

A HEAD-ON COLLISION

Acts 5:17-42

Here we have an account of the second attempt at persecution. We see the forces opposed to Christ gaining courage, most evidently the courage of desperation. Their hostility was due to the great influence of the apostles and the prosperity of the church.

Instead of holding forth on the outside of the metropolis, for fear of the Jews, these followers of the Lord Jesus conducted their meetings on the enemies' territory. What audacity! What superhuman boldness! This resulted in:

I. INDIGNATION. Acts 5:17.

"Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation." In their last skirmish with the Jewish leaders, because of the fact that some of the Sanhedrin shared a suppressed admiration for the apostles, they were released, after a word of warning. In other words, the members of the Sanhedrin were divided in their opinion of the apostles. Some were filled with admiration of them, and others were filled with exasperation.

But here both sides had reached an impasse of which there was no escape--A Head-On Collision. The opposition is desperate. Drastic action must be taken. Daily and hourly the most remarkable miracles were being performed by the apostles before the very eyes of the rulers and elders of the people.

II. INCARCERATION. Acts 5:18.

"And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison." The Sadducees could no longer tolerate the defiance of the apostles and this wonderful popularity of the gospel of the risen Saviour. Led by the high priest, they laid hold on the whole apostolic group and placed them in the public prison. There they were to be kept securely until the morning when the Sanhedrin would convene for the trial.

From being preachers of the Word in God's great open spaces to being prisoners in a common prison was a far cry. And that is exactly what happened, but even this did not intimidate them, for from behind prison bars that they could still look up and see God. The Sadducees hated the apostles because of what they stood for and what they preached. Here is an early report of their attitude toward them: "Being grieved that they (apostles) taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:2). As a result of their stand for Christ, they were put in a prison, but not in a common prison, as is the case here.

III. EMANCIPATION. Acts 5:19.

"But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said," When they put the apostles behind prison bars, and went away to rejoice over their supposed victory, their work was checkmated by an angelic power. The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought out the apostles, and shut the doors without the keepers hearing or seeing it.

"But" can still be uttered by the Christian after Satan has done his worst. "But God." He is still on the throne. And in the midst of the worst storm of life we can still claim Romans 8:28: "For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose." Many times in the Bible the word "but" appears. "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us." "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." Sin and Satan stand for fetters; the Saviour stands for freedom. In many ways and through many means He is engaged in setting people free from the fetters of sin and the folly of sinners. "But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth."

IV. OCCUPATION. Acts 5:20.

"Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." Thus the angel told the apostles, who were released from prison, to proceed on their way to the temple, to take their stand in the temple, and to continue the proclamation of the gospel to the people. They were to preach the same truths in the same place and to the same people. Having heard, they went forth to obey implicitly.

V. CONSTERNATION. Acts 5:21-28.

When the senate and the council assembled in all their pomp and glory, they did so for the purpose of getting rid of the troublesome movement. Ready at length, they sent to prison for the culprits. The head officer of the temple and the other leaders were in distress when the officers came back with a detailed account of the complete security of the prison and still of the absence of the prisoners. Imagine the impression this must have created on that entire body! What an embarrassment this was to them!

In the midst of their perplexity, another messenger rushed in with the report that the men whom they had put in prison were teaching publicly in the temple. What an upset of their plans! How God vindicated his faithful servants, Peter and John! In consequence of this announcement, the captain and his officers went and brought the prisoners without any violence. The apostles offered no resistance and the officers treated the prisoners fairly because they were afraid of the people. This indicates the influence and progress of the gospel among the common people.

After placing the prisoners in the center of the council, the high priest asked them this question: "Did not we straitly command you that you should not teach in this name? and, behold you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." What a damaging admission the high priest was here making consciously or unconsciously! And that in the presence of the greatest religious body of the land! "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." For others to have said that would have been bad enough, but the highest religious authority spoke volumes in that statement. The authority of Jewish leaders was superseded by that of the humble apostles of the Lord. Hence, their jealousy.

Fewer people were attending the temple services. Their influence everywhere was being reduced, while the apostles were preaching to the multitudes just outside the temple. Many who were staunch sympathizers with the Sanhedrin never got as far as the temple, because they were enraptured and enthralled by the miracles and the teachings of the apostles in the court of the temple.

The rationalists of that day had done everything within their power to uproot and stamp out the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. But, in spite of everything they could do, it grew and multiplied under the blessing of God. Today rationalism (Sadduceeism) and ritualism (Pharisaism) are rampant in the land. The Jewish leaders had voted to have Christ killed for fear of the Romans. Now, instead of only a handful of followers of Christ, great multitudes were supporters of the faith, and of all places, right there in Jerusalem--the stronghold of Judaism.

From the high priest's question to the apostles, "Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name?", one would think that the rationalists of that day were the lords of creation. And what that high priest said aloud, every rationalist since that day has said, audibly or inaudibly. Had they the authority, they would silence the voice of every evangelical preacher in this "Land of the free, and home of the brave." Talk about intolerance! Have you ever heard of a greater example of it than we have here before us? God's Spirit commanded the apostles to speak, but the conceited and spiritually-blind high priest commanded them to keep silent. Who were they to obey--puny man or Almighty God?

VI. OBLIGATION. Acts 5:29.

The apostles could not be frightened by threats, stripes, prisons, or death. They took their business seriously. They were convinced that the hand of God was with them. This is a vital thing in matters of religion. Let the soul that has been saved realize that he was snatched by a divine act as a brand from the burning. Let a man who enters the ministry feel conclusively that he was divinely called for that purpose. Such a conviction makes men fearless. Any man is to be reckoned with who is convinced that he acts under divine impulses.

The apostles refused to be intimidated by ugly threats. A prison has no terrors as long as God's angels can open the doors. Bloody stripes cannot stop them as long as they keep singing and praising God that they were counted worthy to suffer for Him.

"We ought to obey God rather than men." The word, "obey", is used only a few times in the New Testament, and means absolute and unquestioning obedience. "We", that is, enlightened Christians, "must obey God." "Must" is an imperative -- not something one can take or leave. "Obey" is not simply to know, but rather actually to do the will of God. "We must obey God" in regard to our positions, our policies, and our pleasures. The question is not what men or women say, but rather what does God say on the matter? We are under obligation to obey God. When the church is persecuted, it is powerful; when patronized, it is powerless. When a Christian is true to God, he will be persecuted and opposed by the world; but at the same time filled with power from on high. When he patronizes the world, he has no power with the world.

VII. PROCLAMATION. Acts 5:30-32.

Notice that Peter refuted the theological position of that august assembly. "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus." If Peter had meant to make friends with them, he would never have flung that statement in their faces at the very beginning. Don't blame him! It was God's Spirit who spoke through him. The last thing they wanted to hear was any mention of the resurrection--their pet grievance.

They exposed the sins of the Sadducees. "Whom ye slew and hanged on a tree." What bold and uncompromising preaching! That was not an easy thing for the apostles to speak like that. They knew their lives were at stake, but what is life compared to a divine responsibility? Neither was it easy for John the Baptist to expose the sin of Herod, but duty led him on whether he lived or died. The same was true of Nathan the prophet. He exposed the sins of David, the king and the most popular man of his day. It was divine obligation that made Nathan perform this hard task.

They added insult to injury when they declared that God had raised up Jesus from the grave. That was the sore spot. The very mention of it was like flinging a burning torch into a powder keg. Their battle was to be fought around that empty tomb.

But they did not leave these sinners without hope. The apostles told them that the Christ whom they killed offered forgiveness for their sins. It is strange that God could hate sin with such vehemence and yet love the sinner with such passion. No sermon will ever be complete that does not point the sinner to a forgiving Saviour. Let the preacher condemn sin with all his power, but let him not fail to point sinning men to a forgiving Saviour.

CONCLUSION: Acts 5:33-42.

This passage presents four distinct types of individuals. They usually make up the average congregation. They are found in every community.

1. The Critics.

- (1) The Pharisees.
They were sticklers for orthodoxy, but very liberal in their morals. They were experts in legal matters, but ignorant of spiritual things. They reduced religion to a set of rules and ceremonies. The genuineness of religion to them was determined by the accurate observance of ritualistic demands.
- (2) The Sadducees.
They were the materialists of that day. They made no place for divine interference, no place for miracles, no place for angels, nor for the physical resurrection of the body. There was no place for faith, nor repentance, nor forgiveness in their estimation. They sought to imprison the Lord in the world He had made, and tried to bind Him by His own laws and make Him conform to human standards.
- (3) The High Priests.
They might be either Pharisee or Sadducee. Their religion was nothing more than loud and long prayers, uttered to be heard by men. They displayed self-imposed authority.

2. Gamaliel.

Gamaliel represents the cautious moralist who waits for further evidence. There is much good in his type. He has self-control, common sense, and calmness. He showed a fairness beyond expectation. Men never lose by being fair, even with their worst enemies.

Gamaliel appealed for time. The waiting policy is often a safe one. Most of the problems of life are accentuated by rashness. In their enthusiasm men often rush in to force a settlement before conditions are ripe. Time is a great solvent. According to Gamaliel, time had done its work upon Theudas and Judas of Galilee, and it could do the same upon others.

Gamaliel made a common sense plea. He contended that if Christianity is of men it will soon pass away, but if it is of God it has come to stay and none can ever overthrow it. Let time prove it. Let the ages test it.

3. The Common People.

Common people always heard the apostles gladly, but they were not always reliable. They heard them gladly because they were not in sympathy with the leaders of the day, and they welcomed anybody who took a stand against these leaders. Some people will oppose anybody who is in a position of leadership, whether his cause be just or not. They are willing to follow anybody because they are against the leadership.

Many heard them gladly, but did nothing more. They stood on the sidelines and agreed with the apostles and cheered, but they held themselves aloof. They were not willing to enter into the new movement and face the responsibilities that were entailed. They were admirers, but not partakers. They would cheer, but not fight.

4. The Christians.

These were not only convinced about Christ and His resurrection, but they publicly declared their belief. They were bold enough to take their stand in defense of what they believed.

They were convinced and then acted on their convictions. Their religion was an experience, and not a mere formality. They had gone further than the multitudes who agreed but nothing more. It cost them much to take the stand which they did, but they were willing to pay the price. They brought all they had and all that they were and laid it upon the altar of God. They were ready to make any sacrifice, to suffer any hardship, to face any foe, or to do whatever was necessary to carry Christ's gospel to any place.