

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 5:21-32

As we finished last time, we noted how an angel had delivered the apostles from the public jail during the night and instructed them to “Go preach the words of life”.

We pick up Luke’s narrative the next morning when the Sanhedrin sat to examine the apostles once again. Let’s read verses 21-24:

“When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. 22 But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, 23 “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” 24 On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.”

The high priest assembles the Sanhedrin very early in the morning. We know that at daybreak the apostles were already back in the Temple Courts teaching the gospel once again.

When the high priest sent the captain of the Temple and his officers to bring the apostles to them for another examination, the officers discovered that the prisoners were not there. We can imagine their dread of having to tell the high priest of the prisoners’ disappearance.

After all, they were they were responsible for the prisoners' safekeeping.

Now let's pay attention to what the officers of the guard said to the high priest and the Sanhedrin in verse 23: "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

The captain of the Temple and his officers were clearly implying that something supernatural had taken place. Verse 23 says, 23 "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

If the jail was securely locked and the guards that had been posted that night were still standing at their posts, then how did the prisoners escape? It could only have happened a couple of ways: 1. There was some collusion on the part of the apostles and the Temple police. 2. Something supernatural had occurred allowing the apostles to escape right under the noses of the Temple police.

Verse 24 tells us the reaction of the Sanhedrin. Luke writes, "On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this."

It was a confusing and embarrassing situation. The apostles had somehow slipped out of the jail, right past the guards stationed to watch them. The Sanhedrin wondered what would come next.

Let's read verses 25-26:

“Then someone came 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 did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.”

It must have come as a shock that the apostles the Sanhedrin were looking for were right back in the Temple courts teaching the believers again. The apostles did not retreat; instead, they followed the angel’s directions and went straight to the Temple courts, and continued their ministry of the word and presumably, miracles.

Once the captain of the Temple police realized that the apostles were still at the Temple – and inside the boundaries of his legal jurisdiction, he took his officers with him and persuaded the apostles to go with him to the Court of Hewn Stones.

Let me make two observations here. First, this time it appears that all the apostles were arrested, not just Peter and John. Second, the apostles did not put up any resistance, nor did the Temple police use force to arrest them. Both groups had their own motivations for what happened.

Luke tells us that the Temple police did not use force in arresting the apostles because they feared the crowds would turn on them. That is a reasonable concern since we know that the numbers of believers were as many as 10,000 at this point. The Temple police would be in serious jeopardy if they agitated so large a group.

The apostles had their own reasons for not resisting arrest. More than likely, Peter and the rest of the apostles reflected on Jesus’ own reaction to being arrested and tried by the religious and civil authorities. Jesus’ response

to Pilate was, “You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above.” – John 19:11

In addition, Jesus had warned his disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they keep my word, they will also keep yours.” - John 15:19–20

Let’s look at verses 27-28:

When they brought them, they set them before the Sanhedrin. Then the high priest questioned them: “Did we not charge you strictly not to go on teaching in this name? But see, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you want to make us responsible for this man’s blood.”

The high priest’s questions really betrayed their exasperation with the apostles. It also showed just how little control they had over the situation. Consider these factors: First, the Sanhedrin had strictly forbidden the apostles to preach or teach in Jesus’ name. That hadn’t worked; the apostles continued preaching and teaching. The high priest note that the apostles had “filled Jerusalem” with their teaching. Now this was no doubt an exaggeration, but it belies the high priest’s greatest fears.

Second, When the Sanhedrin had arrested and jailed the apostles, a supernatural event had taken place, releasing them from the public jail. The Sanhedrin was

powerless to even keep the apostles jailed overnight, until they could examine them in the morning.

Third – and this is a major reversal – the high priest claims that the apostles are trying to make the Sanhedrin responsible for Jesus’ death. Notice that the high priest cannot even bring himself to say Jesus’ name. Instead, he says, “for this man’s blood”. There is a subtle distancing taking place in the high priest’s choice of words.

Still, it’s ironic that the high priest makes this claim. When Pilate was endeavoring to release Jesus, he offered to exchange the life of Barabbas for Jesus. Matthew tells us what happened next:

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!” – Matthew 27:24-25

The very blame that the high priest complains is the result of the apostles’ preaching and teaching is in actuality the fulfillment of the religious teachers’ curse which they put on themselves and their families.

Let’s look at verses 29-32

Then Peter and the (other) apostles said in reply, “We must obey God rather than human beings. 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, but you put him to death, hanging him on a gibbet.

31 It is he whom God has exalted with his right hand as a prince and savior, to give to Israel repentance and

forgiveness of sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Once again, although Luke credits the response to the high priest's questions as that of the apostles, it is no doubt Peter who is speaking for the group.

At a glimpse, it is obvious that Peter's reply to the high priest is much shorter than his previous sermons. There is also something notably absent – the call to repentance and faith in Christ. These were standard elements of Peter's prior messages – as well as the bulk of the messages in the rest of Acts.

With that in mind, let's see what Peter tells the high priest and the rest of the Sanhedrin. He begins by repeating something he said in his last interview with the Sanhedrin. In the last interview he asked the members of the council, “Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” – Acts 4:19-20

This time, Peter does not ask a question; instead he makes a statement. He says, “We must obey God rather than human beings.” He is making it clear to the Council that to obey their prohibition against preaching and teaching in Jesus' Name is disobedience to God.

As you can see, there is no middle ground. Peter is no doubt reflecting on Jesus' command to “go into all the world”, but it's just a possibility he is thinking of what the angel said the previous night when he released Peter and the others from the public jail. He said, “Go, stand in

the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” – Acts 5:20

It's worth noting that there have been many times in history when believers have had to take the approach of obeying God rather than laws, rulings, and decrees that ran contrary to God's Word. As we will see, this approach required a willingness to also suffer whatever penalties were imposed by governing authorities.

We can go back and see this even in the Old Testament. When King Artaxerxes was convinced by his royal cabinet to issue a decree forbidding anyone from praying to any god other than the king, here's what we read:

“Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.” – Daniels 6:10

Here is a clear example of a believer refusing to obey a king – and recognizing that consequences will follow. Daniel was thrown into the lion's pit, but Yahweh rescued him. That doesn't negate the initial danger that Daniel's disobedience to Artaxerxes presented.

Peter moves from the apostles' need for obedience to God to return to an earlier theme of his sermons. He tells the Sanhedrin, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, but you put him to death, hanging him on a cross. It is he whom God has exalted with his right hand as a prince and savior, to give to Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins.” vv 30-31

Here we find Peter's earlier outline of what human authorities did to Jesus as opposed to what God did. There is a subtle change in Peter's newest statement. He reverses the order and puts God's actions in raising Christ from the dead first, and the authorities' actions of crucifying Christ second. In the prior sermons, Peter also offered an opportunity for the Council members to repent of their actions and accept Christ as Messiah. This is not present in Peter's latest message.

We also have a new phrase in this short sermon. In verse 30, Peter says, "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus". While Peter might be referring again to the resurrection, there is another possibility. Peter may be using the phrase, "...raised up Jesus" in another sense. That phraseology is often used to speak of God raising up kings and other theocratic leaders in the kingdom of God.

Peter may be pointing to God "raising up Jesus" in the sense of sending Christ as the Messiah. If that is the case, it is, as F.F Bruce points out, akin to the Old Testament sense of God raising David up to be Israel's king. We find this language later in Acts 13:22, where we read:

After removing him [Saul], God raised up David their king. He testified about him: 'I have found David the son of Jesse to be a man after my heart, who will accomplish everything I want him to do.' – Acts 13:22

Using that sense of the phrase "God raised up Jesus" Peter may well be saying that God had raised up Jesus to be the Messiah. Nonetheless, the rulers had rejected God's overtures and handed him over to Pilate to be crucified.

In this sermon to the Sanhedrin, Peter once again emphasized the means of Christ's death. He states pointedly that the Jewish rulers had "hung Jesus on a cross". Peter says, "... But you put him to death, hanging him on a cross."

Now it's obvious that the Jewish rulers had not physically put Jesus to death. They had not personally hanged him on a cross. However, Peter is not referencing the mechanics of Jesus' death, but rather the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion.

Peter is acutely aware of the disgrace of that kind of a death – especially in the case of the innocent Messiah. Moses' law specifically stated that anyone who was "hung on a tree"- meaning crucified – was under the curse of God. Here's what Deuteronomy 21:22-23 says:

"If a person commits a sin punishable by death and is executed, and you hang the corpse on a tree, his body must not remain all night on the tree; instead you must make certain you bury him that same day, for the one who is left exposed on a tree is cursed by God. You must not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." - Deuteronomy 21:22-23

Peter is emphasizing the ultimate degradation of Christ's crucifixion through the responsibility of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. We know, of course, that Annas and Caiaphas were both an integral part of condemning Jesus and turning him over to the Romans for execution.

Acting as Jesus' enemies, they inflicted on him the lowest form of disgrace possible. But as Peter points out, God raised Jesus from the dead. But more than that, in verse 31 Peter declares:

“It is he whom God has exalted with his right hand as a prince and savior, to give to Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins.”

Peter is hammering his point home. He is looking the Sanhedrin in the eye and saying, “You disgraced Jesus, but God not only raised him back to life, but exalted him. God sat Jesus at his right hand of power in order to offer the rank and file of Israel salvation.”

In verse 32 Peter comes full circle in his sermon. He tells the Council, “We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Since the rulers disgraced Jesus and God exalted him – it’s now the apostles’ duty to be witnesses to what has happened. That is why they are refusing to be silenced – even by the threats of Israel’s highest religious body.

The apostles are not only the emissaries of Jesus Christ, all of them were also eyewitnesses of the events Peter is describing. Peter notes that there is another powerful witness of these events – the Holy Spirit.

It is under the direction of the Holy Spirit that the apostles are carrying out their gospel commission. They are not acting on their own initiative: The two experiences thus far of being “filled with the Holy Spirit” speaks to this fact. Peter notes that the Holy Spirit is imparted to all who obey God in the preaching and teaching of the gospel.

Peter has now, in a very short sermon, brought the matter to a head. No matter what the Sanhedrin decides, the apostles are going to continue to preach,

teach, and demonstrate the reality of their message by signs, wonders, and miracles.

Next time: We will see how the high priest and his associates respond to Peter's message.