

Acts 5.12-42

Passage, focused in Gamaliel's words, illustrate the way the future of the Jesus movement hung in the balance.

God's problem:

1. the man who claimed to be his Son, the Christ, had been hung on a tree, i.e. defeated by human powers and apparently cursed by God. His followers were scattered.
How could the shame and defeat be turned into victory – Jesus' status confirmed?
2. How could his followers be regathered?
3. How could Jesus' mission - the kingdom of God on earth – be fulfilled?
i.e. How would Jesus not go down as just another failed would-be Messiah, his followers perishing or scattered (like Theudas or Judas the Galilean before him)?

God's answer (his "plan and undertaking")

1. *Raise and exalt Jesus. Resurrection of Jesus and appearances to Apostles and more than 500 disciples (see 5.30-31)*
2. *Pour out the HS upon the Apostles. Regathering them and empowering them to preach + perform signs and wonders will give credibility to their witness to Jesus' resurrection and his continuing lordship as they preach and work miracles "in his name"*
 - Fulfilment of Jesus' promise in John 14.11-14 which is clearly for the 11, not all believers (see the 'you' in vv. 10, 18, 22, 24, 25ff.)
 - NB. both the punitive miracle/s in 5.1-11 and healing by Peter's shadow go beyond Jesus' own ministry cf. Luke 8.44 woman with bleeding 12 years
3. *Establish an Apostolic HS community in Jerusalem by pouring out the HS on all who repent and are baptized, to live as model community – testimony to Jesus' kingdom/reign on earth.*
= turn the tables on those who crucified Jesus and reclaim Temple as place of true worship.

vv.12-16

Signs and wonders:

- Many
- Regular
- By the hands of the apostles: “none of the rest dared join them”.
Are “the rest”
 - Fearful disciples cf. 4.18-21 [Witherington, my view]
 - Believers fearful of their powers after Ananias & Sapphira incident [Wall]
 - Opponents [Stott] – in the face of their success)
- but the people held them in high esteem”
- In Solomon’s portico
- Multitudes came to faith
- Extraordinary miracles: Peter’s shadow falling on those in streets (presumably as passed by on way to temple – v.15)
- *All*, sick and possessed, coming from everywhere, were healed (16)

NOW: In the face of this inspired preaching and the convicting work of the HS, and the ongoing power of Jesus as attested by signs and wonders, what are the opponents of God to do?

1. Have already lost round one - the battle over the cross, *the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus*. Jesus has been raised, and thousands already acknowledge it.
2. => must now focus on the apostles, silencing them, killing them if necessary (and possible in light of the people).
Persecution always begins by targeting the leaders: strike the shepherd and the flock is easily scattered.

Bad start! - Divine intervention

- Angel sent to deliver the apostles and to charge them to return to the temple to “speak to the people all the words of this Life”.
- Witherington says ‘this Life’ = “salvation”, cf. 3.15 where Peter calls Jesus “the Author of life”.
- Sets scene for next battle – Sanhedrin, and must have given great confidence to the apostles

vv.17-42

A. The high priest and Sadducees' response:

- "rose up... filled with jealousy"
- "greatly perplexed about them (the apostles), wondering what this would come to" when they learned their prison cell was locked but empty. Must have been a humiliating experience!
- Rearrested them "and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people". Serious as shows that "at the popular level religious authority in Jerusalem has shifted to the apostles; the Sanhedrin has every reason to be concerned. This new political activity is the subtext of the high priest's scolding of the apostles." (Wall)
- HP interrogated them:
 - "we strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching". An admission of humiliating defeat, given they had commanded them not to speak in Jesus' name. "filled Jerusalem" = "a hint that the church was ready for its next phase of expansion" (Dunn)
 - "And you intend to bring this man's blood on us" cf. the reaction of the crowd in 2.37. Note too, they had in fact called this down on themselves! – Matt 27.25
- Enraged by Peter's defence (you killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree; the God of our fathers raised Jesus; God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour...we are witnesses and so is the HS).
- 2 causes of rage:
 - Peter has placed Jesus' blood on them
 - Implication that they do not have the HS as don't obey God!
- Wanted to kill them
- Dissuaded by Gamaliel
- Beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Presumably 39 lashes (40 minus one) – brutal and excruciatingly painful, enough to kill some victims.

B. The Apostles' response

- To the HP and council: "we must obey God rather than men". Cf. 4.19f where they left it to the council to judge whether right or not.
 - Nothing new: Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab and Jezebel, John the Baptist before Herod... Ambrose before Theodosius, Luther before Charles V at the Diet of Worms...
 - Not even church can displace God as ultimate authority. Cf. the Catholic and Orthodox doctrine of authority, "as was formulated, for example, by Dositheos and the Eastern Orthodox Synod of Jerusalem in 1672, that 'for the catholic church, as never having spoken or speaking from herself but from the Spirit of God... it is impossible to err in any way, or to be deceived; but like the Divine Scripture, she is infallible and has perpetual authority.'" (Pelikan) Stott: To be sure, Christians are called to... submit to human authorities. But if the authority concerned misuses its God-given power to command what he forbids or forbid what he commands, then the Christian's duty is to disobey the human authority in order to obey God's.
 - Illustration – Nuremburg trials – acting under orders.
- Their desire in defence is clearly not to defend themselves but to exalt Jesus
- Inspired by the HS, surely (Luke 12.11-12), Peter reiterates God's plan:
 - you killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree;
 - the God of our fathers raised Jesus;
 - God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour...
 - we are witnesses and so is the HS. Cf. John 15.26-27, in which Jesus foretells this as well as highlighting the primacy of the apostles as "you [those] who have been with me from the beginning."
 - "When the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning"
- NB. Peter still holds out the offer of forgiveness to those who killed Jesus *if they repent*
- once beaten and threatened, "left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. And every day, in the temple *and from house to house*, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

- Dunn: their rejoicing even in suffering indicates their enthusiasm and supreme confidence in this Jesus

C. Gamaliel's intervention

- A Pharisee, "a teacher of the law held in honour by all the people".
Bruce: The Pharisees were in the minority [in the Sanhedrin], but they commanded much more public respect than did the Sadducees.
- Tannehill: In Acts Pharisees are consistently presented as either open in attitude toward Christians or as having actually accepted the Christian message (cf. 15.5; 23.6-9; 26.5). This is a different picture from that presented in Luke."
- Witherington: The Pharisees, who believed in the Messiah, resurrection, the afterlife, angels, and demons, were much more likely to be sympathetic to Christian views than the Sadducees or priests, and on the whole this seem to be the way things were.

Barclay: Gamaliel was more than respected; he was loved... He was one of the very few to whom the title "Rabban" (master-teacher/rabbi) had been given. Men called him "The Beauty of the Law." When he died it was said, "Since Rabban Gamaliel died there has been no more reverence for the Law; and purity and 'separateness' died out at the same time."

- Tutor to Saul of Tarsus (22.3)
- "his clout is quite clear" (v.34, Witherington)
- Urges caution, based on recent experience of 'messiahs' Theudas and Judas the Galilean
 - o If this plan or this undertaking is of man- (Witherington: the grammar indicates a less probable condition, "if it might be of man...")
 - It will fail
- BUT
 - o if it is of God – (different grammar, indicating this was Gamaliel's view)
 - You will not be able to overthrow them
 - You might even be found opposing God

= prudent advice on this occasion, and in relation to the Apostles, but not to be taken as a universal maxim to allow anything. Apart from anything else, not always true; evil does sometimes prosper (in short term).

Conclusion

God's opponents have already lost round two of the battle too.

They have failed to silence or discredit the apostles' witness.

Things are already getting out of hand with people flocking to Jerusalem to be healed and to hear.

And they haven't even preached outside Jerusalem yet!

HIGHLIGHTS UNSOPPABLE NATURE OF GOD'S WORKINGS AND PURPOSE, and LONG GAME

vv.40-42 signal that the battle is now to rise to a new level: persecution.

But it will also move from temple to streets/houses.

Looking ahead, the consequence will be that God's opponents, having lost rounds one and two, will turn their attention to the apostolic *community*. Satan's hand will be seen to be at work, both from without and from within.

These halcyon days did not continue past the early days. 'Normal' life set in, with internal strife and external opposition/persecution.

NB. This all = God's great plan to fulfil his purposes.

God is playing a long game which will only be completed (and won) when Christ returns at the end of the age.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the short period of intense, dramatic signs and wonders recorded in Acts 5 is unique in the history of the church (in terms of the fact that *everyone* was healed, and even Peter's shadow imparted healing)? Do you know of any equivalent situation? If so, what was the context (i.e. what did God seem to be doing)?
2. What are the problems with us applying Jesus' words to the apostles (in John 14ff.) to ourselves and our ministries? E.g. If we do apply Jesus' words to the apostles to all believers, how do we account for the fact that God's promise to give anything asked in his name, and to do greater things than Jesus, do not appear to be true for us in the way they evidently were for the apostles? Or how do we explain to those not healed that God is nevertheless unchanging, his Word true, and his

promises never fail us - in spite of our prayers for their healing not being answered?

3. Signs and wonders convinced many of “the people” of Jesus’ resurrection and reign, but not the Sanhedrin (except perhaps Gamaliel). What was their problem (the Sanhedrin)? How do we see those attitudes displayed today?
4. As persecution ramps up in Acts, from threats to floggings, the church grows. Why is this?
5. Why do you think God sent an angel to rescue the apostles from prison but didn’t send one the following day to deliver them from being flogged? Is there anything we can draw/learn from this?
6. What do you think the apostles preached as “all the words of this Life” (5.20)?
7. The Apostles rejoiced that “they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name”. What do you understand by this? Have you ever thought of suffering for the Gospel as a compliment, or even a sign of God’s favour?