

ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

STUDY 20

ACTS 5:33-42

FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

Peter and the apostles had just finished addressing the Sanhedrin after their being miraculously released from prison after healing and teaching about Jesus in the temple courts. Peter had just told them they had to obey God rather than men and reminded them of the gospel: Jesus whom they had put to death on the cross, is the One whom God had exalted to His right hand “as a Prince and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:31-32).

Now we read that the Sanhedrin was “cut to the quick” when they heard this bold, authoritative response, and intended to kill the apostles. It is interesting that their being convicted and cut to the quick led to their intent to kill Peter and his fellow witnesses. Being cut to the quick is a phrase meaning being deeply convicted of the truth of something.

In Acts 2: 36-41 we read a similar report. Peter had just preached the first expository sermon in the life of the new church launched by Pentecost. When he finished preaching the gospel and explaining who Jesus was the people “were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

In that instance just weeks before, thousands of those who heard Peter’s message were deeply convicted and asked to know how to respond to this amazing truth. Their response was to believe in the Lord Jesus, and they were born again and baptized.

Acts 7:54-60 shows another situation where people were deeply impacted by a declaration of the Lord Jesus and His gospel, but this event turned to murderous rage. Stephen was declaring the reality of the Lord Jesus and His finished atonement for sin, but the Jews “were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

The situation in Acts 5 provides a glimpse into the contrast between people with soft hearts being cut to the quick and people with hard hearts being cut to the quick. Those with hearts soft towards the truth will respond with repentance when they are confronted with the gospel. Those with hard hearts who want their own way and desire to maintain power and control will respond with rage when they are confronted with the truth. The Sanhedrin determined to eradicate the offense of the apostles: they made plans to kill them, just as they moved beyond intent and literally stoned Stephen a short while later.

The Sanhedrin who heard Peter declare they had to obey God rather than man and proclaim the Lord Jesus as Prince and Savior knew deeply that they were telling the truth. They were cut to the quick, just as were the people at Pentecost. Instead of allowing the sword of God’s word to convict them of sin, however, the Sanhedrin resisted the piercing truth and tried to silence the source of the convicting words. The Jews who killed Stephen went straight to rage. When the words of the truth of Jesus came from Stephen’s lips, their hearts, which had been hardened by repeatedly suppressing their own conviction, expressed murderous rage and immediately killed the bearer of the gospel.

The conviction of the gospel cements people’s hearts toward either belief or unbelief. The Jewish leaders during the days of the formation of the church hardened their hearts and rejected the clear evidence that the Man they had killed had risen from death and was, indeed, their Messiah.

The reason the Jews did not rush to kill the apostles at this particular time was the moderating influence of Gamaliel. He was “the most famous Jewish teacher of his time and traditionally listed among the ‘heads of the schools’. Possibly he was the grandson of Hillel. Like Hillel, he was moderate in his views, a characteristic that is apparent in his cautious recommendation on this occasion. Saul (Paul) was one of his students” (NASB Study Bible notes, Zondervan).

Gamaliel warned them to stay away from the apostles. He said that if their movement was not from God, it would eventually fall apart. If it was from God, no one would be able to overthrow them, and they would find themselves fighting against God.

By taking the high road, the Jews could avoid embroiling themselves in a public “mess” that might backfire on them.

There are biblical precedents for Gamaliel’s conviction that they wouldn’t be able to stop a movement of God and that hasty, bold offensiveness marks wicked men. Proverbs 21:29-31 says, “A wicked man puts on a bold face, but the upright gives thought to his ways. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.”

Isaiah says this is 8:9-10: “Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear, all you far countries; strap on your armor and be shattered; strap on your armor and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.”

In other words, godless nations, no matter how well-armed and prepared, will not be able to destroy God’s people. The counsel of nations plotting against God will ultimately come to nothing, because God is with His own.

Jeremiah wrote this in Lamentations 3:37-39: “Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?”

Jeremiah articulated a core truth of Scripture: God is God, and we are His creatures. He owes us no explanations, and we have no right to complain about His dealings with us. When we are punished for sin, that punishment is the natural consequence of our rebellion. God disciplines His people when they sin, and we have no authority to question Him. Ultimately, whatever happens in our lives, the good and the bad things, all are God’s provision for us, events that He will use to strengthen our trust in Him and our submission of ourselves to His will.

Nahum also had words about this subject. In Nahum 1:9-15 we read: “What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end; trouble will not rise up a second time. For they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink; they are consumed like stubble fully dried. From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD, a worthless counselor. Thus says the LORD, ‘Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart.’ The LORD has given commandment about you: ‘No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile.’ Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off.”

Nahum writes in this passage about two things: God’s impending judgment against Ninevah, and His deliverance of Judah. The last part of this passage is Messianic and refers to the coming One who will bring good news and publish peace in Judah. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, the nation that had taken the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity—a captivity from which they never returned. God used the Assyrians to deliver judgment on the stubbornly rebellious northern kingdom, but He also punished them for their cruelty to His own people. Nahum prophesies their eventual demise and also God’s eventual restoration of His people, promising the wicked will be “utterly cut off”.

The Old Testament is full of prophecies and statements of God’s sovereign sureness. He is in charge of everything, good and bad. He is the one who raises up nations and people and determines the times and places where each should be (Acts 17:26-27).

Gamaliel knew the Old Testament, and he knew that should they attempt to stop a movement of God, they themselves would be exposed and destroyed. His counsel gave the apostles a reprieve, but it also revealed the pragmatic nature of their decisions. More than anything else, the Sanhedrin was concerned with preserving their power and their reputation.

God is not deterred by wicked people, and we as God’s children do not need to be intimidated by them, either. God is in control, and He protects His name and His people, even if they suffer. As we read these biblical accounts, our proper response is to trust and submit to the Lord Jesus and give Him authority over every part of our lives.

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After Peter and the apostles told the Sanhedrin that they couldn't stop preaching in Jesus' name—that they had to obey God rather than men—and that God had raised Him, the One the Sanhedrin had put to death, and seated Him at His right hand, the Sanhedrin was convicted and wanted to kill them. Gamaliel, however, stopped their murderous intent.

1. In verse 33, what does it mean that the Sanhedrin were “cut to the quick”, and how does this mesh with their intending to kill the apostles?

Acts 2:36-41 _____

Acts 7:54-60 _____

2. In verses 34-39 we meet Gamaliel, one of the great rabbis of his time. He was also Paul's teacher (Acts 22:3). He recommends that the Sanhedrin not rush forward with their intent to kill the apostles because they are not from God, their movement will die. If they are of God, nothing will be able to stop them. What biblical support is there for this claim?

Proverbs 21:30 _____

Isaiah 8:9-10 _____

Lamentations 3:37-39 _____

Nahum 1:9-15 _____

3. Gamaliel drove home his point by saying not only would a move of God not be able to be stopped, but if they tried to stop one, they might be “found fighting against God”. Where do we find insight in both the Old and New Testaments into this presumptuous sin, and what can we conclude?

2 Chronicles 13:1-18 _____

Acts 11:2-18 _____

4. Ironically, the council allowed the apostles to go free—but not until they had flogged them with the Jewish penalty of thirty-nine lashes (or possibly fewer). Why was this punishment not surprising, even though it was unjust?

Luke 23:13-16 _____

Matthew 23:34-36 _____

Mark 13:9-11 _____

2 Corinthians 11:22-29 _____

5. How were the apostles able to rejoice for being “worthy to suffer shame for His name”, and how does this suffering fit into a Christ-follower’s life?

Acts 9:15-19 _____

Acts 21:11-14 _____

Matthew 5:10-12 _____

John 15:18-21 _____

1 Peter 4:12-19 _____

MEDITATE

How do you react when you read that the apostles rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus? What circumstances in your life are you resisting submitting to the Lord Jesus? How has He brought you peace and healing when you have submitted threatening events to Him? About what is He asking you to praise Him instead of complaining to Him?

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” 1 Peter 2:24-25, NIV