

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FIRST PERSECUTION

(Acts 5:17-42)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 29

1. The enemy aroused by a Spirit-filled church (17-18).
2. The Lord protects His true witnesses (19-20).
3. The Lord gives boldness to His true witnesses (21, 25).
4. The enemy baffled by Spirit-filled messengers (21-28).
5. The unswerving testimony of Spirit-filled men (29-32).
6. An unexpected deliverer (33-40).
7. The unquenchable joy in a Spirit-filled church (41).
8. The unceasing energy of a Spirit-filled church (42).

We have seen opposition to the Gospel prior to this in the Christian church. There was indeed the arrest of the apostles but the officers allowed them to go with a warning and a threat. Now the opposition grew furious. The officers, led by the Sadducees, arrested the apostles and placed them in the public ward. They plotted violence against them.

THE ENEMY AROUSED BY A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

It was not a mistake that the apostles had made, or any evil that they had done which aroused the enemy: "**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, And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison**" (5:17-18). They had been healing the sick and casting out unclean spirits. They had been doing a work of great value to Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. That which aroused their persecutors was their success, or the blessing of God upon the church which caused it to grow so rapidly. As the popularity of the Christian church increased the popularity of the Sadducees waned. The Sadducean party saw that they must soon lose their power if the people continued to believe in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. It was jealousy which stirred up the opposition. They had not succeeded by threatening. They had determined to use sterner means.

If we read history aright we will not be deceived into thinking, that if the church continues to do her work faithfully, that if she is kind and charitable to friend and foe and conducts herself judiciously, she will not meet with much opposition. History repeats itself; Satan is always aroused when the church is making an increased impact upon the world. We have more reason to be concerned for the vitality and welfare of the church when Satan is not aroused, for then the church must be asleep.

There is an old legend to the effect that Satan called in his evil messengers to learn what success they had met with; when he asked one what he had done he replied that he had sent forth a wind which caused such a storm at sea that a missionary ship was sent to the bottom. Satan said: "What of it, their souls were all saved." Another told of the persecution which he had aroused against a Christian until he was put to death. But again Satan replied: "What of it his soul was saved." Then another said he had spent several years trying to put a single Christian to sleep and had finally succeeded. Then Satan and all his angels shouted for joy.

THE LORD PROTECTS HIS TRUE WITNESSES

After the apostles had been arrested and placed in the public ward: "**But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life**" (5:19-20). Jesus had said: "**Lo, I am with you alway,**" and He was making His promise good. The prison walls could not hold his messengers when He chose to release them. He who could release Jeremiah from the dungeon and Daniel from the lion's den could release the apostles from the Jerusalem prison. Later He could release Paul from the prison at Philippi. Again He could release Judson from the Indian prison and still later He could protect Mr. and Mrs. Glover from the mob of Chinese Boxers. Sometimes the Lord's cause is furthered by the martyrdom of His servants. But even then, the Lord is with them, He bears their souls to their home in Heaven there to praise Him forever.

THE LORD GIVES BOLDNESS TO HIS TRUE WITNESSES

Early in the morning, about daybreak, the apostles entered into the temple and taught: "**And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within. Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people**" (5:21-25). They had anticipated persecution. They had prayed for boldness. They were watching and praying and they did not give way to temptation. God gave them boldness though they had been imprisoned and confronted with bitter persecution. They were speaking "**all the words of this life,**" that is they were giving a full clear testimony concerning the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.

THE ENEMY BAFFLED BY SPIRIT-FILLED MESSENGERS

The Sanhedrim gathered and sent for the prisoners to be brought when to their astonishment they found that they were not in the prison, but standing in the temple teaching: “**Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us**” (5:26-28). Even the keepers of the prison were standing on guard before the locked doors thinking their prisoners were safe within, but when they opened the doors there was no man there. When they found the apostles teaching in the temple, the officers brought them without violence for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.

The high priest asked them: “**Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this mans blood upon us.**” This was a remarkable testimony to the progress which the Gospel had made in so short a time. They had filled Jerusalem with their teaching. It had taken zeal, courage and above all the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to do this.

It is interesting to note how throughout the ages different methods have been taken by different kings or governments to silence the messengers of God and how they have failed. God’s Word will continue to live in the face of all opposition and there will always be witnesses who are ready to proclaim it.

THE UNSWERVING TESTIMONY OF SPIRIT-FILLED MEN

“**Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him**” (5:29-32). They were not equivocating, they were giving their real reason for teaching so persistently. They chose to obey God rather than men. This ought always to be true of the messengers of Christ. Neither civil nor ecclesiastical officers can take precedence of Christ. When He has spoken that is the final word. No man has a right to silence the Gospel minister so long as he is preaching the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

The members of the Sanhedrim were cut to the heart at the bold answer of Peter and were minded to slay the apostles. They did not carry out that impulse for two reasons, partly because they feared the people, and partly because one of their influential members persuaded them to follow another policy. There are places today where the missionaries of the church still confront physical persecution.

That is rarely true in this land but it does not mean that there are no perils which beset the preaching of the Gospel. It was rationalism, under the name of Sadduceeism, which opposed the Gospel then most bitterly. Rationalism is very active in opposing the Gospel today. The Pharisees were also opponents of the Gospel then. They were ritualists. Ritualism is still drawing men away from the simple worship and the plain Gospel.

AN UNEXPECTED DELIVERER

A prominent member of the Sanhedrim, by the name of Gamaliel, calmed his angry fellow-councilmen: “**When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them. Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go”** (5:33-40).

As when the jury is dismissed while the lawyers argue a point of law before the judge, so Gamaliel asked that the apostles be dismissed from the presence of the Sanhedrim while he should address them. He advised caution. He reminded them of former abortive efforts of different leaders. There was one by the name of Theudas and another by the name of Judas, each of whom attempted to incite an insurrection and lead people away after them. But in each case their efforts failed. They and their followers perished or were dispersed. He advised the Sanhedrim to let these men alone. He argued that if their effort was merely human it would come to nought, if it were of God they would not be able to overthrow it.

Gamaliel was an instrument used to deliver the apostles at this time and yet we cannot approve of the attitude which he took toward the Gospel or the apostles. Many have complimented Gamaliel and have called him a broadminded man. The spirit of Gamaliel was that of unbelief professing honest doubt. He did not need to speak doubtfully about the new Gospel movement. He had opportunity to prove whether it were of men or of God. It was his business to study religion. The evidences was available to show him that these men were of God. When men in high position, men who are influential in political and religious office, express doubt, then we need to be on our guard lest we be led to compromise with them.

Moreover, Gamaliel’s profession of impartiality was simply masked unbelief. Jesus was either a good man or a bad man. We cannot treat His message with indifference. Sometimes we hear men trying to prove that Christ was only an ordinary man, and then speak highly of Him as a man.

We must accept Christ either as the incarnate Son of God, or else we must reject Him as a wicked imposter. Abundant proof had been given only the day before, before the apostles were arrested, to show that they were men of God and that Christ, in whose name they wrought wonders, was the Son of God.

Gamaliel's declaration was one of unbelief under the guise of judicial calmness. Men often think today, that it is a virtue not to take sides even though the issue may be one of the morals or of Gospel truth. It is well to be tolerant, but to profess neutrality when truth is at stake is wrong.

Gamaliel's philosophy would lead us to teach that physical success will prove the truthfulness or falsity of a doctrine. It is however, a grave error to argue that a doctrine is true because the multitude accepts it as true. More often minorities have been right. During the centuries past the masses have not been with Christ. It is true that error and falsehood will one day perish, but a doctrine is not necessarily true because it has persisted for centuries. Take as an example the Mohammedan religion. It has prevailed in parts of Asia and Africa for centuries. It has been accepted by multitudes. Men have fought and died for that religion, but that does not prove it to be true. Where the seven churches of Asia were located, truth at one time held sway, but it has given place to false religions today. Gamaliel as a politician has many followers today but he is no pattern for us.

THE UNQUENCHABLE JOY IN A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

“And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (5:41). We would not have been surprised if we had found them weeping, for they had been beaten before they had been released. Their backs were no doubt still smarting, but their hearts were glad. They were glad to be permitted to suffer for the honor of Christ. The words of Jesus, **“Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you . . . Rejoice and be exceeding glad,”** were being fulfilled at that moment. It is only when we realize the great love which Jesus manifested to us that we can rejoice when we are made to suffer for His sake. Many another has found great joy even while undergoing persecution.

James Renwick, the last of the Scottish martyrs, said of his suffering: “Enemies think themselves satisfied that we are put to wander in mosses and upon mountains; but even amidst the storms of these last two nights, I cannot express what sweet times I have had when I had no covering, but the dark curtains of night; yea, in the silent watch, my mind was led out to admire the deep and inexpressible ocean of joy wherein the whole family of heaven swim. Each star led me to wonder what He must be who is the star of Jacob, of whom all stars borrow their shining.”

THE UNCEASING ENERGY OF A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH

“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (5:42). They taught daily, they taught publicly and they taught privately. They never tired of preaching and teaching Christ. After they had been in prison and had been beaten they might have said, now after what we have gone through we need a time of retirement.

They did not say, our name will henceforth be a reproach perhaps we had better retire permanently. They went right forward the more diligently telling over and over the glad tidings of the Gospel.

The Rev. Chas. Simeon kept the picture of Henry Martyn in his study. Move where he would through the apartment it seemed to keep its eyes upon him and ever to say to him: "Be earnest! Be earnest! Don't trifle! Don't trifle!" And as if in reply he would say: "Yes I will be in earnest: I will not trifle; for souls are perishing, and Jesus is to be glorified." Christians should look away to Martyn's Master and to Simeon's Saviour. They should ever hear His command, Go, preach! Daily, privately and publicly, they should cease not to teach and to preach Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS (Acts 5:17-42)

1. How bitter did the opposition grow at this time?
2. How did it differ from former opposition?
3. Was the persecution aroused because of some wrong-doing of the Christian Church?
4. Which party was in power among the Jews.
5. What effect did the growth of the church have upon the influence of the Sadducees?
6. If the church is faithful may she expect to escape opposition?
7. What effects does the success of the church have upon Satan?
8. How did the apostles get out of prison?
9. For what purpose does God protect and deliver His disciples?
10. How soon did the apostles obey the command to preach again?
11. How were the officers perplexed by the deliverance of the apostles?
12. What did the testimony of the high priest indicate concerning the influence of the Gospel in Jerusalem?
13. How did the apostles answer their persecutors?
14. What does Christ always expect of his witnesses?
15. What man was used in God's providence to deliver the apostles from their persecutors?
16. Can we approve of the attitude which Gamaliel took toward the Gospel?
17. Is it right for men to take a neutral attitude toward the Gospel at any time?
18. Does physical success prove the truth or falsity of a doctrine?
19. Were the disciples downcast after this persecution was over? What lesson is there here for us?
20. What was the result concerning their activity? What should be ours when the church is opposed?

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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