

Five Essentials of Evangelism, Part 2

Scripture: Acts 5:1-42

Code: 44-22

Let's open the Word of God to the fifth chapter of the book of Acts. We are in the middle of this chapter. It's a narrative chapter. It gives us some history of the early church, but also it gives us a pattern for understanding early church evangelism. As we read the narrative running all the way from the beginning of the chapter and the story of Ananias and Sapphira all the way to the end, verse 42, we follow the flow of the early church's impact, and it's an immense impact.

I reminded you last time that as we talk about evangelism, we are talking about the reason you are here. The reason you, as a believer, are not in heaven is because you need to do evangelism. The Lord builds His church through His church. The Lord uses the saints to draw the elect. His means is evangelism through men and women. We are on the earth to reach the chosen of God with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. "How will they hear without a preacher?" Paul writes in Romans 10, "And how will they preach unless they're sent?" You have to go and you have to go with the right message.

The book of Acts began in chapter 1, verse 1 with a reference to all of that Jesus began. We like to talk about the finished work of Christ and rightly so. The finished work of Christ was His cross work, His work of putting an end to sin, His work of making atonement, His work of providing salvation, providing propitiation or satisfaction to God by being a sacrifice that satisfied divine justice. We understand the finished work of Christ. We know that as He gave up His life on the cross, He said, "It is finished." And the triumphant commendation of His finished work was that the Father raised Him from the dead.

But there was a work that Jesus only began, and the beginning work was the work of calling His people together. Jesus began to do this work in His life, and then He extended that work through the apostles. The first generation church then picked up the work, and it goes on all the way down to our time. To empower us to do this, our Lord promised that He would send the Holy Spirit. He promised that in the upper room on Thursday night of Passion Week to His disciples and on the Day of Pentecost. That happened.

You remember in Acts 1:8 He says, "You will receive power after the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth." The powerful witness is the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost that promise came true. The Spirit of God came, and the Spirit of God empowered the believers and has continued to empower every believer since because all of us are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we possess access to His power.

We are then empowered for evangelism. Again, that's why we are here. The Lord constantly builds His church, adds believers to His church through the faithfulness of His church. We see this unfold in the fifth chapter of the book of Acts in the case of the first church. There are at least five features of this early church evangelism, and I've been kind of pointing them out to you.

I'll remind you about number one. The first feature of their effective evangelism was purity. We remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira at the beginning verses of chapter 5, how they had lied to the Holy Spirit. They were professing believers who were in the church. As far as the church knew, they were legitimate. They belonged. They were a part of everything. They decided that they wanted to get in on the respect and the admiration that certain people were getting because they were selling what they had to provide money to meet the needs of folks whose needs were known to them. It was great love and great generosity and great unity. That's how chapter 4 ends.

So they wanted to be among those who were admired and honored, and so they promised to sell a piece of property and give all the proceeds to the church for distribution to the needy saints. However, they kept back some of it and thus, they lied to the Holy Spirit. They were deceitful, and you remember the story. They showed up at church and they came to present their offering, their deceptive offering. First, Ananias dropped dead as God executed him in front of the whole church. A few hours later his wife showed up, and she dropped dead at the very time the young men were coming back into the service from having buried her husband.

The Lord was saying, "I want a pure church. I want a pure church." Holiness validates the message. Holiness validates the message. If we are not a people with transformed lives, then proclaiming the gospel of transformation is hypocrisy. Holiness validates the message, and the Lord made that very clear. That is why Peter says later in his first epistle, "Judgment must begin at the house of God." It did begin in that first church, and God did it. From then on, there have been times throughout church history, even in our time when the Lord has also exercised the right to take the life of a believer.

We are told about that in the early years of the church; not the church in Jerusalem, but the church in Corinth where some people died because of sins committed at the Lord's Table. We are reminded at the end of the New Testament by the apostle John writing at the end of the first century that there is sin that brings death in the life of a believer because you're such a hindrance to the testimony of the church that the Lord removes you.

Judgment begins at the house of God. God was in action at that first judgment, which is in Acts 5. When the first time we see the sins of the saints appear in the church, God takes dire action, executing those people in front of the whole church. May we also understand that this had an immense effect on the church. Verse 11, "Great fear came over the whole church and over all who heard of these things." They knew that church was serious business, that God was serious about sin and righteousness. We talked about how important it is that the church pursue holiness, that the church be pure. What a terrible detriment is it to the testimony of the church and the effectiveness of the gospel when you have impure Christians, sinful people claiming to be transformed by Christ.

Even worse, when you have sinful, impure leaders in the church and pastors in the church. But when the church is pure, pursuing holiness, when the church deals with sin in the way that we are told to deal with it, confront it, take two or three witnesses, tell the whole church, and even remove the person from the church if they don't repent. When we are serious in dealing with sin, the church attracts people who seek holiness and the church becomes the enemy of hypocrites and false believers. It pays huge dividends to deal with sin in the church. It thwarts the hypocrites and the false Christians and it invites those who are true believers, and who are true believers because they want their sin dealt with and they want their life transformed.

So the first mark of early church evangelism and the necessary platform on which all testimony becomes believable is the purity of the church. The second thing that marked the church is power. We picked it up in verse 12. "At the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders were taking place among the people." If you'll look down in verses 15 and 16, this display of apostolic power was to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also, the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, demons, and they were all being healed."

This is an explosion of the miraculous. The church that is believable, the church that is impactful is the church that has a history of the miraculous because that's how we know God is in it. There is no parallel to the history of the Christian church. You can take any religion in the world and there is nothing in any world religion, large or small, that can parallel the inception of the early true church of Jesus Christ, the church of God. This massive array of miracles: casting out demons, healing diseases, raising dead people, controlling nature, done by our Lord Jesus Himself, also by the apostles and even after the Lord has ascended back into heaven, the apostles are still doing miracles to such a degree that everyone is being healed and being delivered.

They understand that the power is in the apostles, and that's where it needed to be set because the apostles needed to be seen as the spokesmen for God. With all the teachers floating around in ancient times, as in all times, why would you believe the apostles? The New Testament hadn't been written, so why do we believe them? We believe them because they have supernatural power, and that's how God validates them.

I've told you before the reason I do not believe that charismatic leaders do miracles is because God would never give miracle power to people with bad theology. He gave miracle power only to His apostles. In fact, Paul writing to the Corinthians says, "These are the signs of an apostle." It was in that apostolic time. The true church is the empowered church, and from its inception its power is clear and the record of that power explosion is contained right here in this history in the book of Acts.

It starts out in chapter 1, verse 8. You remember, "You shall receive power." It shows up in chapter 2 in that amazing eruption of power on the Day of Pentecost, miracle languages, phenomena happening in the natural world. It shows up further in verse 43 when everyone was feeling a sense of awe and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles, chapter 2, verse 43.

We see at the beginning of chapter 3, Peter and John go up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer, and they heal a lame man. This is a man that everybody knows because he's been sitting there begging and the people there all, in verse 9, see him walking and praising God and were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the beautiful gate of the temple to beg alms.

They were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened. This carries all the way through chapter 4 as they try to sort out this power and where this power comes from, and how do they have this power to do these kinds of things? The discussion of that power goes through chapter 4. We come into chapter 5 and where we are right now down in verses 12-16 and the power display continued. Purity and power mark the early church.

Though we don't have miracle power today, we have a history of miracle power. That's our history and that's the validation of the church at its beginning. God, through the Holy Spirit gave to the apostles the ability to write down the record of this and also to write down the sound doctrine that God revealed to them. No religion has this kind of history of heavenly explosion of power, validated by history and by a myriad of eye witnesses; so much so that even the enemies of this truth never could gainsay its power.

Now, that leads us to the third mark as we think about clearing the path for effective evangelism, and it is persecution. It begins in verse 17. We've already seen it in chapter 4, but at least at this point, we pick it up in the narrative of chapter 5 at verse 17. "The high priest rose up along with all his associates; that is the sect of the Sadducees. They were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail."

Now let me just say this: persecution is predictable. Persecution is inevitable. "All that will live godly will suffer persecution." Why? Jesus said it in John 7. "They hate me because I tell them their deeds are evil." If you're going to preach sin to self-righteous proud people, they're going to resist and resent that. We saw in the opening 20 verses of chapter 4, the persecution begun. It didn't take very long, and even that couldn't stop the effect of the gospel.

It was the early church's conviction that they would ignore the persecution and proclaim all the more boldly and loudly the message, and that's exactly what they did. So another wave of persecution comes in chapter 5. This time it comes from the high priest, who is either Annas or Caiaphas, we don't know which. But if you were ever that, you kept that title for life. So either Annas who was behind the scenes or Caiaphas, who was in the position at the time, along with his associates. Who are the associates of the high priest? The Sadducees, the sect of Sadducees.

They are the ones who are the leaders of the temple operation. They're in power in the temple. They are narrow fundamentalists in that they only accept the opening five books of the Old Testament, the Mosaic books. They are collaborators with Rome. They want Rome to be pleased because they don't want to have their power removed and because Rome is the occupying power, their power is only theirs if Rome agrees. They are therefore uptight about any disruption publicly. They are uptight about any potential disturbance or any disturbing person who might be a threat to Rome.

They are also extremely agitated at Jesus because His teaching exposes them as heretics. These Christians are essentially in their view the real heretics. They are not only heretics. They are not only apostate from what they believe is the true religion, but they potentially are disturbers of the peace that could bring Rome's head and hand down on them. Palestine is always inflammable because the Jews hate the occupation of any outside power. If that flammable characteristic is not checked, there could be a popular uprising.

What's happening in the early church is explosive. The people are pouring toward the apostles. We read that in verses 15 and 16, carrying all these sick people into the streets and putting them on cots and pallets. The people are coming not only from Jerusalem, but the surrounding region in the vicinity. They're bring people who are sick and afflicted with unclean spirits, and they're all being healed. No one can deny it. No one tries to deny it. You can imagine what a massive rush there

would be in that kind of setting in an ancient world where they didn't know how to cure anything, nothing.

The high priest knows exactly what's going on, along with his associates. They are filled with jealousy. That's *ze/oo* in the Greek. That means anger. It could mean a lot of things: anger, malice, zeal, indignation, but certainly all of that is borne of jealousy, and that's why the translators used that word. They can't stand the explosive popularity of Christianity. They see it as defiant toward their authority. They see it as defiant toward their theology, and they are infuriated.

So they arrest the apostles and put them in the public jail, a horrible place, but the way, a horrible place. For the moment, they think they've solved the problem. But, verse 19, "During the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, 'Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.' Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach."

One of the characteristics of the Sadducees theology is they did not believe in angels. Don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor. He sent an angel. They didn't, of course, believe in resurrection and these apostles and the rest of the believers were preaching a risen Christ. They didn't believe in angels, so God sends one of the very beings they deny, defiantly so, to take His apostles out of prison.

By the way, angels are repeatedly used as messengers in the book of Acts, as we will see. Now, we don't know how the angel got them out, but he opened the gates of the prison and took them out. There's no further explanation of that. We'll see a little more about the miracle of that in just a moment. They are delivered and what are they told to do? Run for the hills and hide or you're going to get thrown back in here. I can't keep doing this. That's not what the angel said. The angel said, "Go stand and speak to the people in the temple," the domain of the Sadducees. "Go there," the heart of error, the apostate temple, "Go there and proclaim to the people the whole message of this Life.

God wants boldness in the face of persecution. The command sounds really incredible. To obey may be a little bit reckless. It's certainly audacious. I love that kind of boldness and so does God, and that's what He expects and that's what He commands through His angel. Obedience at any cost and preach the gospel at any cost. They were expendable. They didn't ask, "Is it safe?" Only, "Is it what you want us to do?" And they are told, "Go speak," and I love this, "the whole message of this Life, the whole message of this Life."

If Christianity is anything, it is life. Life abundant and life eternal, life in His Son. He who is the Life. What a beautiful reference to the Christian gospel. All the words, literally, of this life, this eternal life, this abundant life, this life in Christ. Go and speak this to the people in the temple. "Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach." The angel did a miracle to let them out. Their obedience put them in the temple. They arrive in the morning, and they begin preaching the gospel again. I just remind you that God doesn't release them from a very difficult situation so they can have an easy time. He has a lot bigger plans than that. He puts them right back in the very place that is going to be the greatest threat to the people who put them in prison to start with.

The middle of verse 21, “Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel.” Those are two ways to describe one group, the Sanhedrin. These are the elders of Israel. They’re old. They’re mature. They’re influential. They’re experienced. They are the supreme court of Israel. They come together, calling the Council. They don’t know what’s happened yet. They sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought. They want to indict them. They want to deal with them as a court.

“So they sent word to bring them, but the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back.” Shock. The temple police, a Levitical function, go to the prison and they’re not there. The apostles are not there. Now, watch this, verse 23. Here is their report: “We found the prison house locked quite securely. We found the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.” How did that happen? I don’t know, but it must have been miraculous or you wouldn’t need an angel, a supernatural work of God. A locked jail and all of the sudden, they’re on the outside. No one has unlocked it, and the guard has been there all the time. Mysterious, miraculous event, just another indication of the supernatural realities that are going on in the early church to demonstrate its divine character because only God can do these things. Well, this sets off a panic.

Verse 24, “Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.” They go into a kind of panic. What is going on? Where are they? Verse 25, “But someone came and reported to them, ‘The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!’” The final blow. I suppose they would have thought that they’re out somehow and they’re hiding. No. They’re out, but they’re not hiding.

I was thinking about this. I remembered a few birthdays when Patricia put on the birthday cake candles I couldn’t blow out. Have you seen those? You blow them out and they keep coming back? Well, that’s like the apostles. You can’t extinguish the fire. Satan, by the way, had overreached himself. He extended himself beyond where he could control. He imprisoned them, which only allowed God to do a mighty miracle, confirming the Messianism of Jesus and confirming the legitimacy of the apostles, and confirming the faith of Christians. Satan overreached.

There they were back preaching with more confirmation than ever because now they were there by a miracle that no one could deny. So the captain – this is the man who is responsible for prisoners along with the officers – went to bring them back to the prison without violence where they were afraid of the people that they might be stoned. Yeah. You say why would the people stone them? Why? They’re packing the city out with sick and demon-possessed people, and they know that these people can all be healed and delivered. If these guys come through the massive crowd treating the apostles with violence, intending to throw them in prison; it’s liable to incite a riot from these people who are emotionally high, waiting for the healings and the miracles to take place. Their lives could be in jeopardy.

So they have to do this without any violence because they’re afraid of the people, that the people might revolt and stone them to death. They’re a fragile group of leaders anyway. There’s a lot of resentment toward them. They resented the Sanhedrin. The people did in general, and they resented the Sadducees, and they resented the high priest. They knew they were corrupt. They showed that corruption in the temple operations day after day after day after day, year after year after year. That’s why Jesus went there and assaulted the place at the beginning and end of His

ministry, called it a “Den of thieves.” The people knew that. They knew they were being literally stolen from, robbed. They didn’t have any respect for that operation. Something could have triggered a mob violence action, and they might have lost their lives.

So the idea was to get them out of the temple, bring them back before the court without any violence. Verse 27, “When they had brought them with the intention of taking them back surely to prison, they stood them before the Council.” This is the supreme court of Israel. Stood them there. The high priest then questioned them saying - ” verse 28 “ – We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.” Isn’t that wonderful? I wish somebody would show up here, somebody in power and say, “Okay, you people called Grace Community Church, you’ve got to stop this because you are filling Los Angeles with this teaching.” What a commendation that would be.

That’s what they said. “We gave you strict orders not to do this, not to continue teaching in this name.” That’s said with disdain. They won’t even use the name of Jesus. This is the high priest. “And yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.” This is the first indictment: disobedience, disobedience. We commanded you not to speak in this name, and you are not only speaking, you’ve filled Jerusalem with this teaching. The second indictment, “You intend to bring this man’s blood on us.” You are making us responsible for the death of this man. This name and this man. What disdain is in their unwillingness to say the word “Jesus.” You filled Jerusalem. You are disobedient and you have laid the burden of guilt on us.

Oh, by the way, do you remember what they said in Matthew 27:25 when they were calling for the death of Jesus? Do you remember what the leaders all said? They said, “His blood be on us and our children!” Chapter 2, when Peter preached in verse 23 he said, “Men of Israel, this man you nailed to a cross,” and verse 36, “Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God hath made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Chapter 3, verse 15, “You put to death the Prince of life.” Chapter 4, verse 10, “Let it be known to all of you and all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene whom you crucified.”

Yes, they had held them responsible. When the apostles preached, they preached Christ, crucified Christ, risen, but they preached also that the Jews had been responsible for the death of the Messiah. They filled Jerusalem with this message. Persecution, persecution. It’s an inevitable reality. It is an inevitable reality. Those who hate the gospel, hate Christ and hate those who preach Christ. That’s why Paul says, “I bear in my body, the marks of Jesus Christ.” When he was persecuted, it was Christ they were after. It was Christ they hated, and he took the blows meant for Christ.

Persecution: expect it, expect it. They only saw it as an opportunity to be more bold, more courageous, more straight forward, not to flee to the edges, not to go to the fringes, not to hide, but to rush back into the very heart of the city, right into the middle, into the temple and keep preaching. And as Peter later wrote, they like Christ entrusted themselves to a faithful creator and counted it a privilege to suffer.

There’s a fourth characteristic in the life of the early church that I want to point out to you in this narrative. Not only purity and power, persecution, but this one follows on kind of naturally. Persistence, just so you have another little word for your outline. Did all this arrest and all this harassment and all of these threats scare them, quiet them? No. Proverbs 28:1 – I love this - says,

“The righteous are as bold as a lion. The righteous are as bold as a lion.” Pressure only brings out the best in the righteous.

So starting in verse 29, we see the persistence of these faithful evangelists. Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” That’s the simple reality. “We must obey God rather than men.” Well, you say, what about the fact that we are to be subject to the powers that be? They are ordained of God, as Paul says. What about what Peter says, that we are to submit to the king and those that are in authority over us in his epistle? Well, that’s all true until they tell us not to do what God has commanded us to do or tell us to do what God has commanded us not to do.

We obey God, not man. We have been commanded to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost part of the earth. We will not be silent. We must obey God rather than men. This is a sweeping statement that every believer should be able to make. When you become a believer, you confess Jesus as what? As Lord. You heard that in baptism. You have one master. You are a slave under one master, one Lord, and you obey Him, not men. What men say, what men desire, what men demand, what men want has no bearing on us. You can’t be a slave to two owners. We are slaves of our Lord and you see that bound up in their statement, “We must obey God. We must obey God.” That’s characteristic of a true believer. That’s what Christians should be able to say. We must obey God.

If God says, “Preach the gospel,” we preach the gospel. If God says, “Let the persecution come, and I will draw out of it my own fulfilled purposes and bring blessing to you and glory to myself,” then we preach the gospel no matter what the cost.

Verse 30, Peter and the apostles go on to say, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus.” Again, they don’t believe in resurrection, the Sadducees, but, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.” They reiterate the indictment that offends these men. The end of verse 28, “You intend to bring this man’s blood on us.” Peter in effect says, “Absolutely, we do. You put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross.” This is boldness. “You killed God’s Messiah. We obey God. You disobey God.” Do you remember what God said about Jesus Christ? “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him.” You disobeyed God. You killed His Son. That’s the difference between a believer and a non-believer. We obey God. We obey God’s command regarding His Son and in all that He has commanded us. That’s why the Great Commission says, “Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”

We are marked as believers by being obedient. “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior to grant repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. He rose again to provide salvation and forgiveness.” What’s Peter doing? Talk about persistence. He’s preaching the gospel to the people commanding him to stop. He’s not saying, “Well, as soon as I get out of your presence, I’m going to give this message somewhere else.” He’s giving it right back in their faces.

Peter says, “We didn’t invent this.” Verse 32, “We’re witnesses of these things. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” We aren’t just inventing this. We aren’t making this up. We are eye witnesses of His death and of His resurrection. He has personally called us to this commission. Further, we are empowered by the

Holy Spirit for this work of preaching. We need a pretty powerful dose of this kind of persistence in our lives, don't we? We get a little bit of resistance from family, a little bit of resistance from friends, a little bit of resistance maybe from strangers or whoever. It's easy for us to kind of become silenced. Silence doesn't work in this calling. It doesn't work. We need to be willing to confront those who would silence us and to say we are witnesses of these things.

Peter spoke from personal experience. We speak from the record of personal experience in the New Testament. Persistence marked the early church, just an amazing, bold persistence. Now, all of that bring me to the final section in the chapter. I want to kind of talk through this a little bit starting in verse 33 and maybe in the next 15 minutes we can actually cover all of this. It would be helpful.

There's one more point that you have to consider. Purity is essential. Power is essential. Persecution is to be expected. Persistence is essential, but there's another component in the impact of the early church. I'm going to give you the word, and then I'm going to explain it. Providence, providence, providence. What do we mean by providence? Yes, we can be pure in the church. Yes, we possess the power of a divine record and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Yes, we can face squarely persecution and opposition and be persistent in that, but there is another component that is really beyond our control, and that is providence.

What we mean by providence is God's control of circumstances. Ultimately, the impact of our evangelism is in the hands of God. It is in the hands of God. When the leaders in this Council – this is the supreme court of Israel meeting officially and the apostles are there. Peter and the rest of them from verse 29 to 32 just unpacked the gospel, preached the gospel to the supreme court without flinching persistently.

Verse 33, "When they heard this," when the justices of the Sanhedrin of Israel heard this, "they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them." Cut to the quick? What is that? Some translations, "cut in the heart." The word means to saw in half. It speaks of a violent kind of mental agitation and anguish. You could say about somebody that their words were cutting, but you'd be pretty extreme if you said, "His words saw me in half." They are violently agitated to the very core of their being. The word is sharp and powerful. If I could change the analogy, like a two-edged sword, like a saw. It cuts in half. Their hearts are literally torn asunder because of the persistent preaching of these Christians.

They had indicted these believers in this man, this name for heresy; heresy about the resurrection. Yet they kept preaching the resurrection. Right in the faces of the supreme court they preached the resurrection. They had been forbidden to talk about this person, to preach His name, and yet they did it. They had been jailed for doing it. They came right out of jail, right back into the temple, kept doing it, defying the Sadducees authority, and then they were indicting the leaders of Israel for the execution of their Messiah, and they repeated that indictment in the faces of the judges. They had been winning converts rapidly by the thousands, defying the Sadducees domination of the people and they will not stop. They will not stop. At this point, we would expect that men with that power and that position who literally have been sawn in half with fury would have executed all of them on the spot. They had the power. They had the force, and they would have met with no resistance, no physical resistance. Why didn't they kill them all on the spot, and put an end to the whole thing?

A very strange thing happens. A Pharisee, verse 34, a Pharisee. Hmm. A Pharisee? In the midst of Sadducean power, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people

stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. Who is this guy? What is going on here? The Sadducees were the dominating faction in the Sanhedrin. The high priests were Sadducees. They were enemies, in a sense, of the Pharisees, but there were Pharisees in the Council. The Pharisees had the people in their influence. The Sadducees had the power. They ran the temple operation, but the Pharisees had the people. The Sadducees were the political collaborators with Rome. The Pharisees were the teachers of the people. They were poles apart religiously, politically. The Sadducees had influence with Rome. The Pharisees had influence with the populace.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, says that because of the popularity of the Pharisees, the Sadducees would not oppose them openly because they didn't want the Pharisees to turn on them because if they did, the people would turn on them. Very important to the Sadducees was the people's good will to overcome the way they were bilking the people and robbing them. The Pharisees wanted to maintain the people's respect, and the Sadducees wanted the Pharisees to deliver the people to them, so they had to be very careful publicly how they dealt with Pharisees.

If a Sadducee had stood up, he might have said, "Call the temple police. Kill them all immediately." But it was a Pharisee who stood up, and the Sadducees are caught in a bit of a dilemma. They want them all executed immediately, but this is a man who represents the population. Not only that, he's a teacher of the law, respected by all the people. Very eminent, exceptional man. In fact, he is known so well that if you look at the Talmud, you will find in the Talmud, he is called "Rabban Gamaliel, the elder." That's a title only given to one man, "Rabban." He was the first one ever called "Rabban." That means master teacher. He's the master teacher.

He commands the Pharisees, and the Pharisees own the people. He's the greatest teacher of his day. By the way, he was the grandson of Hillel, the founder of the School of Hillel, which was one of the two schools of Phariseism. One was Shammai, more conservative and Hillel, more liberal. Great learning, noble character, studied afar, much in advance beyond other rabbis. He was actually given a title. He was called, "The Beauty of the Law." By the way, he died 18 years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

It was said in the Mishna about him this: "Since Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law and purity and abstinence." That all died when he died. That's how revered he was. He had a very famous student. Acts 22:3 names him. Saul of Tarsus was mentored by this man. This is a very powerful man. When he stands up to talk, everybody listens. So he says to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men." He knows exactly what they propose to do. I don't think you want to act. Act cautiously, act wisely. Don't do anything rash. Think before you act. Use your head, not your emotions. Calm your fears and your fury. You don't want to start something you can't control. You execute these men, and you may have a full blown revolution. God is supreme, he thinks. Let Him handle it.

This is what he says, "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody –" somebody great "– and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were disbursed and came to nothing." Hmm. We don't know who this Theudas is, a somewhat common name. There were a number of them. A lot of disorders were going on led by would-be Messiahs. In fact, in ancient Israel around the time of our Lord Jesus, Israel had a quick succession of a whole lot of rebel leaders who set themselves up as deliverers and Messiahs. "After the death of Herod, 4 B.C.," Josephus says, "there were 10,000 disorders in Judea. It was full of

robberies, and whenever the several companies of the rebels could light upon anyone to lead them, he was created king immediately.”

They were just making rebel leaders into Messiahs and running off with little revolutions. He reminds them of one led by a man named Theudas, and it went nowhere. Then he says, “After this man, –” sometime after this man, “– Judas of Galilee –” We do know him. This would have come in 6 A.D. “Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census –” when Cyrenius, remember, was governor “– and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.”

These things have a way of kind of resolving. This has been tried before, and it came to nothing. So verse 38, “In the preset case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”

That’s human wisdom, and it’s really stupid because not everything that succeeds is from God, right? The principle needs some thought. The first half is true. Occasionally, things kind of resolve themselves. So slow down, let things kind of take care of themselves. The second half is not necessarily true, not everything that succeeds is from God. What he should have said as the Beauty of the Law and the teacher of the Law, let’s open the Old Testament and see if this man Jesus and this message is true to the Scripture. That would have been real wisdom.

If we look at Scripture and we see that He matches Scripture, then we know that He is our Messiah. You don’t want to say that anything that’s religious that succeeds is from God. Is Islam from God? Is Hinduism from God? Is Confucianism from God? Is Buddhism from God? Is Mormonism from God? Roman Catholic Church true representation of God? The fact that something succeeds doesn’t mean it’s from God. It’s kind of interesting to me to think that the wisest men in Israel couldn’t get this right. Go to the Book and compare Jesus with the revelation that we spend every day studying. If they’d have done that, they would have known that beginning at Moses and the prophets and in all the holy writings, the writers all spoke of Him. They could have started in Isaiah 53 maybe.

You can’t judge anything by success. So it was a very noble man who has the power to stop things with a kind of sophomoric, simplistic idea. He sort of popped up out of nowhere. Right guy with the right influence and because He had the right influence, even his bad idea seemed like a good one. If you’re in the right position, people buy anything you say. So verse 40, “They took his advice; after calling the apostles in, they flogged them.” They didn’t get rid of all their anger, so they couldn’t just not do anything, so they flogged them, “And ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them.”

Now, are you starting to get a sense of providence here? Who is this guy? He’s doing something purely on his own human terms. He pops up in the middle of this meeting that could have ended in the death of all the apostles. He belongs to the kingdom of darkness. He makes a silly, unqualified, simplistic statement about reality that doesn’t bear out truthfully; and yet God uses this man acting on his own to keep the opportunity to preach the gospel alive. So they flogged them, ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, released them, “And they went on their way from the presence of the Council rejoicing they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the

Christ.”

This is providence. Providence allowed them to continue to do this, and I submit to you that God has His purposes in every era, in every age, in every country, in every time and place. We can have the purity and we can have the power and we do. We can face the persecution and we can be persistent, but the end of it all is determined by divine providence. We can't create a revival. We can't create an explosion of the gospel in Los Angeles or in America.

They weren't as well-trained as we are. They didn't have any more power than we do. It was the Holy Spirit. We have the truth written down that they had received verbally. They didn't, in a sense, have any more than we do, but providence had ordered the explosion of the church in that time. If you study church history, you know there are times like that. Providence ordered the Reformation. You can ask what happened from 500 to 1500 when you have 1,000 years of darkness, and then explosion of the light of the Reformation.

It's the purpose of God in His providence. God was not ready to shut down the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem. The church was not complete in Jerusalem, and so you read this in chapter 6, verse 1, "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing - " meaning in number " - while the disciples were increasing in number." Go down to verse 7, "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

God providentially kept the gospel going. They were released. They kept preaching. They kept preaching until God was satisfied that the church had been begun. Then in chapter 7, they killed Stephen. Then in chapter 8, wholesale persecution explodes. On the day that Stephen was killed, Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. On that day, a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea, Samaria, except the apostles.

The apostles, of course, began to be martyred. The end of it all really is determined by divine providence. What a wonderful reality that is, isn't it, to know that? We have access to the purity and the power. We face the persecution. We are persistent in the persecution, but divine providence determines our access, our opportunity and the extent of the reach. That's in God's hands. I'm happy to leave that to Him, aren't you? So we don't panic about results, do we? We are just to be faithful about the proclamation. God that? Okay, I'm done. Let's pray.

Father, we are so grateful for your Word, how it lives and move and empowers our thinking and then our action. Just privilege to be in this chapter and to live through these experiences of the blessed apostles. So grateful that we can be considered as part of this long line of godly men and women right down to the present. So eager to trust in your providence. We've seen providence in the past in America. Providence operates so that the gospel is free to be preached and proclaimed anywhere and everywhere in schools, universities, government halls to be proclaimed in businesses. Then we've seen all of that seemingly going away, and you are working in a different way.

Now there seems to be persecution beginning, and threats being breathed out against the gospel, the church, but this too is in your providence. All you ask of us is not that we order the world in which we live. You do that. But that we faithfully proclaim the message with persistence, boldness,

and courage. Use us in that way we ask for your glory. In Christ's name, Amen.

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