

17. The Church Rejoiced in Persecution

In our last topic, we saw the need to prepare our physical and spiritual children for opposition and even persecution. We saw that the Jewish religious leaders arrested the apostles for speaking about Christ. Christ showed the Jewish religious leaders that they were not in control by sending an angel to let the apostles out of prison so that they could go back to the temple and share with the people about the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostles were again taken back to face the Jewish religious leaders. In our topic today, we are going to see how the apostles answered the religious leaders.

In Acts 5:29-32, we read, “But 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 you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand *to be* Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.’” The Jewish religious leaders reminded the apostles that they had told them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus. Here, we see the answer of Peter and the other apostles. Their answer was, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” This gives us an example of how to answer if anyone tries to stop us from speaking about the death and resurrection of Christ.

However, the apostles did not stop speaking after they had said that they ought to obey God. They continued speaking and again spoke about the death and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles said that God had raised Jesus from the dead after the religious leaders had murdered Him by hanging Him on the cross. 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Then, 1 Corinthians 15:19-20 adds, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Those who reject Christ do not want to hear about the death and resurrection of Christ but that is the message that they need to hear in order to have life. Our desire is for them to receive that life.

The apostles also said that the Father had exalted Jesus. At that very moment, Jesus was sitting at the right hand of the Father. The Father said that Christ is both a Prince and a Savior. The word translated “Prince” here means the author or originator of something. In fact, the word is translated “author” in Hebrews 12:2 where we read, “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus is the One who provided salvation and made our faith possible. Then, in Hebrews 2:10, we read, “For it was fitting for Him, for whom *are* all things and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” Here, the word is translated “captain” and points out the fact that Jesus is the One who provided that salvation through His sufferings. That is why Christ is able to provide forgiveness of sins to all who repent.

The apostles said that they were witnesses of the death and resurrection of Christ. They also said that God has given the Holy Spirit as a witness to all those who obey Him. Romans 8:9 tells us,

“But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.” Every Christian has the Holy Spirit dwelling in them as a witness of their salvation, which we received as a result of our repentance and our faith in the death and resurrection of Christ.

When the Sanhedrin heard the words of the apostles they reacted with great anger. Acts 5:33-34 says, “When they heard *this*, they were furious and plotted to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.” Most of the Jewish religious leaders were ready to kill the apostles. However, a Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel spoke first. Gamaliel was a highly respected teacher of the Jewish law. As a result, the others on the Sanhedrin were willing to listen to him before they killed the apostles. Gamaliel told the officers to take the apostles outside while he spoke to the Jewish religious leaders.

Acts 5:35-39 tells us what Gamaliel said to the rest of the Jewish religious leaders. Those verses tell us, “And he said to them: ‘Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God.’” Gamaliel told the religious leaders to think carefully before they killed anyone.

Then, Gamaliel reminded the Sanhedrin of two other leaders that had arisen and gathered a group of followers around themselves. Theudas had claimed to be a leader who would set the Jews free from Roman control. He persuaded four hundred men to join him in his plan. However, he was killed and the men who had followed him were scattered. Later, a man named Judas of Galilee became a leader during the time of the census. Luke 2:2 says, “This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.” This was the census which caused Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem so that they were in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. Many people followed Judas. However, he was also killed and the people who followed him were scattered.

After giving these two illustrations, Gamaliel told the Jewish religious leaders to leave the apostles alone. He told the Sanhedrin that if the apostles were depending on their own strength their plans would come to nothing. Christ told the apostles the same thing the night before He was crucified. John 15:5 says, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” Christ told the disciples that they would bear much fruit if they would abide in Him but their lives would produce nothing if they depended on themselves.

Gamaliel then warned the Sanhedrin that if the apostles were depending on God for their strength the Jewish religious leaders could do nothing to stop the apostles. Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” We can do nothing in our own strength but Christ

can give us His strength to do all things. Gamaliel knew that God would give the apostles strength if they were serving God. As a result, he also warned the other leaders that they could not stop the apostles if they were depending on God. In fact, the religious leaders would be fighting against God if the apostles were receiving their strength from God.

The rest of the Sanhedrin listened to Gamaliel and had to agree that he was right. As a result, Acts 5:40-42 says, “And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” The Jewish religious leaders were willing to choose not to kill the apostles but they did give them each a beating and commanded them not to speak in the name of Jesus any more.

The apostles had already said in Acts 5:29, “But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’” As a result, the religious leaders knew that their threats would not stop the apostles from speaking. However, the beatings did give the religious leaders a way to show their anger and try to use fear to silence the apostles. However, those beatings did not produce the result that the religious leaders wanted. We see that as the apostles left the Sanhedrin they were filled with joy. They counted it a privilege to suffer shame for speaking boldly about Jesus. Here, we see that we want to show our children by our example that it is a privilege to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. He died for us so it is a privilege to suffer for Him.

In addition to rejoicing for the privilege to suffer for Christ, the apostles continued to tell the people about Christ. They spoke about Him daily in the temple when the crowds came for the times of prayer at the morning and the evening sacrifices. In addition, we see that they were sharing the message of the death and resurrection of Christ in every house. In Acts 2:46-47, we read, “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Threats and a beating did not stop or even slow down the apostles. They continue to share the message of the death and resurrection of Christ just as they had done when the church first began.

We may face opposition and even persecution for sharing the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. However, we provide an example for our physical and spiritual children to follow as we continue to share that message. Our children will see from our example that the Lord will work in great ways through our lives as we are obedient to Him and others will be drawn to Christ. May the Lord richly bless you as you provide your children with an example of the fact that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ.