

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Study Notes: Acts 5:33-42

As we return to our study of Acts, we find the Sanhedrin in session. They have just heard Peter's defense and are weighing their possible responses. Let's look at what happened, starting with verse 33

- **The First Instinct: v.33**

"Hearing this, they were enraged and were minded to put them to death."

To understand the Council's aggressive reaction, we need to remind ourselves of what Peter has just said to them: (see vv. 30 ff)

"The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." – Acts 5:30-32

There are a couple of things worth noting again. First, Peter is using accusative language when he tells the Sanhedrin, "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross."

Did you notice the phrase, "the God of our ancestors"? Peter is saying something to them. Yahweh, the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead. That's powerful language: Peter is not giving the Sanhedrin an out on this one.

Next, as we have seen before, Peter is drawing a very tight contrast between the actions of Yahweh and those who supposedly represent Him. God raised Jesus from the dead, but as Peter tells the Sanhedrin, "You killed him by hanging him on a cross."

I think we can clearly see the contrast. The Sanhedrin is supposed to represent the greatest scholars and theologians of the day. They have the power to legislate ordinances that are binding on the entire Jewish people. They are supposed to be the wisest group of priests in all of Israel.

And yet, Peter tells them that they were ignorant of God's plans. Worse yet, they killed the very Messiah God sent them. The highest theologians in Israel were on the wrong side of what God was doing to save the nation.

Now I think you can see why they are so enraged. Here are these "unschooled" disciples of Jesus telling them that they not only missed the signs of the Messiah, but they had also him killed. Peter's statements aroused the deepest feelings of hatred possible.

By the way, this isn't the first time we have seen this kind of reaction from the priests and even the lower classes of the Jews. When Jesus spoke at his boyhood synagogue in Nazareth, this was the crowd's reaction:

"All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff."
– Luke 4:28-29

In the case of the apostles being examined by the Sanhedrin, Luke tells us, "*Hearing this, they were enraged and were minded to put them to death.*"

The high priest and his Sadducee followers immediately decided to execute the apostles – most likely by stoning them for blasphemy. This was, perhaps, a rash reaction, but it shows their mindset.

Let me remind you that executing a Jewish person normally could only be done in collaboration with the Romans. Still, they had been successful with this strategy in the past, so the threat has some substance.

There was another roadblock to their rash decision: While the Sadducees held the most power in the Council, they would need the support of the Pharisaic members of the court.

Although the Pharisees held a lesser number of seats on the Council, they enjoyed a much greater degree of respect from the Jewish people. Because of this situation, the Sadducees felt compelled to consider the Pharisees' opinions.

- **The Wisdom of Gamaliel**

It's at this point that something unexpected happens. Let's look at verses 34-35:

"But one of the Pharisees stood up in the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel by name. He was a doctor of the law, honored by all the people. He directed that the men should be put outside for a little while, and he said to his colleagues, "Men of Israel, beware of what you plan to do about these men."

To understand why Gamaliel's advice was important, we need to know a little about him. Gamaliel was a well-known Pharisee and theology teacher. He was the grandson of one of the most famous liberal rabbis of the day, Rabbi Hillel.

Gamaliel was honored with the title, "Rabban", meaning, "Our Teacher". Gamaliel was the scholar who taught Saul of Tarsus. Paul stresses this fact in his defense of the gospel in Acts 22:3. He says:

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today."

Gamaliel was considered one of the greatest, if not the greatest teacher of his day. After his death, he was often described as the "embodiment of pure Pharisaism". One Jewish scholar noted that "When Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died."

It was because of this kind of standing that Gamaliel was able to take to the floor and suggest the apostles be sent out of the council chambers while gave his advice to his colleagues.

Now that we have this information, let's return to our text, starting at verse 36. Here's what Gamaliel said to the Council:

"Men of Israel, beware of what you plan to do about these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.

After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Gamaliel's tone is just the opposite of the high priest and his Sadducean counterparts. While they are rashly moving towards stoning the apostles, the great teacher takes a much calmer approach. Let's break down what he said:

First, he reminded them of the fate of an insurgent named Theudas. We do not have any solid historical information about Theudas, but it is likely he is one many insurgent leaders who came to power in Palestine after the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.

Theudas gained a following of four hundred men, but ultimately, he was executed by the Romans and his followers scattered.

Next, Gamaliel reminded the Council of a second insurgent called Judas the Galilean. In 6 A.D. when Judaea lost its independent status, it was demoted to a Roman province. Historical records reveal that a census was directed by one Quirinius, a legate of Syria.

When a new tax was imposed on the Galileans, a man named Judas the Galilean launched a religious and nationalist revolt against the

Romans. He claimed that paying the tax was high treason against God, since Yahweh was Israel's one and only true king.

The revolt was short lived, but its results were evident in the much later rise of the Zealot party and their massive revolt in 66 A.D.

With these two references to zealots that the Council members were intimately familiar with, Gamaliel noted the common features of both men: They both made great claims, gained followers, but were ultimately killed. Both of their insurgencies died with a whimper.

- **Fighting Against God:**

Given these facts, Gamaliel took a very different stance than the high priest and his supporters. Notice what he says to the Council:

“Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” – vv. 38ff.

The last phrase really pegs the situation with the Sanhedrin. “You will only find yourselves fighting against God.” Not all that far into the future one of the most famous Pharisees would hear Jesus say this to him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” – Acts 26:14

“Kicking against the pricks” was a Greek proverb, but anyone who worked with oxen knew the meaning. An ox goad was a stick with a pointed piece of iron on its tip used to prod the oxen when plowing. The farmer would prick the animal to steer it in the right direction. Sometimes the ox would kick out at the prick, but this would only cause him more pain. The more an ox rebelled, the more it suffered.

The Sanhedrin was in that position. Gamaliel was correct; the Council was fighting against God. They had fought against him throughout Jesus' ministry. They fought against him when they crucified Jesus.

And now, they were fighting him again – as they tried to slow or stop the apostles' ministry.

What should we make of Gamaliel's advice to the Sanhedrin? Will his approach always work? Perhaps not, but for that moment and that situation Gamaliel's advice had a ring of truth. As others have noted, in the long run whatever comes from God will succeed and what is not from God will ultimately fail.

While Gamaliel's advice will not always prove successful, it met the needs of the Council at that moment.

It's probably not a stretch to suggest that Gamaliel's advice represented the minority viewpoint of the Pharisees. Still, it seems to have quelled the red-hot anger of the high priest and his counterparts.

After Gamaliel's speech, Council decided on a lesser form of punishment. Luke tells us, "His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go." - Acts 5:40

In essence, the Council had the apostles whipped for disobeying their prior order to no longer speak or preach in Jesus' Name. Luke does not tell us the severity of the flogging – whether it was the "40 stripes minus 1" or something less than that. After that, they restated the Council's prohibition against speaking in Jesus' name.

- **Staying The Course:**

What comes next in Luke's story is quite amazing. Luke records, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." – Acts 5:41

When the apostles left the Sanhedrin, they were feeling the full brunt of the flogging. Whether or not they received the infamous "40 lashes minus 1" their backs were bleeding. They were no doubt wincing and

they walked – yet note their response. “They were rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

Here, the Name functions as a substitute for identifying Jesus. Luke is saying that they rejoiced that they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus.

John Stott makes an insightful statement about this. He writes, “Luke’s expression is a beautiful antithesis, the honor to be dishonored, the grace to be disgraced.” In that moment the apostles were fulfilling Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:11-12

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” - Matthew 5:11-12

The apostles rejoiced in persecution. Now that’s something that many modern Christians know nothing about! Modern Christians tend to be discouraged by a lot less than outright persecution.

As we come to verse 42, we find a note of continuation. Look at what Luke tells us: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Once again, the apostles defied the Sanhedrin’s prohibition against preaching or teaching in Jesus’ Name. Just the opposite happened: Luke says, “Day after Day” the apostles kept teaching and proclaiming the good news. They did it in the large temple courts and they did it in the more personal home settings.

With this story now told, Luke has now given his friend Theophilus some detailed insights into the first two rounds of persecution the fledgling Church endured. Twice the Council arrested the apostles and issued a prohibition and a warning against teaching or preaching in Jesus’ Name.

The first time ended with the apostles praying for boldness to go on preaching. The second time ended with the apostles being flogged and sent on their way, rejoicing that they had the honor of being dishonored for Jesus' sake.

Of course, this was only the beginning of what the Church was to face in the future. John Stott gives a compelling summary of these persecutions when he writes:

Under Nero (AD 54–68) Christians were imprisoned and executed, including probably Paul and Peter. Domitian (AD 81–96) oppressed Christians who refused to pay him the divine honors he demanded; under him John was exiled to Patmos.

Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180), believing that Christianity was dangerous and immoral, turned a blind eye to severe local outbreaks of mob violence. Then in the third century what had so far been sporadic became systematic. Under Decius (AD 249–251) thousands died, including Fabian, Bishop of Rome, for refusing to sacrifice to the imperial name.

The last persecuting emperor before the conversion of Constantine was Diocletian (AD 284–305). He issued four edicts which were intended to stamp out Christianity altogether. He ordered churches to be burned, Scriptures to be confiscated, clergy to be tortured, and Christian civil servants to be deprived of their citizenship and, if stubbornly unrepentant, executed.

Still today, especially in some Marxist, Hindu and Moslem countries, the church is often harassed. But we need not fear for its survival. Tertullian, addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire, cried out: 'Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust.... The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians.'