

The Apostles Meet Opposition

By Tom Stephens

Acts 5: 17-28

On the evening before his arrest, Jesus assured His followers: “Since they persecuted me, naturally they will also persecute you...the people of the world will hate you; for you will be expelled from the synagogues” (John 15:20-21; 16; 2).

It’s not a promise most believers want to claim, but its fulfillment was, and is just as certain as any other prophecy. Because of the continuance of the Apostle’s ministries, the Sanhedrin clamped down, and they arrested Peter and his colleagues. When God miraculously freed His spokesmen in the night, the apostles marched straight back to the temple and resumed their preaching!

Again, they were detained and commanded to never speak in Jesus’ name again. Then the apostles vowed to continue their relentless proclamation of the gospel, obeying God and not man. They were severely scourged, but this did not dampen their determination, adding credibility to Gamaliel’s statement to the Sanhedrin that they were likely fighting a losing battle. The high priest and his friends, the Sadducees, reacted with violent jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in jail. These Jewish leaders were God’s own people who claimed to know Him; and knew His Word almost by heart, yet they refused to know the author of that Word. Their jealousy was violent, which, when translated, also means “zealous”. They desired to completely wipe out this “sect”. The Apostles and the other followers of Christ had earned more respect than the Sanhedrin ever knew; and we must remember that the Sadducees had no power over evil, or sickness.

Remember also Caiaphas had condemned Jesus to death, and was still the high priest, along with all the other men on his council. Yet...though the Apostles had power, great boldness in preaching God’s anointed Word, they were not free from hatred and persecution. They were arrested, jailed, scourged, slandered, and ridiculed by community leaders. Troubles did not disappear. They were less threatening because the believers had a *just perspective* of the battle before them. They knew where they came from, where they were, and especially their destination! We must be more serious about our commitment to God than our reactions to men.

But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new and wonderful life in Christ Jesus”. The zealous religious leaders thought they could silence the apostles. Wrong. They could not, for an angel of the Lord released them and told them to go back to the temple and preach the life-changing gospel of the Lord.

The angels deliver messages from God to protect, give guidance, offer encouragement, carry out punishment, fight evils for man’s liberty, and patrol the earth. Satan’s angels oppose God’s angels and attempt to battle the righteous angels in the air (Satan’s angels are from the pit and are demonic in design). *Angel of the Lord* denotes divine intervention; and the angel of the Lord also indicates the very presence of God. The Sanhedrin did not believe in angels, either good or evil. The Apostles were to preach the complete gospel, leaving nothing out. The nature of the message was, and is “new life”. Our Mighty God can deliver any person at any time. He can go into the deepest dungeon or the deepest “outer limits” (Verses 20-21a).

“So the apostles entered the Temple about daybreak and immediately began teaching.” They were consistent in their teaching of complete obedience; they fully persuaded, courageously and boldly. The Temple was busy at daybreak, as many stopped there to worship during the early part of the day (6:00 a.m.). Soon their absence in jail would be noted. They would have a much more hostile group to preach to than Temple worshippers. There is no fear of man’s power here.

Note: Consider here that the angel commanded the apostles to disobey the law. This would cause brutal flogging. No, that’s not odd! Serious students of the Bible know that obedience to God often means pain and

suffering. Remember what God relayed to Ananias about Saul that day. We recognize that being persecuted for Christ is a deeper kind of blessing. What biblical commands, if obeyed, might result in discomfort to us now, and how will we react to that discomfort?

“When the high priest and his officials arrived, they convened the high council, with all the elders of Israel. They sent for the apostles to be brought for trial.” But meanwhile back at the courthouse: The Sanhedrin Council which was made up of 70 men, plus the high priest had determined to finalize the problem this day. This is the same group that assembled for Jesus’ trial only weeks before. So, after convening the entire council, they sent for the apostles to be brought to trial and what a surprise awaited the council! **Note:** If we were threatened with our lives by haters of Christianity today, even the law, would we be quiet? Reconsider the reaction of the apostles after being warned, arrested, flogged, jailed, and miraculously released by angels. Without hesitation, they continued in the ministry with the same boldness. When we are utterly convinced of the truth of Christ’s resurrection, and when we intimately know the presence and the power of His Holy Spirit, we will speak out for Jesus Christ, no matter what! (Vs. 21.b)

When the Temple guards went to the jail, the men were gone. So they returned to the council and reported, “The jail was locked, with the guards standing outside, but when we opened the gates, no one was there!”

The Temple guards were of the tribe of Levi, and were literally “priests”. They were stationed around the Temple to keep order while many were there to worship and pray as the non-believers prayed. These guards returned from the prison rather disturbed because all the doors were locked, all the prison guards were at their posts (funny they did not even miss the prisoners), but the prisoners were not there! This was a miracle so big that they that it was totally undeniable (Verse 23).

“When the captain of the Temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on” (Verse 24).

They “were at a loss to explain” how these men had escaped from a locked cell. Professional guards do not lose 12 prisoners! The captain was a high-ranking official belonging to the priestly aristocracy (Sadducees), second in command only to the high priest.

“Then someone entered and said, ‘Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the Temple courts teaching the people.’ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They didn’t use force because they feared that the people would stone them” (Vss. 25-26).

Get a mental image of this picture and put yourself in the place of the Temple guards and high priest with the other 70 and imagine how you would respond when you realized the escaped prisoners were now back in the Temple courts preaching again! The officials were afraid to use force because of the power of the Church. They were afraid they would be stoned, but I feel that by now, the entire Jewish leadership was beginning to see divine power at work, but refused to give in and the guards did not want a riot on their hands.

They made the apostles appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said, “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” The Temple was near the complex which housed the high priest (Vss. 27-28).

Why didn’t Caiaphas even mention the name “Jesus”? It was because the leaders did not want to seem guilty of crucifying the Christ. “This name” should be “This man’s Blood”. The hatred of the name “Jesus” was now clearer than ever, for the apostles had “filled Jerusalem with their teaching”.

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