

Suffering for the Gospel
Acts 5:12-42

James 1:1-18

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Responsive Psalm 56:1-11

This morning we are going to pick up right where we left off last week in chapter 5, of the book of Acts so, let us read this morning starting in verse 12, and going to the end of the chapter. (read Acts 5:12-42)

Last week in the end of chapter 4 we read the account of Ananias and Sapphira, and chapter 4 ended saying “So great fear came upon the church and all who heard these things.” Yet, we see in verse 14 here of chapter 5 it says that “believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” It would seem that such an event that would drive such a fear into the people would instead cause them to flee it, but rather it had the opposite effect. These accounts that we have recorded here I think serve a purpose to highlight the supernatural characteristic of this fellowship of early believers.

There was much power in the Holy Spirit's ministry, Already, we had Pentecost, where the disciples were speaking in tongues, and event which made the gospel of Christ available all, there was no language barrier, nothing hindering for the spreading of the gospel to all people. Then we saw the account of the healing of the Lame man outside the temple, a very visible, noticeable miracle for this man would have been known by all in the area. But even in that account, we see the Holy Spirit's protection of Peter and John as they are brought before the High Priest, who wanting to silence them could find nothing to accuse them of and had to let them go.

Then last week, we saw the unity that was among those believers there in Jerusalem. They had a compassion and concern for one another, they did what they could to help with each others needs not esteeming themselves any better than anyone else. They were of one heart, and one of one mind in the spirit. Luke then gives the account of Barnabas selling his property and giving it to the apostles for them to distribute as needed, and it is immediately compared to the hypocrisy of the gift given by Ananias and Sapphira. In this example again we see the power of the Holy Spirit brought upon these 2 who were struck down by God, for their deceit and evil plotting.

With all of these examples we have seen so far, we again get this picture of a great supernatural work being done among the people. And these works are not done in the presence of one or two disciples, but are all very public and very open. At this point the last count that we had was in chapter 4, said that there were about 5000 men who were following Christ, believing and being baptized. And that they were gathering at the temple, worshiping and praising God, but despite all of this that was going on, there was still many who did not believe, nor did they join but rather watched from afar as we see in verse 13, “Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.” I think that this is an important thing to point out, that the people esteemed them highly. This stood out to me in light of what I see parades itself as Christian today.

It would seem that there are basically 3 camps of “believers” There are the passive believers...the ones who claim Christ but do little to show it, their lives rarely reflect it. There is a sort of nominal assent to God, a mention of him on the holidays...but for the most part, their belief is passive, it really isn't much a part of their life. Then you have your militant believers, these are those who walk around in arrogance with their heads held high, acting like they are just a little better than everyone else, who have no problem telling you why you are wrong, who are quick to cast judgment, and are very vocal and aggressive in their conduct with the world. Then last, is those who's faith reflects the examples we are given in scripture. The meek, the humble, ones who are not looking to draw attention to themselves, nor react swiftly and harshly, but instead have a passion for the word, and a love for God that is reflected in their response to the world and the people around them.

And this is the example we see here in Acts, this large multitude of believers who are gathering together to worship and praise God, to have compassion on the needy, and even all this is a ministry to those watching, for it says that even those who did not join them esteemed them highly. The goal in our conduct in this world as Christians in all that we do should be to reach the lost. We should not be an abrasive people, and sadly it is this abrasiveness that it seems that the world sees when they look at the church. They see a group of people who they believe are unloving, judgmental, arrogant, and hypocritical, and sadly in many ways they are not wrong. The reality I think honestly, is that the church is just as much of a mission field today as any 3rd world country. For the church has gone astray, having put up for itself idols of success, and in doing so have compromised the gospel, being more concerned of how many people they can bring in through programs, or entertainment, or as I had just learned about recently, a local church here has started serving alcohol at their services.

Compare that to what we see here in Acts. The apostles are not concerned about drawing people in, they are not concerned about the offense of the gospel, they are preaching the word...and God is adding to the church, no gimmick, no tricks, no bait and switch, just the word of God alone. And it is apparent that it is the word of God preached working in the hearts of those the Holy Spirit has prepared that is bringing people in. For even though many witnessed the miracles and saw and heard what was going on, we see that there were many who still did not join them, who remained outside and did not believe. Our churches today have it wrong, it is not what we do that will add to the body, it is what we say...and if we are not sharing the gospel of Christ, if we are not warning of the coming punishment for sin and the only hope we have for redemption then we are a false church adding false converts.

And while we should be mindful to not bring any cause for persecution upon ourselves for the sake of the gospel, just as Paul wrote, as much as it is within our power, we should leave peaceably with all men. Yet the truth is that the gospel message itself will bring anger and persecution from those who hate God. In our text today we also see 2 examples of unbelievers, to the reaction of the gospel message. We see those who do not believe, but yet still have a level of respect for they see and recognize in the believer goodness in their conduct, but we also see those like the High Priest who are greatly offended by the word and seek to cause harm. But that should be of little concern for us, for we like the disciples did should pray Lord, look upon your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word. Knowing that this God that we serve is sovereign and that nothing will happen to us outside of his will for us, and we see that here in these past 2 chapters in Acts with Peter and John. Already they have been arrested twice, and warned by the High Priest that they should cease, and no longer speak of Jesus....yet their response was “We out to obey God, rather than man.” And we see God had delivered them time and time again.

No matter what man may plot, no matter the schemes that man may create to lash out against God, God is sovereign, and even those things which they mean for evil God works for good. There is no better example of this than the death of Jesus on the cross. The very thing that was intended to end his following, only served God's purpose of redemption and now the holy spirit has come and is working in the hearts of people to believe. And it is this truth that is not lost on Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, a man who was well respected among the people. Just as God used Judas, and the religious leaders in Jerusalem, and the Roman's to accomplish his plan of redemption, this man Gamaliel God has used in the protection of his Apostles.

Gamaliel understood what was happening here, as he gave examples of various other times that men rose up as some sort of religious leaders, or messiah and when they died their followers scattered, but with the followers of Jesus he saw it was different. As we see in our text this morning he warns them, that this very thing that they are seeking to persecute may in fact be from God and they should be careful that they not be found fighting against God. I find it interesting that although it says that they agreed with him, the rest of the Sanhedrin still took the apostles and, beat them, warning them to not talk about Jesus. So really, they did not heed the advice of Gamaliel. This really shows the darkness of their hearts, that even when confronted that there is a possibility that these men's words and ministry could be from God, they still sought to silence them.

After they had been beaten and set free, look what it says in verse 41. "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." Rejoicing that they were worthy to suffer being beat, and threatened by the religious authority in Jerusalem. How often do we rejoice when we are being mocked, ridiculed, and persecuted by our friends, our family, or society at large. Rejoicing is not usually our go to reaction, rather we respond in fear, or anger, or self pity, it says, that these apostles that were taken rejoiced in such suffering. In many ways we should be thankful that for a moment we are living in a time where we are not greatly persecuted for our beliefs. There is still yet a level of respect toward the religious, but even that is fading as we are seeing what appears to be a great falling away in our churches today. There seems to be a culling of the true church from that which calls itself the church.

As so called christian organizations, denominations, and congregations leave off the gospel, they begin to focus on a social ministry, and as we see today that becomes tainted and now there are many who openly accept sinful behaviors and lifestyles among the so called believers. But in what appears to be a sea of such empty gospel-less ministries, as God has always done since the foundation of the world...he has always kept a remnant for himself, and it would seem that is what we are seeing today as the divide is growing between those who stand firm upon the word of God, and those who want to flirt with the world. Israel did this if you remember, and what did God say about Israel? Jeremiah 3:8 "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also"

In many ways I think that this is what we are seeing, the church has played the harlot with the world, trying to use the worlds ways to entice people, they have left the one true God and sought after the idol of success. And I believe it won't be long, as this divide continues to grow and become more apparent that those of us who stand upon the word of God, calling sin as sin, and calling for the world to repent will start to feel the sting of persecution. Only God knows, but we should look at these apostles here in acts when we look toward those days...and not be fearful, or cower, or even be anxious and fret over them, for it is in the darkness that the light shines.

It seems that God has always been pleased to use hardship, and trials for the spread of the gospel. It seems that we are such a stubborn, stiff necked people that he must first be torn down before we are brought to a place that we would be open to hear. There is a reason that Paul wrote, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence."

I had seen a post online this week talking about suffering, saying why does it seem that there is always trouble, why are we always suffering. And I got to thinking about that, and the answer, is to the Glory of God. May we be found worthy to suffer for the sake of the gospel. And in many ways that is the purpose and reason for suffering is it not? For the believer to grow in their faith, to find grace and peace and reliance solely upon God. And for the unbeliever, maybe you need that suffering to be torn down to a place of hopelessness before you can hear God. In fact I wouldn't say maybe.. I would say yes, you do need to be torn down to your base level, to see yourself for who you really are, a sinner worthy of all punishment and suffering and then turn, repent and give it all to the only one who can give strength and hope in that moment.

Truly knowing God, is truly resting in him through all things, knowing that all purpose, all meaning is found in him. This is what separates Israel, from the true Israel, or in other words...God's children, from those who appear religious. We have a good example of that here with this Pharisee Gamaliel, for he does not argue that these men are right, but rather that they should play it safe....in a way trying to hedge his bets, and skirt around the middle, seeking his own safety, his own life, not willing to give his life and stand with the apostles, just like many we see claiming Christ today. There is an ascent, an understand, and a claim...but an unwillingness to truly give of oneself to God. Holding on to the old ways, holding on to selfish desires, claiming a love for God, but having no true willingness to fully commit. It's the rich young ruler isn't it, Jesus tells him.. go sell, all you have and follow me...and he turns away sad, because he has much and ultimately was unwilling to part with it. Not seeing that the riches of God's glory is worthy of sacrificing the fleeting glory of this world.

So in many ways, we can look at these Apostles rejoicing in their persecution because it stands as a proof of love for God....for they are willing to risk it all for the sake of the gospel. And in that there is much to rejoice for, because it is God working in us to do so, as he told them.. do not worry about what to say when they bring you to the courts, for the holy spirit will give you words....and look at God's mercy here, that this one Pharisee would stand up and warn the others to be careful when dealing with these men. God is sovereign and in control of all things, without Gamaliel, there it is possible that they would have been jailed, or worse yet.. put to death...but nothing is random, nothing is left to chance but it is all God.

This is the challenge I think that we should take from this passage this morning for our own lives, and in our own ministries....are we trusting God, or are we afraid of mankind? May we be more like these disciples, to be ever faithful to God and his word, to stand solid on truth and not be swayed, when trials arise, when persecution comes...may we like them also rejoice and praise God for being found worthy to suffer such for his name. Having our hearts and minds set upon him, our hope, our Savior, our king.