

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 14, Chapter 5 continued

Amidst the incredible outpouring of God's Spirit through the miraculous works and deeds of the disciples, what we see in Acts Chapter 5 is a rising level of tension and conflict between the followers of Yeshua and the local Jewish Temple authorities. At first it was warnings from the High Priest Caiaphas to stop healing in the name of Yeshua. When this warning wasn't heeded it followed with floggings. And in the next chapter the tension spills over to the Synagogue and thus is taken up by the population of Jerusalem at large. That is, at first it was those whose livelihoods and status centered on the Temple (the Sadducees, Priesthood and Sanhedrin) that had issues with Peter and the Believers; and interestingly these issues were mostly about a perceived threat to their personal power and authority, although the sticky matter of resurrection also played a role. But then in Chapter 6 we will see the Synagogue take up the persecution of Believers for mostly theological reasons that primarily interested the Pharisees. And these theological issues were less about Holy Scripture and much more about Synagogue customs and traditions.

From a broad panoramic view we see that the spiritual change in Believers brought about by the advent of Christ, and the subsequent empowerment by the Holy Spirit, cannot help but affect the tangible physical world we live in. The notion that our faith can be separated from our daily lives, behaviors, decisions and activities is not feasible if true and sincere faith actually exists within us. The effects of our salvation change everything in us and how we relate to everything around us. Thus while a political philosophy can indeed call for a separation between faith and state, in practice for the true Believer this is an impossibility. This reality automatically brought Peter and the 11 disciples (as well as their followers) into unavoidable direct confrontation with the powers-that-be.

I don't recall who said it, but I once heard a person insist that if a Believer isn't a pariah to the world then they aren't trying hard enough. All throughout the Scriptures we are presented with a mental picture of a wide, yawning chasm between the ways of the World versus those who put their trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. "What has light to do with darkness?", Yeshua asks His disciples. Therefore persecution of Believers by the World is inevitable and we should not be surprised that when we come to faith it not only involves incalculable gain but also loss in the form of relationships and perhaps other things that have meant so much to us in our past but are now incompatible with our new life. Peter's admonishment is that since this fact is inescapable, why not consider it joy if you are being persecuted (experiencing loss) for your faith in Yeshua because in persecution and suffering there can be no better concrete proof that you are firmly on the side of divine righteousness and holiness?

So it is an irony that a religion of peace and love was born and will remain in confrontation, if not battle, with the World until Messiah returns to take charge. This confrontation is what we're seeing in the Book of Acts, and it ought to be what we're experiencing in our own lives. Since this is the case, then last week we discussed the thorny issue of what we should do when our

government installs immoral laws and insists that we obey them. And here in Acts we find Peter making the decision that when God orders one thing and human government the opposite our pathway is clear: obey God, and let the chips fall where they may. This brought us to the matter of civil disobedience, which from the Believer's perspective I would define as knowingly and openly choosing to disobey immoral manmade laws in order to be obedient to the Lord. We'll not review that conversation from last week, but I will sum it up by saying that the answer is that yes, if civil disobedience is our only avenue to obey God, then as Believers we must take it. And that may well mean we pay a price for it that includes loss of personal property, fines, or perhaps going to jail. What I'm proposing is not hypothetical or something that belongs in fiction books; it is here and upon us now. A few weeks ago in America's northwest a Christian bakery refused to create a wedding cake for a gay couple. The local government is currently trying to put them out of business. In France, just this week, a political leader has been indicted on hate crime charges for saying that Islam is a religion of violence and it worships a false god. I told you the story in our last lesson of a Canadian minister who spent 3 months in jail for teaching from the Bible about homosexuality; not publically but inside the walls of his own church, to his own congregation. If this sort of thing is not already happening where you are, it soon will be so it is better to decide now what you will do.

As we left off last week, Peter and the disciples had been arrested (again) by the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin for healing the sick in the name of Yeshua and spreading the Gospel of Salvation in Messiah. While they were in jail an angel of God broke them out in some miraculous way such that when the prisoners were found missing, prison officials found the locks were still intact and the guards were still on duty; but the jail cell was empty. God had once again overruled that which man had decided, but was against God's will.

Let's re-read part of Acts chapter 5.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 5:17 – end

Through His angel God told the disciples to return to the Temple Mount and continue to speak about this new life. The new life was referring mainly to the eternal life given to Believers through faith in Yeshua. They entered the Temple grounds at daybreak meaning that their escape from jail had been during the night. No doubt they went immediately there and had not returned to their homes, yet. The Temple grounds closed at dark and didn't open again until daybreak. Since it was morning the High Priest arrived to his post and convened the Sanhedrin. It seems their first order of business was to deal with these radicals who refused to stop healing in name of, and speaking about, their dead Master, Yeshua. So they told the prison guards to go and get the men from their cell and bring them. Dumbfounded the prison officer said that even though everything was secure and the guards were at their posts, the holding cell was empty.

Escapes like this just didn't happen, and especially when the guards had shown no signs of being derelict of their duties; in fact there is not even a hint of accusation that the guards had fallen down on their jobs. Thus the result was that the Captain of the Guards and the High Priest were perplexed as this simply made no sense. But suddenly some unnamed person comes and tells the High Priest that these escaped disciples are right back at the Temple and

teaching the people! Luke doesn't tell us who this informant is, but no doubt he was in the employ of the Sanhedrin because he was aware that the disciples should have been in jail and now back up on the Temple Mount in defiance of the local authorities. The Captain himself went up with a contingent of Levite guards to the Temple Mount and sure enough there they were. Apparently the Captain went out of his way to treat these disciples respectfully because he didn't want a riot on his hands. After all, people were getting healed right and left and those who were afflicted were anxiously waiting and hoping that they too would be healed. Roughing up the healers wouldn't sit well. So now again standing in front of the Sanhedrin Caiaphas, the High Priest and President of the Sanhedrin began to interrogate them.

Recall that the first time Peter and John were arrested, they were let go because they had violated no law. But before they were released the High Priest told them they were not to teach or heal in the name of Yeshua henceforth. He had essentially made new law (and had the authority to do so) and Peter and John were acutely aware of it. The High Priest now reminds them of this so that no excuse of ignorance of the law could be claimed. But then the real cause of concern for Caiaphas slips out; "moreover, you are determined to make us responsible for this man's death" (this man referring to Christ). What this passage actually says is that "you are determined to bring this man's blood upon us". Bringing blood upon someone means to accuse them of unjust killing; murder. Shedding innocent blood, **dam naki** in Hebrew, is a grievous sin for which there is no atonement in the Law of Moses.

This statement of Caiaphas about the disciples trying to pin the crime of blood upon him directly ties to a passage from Matthew 27.

Matthew 27:20-26 CJB

²⁰ ***But the head cohanim persuaded the crowd to ask for Bar-Abba's release and to have Yeshua executed on the stake.***

²¹ ***"Which of the two do you want me to set free for you?" asked the governor. "Bar-Abba!" they answered.***

²² ***Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Yeshua, called 'the Messiah'?" They all said, "Put him to death on the stake! Put him to death on the stake!"***

²³ ***When he asked, "Why? What crime has he committed?" they shouted all the louder, "Put him to death on the stake!"***

²⁴ ***When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, "My hands are clean of this man's blood; it's your responsibility."***

²⁵ ***All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!"***

²⁶ ***Then he released to them Bar-Abba; but Yeshua, after having him whipped, he handed over to be executed on a stake.***

Notice that it was the head cohanim, head priest Caiaphas, who persuaded the crowd to beseech Pilate to let the murderer Bar-Abba go and instead to crucify the innocent Yeshua. Let me say this way: it was the chief religious leader of the Jews who insisted that the people convict Jesus and pardon Bar-Nabba. So what were the common people to do if the head of their religion insisted that it was the godly thing to do to choose a certain way? Thus in verse 25 when the crowd followed their High Priest and carelessly said that Yeshua's blood would be upon them and their children, then the one who bore most responsibility was Caiaphas. Now, perhaps 3 months later, Caiaphas is furious and defensive when Peter tells him that indeed the blood of the Son of God is upon him. And for this there is no atonement, no escape. The High Priest is not used to being talked to like this.

So in Acts 5 verses 29 – 32 Peter answers Caiaphas's question about why they were back at the Temple doing what he had expressly told them not to do. He says, "We must obey God rather than men". Peter isn't using the words, of course, but he is speaking of justifiable civil disobedience. My fellow Believers he is speaking to us as much as he was to the High Priest. In today's world we (and by we I mean YOU and I) are being battered and threatened with Biblically immoral demands from our civil authorities (and sometimes from our religious authorities) to do things that God expressly forbids. From Gay marriage, to homosexual ministers, to a casual acceptance of a woman's right to kill her unborn child, to insisting that we back the corrupt UN and a non-people who call themselves the Palestinians; and instead we are to boycott and in every way possible stand against God's people Israel. We are not to pray at government functions; we cannot let our children wear a Jesus Loves You shirt to school. We must accept and embrace adherents to Islam as a show of love and tolerance.

Peter is showing us the way to respond; but do we have the fortitude and courage to do it? I can guarantee you that you will be called backward, a hater, ignorant, a fundamentalist, and a heretic if you do respond. Not too long from now I think the word terrorist will be added to that list. So far, I don't see very many who are willing to brave the accusations of men and stand up for what is right. Earlier in Acts 5 we read of Believers who were too afraid to go and stand with Peter at Solomon's Portico in defiance of the civil authorities' order to not preach the truth of Messiah. So fear of the repercussions of disobeying people in authority in order to obey God is not a new phenomenon or challenge for Believers. It is something that we shall face nearly daily until we depart this earth or until Messiah makes His return.

If ever you are looking for a brief summation of the Gospel to tell friends and family who won't give you anything but a few moments of their time, simply copy word for word verses 30 – 32. I mean that quite literally; write it down, copy it, reduce it in size, and stick it in your wallets. Let's go through Peter's Gospel step by step. First he identifies who God is: He is the "God of our Fathers". Who are the Fathers of the Jews? The Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is as important in our time as it was back then. The peoples of the earth worship no fewer gods today than in Peter's day; so for someone to say that they worship God only has meaning when their God is positively identified. And the God that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped is the God of the Israel, YHWH; there is no other. This is why (to the shock and anger of many) I openly and firmly say that the God of Islam is a false God; He is not the same as the God of the Bible. This verse, among many others, is proof. Islam says that their God is the God of Abraham and Ishmael. Ishmael worshipped the moon God and before God chose

Abraham, so did Abraham worship the moon god along with a few others. The God of the Jews is the God of the Tanakh, the Old Testament. The god of Islam is the god of the Koran, the Islamic holy book. Thus Peter identifying the true God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob makes a distinction between Him and all other gods.

The next point is that God exalted Yeshua whereas Caiaphas and his crew had Him killed. Saying Yeshua was raised up is meant both in the sense of resurrection and glorification by placing Christ at God's right hand in Heaven. As I've mentioned before; God's decision about Yeshua was the opposite of men's decision, so He simply overturned the decision to kill Jesus and un-killed Him.

How Messiah was killed also matters; He was hanged on a stake. Hanged doesn't mean to place a rope around the neck; it means to impale on wood. Of course what this is referring to is Yeshua's crucifixion. This matters because several Messianic prophecies call out various elements of Messiah's execution. We find these in Isaiah 50 and 53, Psalms 22, 34, and 69, and a few other OT passages. So Yeshua's death fulfilled the ancient prophecies in detail.

After that, Peter says that Yeshua is Ruler and Savior. That is, He is not only the Messiah in the sense of being a sacrifice for sins. He is also God's chosen ruler over mankind; Christ has authority.

And why did God make Him Ruler and Savior? Verse 31 says it is so that **Israel** would do **t'shuvah** (Hebrew for repent). Stop and think: so that WHO would repent did God make Yeshua Savior? **Israel!** So once again the Two-Covenant Theology that the Law of Moses is for Israel and Christ is for gentiles is shot down. In fact, notice something I've mentioned a couple of times; Peter has so far shown no interest in gentiles (as relates to Christ and the Gospel). In fact it will take a particular incident that is recorded in Acts chapter 10 before God gets the message across to a reluctant Peter that Yeshua is for all peoples, not just Jews.

And, Peter says that "we" (meaning the 12 Disciples plus others) are witnesses to all this. They physically and tangibly saw these things with their own eyes. But finally, Peter states that God gives the Holy Spirit to everyone who obeys Him. Not to **some** of whom obey Him; and **not** to those who do NOT obey Him. In this context obeying God means to welcome His Messiah, Yeshua, and to follow His instructions. So the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a key element, and is part and parcel, of salvation.

Let's sum up Peter's Gospel presentation in 7 points:

1. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
2. Yeshua was executed by humans on a Cross, thereby fulfilling the OT prophecies about Him
3. God resurrected Yeshua from the dead
4. God exalted Yeshua and has placed Him at His right hand, in Heaven
5. Yeshua is not only Savior, He is Ruler.
6. Repentance of our sins that comes from the knowledge of Yeshua is required for forgiveness of our sins

7. All who Believe and obey God are given the Holy Spirit to indwell them

Then verse 33 gives us the response from the members of the Sanhedrin to Peter's Gospel presentation. And what we hear is about what happens when people hear the Gospel; they react in one of two ways. Either they are cut to the quick, feel convicted and open their hearts to it; or they are cut to quick and react in anger and reject it. The Sanhedrin was so hostile to the Good News that the consensus was to put Peter and the disciples to death.

The only thing that stood between the deaths of Peter and the disciples was a man named Gamaliel. One of the few Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, he was known at that time as perhaps the greatest Torah teacher in the Holy Land. The Apostle Paul was trained up in Gamaliel's teaching academy. Gamaliel cautioned a much more measured approach to this problem. Before we discuss what he said, let's see who Gamaliel is.

Gamaliel was a member of the most prestigious Pharisee family in the Holy Land. He was considered as unrivaled in His knowledge of the Torah. He was also known as Gamaliel the Elder, which helps to distinguish him from a grandson named after him (Gamaliel II) who was part of the council of Yavneh that some years after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem finalized the OT canon as we know it today. Gamaliel II also helped to revise the Synagogue and Rabbinical systems more or less as has come down to us in our time. It is so very important to our understanding of the New Testament to grasp that Gamaliel the Elder, and Paul, were products of the Synagogue and not of the Temple. The Synagogue was run by the Pharisees, and their doctrines and teachings revolved around Oral Torah, also known as Tradition. We'll talk much more about this at a later time because we must understand that the same term (such as the word "law") can mean different things depending on whether one is operating within the principles of the Synagogue or operating within the principles of the Temple. This is why, I might add, Paul trips up scholars and laymen alike in trying to understand his writings.

So Gamaliel the Elder makes an eloquent speech to the Sanhedrin, not so much on behalf of the disciples but rather out of enlightened self interest as well as personal religious doctrine. He takes the tact that before the Sanhedrin acts harshly it should consider what happened to other recent movements of radicals and zealots and he offers two well-known examples. The first is of a man named Todah who convinced people that he was a special person that ought to be followed (and no doubt this involved some sort of rebellion against the Roman occupation). About 400 men became dedicated followers. However when Todah was arrested and executed, his movement ended.

Then there was the case of Judas the Galilean who led another uprising against the Romans about 30 years earlier. Apparently the catalyst for his cause was the Roman census taken for tax purposes. But as soon as he was captured and killed, his movement also disintegrated and caused no further trouble. So the lesson, says Gamaliel, is that if a political or religious movement is a strictly human endeavor then when its founder and leader is killed, his followers will soon grow disheartened and fall away on their own.

His conclusion is that since in all likelihood this will be the same case with these Yeshua

followers, then no action at all is probably the best policy. However, if in the off chance this movement really is God-ordained, then no action is also the best policy otherwise the Sanhedrin would find themselves fighting against God.

Very smart man. But, let us also remember something else: the Pharisees were generally sympathetic to their own Jewish people, whether radicals or ordinary citizens, and were strongly against the Roman occupation. So while the Sadducees were beholden to the Romans and always co-operative with them, it was against the law of the Synagogue (run by Pharisees) to turn Jews over to the Romans. Because before his speech the Sanhedrin wanted to have Peter and the disciples executed, that would necessarily mean Roman involvement since Jews were not allowed to carry out their own capital punishment. The Sadducees had no issue with that, but as a Pharisee and leader in the Synagogue system, even the thought of turning Jews over to the Romans to be killed went against Gamaliel's convictions.

The Sanhedrin took Gamaliel's advice. After the deliberation the disciples were called in and once again ordered to stop healing and teaching in the name of Yeshua, and then released. But not before they were flogged. Why were they flogged? Because they indeed were guilty of breaking the law. The law they broke had been established just a few days earlier when Peter and John were arrested and plainly told that they could not preach, heal, and teach in the name of Yeshua. So some punishment had to happen or the Sanhedrin would look weak. Obviously the flogging was not extreme as they returned back to their fellow Believers immediately afterward.

What a victory for the followers of Christ! They had stood up to the Sanhedrin and not given in on their faith. This would set the tone for years to come that Believers were willing to suffer anything to obey Messiah and take the Good News to everyone regardless of opposition. The CJB says that they were actually overjoyed at being seen as worthy to suffer "disgrace" for the sake of Yeshua. The Greek word being translated as disgrace is **atimazo**. **Atimazo** most literally means shame in the sense of loss of one's honor. Among Middle Easterners while the pain of flogging was certainly a major part of the purpose for flogging, every bit as important was that culturally flogging brought shame upon the victim. Shame doesn't mean ashamed like we think of today in the West whereby guilt is the result. Shame was not a feeling of guilt; it was a demeaning social status. A person who was shamed was looked down upon by his family, friends and countrymen. It was a very undesirable social stigma because honor was the status that all people wanted to maintain.

Thus when one was shamed, it became that person's sole goal in life to do whatever it took to recover his or her honor. Different Middle Eastern societies vary a little in how shame was resolved and honor recovered. But often this included killing the person who inflicted the shame. Thus even today we'll hear of the term "honor killing". This is a killing for the purpose of recovering an individual's or a family's honor. In fact, shame and honor was the point of Christ's famous turn the other cheek statement in Matthew 5:39. And the idea was that as horrible as being shamed was in Jewish society, one should be willing to suffer it for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and not lash out.

Thus if you were a Jewish Believer and saw Peter acting joyfully after his flogging and now in his condition of cultural shame, it would have caught you off guard. Thus the final statement that ends this chapter that says that the disciples who still bore their flogging marks went right on teaching and proclaiming the Gospel both in private in people's homes, and in public at the Temple, has a much greater meaning than it does to modern day Believers. This is because shamed people were shunned; they weren't invited into other people's homes. And shamed people hid themselves; they certainly didn't go out in public on their own volition and draw a crowd to boot, or they would have been publically ridiculed. And yes, of course they were continuing in their civil disobedience as they defied the court order to stop teaching and healing in the name of Our Savior Yeshua.

We'll begin Acts chapter 6 next time that prepares for the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.