet. Hadn't ever walked. He was over forty, and the crowds drew together, and Peter got a chance to preach his second sermon, and he preached Jesus at the Porch of Solomon (it was called) there in the Temple. So Peter got to give another message. We mentioned to you there're quite a few sermons recorded in the book of Acts. I think they're worth studying because they all have kind of common elements, and you get to see how God used His Word to bring people to Himself. Most every sermon Peter preached (Paul and others) has some components to it that are always the same - the

sinfulness of man always at the forefront, the need for repentance is always there, Jesus as being the only hope for man is always presented, the death and resurrection of the Lord, and then the outpouring of God's Spirit. So Peter preached at this much smaller crowd, certainly. But we are told that, even though he was interrupted and arrested as he was preaching, the number in the church now grew to five thousand men plus women and children. The religious men - the Sanhedrin, the overseers - were up in arms about this powerful kind of influence that was invading their dominion, their power place, if you will. And, as a result, they really didn't know what to do with Peter and John. They arrested them. They kept them overnight because it was already evening. They brought them out in the morning and basically just threatened for persecution and for difficulty if this continued. Peter honestly said, "We can't listen to you. We have to listen to the Lord. He called us to preach to every man. But you decide what you want to do with us." And then they kind of let them go. And so it was hard to discipline them too much with a man that's healed standing next to them, and everyone knew who he was. So, after the arrest, after being let go, Peter and John go back to the flock, to the church, to friendly confines. They get together on their knees and pray, not for deliverance from the oppressors but just boldness in the face of them. And God pours out His Spirit again upon this group. The Bible tells us that the place where they were gathered was shaken, and God gave them His power, and the ministry continued, as we'll see tonight. Chapter 4 ends, if you will, with the telling of the love in the body - one guy named Barnabas who became an example, really, of those giving of themselves for the needs of ministering to others.

Well, then, in chapter 5 (and I don't know if I can do this every week until we get to chapter 28), we see the enemy attacking for the first time within the church. Notice the word "but" in verse 1 of chapter 5, "but" as all these things were going on. But there was this work in the church. And there was a couple in the church that wanted to have the same kind of honor as Barnabas had been given by the church for his selflessness. They came pretending to give something that they hadn't. They both dropped dead in the midst of a church service. It would put the fear of God, I think, in most of the folks, and it did as well. But God dealt with these folks with death on the doorstep immediately. The young church took it seriously. God doesn't deal with us like that most of the time. And aren't we thankful! But, at the same time, He'd made an impression that was hard to miss. "Blessed subtraction." And what we'd been adding to the church, we now will soon begin to read that God begins to multiply the church as this purity continues.

So we want to pick up the story tonight in verse 17, which is really at the end of that story of Ananias and Sapphira. Verse 12 and down through verse 16 is the ongoing ministry that the Lord continued to do with the disciples, and the healings and the salvations increasing (verse 14 and all), multitudes coming, people coming from outside Jerusalem now to the city to just have the Lord touch their lives. And tonight we really go back to finish what we read in chapter 4, the threat from the Sanhedrin. "You keep this up, things are going to get worse." And they did keep it up - right here, verses 12 through 16. And tonight we get the fallout, the council advice from one man out of the seventy who seemed to have some insight, and then just the continuing opposition that came, not from within now but from without as the ministry of the early church began to thrive. The evangelism numbers continued to grow, but the work was done in the face of an enemy that just is relentless. He just won't quit. You've probably noticed that before. Who does God use? And we've been bringing that question up a lot in the book of Acts. Those who will stand fast in the Lord, facing the opposition. God will use you if you're willing to stand fast. And that's certainly the lesson we learn tonight.

So let's look at verse 17. "Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.'" So, some time obviously has passed from chapter 4 to chapter 5. There aren't a lot of time stamps, so we can't say three months, six months. We don't know. But we do know that they are attached to the warnings that were found in chapter 4. And so there was an escalation, if you will, of fruit as the Lord continued to work and, as a result, Caiaphas and his family had had enough. "Filled with indignation." The word "zealous" means not zeal but envy or jealousy. So these men, these religious men, were very jealous that the church was having such an influence, and they were worried about their loss of control and power. You might remember reading that back in chapter 2. It was still their main concern. What you don't find amongst these religious men that were opposing the work of God through this church is any kind of rejoicing in the fact people are being delivered from sin or that lives are being touched or that the lame can walk. You would think at some point somebody would stand up and go, "Yes! We're getting through somehow!" But that isn't it. There's no hatred like religious hatred, is there, and it is put on full display in this generation and, for that matter, in every generation.

Notice (in verse 17) that we're told again that most of these rulers were Sadducees. I've said it before, but if you're new, they don't believe in life after death. That's why they were "sad, you see." And that's a good way to remember. They were different than the Pharisees. This life was all that you knew. This is all that you had. So they spiritually denied life after death, if you will. They had a problem, though. They saw the fruit of what these believers believed. They saw the power of God in these believers' lives. But rather than saying, "Maybe we're wrong," they just stick to this idea of shutting them down. Right? "We don't want people to listen or to follow them."

We sometimes see it, even in southern California - jealousy among churches. If God blesses a body, somebody else gets mad, and they start to downplay his work as if somehow maybe that's not happening to them. I am totally committed to biblically the idea that you should be in a local fellowship where people know you, where you are known, where you serve, where you commit yourself to the people there, that you love them, that you allow God to use you through their lives and yours, that you solve your differences without running off. On the other hand, it is foolish to think somehow that we're the only church in town. God works in a lot of places, and I want to be able to rejoice when I hear that work of God in other places. It's exciting to hear, whether it's next door or down the street or across town. We actually had a fellow come to our church a couple of years ago, and he said, "I asked a guy about your church, and he said, 'Oh, them pastors over there didn't graduate from seminary. They'll never last.'" And I thought maybe he's a prophet. I don't know. But it's good to be encouraged.

But here's the negative side. Here're religious people who are hanging on to their power base through their own strength. They don't have a gospel. There's no God that they know. There's no relationship with God. They've got a lot of ritual. And they have a lot of pride and a lot of jealousy, as we read here, and they want to put an end to these upstart bunch of Jesus-preaching Christians, warning them to knock it off. They'd already brought them in once. They did one of these in their face. It hadn't gone at all. In fact, the wheels were coming off. And so they now kind of ratchet up their pressure, if you will. Notice they were angry, verse 17. They had limited power, but they ignored God's power which had been set on display. And it does appear, the way at least that it was written in verse 18, that it isn't just Peter and John that are arrested here (the way that the words are used in Greek). It sounds like maybe all of the disciples, collectively, were dragged into this hearing. So we will read in verse 29 here, in a little bit, as we try to go to the

end of the chapter, that Peter and the other apostles answered together, and it's a plural there as well. So it does appear like maybe it wasn't just Peter and John.

But what we are told is that God had other ideas. He didn't want His folks in jail, so he sent an angel to lead kind of a divinely-led prison break. It got them out of prison, left the doors locked and the guards unaware that these folks were gone. So you think there was trouble before, there's certainly going to be trouble now. Notice what the angel says to these men as he breaks them out of jail. "Go and stand and speak." Go where? "Go and stand in the exact same place you were just arrested. Go back to the point of trouble, to the scene of the crime, to the place that you probably don't want to go back to, to the place that was as hard as could be. Go back there." How do you stop men like this, whose God is able to remove every obstacle set against them? And God uses those that will speak His Word, confidently so, and they're driven by a mandate. Right? In other words, the Lord wants us to go stand and speak. That's what God wants us to do. And if you're convinced where God wants you to be, you can't be stopped because you're serving someone other than yourself.

"Go tell them," verse 20, "all of the words of this life." Not just of a future life. Isn't that interesting? But it's a present-tense word, "this life." The moment you give your life to Jesus, you have eternal life. Don't you? So often we think of eternal life in terms of length - forever. But the term "eternal life," "*aionios*," is also a word that means quality of life. Your life has a different quality than it did before you got saved. You have an eternal hope, you have a purpose, you have a God that you love, that loves you. He's alive. He can actively move in your life. So the angel refers to Christianity as "this life." Are you a Christian? Do you have "this life"? Are you walking in the way of the Lord? And that's the way it was presented to them. You believe in Jesus, you receive Him into your heart, you look to Him for direction, He becomes your strength. That's no longer a religious position. Religious people have positions like that. This is a life that you have, right? A relationship. "This is life eternal," Jesus said in John 17:3, "that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). That's what He said. So if you know the Lord, you have a different life. It's an eternal life. Dying, at this point, moves you closer to the Lord but doesn't change your status. It changes your position, doesn't change your status. You still have eternal life. And so this is the word from the angels, "Go and share the words of this life." And I like the fact that you and I are called to go share the gospel with others, but you should know that's

more than your opinion - what you're sharing. Right? You didn't come up with this. This isn't just your persuasion. This is the way of life God has set forth and provided for all men through His Son. So He busts them out of jail. He sets them free - not to just be free to run around but to continue to serve Him. "Go stand and speak the words that I've given to you. Go and do that. Do it even now."

Well then, beginning in verse 21 and then moving through about verse 25, Luke gives us one of these two screen locations where one screen plays a scene from one place, and the other screen shows a view from another. And so we get a picture of the guys going and standing in the Temple area, and then we get a picture of the city council meeting over here, but it's the Jewish Sanhedrin that is meeting. And we kind of just bounce back and forth - get to watch both sides. Verse 21 says this, "And when they heard that," (the disciples whom the Lord had sprung from prison) "they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought." There's your screens - there's the guys preachin' in the morning and here's calling an early meeting with every big shot (who can be a big shot) to talk about what they're going to do with the prisoners. "What are we gonna do?" One camera is mounted in the Temple area, the other one mounted in the Senate floor, if you will. And notice that they called together all of the council. The way it reads, really, in verse 21, the full council. Everyone was asked to be there. This was going to be a big day. They're going to discuss how to get rid of these Christians. A lot of them were Sadducees, at least the rulers were, but a lot of them were Pharisees as well. These were Christians (that they would call a little later in the book of Acts) - they were the ones who walked in "the Way" (Acts 24:14), the way of the Lord, distinctly put.

So verse 21 we get the picture, like I said, of the Temple. I want you to notice that the Lord didn't spring the disciples to flee but to serve. And I love the fact that it reads (in verse 21), "And when they heard that, they entered the temple." It's kind of like when God has your heart, and you know what He wants, the quicker you can do what He asks, the better. Right? They're marked by this willingness to immediately go do what God says. So they show up obediently at the Temple at the crack of dawn. They might have argued with the Lord, "Maybe that's not a good place for us to hang out right now, the first place they're going to look. Word's going to get back, and they're pretty close to where we're meeting. If we could just go down the block and up the street and maybe hide out for a few days until

things calm down, that would be great." I underlined in my Bible, when they heard that, they entered the temple. They went early, they went to do what God said, they put themselves where the Lord wanted them to be. They're not running. And I would say to you - when God speaks to you, whether you're praying or when you're sitting in church and you're opening the Bible, and God points something out to you, obey it as quickly as you can. It's wise. It's wise to be responsive rather than to do so eventually, "Oh, I'll get to it." I think I read somewhere that the largest nation on the planet earth was procrastination. (Laughing) Just put it off. Right? In fact, I read about an inventor - and I forget his name, maybe it'll come to me, I'll tell you an hour from now - who had invented ten or fifteen inventions, and as he was being interviewed by someone, "How do you come up with all these things?" one of the things he said in the interview was, "Every time I release a new invention, somebody said, 'Oh, I thought of that years ago.'" And he said, "My blessing is people think about it, and they do nothing with it." And I thought that's exactly the way we so often go. God blesses doers. Not dreamers. Get goin', man! "Oh, I feel like the Lord's speakin'." Well, go! Then go do it! "Well, I'm waitin' on stuff." What stuff are you waiting on?!

Verse 21, they got busted out of prison. They were set free. The Lord said, "Go stand in the Temple," and when they heard that, they went and stood in the Temple. They went to do what God had said. The early church were the doers. Right? So early they came - back to serve the Lord, back to where they were arrested, back to the place that they were probably going to be found out, where they knew the risks. It's interesting. In our politically-correct society, sometimes we're not willing to stand up for the Bible. Right? We kind of buckle under the pressure. We don't want to be offensive. But you don't want to allow yourself to refuse to honor the Lord when push comes to shove either. And these saints were willing to do the work.

In the other picture, on the other screen, it's a funny picture to me. You see the meeting room filling up with stuffed shirts. They've got their robes on. Maybe there're some hats. And they're lookin' pretty spiritual for that time of the morning. They got an email, and they came runnin'. Right? There was a meeting. Small talk. Opinions. Until Caiaphas comes up, and he raps the gavel. He gets everybody's attention. He goes, "Oh, go get the prisoners! We gotta deal with these guys." And soon the guards run off, and they come back with some weird looks. (Pastor Jack is whistling) "What's wrong?"

Verse 22, "But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, 'Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!' " I love it. It seems that the birds have flown the coop, and none of the guards know a thing. Verse 24, "Now when the high priest," (Caiaphas) "the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be." ("What in the world's going on? When is this going to end?") Look, the salvation of people's lives, the healing of the sick, the reports to the crowds, were becoming the talk of the town. It won't be long before they begin to say to the church, "These are the men that have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). That's how they had the impression of the church. It's not really the impression the world has of us today, is it? But God, use us. May we be the ones that are known for that. Their concern - these religious folks - was, "How are we going to stop this train called the church of God? How are we going to reel this in and back this up and get back to having all of our power ourselves? How are we going to put an end to this?" And even with the whole council present, the previous warnings and threats made hadn't made anything better. For them, it had made it increasingly worse. So now it looked like they walked out of prison. Who's in on this? And you want to say to these guys, "Could one of you guys please wake up and admit you need Jesus, and get on your knees and turn away from your wicked religious life?" But they don't. They'd made up their minds. They don't want to be confused with the obvious evidence. If they're going to go down in defeat, they're going to go down boxing. Which is really dumb because you're arms are really way too short to box with God.

But I love verse 25. "So one came and told them, saying, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!' " I think that's a touch of satire. I think the Lord has a good sense of humor. "The ones you arrested are preaching in the Temple again." Oh, that's got to be pretty embarrassing to the guy with the hat and the coat. Right? And the gavel in his hand. "Out doing what we told them not to? At our place of worship? The place that we run, that is our home? Well, we'll show them. You go get them and bring them here." And I imagine there was this saving-face shifting blame. You can just imagine how this went. Right? But here's how the Lord worked.

Verse 26 tells us, "Then the captain went with the officers and brought them" (these disciples, 'them' again more than two) "without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned." That's how committed the people were to

hearing. "And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, 'Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!' " So the guards go to delicately arrest men that are very popular still, at least in the culture. The people could easily have turned on them. They didn't like them much. They didn't have much of a good relationship with them. So there's no aggressive arrest here, no show of force. The captain, I think, went himself - didn't just send his men. It does sound like the apostles just give up peaceably; they're not stirring up the crowds. But notice that when they gather them together and set them before the high priest, out of his mouth comes these words of anger and embarrassment and frustration, besides a guilty conscience. If you were the high priest, would you not have first said, "How did you get out of jail?" I think that would have been the first question out of my mouth. "Who let you out? Who's the rat? Who do we take out?" He didn't and wasn't concerned about that. He was concerned about his own standing before his own people. "Didn't I tell you to knock it off? Didn't I bring you in here? Didn't I give you a chance?" It was all about him, wasn't it? The accusations show what the Holy Spirit had been doing according to one enemy of the gospel. Here's what the enemies of God were seeing in the disciples and in the church. "You're filling Jerusalem with the doctrines of Jesus and the blood that He shed. That's your reputation, and that was your reputation amongst your enemies." Wouldn't it be good if people looked at you and went, "We don't like those people. You know, all they do is talk about Jesus and how that you can go to heaven and how you can't go without Him." Rather than, "That guy's an idiot." You don't want to hear that. But if they're offended by your message, then so be it. So, "Didn't we pass a law last time about preaching in His name, that you so much as preach in His name again, we were going to have to deal with you? And now you've not just preached in His name, everyone has heard about it." Which is kind of like your enemies admitting you're doing a good job. "Well thank you very much. I'm glad the whole city has heard. We thought we still had a couple places to go. Despite your orders, the whole city is now talking about the doctrines of Jesus - salvation by grace, faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord. He's the promised Messiah. He's the Savior. Everyone's hearing that!" I would hope we could say everyone's hearing that in our circle. It's quite an admission from an enemy of the cross, isn't it? Wouldn't it be cool if we could go to the deli you go to, and we mention your name, and then people say, "They're always in here sharing their faith"? Or you go to the bank or to the gym or to the park or at recess at school or to the market. In Jerusalem, every chariot Uber driver was talkin' about Jesus. Everyone had an opinion. Someone

knew somebody that was already saved, that the family had been touched. There was revival in the land. It's a glorious indictment, I think, verse 28. What a glorious indictment! Oh, that we would have that kind of reputation in our city and the people around us. Could you be accused of this? Or are you accused of muttering and a sharp tongue or your political opinion or your quick wit, instead of the testimony of, "This is the way of life that you can find in Christ"? May the city be filled with that. "You intend to bring this Man's blood upon us!" You want to write in the margin, "Well, if the shoe fits....." In reality, we're all guilty. Right? Jesus died for our sins, not for your sins. But our sins. Every one of us. We've all fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). We've all as sheep gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). It was God's will that Jesus die for us, and both messages of Peter (to this point) point to that. That didn't absolve them from plotting and lying and conniving to have him killed. In fact, do you remember what they said in Matthew 27 when Pilate said, "What am I supposed to do with Jesus? I want to be innocent of this Man's blood"? And then they said, "May His blood be upon us and upon our children" (verse 25). Now they weren't asking for His forgiveness in terms of blood. They were asking for culpability. "All right. We'll be responsible for His death. We'll take the responsibility." And now they say, "Well, you want to bring this guy's death and lay it at our feet." "Well, that's exactly what you asked for several months ago." Now they wanted to change their tune. The apostles wanted the blood of Jesus upon them too; but not upon their heads for guilt, but upon their hearts for forgiveness. That's what they were preaching - a forgiveness that God would bring. This guy was only interested in his appearance before others. He didn't want to be made a fool of. He's not concerned with how they got out of prison, doesn't want to talk about that. He doesn't want to talk about how the lame can walk, doesn't want to hear the gospel. He just wants to look good when the meeting's over and have people walk out thinking he's quite a guy.

Well, Peter's response and the other apostles speaking with him is (because we don't know - they must have all agreed at least), verse 29, " 'We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.' When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them." Again, plural. So, I love Peter because he sees this as another opportunity to glorify Jesus. But it was going to cost him, and I think he knew it. I mean, he's been here before. He's been here when Jesus was killed, he was here just maybe weeks or

months earlier (back in chapters 3 and 4). But he's not concerned with his well-being at this point, which is something unusual for Peter who's always concerned for Peter. He just wants to faithfully represent the Lord. He doesn't want to pass on a chance to be able to minister. And so he says very boldly, verse 29, "I'll tell you what. We can only obey God." In fact, the word "ought" is an imperative in Greek, and you can translate it to the word "must" because it's an imperative. "We must obey God rather than man. At this point, there's really nothing that we can do." And he gives them the exact same answer that he gave them back in chapter 4:19-20 where they said, "Don't do it anymore," and he goes, "Well, you'll have to figure out if that's right or not, but we have to obey God."

So Peter lays out why they took the course of civil disobedience, and I think if you were with us a couple of weeks ago, we said to you that civil disobedience in the Bible is not found very often. And the reason is God wants you to submit to those over you whether they're fair or not. Whether the boss is on your side, whether he's an honest guy, you've just go to, as unto the Lord, be that witness. If you're a slave, be the best kind of slave. If you're a slave owner, at that point, the Lord said, "Just be kind and merciful. Represent the Lord." So it was God's will that we, as God's people, submit ourselves to those who God has placed over us. However, there are times when you just can't do that, and this is one of those times. And I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago - but I'll reiterate them all in one minute here - it is always an individual choice to personal biblical convictions when you disobey in a civil way. In other words, you don't ever find a group getting together and saying, "As a point of our political leverage, we're all going to disobey God." What you do find is individuals walking with God who come to the determination what they're being asked to do they cannot, in good conscience, do before God. When civil disobedience is followed by an individual in the Bible, it is always undertaken with humility. By that I mean they go to the people that they have disobeyed, or that they have to answer to, and they explain in level language, without lots of emotion or threats, "This is why I can't do what you've asked me to do." And thirdly, they are willing to pay the consequences to have exercised that responsibility to obey the Lord. And we mentioned a couple weeks ago that when you are ordered to disobey God (in other words, God clearly says, "Do this," and you are clearly being told you cannot), or when you are forced to do something that God says you should never do, those are the two instances that you'll find civil disobedience laid out in the Bible. Otherwise, you're to submit even if it's not fair or the people are not godly or there're a lot of unethical things around you. You just have to let God work it out. But if you personally can't cross that line - as

Peter says, "It's up to you to think about what you want, but this is the line that God has set for me. He said we must go preach, so we're gonna preach. You can give us any rule we want. We'll suffer the consequences as we go forward. But we're not going to be able to do it." So Peter and the boys very clearly profess, kind of like those three men in the book of Daniel (Daniel 3). "We have to obey God, and whether we get delivered or not, whether we die or not, whether You deliver us or not, it doesn't matter. We have to do what God says." I think sometimes Christians see obeying God as an option, one option. "I could obey the Lord or I could not." To the believers in the 1st century, in the young church, God's authority was the authority in their lives. How do you stop men who have God as the authority? You don't. Right? They stand facing the same kind of opposition we do. From the materialists, they were getting it. From the religious humanists, they were getting it. They held the power. The disciples did not. They were the minority. They were weak in that regard, as far as politically. They just said, "We can only obey God, and it might very well cost us our lives" because there're plenty of folks around there, and all you have to do is jump ahead to chapter 7 where Stephen preaches one sermon, and they stone him to death. This was volatile. This was very dangerous. This wasn't an argument at Starbucks. This was the powers that be and a young church standing before them, seeking to share their heart. Very different.

So Peter just took the stand, and he explained himself. Notice what he says here in verse 30, "The God of our fathers has raised up Jesus. You murdered him. God exalted Him. He's brought forgiveness and repentance." And, verse 32, "We saw that. We saw Him dead, we saw Him alive. We know and have now the Holy Spirit, and God has given Him to us because we're walking with Him." It is, like I said, very rare in the Bible you find disobedience like this. But Peter adds the explanation, and he says, "The Father in heaven raised up His Son who you killed by crucifixion. And now He sits at the right hand of the Father. He's the Lord. He's the Savior. He's reaching out to us. We're reaching out to our nation. He offers forgiveness to anyone who will look to Him and repent. And if you do, you'll be given the Holy Spirit as well." Peter preached to a guy that's threatening to kill him. Time was running out. In fact, I think I told you (as we began to overview the book of Acts when we first started) that much of the first seven or eight chapters has to do with God's reaching out to Israel. But then the change happens fairly quickly when Saul goes on the warpath, and then the church runs everywhere, and they go to carry the gospel everywhere, and pretty soon it's the Gentiles that hear it. So Stephen will be killed for preaching the good news in a little while now. But notice

verse 32, "We're witnesses of this. We saw Him die. We saw Him rise. We believe in Him. He's forgiven us our sins, and we're His witnesses." The word is "*martyras*," witness. We get the word "martyr" from it, but unfortunately not the way we like to use it. A martyr, in the Bible, is not someone who dies for their faith but someone who dies to themselves to live out their faith. It's someone who dies to themselves and begins to live to serve the Lord. So, the whole senate is sitting there and listening. And, by the way, one of the people sitting in this meeting and listening is Saul of Tarsus - where the seeds are being planted in this man's heart.

Verse 33 is very interesting. "When they heard this," (they repented of their sins and fell on their faces. No!) "they were furious and plotted to kill them." Right? Four-sentence gospel presentation. That's all that Peter laid out for them. Four sentences, if you read it, and it cut them to their heart. Because when the Holy Spirit is at work, men will either embrace the truth or seek to destroy the messenger. It's always the same. You either respond or you seek to eliminate the irritant. Wherever Paul preached (when we get through to where Paul is preaching), there was either a revival or a riot, sometimes both. But the responses are very violent. One way or the other, the gospel message moves people's hearts, and hopefully it moves them to the Lord. So here're the cries in the crowd of religious people. It's run by a bunch of religious guys, and the whispers in the back rows are, "How do we kill these guys? How do we kill them? There're already thousands of people in town that are believers. They seem to follow everywhere they go. We can't afford a riot. Rome'll come down on our heads. We've just got to eliminate this. We've got to stop this now! What do we do? Everyone, let's just kill 'em!"

Well in the group, verse 34, "Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee" (not a Sadducee, believed in the Bible) "named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while." So he asked them to step outside. Gamaliel was a Pharisee that was known in his day as one of the greatest teachers in Israel. In fact, this was, and would be, Paul's teacher. We have a quote from Gamaliel in secular history that says that he, as Paul's teacher, had only one problem with Paul and that was that he couldn't keep him in books enough. He couldn't find enough books for him to read. I think you might remember that Paul's last letter (2 Timothy) in chapter 4:13, he wrote to Timothy and said, "Bring me my books." He was a reader. He was an avid kind of studious guy. But anyway, this is the guy that Paul was led to. He was, at

this point, a Christ rejecter. We don't know if he came around under Paul's ministry or not, but we do know that he was very unlike the rest in the sense that he wasn't so aggravated by his emotions or religious fervor. He'd been around a long time. He didn't share their ideals. He was more pragmatic, if you will, than their council was. And he asked the disciples to stand outside so he could challenge the body politic. He wants to challenge the group, if you will.

So here's what we read in verse 35. "And he said to them: 'Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God.' " Pretty smart counsel, don't you think? He no doubt felt, and it kind of bears out, but he believed - being on this wicked bunch of people's council - that this was just another movement of men, just another bunch of people that got kind of worked up. But he left open the possibility (in the last verse) that maybe this was far more than that. And I think he looked at this man that was unable to walk, and he couldn't explain it. So he was willing to at least entertain the idea that God was behind this moving in the church amongst the saints. He didn't, I don't think, buy it internally yet, but he was pragmatic enough to say, "Well, maybe that's what's happening. Our best policy, men, all seventy of you, is to just stand by and watch what goes on. We've had two examples in recent times of guys who moved people, only to die and their move went with them - a guy who boasted that he was somebody, another guy who tried to get people to follow him. Both of them failed. Their charisma was buried with them. So why don't we be wise how we handle this?" For one thing, they were controlled by the Romans. So, if they cause too much trouble, here come the Romans. And then everyone pays. "But if this is God we're fighting, then there's nothing we can do. We're fighting a losing battle." Don't you like that the enemies of God see it that way? I hope you and I see it just that way as well. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) If the Lord is in it, who can stop it? Like I said, it's such a hopeful comment that I hope that Gamaliel, who had such a close relationship with Paul, will watch and hear and see what God is doing and eventually come around. I don't know that he did. We don't have any evidence of it otherwise. But I like the fact that the work of

God is dependent only upon God. Right? If God's in this, you're going to fight God and lose. Whereas the movements of men were always dependent upon some individual personality. And I think there's a great difference there.

The church grows - not because of dynamic preachers or of loud saints - because God's involved, and His Word goes out. Gamaliel was right. And if you believe that if God's involved, things will go fine, then you don't strive to make things happen. You just let God make things happen. I've learned over the years as a pastor that, when people come with ideas about potential new ministries - and folks have a heart to do things, and a lot of times they'll come and they want to present them to you; and you want to say, "Is this the Lord who is doing this, or is this just a guy that has a good heart but he's trying to make something happen?" How do you decide that? And I think that the way you decide most of that stuff is you wait a while. Time will tell. Right? If the fruit comes, if longevity is increased, if God is glorified (not the individual), if there's no striving but just a trusting in God, then you can conclude this is the Lord's work. But I learned from Gamaliel not to be too critical of other people's ministries too quickly unless there are doctrinal issues. I think doctrinal issues, you don't have to wait around because they're right and wrong, they're black and white. But when it comes to people and, "I don't really like what he's saying or how he's doing," you don't know what God's doing. Better just to wait upon the Lord, and God will show you what to do. Well, that was his counsel, "Bring the guys back in."

Verse 40, "And they agreed with him," ("Yeah, you're right, Gamaliel, good advice.") "and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them." (Wait a minute! You just agreed with him!) "They commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." The council listened to the famous Gamaliel's advice, sort of, but they were still frustrated with the apostles. And I don't doubt being good Jews, so to speak (in the Old Testament sense), they went to Deuteronomy 25, and they said, "Well, this guy's claiming to be something that he's not. So let's beat them, and so then they'll be quiet." And Deuteronomy 25:3 talked about getting forty stripes minus one - that's what you could be beaten with. And these guys could really have been beaten. This is the old axiom, "If you can't beat 'em," no, "If you can't join 'em, beat 'em." That was funny, but I messed it up. (Laughing) It's terrible when you can't tell a good joke. I'm tellin' you. So can you imagine? Now you're the apostles. Everything's going so well. A couple people drop dead at the church. Now you're gettin' arrested and beat up, and God busted you out of jail so

you could get beat up. "Lord, why if You bring us out here, we're just gonna get beat up!" And yet that's exactly what happened. That's exactly what took place.

But far from being discouraged, we read in verse 41, "So they departed from the presence of the council," (and this is very strange) "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." That's an amazing statement, isn't it? Bodies, lacerated backs, bloodied, moving slower than they had in the morning, faces that now hide the pain through a smile. How do you stop people like this? They leave gettin' beat up, goin', "Thanks, Lord. We just wanted to stand where You stood. We're so proud of being able to identify with You, even in Your suffering." We all want to identify in the Lord when He's powerful, but in His death not so much. So, this kind of persecution you and I rarely see in America. You can be alienated by people. They can speak to you with condescension. They can even reject you. It's a pretty small price to pay. Right? I remember back in the late 70's, Bishop Festo in Uganda spoke at the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum, who was a really strong believer who was assassinated (actually killed) for his faith. But one of the last things this man says was, "Without the church bleeding, they'll never be blessed." Now, we don't have much experience with that. But notice that these disciples, these apostles, walk away from persecution by singing praises. "Lord, we're so happy to be identified with You." I think so often we complain about that. "Oh, everyone gets a break but the Christian. Everyone but the believer gets a fair shake." Hey, we're just standing where Jesus stood. "If they hated Me, be sure they're going to hate you" (John 15:18). If you read church history, Jesus pays the ultimate price. We're asked to give a little. In the next three hundred years - from the end of the book of Luke, let's say, forward in history - almost six and a half million believers are killed so that the next generation can have the gospel. Six and a half million people put to death by Rome just so that the Word could be passed on. There was no easy way to live your life as a Christian in these days. You and I have it far easier. What we have a harder time with, because it's easy, is finding the same level of commitment - because it's so easy to slack off and complain about, "Oh, Lord, I didn't get what I wanted for Christmas. I thought You loved me." (Pastor Jack says this in a whining tone) These guys are just trying to survive the day and having to live with the losses that they had faced because of the gospel.

So they leave the council singing praises, walking slowly. They'd been counted worthy to suffer shame within the culture just for the name of Jesus. That's why they were suffering. They weren't foolish, they weren't being shamed because

they were shameful. They rejoiced that they were identified with Jesus. And here's what they did in the days to come. Verse 42, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." Far from stopping the work, it continued unabated, it continued publicly in larger groups. It continued from house to house as the Word of God was going out. And I love this. It says they didn't cease. They just didn't stop. They continued teaching and preaching. Teaching is instruction for the saints. Preaching is the declaration of the good news to the lost. Right? They got to the lost, they continued to teach the saved. They didn't stop. I love the verse in 1 Corinthians 16:15, and I like it better in the King James Version because it talks about the house of Stephanas, and it says they were the firstfruits, and then it says these saints in this home fellowship were "addicted to the ministry of the saints." That was their heroin, you know? That was their lifeblood. In the New King James, it says they were "devoted" to the saints. I think Churchill years ago, said, "A fanatic is someone who won't change his mind and who won't change the subject." And I think that's right. I mean, the church is fanatical for Jesus. They're threatened, they're under pressure. Life couldn't be more difficult. And yet God, as He continues to bring them together, they just commit themselves to the one thing that matters - they went to serve the Lord. And I'll tell you what - it was so effective that verse 1 of chapter 6 tells us when the Lord was multiplying the church, the church had to finally make some organizational changes. They never had to make a rule or to do some business organizing; they had to do it because of the phenomenal growth that was taking place as the gospel was going out, even under that kind of pressure. So you read in verse 1 about the multiplication of the saints and of the disciples. And you can jump down to verse 7 of chapter 6 as well, where it says "the number of the disciples multiplied greatly," and now the priests started getting involved as well. How did that happen? While the church gets beat up and threatened, and suffers shame, and doesn't abandon the work. Right? The fanatic, as Churchill says, "doesn't change his mind and won't change the subject."

So next week we're going to pick up on what happens when the church begins to grow and you need to organize; and how should you then continue the work. Because God has a lot to show us about this early church, and I pray that we could be like the early church. Don't you?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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