

INFLUENCE AND ENMITY

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

As we have seen, the first five chapters of Acts tell the story of the Jerusalem church. Courage, power, love, unity, and selflessness were evident everywhere. Even problems led to opportunities. These early chapters of Acts are meant to challenge us with what is possible, with what God can do, and they're a beacon for us to move toward.

From failed friends to courageous apostles

The prominent people in these early chapters are the apostles Jesus appointed during his ministry on earth. Two of them were James and John, the "Sons of Thunder." In the early days they were young, proud, self-impressed, longing to have benefits for themselves. Just days before Jesus was executed, they were arguing for places of prominence in Messiah's kingdom, urged on by their mother. Yet only weeks or months later, these two were among the apostles who led a church characterized by a remarkable insistence: that what was owned by one was owned by all. Instead of angling for the best advantage to themselves, they all looked for opportunities to give their possessions away to the blessing of other people. The radical change from the James and John who wanted prominence to the apostolic leadership that wanted blessing for everyone is dramatic.

Another apostle was Peter. Remember that the night Jesus was being tried in the high priest's house, out in the courtyard Peter was being accused of being one of Jesus' disciples. He cursed the slave girl who made the accusation, in a strong voice absolutely denying anything to do with this Galilean. Yet it was that same strong voice of Peter, not more than a few weeks later, that would preach with authority and power that Jesus is Lord, that all must repent, that there is no other name in heaven or earth by which any can be saved.

These people began as failures. Predicting their abandonment of him, Jesus quoted Zechariah: "I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered" (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27), and surely they were. He was tried, flogged, and executed with no one to stand by him. Yet, before long, the same ones who had been unable to even stay awake and pray with him in the garden, guilty and miserable at their own weakness, hopeless about the future, were now strong and courageous, filled with the Spirit, certain of their message, undaunted in their witness. How did they change?

Perhaps more importantly, is it possible for people like us to have the same transforming experience? Aren't these stories being told to us precisely to make the point that it's possible for God to do the same thing again for weak, inadequate folks like us, who have past lives we're ashamed of, who are uncertain of what is before us, who get it wrong a good bit of the time? We should be both encouraged and challenged that these are Christian lives that *are* possible for us.

The last verses of chapter 5 give what is perhaps the most succinct statement of change from failed friends to courageous apostles:

"And after calling the apostles in, [the Sanhedrin] flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council,

rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

This flogging was surely the “thirty-nine strikes,” the characteristic punishment given by the Jewish authorities, which Jesus himself received. They used a cat-o’-nine-tails, a vicious instrument, to whip the miscreant. It was a terrible punishment. But the apostles considered the beating a privilege! They drew strength from the fact that they were identified enough with Christ that they even received some of the same punishment that he received. Their new conviction about life was that they would rather be identified with Christ, preach the news of the death, resurrection, and hope that was in Christ, and suffer for it than anything else in the world! Forbidden to speak, they spoke the louder. Beaten for the insistence of their message, they considered the beating a privilege. These were profoundly changed people.

In the last message (Discovery Paper #4746) the camera of Luke’s history was focused on the Christian community as it began to mature even in its first months. The camera zoomed in on two stories. One was of Joseph, later called Barnabas, who was generous and would go on to be even more so. The other story was of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to God.

Now in 5:12-42 the camera turns to the church in the world. What was it like for Christians to live their lives out among unbelievers? What can we learn from their interactions? There are two main ideas here. The first is found in verse 13: “The people held them in high esteem.” The second is found in verse 18: “[Their enemies] laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail.” Genuine Christians will experience both the approval and the rejection of the world, as their Savior did.

Verses 12-18:

And at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico [part of the large, flat area of the temple mount]. But none of the rest [the other itinerant teachers, scribes, and lecturers who would also be in the temple environs] dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number; to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets, and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. And also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits; and they were all being healed.

But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy; and they laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail.

Held in high esteem

The larger population was blessed by the presence of Christians in their midst in two ways. First, multitudes were being attracted to Christ, giving their hearts to him, and finding the life-transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. The Christians were winning their friends, neighbors, and associates in the vicinity around them. Second, the city itself was made more beautiful and hopeful and free even for those who did not come to faith.

It’s worth asking ourselves as a church, as a small home group, as a family, even as an individual: Do we expect some to come to Christ if we live Jesus’ life, speak the truth as we have experienced it, and walk through the open doors God gives us in the world? If we would honestly have to say no, then we ought to be in earnest prayer about it.

Verse 12 says, “At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place,” and verse 16 says that people were being healed and the power of unclean spirits was being broken. The apostles were central to this, and we’re going to discuss that further in the next message (Discovery Paper #4748). Through them blessing was being expressed, not only to those who were becoming believers, but to others who were too scared to even attempt faith in Christ, though they were in great need of help.

Luke says that it was by the hands of the apostles that healing was being communicated and the power of darkness was being broken. They would touch the sick and afflicted lovingly, speak to them, pray for them, and probably hold them. This was a ministry not just of healing but of love and welcome and tenderness, through both their hands and their words.

Luke also talks about their shadows, Peter’s in particular, falling on some lying in their cots along the road. Luke doesn’t actually say that this accomplished any healing, just that the people hoped and believed it would. They wanted mysterious good to happen. Yet there may well be a symbol in it. That is, the mere presence of believers without their making contact with anyone may raise hopes, do good, awaken possibilities for people in ways they aren’t even aware of. Your shadow is being cast by the light. When your shadow falls on someone, nothing seems to change, because a shadow is insubstantial. But Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:14 that Christians are very often like fragrance, something that can’t be measured or contained. There is a subtle, mysterious influence that Luke is probably making reference to here.

Public scandals have rocked churches recently as people have spoken up about the experiences of the church that they had in their youth, which were filled with aggression and hurt and abuse. This is tragic not just for the people involved but because it is in such horrific opposition to what God intended us to be like in this community: help, acceptance, encouragement; less darkness rather than more! That’s surely what was true in this beautiful Jerusalem church.

Some were healed, some believed, some merely had a shadow pass over them, but in every case the fact that there were Christians in Jerusalem was doing good in the entire region, even if it was just a subtle awakening in people that God might care for them after all.

But in verse 18 Luke draws a contrast. He says the Council and their troops laid hands on the apostles and put them in jail. On the one hand, the hands of the apostles were instruments of healing, and on the other, the hands of their enemies worked violence. What God was doing among believers was the exact opposite of what was happening among those in the religious establishment, who found themselves marginalized among the people and grew jealous of the apostles.

The enemies of the church

Verses 18-33:

And they laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail. But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, “Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” And upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates had come, they called the Council together, and all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought. But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned, and reported back, saying, “We found the prison

house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.” Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. But someone came and reported to them, “Behold, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, lest they should be stoned). And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered and said, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay the m.

This is an interesting passage. What we read is not just the experience of the Christians but the experience of their enemies. What were they like? We would do well to see what is here and learn from it.

One of the things that surely motivated Luke’s writing of this was to make the point to Theophilus, who was to receive this book, that Rome had nothing to fear from the Christian church. In fact, the high priest had nothing to fear directly. From the beginning, believers were not interested in political power. There was nothing in the origins or the message of the Christian movement that suggested revolution, violent overthrow, or lawbreaking. What they were doing was making the hierarchy of the Jewish religious system irrelevant. They would someday make Rome irrelevant, for that matter. But there was no direct assault on either institution.

It will help us to acknowledge that we do much better when we offer a spiritual alternative to what the world insists is important, when we are different and invite others to join us, than when we try to control the levers of authority that already are in place—religious hierarchies, economic or political hierarchies, military power, or any other human institution. The church is at its best when it’s an alternative, rather than an enemy wanting to have what those already in power have.

It is obvious here that the authorities were ineffective. That’s another motivation for Luke to tell this story. Their jails didn’t hold the Christians if God wanted them out. They made declarations but nobody was persuaded. They issued threats but the threats were ignored. In general, the power of the enemies of the gospel was much less than they thought it was and is today much less than we often give it credit for. One voice that says, “I will obey God rather than men” is stronger than ten voices who insist, “You may not do so.” It’s clear that there is bluster without substance, a paper tiger, in these enemies. We saw that in chapter 4 as well (see Discovery Paper #4745).

Three statements Luke makes about these enemies are worth noting.

Jealous, guilty, vengeful

Verse 17 says that they were jealous. Why were they jealous? Because the temple had become a place of spiritual renewal. The work of priests of offering sacrifices and making pronouncements was being replaced by a handful of fishermen who were saying, “God already loves you,” preaching what the angel called “the whole message of this Life.” Healing, the breaking of the power of evil spirits, the love of God, community, hope, life—these things were

being given away for free! And none of the Sadducees or the Council or the important people were getting any credit for it; in fact, they were being ignored. So they were intensely jealous.

Verse 28 says that these enemies were guilty. They complained, “[You] intend to bring this man’s blood upon us!” That’s an interesting note, isn’t it? It was not the apostles’ preaching that was making them guilty. The high priest and his associates *were* the ones responsible for Jesus’ death. They had in fact conspired knowingly to accomplish it. The apostles’ preaching was just exposing their guilt.

There is an important difference between guilt feelings and guilt. As a Christian man or woman, you are loved by God and forgiven of your sins completely. At times you may have guilt feelings that are completely inappropriate, because indeed you are no longer guilty but are forgiven. The answer to guilt feelings that are false is to go back to the cross of Christ, to take again the bread and wine of communion to remind yourself that you are forgiven. But the real guilt of those who defend themselves and refuse to repent, who shake their fist at God, who would kill Jesus again given the opportunity, needs to be addressed. Unless somebody speaks about it, these will never find repentance. The only way to repentance is through acknowledgment: “I have a horrible problem.” These council members needed that preaching. But they didn’t want to be told that they were still guilty in their sins. So they blamed the messengers.

Finally, verse 33 says that because their consciences bothered them, they determined to kill the ones who pricked their consciences. This is not infrequent, is it? We too are learning lessons about those who oppose Christ. They will turn their jealousy, guilt, and bad consciences around. The hard rejection that we often feel, the aggression against what we stand for, the ridicule that is routine, all are born in their hearts. This resistance doesn’t happen because of our inadequacy as messengers.

The empty jail that is described here is very much like the empty tomb of Jesus. The apostles were released by God’s intervention. An angel appeared and spoke of those who were released. Guards were posted who were completely ineffective in preventing the miracle from taking place. The authorities who put the apostles in jail were the same ones who had put Jesus on the cross. Both cases lacked a just trial. The point is that the apostles not only had been with Jesus, but they were still living out the life of Jesus. May the suffering and victory of Jesus be displayed in our lives as well.

At the end of chapter 5 something surprising happens.

The church tested

Verses 33-42:

But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them. But a certain Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody; and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. And he was slain; and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away some people after him, he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.” And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them.

So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Gamaliel essentially quoted Peter in his speech. Peter, remember, was saying, “We must obey God rather than men.” Gamaliel said, “What if this is of God? If it is, we can’t resist it; and if it’s not, it will fall apart on its own.”

One of the things I love about our church is this: It is filled with saints who are young and vital, who are out in the world talking about what is new to them. They expect some to believe, and they are a source of blessing to others. They are expanding the reach of the gospel to their circle of friends in creative, energetic, hopeful ways. But there are also saints in this church who have lived a life of faith for sixty, seventy, eighty years, who bear witness that the gospel has never failed them. The cause of Christ has changed the world and will until the end of time. And the test of longevity holds true for you and me as well. “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

What allows you to have not only passion in the moment but faith for a lifetime, either as a church or as an individual? It is being sure of what the last verses in the chapter say: that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ. Most of us begin the Christian life because it offers an answer to our longings or relief from our burdens. But we discover that the gift of intimacy with Christ himself is much greater than we anticipated: “If I suffer because they hate him, I am privileged. If I receive the lashes he received, it is my blessing, because it draws me nearer to him.” If you can say that, then your faith will last a lifetime, and Gamaliel’s test will find it true.

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Catalog No. 4747
Acts 5:12-42
7th Message
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March 17, 2002

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