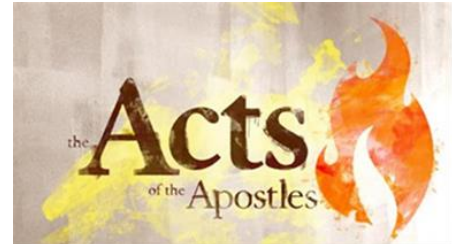


ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – Part 7

Uh Oh, the Sadducees are Angry Again!

Acts 5:12-43

Soon after the Ananias and Sapphira drama the disciples return to preaching and performing miracles. Verse 13 tells us, “all the believers were wonderfully united as they met regularly at the Temple area called Solomon’s Porch.”



At this point the new movement had more fans than detractors and Luke tells us the people held the disciples in high regard. That would soon change, of course, as the Sadducees were waiting for a new opportunity to close the door on what they considered to be a heretical cult.

Peter had become somewhat famous for his supernatural ability to heal the sick. Verses 15-16: *“In fact, when people knew Peter was going to walk by, they carried the sick out to the streets and laid them down on cots and mats, knowing the incredible power emanating from him would overshadow them and heal them. Great numbers of people swarmed into Jerusalem from the nearby villages. They brought with them the sick and those troubled by demons - and everyone was healed!”*

So much for flying under the radar, after being ordered by the Sadducees to cease preaching about Jesus. I guess it was the “great number of people swarming into Jerusalem from nearby villages” that caught the attention of the religious leaders, or possibly the large-scale healing taking place. Whatever the cause the Sadducees had reached a tipping point that led to the arrest of all the disciples.

During the night, an angel came and loosed them from their chains and told them, *“Go, stand in the temple courts and preach the words that bring life!”* And that they did. Verse 21: *“So early that morning they entered the temple courts and taught the people.”* In a genuine, *Hey, what just happened moment*, none of the disciples were in their cells prior to the meeting of the leaders who would decide their fate. Luke tells us, “They sent for the disciples to be brought to them from prison. But when the officers came to the prison cell, it was empty!” (as a former Corrections officer I can attest to this being problematic).

The officers returned to the Supreme Council (you have to love that title) and told them, *“We found the jail securely locked and the guards standing by their cell, but when we opened the door, there was no one inside.”*

The captain of the temple (the guy in charge of prisoners) was perplexed, likely since this was a new and unique way to break out of jail, and Luke tells us: *“they were at a loss over what to make of it.”* Then someone entered and said, *“The men you put in prison are out there standing in the temple courts, teaching the people.”* So, the captain of the temple guard and his men go out and arrested them all over again.

Once back in custody the Sadducees ask them: *“Didn’t we strictly warn you that you were to never again teach in this name? But instead you have now filled all of Jerusalem with this doctrine and are committed to holding us responsible for this man’s death!”*

Peter’s response was quick and to the point:

We must listen to and obey God more than pleasing religious leaders. You had Jesus arrested and killed by crucifixion, but the God of our forefathers has raised Him up. He is the one God has exalted and seated at His right hand as our Savior and Champion. He is the provider of grace as the Redeemer of Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God freely gives to all who believe in Him (5:29-32).

The two sides of Judaism (two stark divisions that overshadowed all the smaller divisions) were fully on display. To the traditional, law-based and Mosaic branch, which was also the majority, everything Peter said was blasphemy. Jesus did not meet the threshold of being Israel’s Messiah in the eyes of the Sadducees, a group that did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. To them Peter’s teachings were heretical and false, and worse inciteful. A rebellion against their leadership and position could easily break out. So, what did they do? *“When they heard these things, they were infuriated and determined to murder them.”*

It seems harsh and brutal, but blasphemy did have capital consequences (with sanction from Rome). And, it seems a quick way to shut up and shut down the disciples. Before any action could be taken a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a highly regarded teacher spoke up:

Once the disciples had been taken outside, he said to the Supreme Council:

Men of Israel, you need to be very careful about how you deal with these men. Some time ago there was a man named Theudas who rose up claiming to be somebody. He had a following of about four hundred men, but when he was killed, all of his followers were scattered, and nothing came of it. After him, in the days of the census, another man rose up, Judas the Galilean, who got people to follow him in a revolt. He too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. So, in this situation, you should just leave these men to themselves. For if this plan or undertaking originates with men, it will fade away and come to nothing. But if this movement is of God, you will not be able to stop it. And you might discover that you were fighting God all along! (5:34-39)

After Gamaliel's speech the Council was convinced to take minimal action against the disciples. They were beaten and again warned to never speak in the name of Jesus again. Fat chance there.

Question: Was Gamaliel a closet believer? Was he moving in the direction of seeing Jesus as the Messiah? And, who was this guy who could hold complete sway of the Supreme Council?

Gamaliel was the purported teacher of Saul/Paul and theologian L.T. Johnson believes he was active in "various damning decisions resulting in Jesus' death."

Was he inching toward rethinking his views of Jesus? Likely not. His two examples were lightweights who were closer to being Zealots than a possible Messiah. Gamaliel was most probably placing Jesus in the camp of "would-be prophets" (Johnson, 103). Many theologians believe he expected the movement to fail and for the followers to scatter, rendering this Jesus movement a blip on history's radar and map.

So, the disciples are released after their beating and they lived to preach another day. This movement had at a minimum over 5000 men by this time. Multiply the men by three and you will have a picture of how quickly the movement had grown. On his best day Theudas had maybe a thousand followers (including women and children). He died and remained dead. A Messiah movement requires a Messiah. Jesus died but He defeated death and resurrected, thus the Messiah movement had a Messiah. As the song says, "Ain't no stopping us now."

Takeaways:

1. Peter, John and the rest of the disciples could not refrain from proclaiming the reality of Jesus as Messiah and of God's salvation for all people. They knew they would be jailed, beaten and likely killed, but they were called and set apart to proclaim Jesus to Israel. There are so many lessons here it would take several pages to cover them all. Pick one.
2. There has always been pushback on the reality of Jesus. It may not be as localized as it was for the first disciples, nor is it today just a difference of opinion with Jews; there continues to be wholesale pushback across the globe. It is mostly an exclusivity thing. To follow Jesus is to follow Jesus. There is no room for multiple gods/goddesses or additional latter-day prophets. It is all built around Jesus and when that changes the wheels come off the movement. Lesson here? Be exclusive in theology while being inclusive with love and community.
3. Gamaliel expected for the entire movement to fail. He expected this while overlooking an amazing array of miracles done in Jesus' name. From the resurrection (witnessed by hundreds) to Pentecost to the miracles done by Peter... God was all over this. This was not about a would-be-prophet-leader leading a ragtag group of followers; it was about God coming to His creation to redeem it. God things simply do not fail.

Let me say it again: **God things simply do not fail.**

It is worth the cost of being part of a God thing.

Amen and Amen.

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