

ACTS 5:17 thru 6:7
IT DOES YOU NO GOOD TO FIGHT AGAINST GOD!

We'll take a look at these guys here – the Sadducees. But before we do, it's been a couple of weeks so we need to quickly recap what we looked at last time – a memorable yet scary event in the life of the church. That was the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, two believers, a married couple. How did they die? Do you remember? I was asked when I was presenting this lesson, "How did they die?" The text only says that Ananias "fell down and breathed his last" (Acts 5:5). Later it says that Sapphira "fell down at [Peter's] feet and breathed her last" (Acts 5:10). So, how did they die? We don't know. The Bible doesn't say. It could have been a stroke, a heart attack, a brain aneurysm, a pulmonary embolism? It could have been any number of ways. I guess it is not important or God would have told us. What is implied strongly in the text, however, is that God struck them both dead. Now the question comes, "Why did God do that?" It seems harsh, doesn't it? The answer to that question is actually provided in Peter's rebuke of Ananias and later Sapphira. He asked Ananias, "Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:4). There is one hint right there. And then to Sapphira Peter asked, "How is it that you have agreed together [you and your husband] to test the Spirit of the Lord?" (Acts 5:9). So, the reasons given for their deaths are (1) lying to the Holy Spirit and (2) putting God to the test. If you read all the commentaries another way of looking at this is the sin of hypocrisy. But why this extreme judgment by God for something we see all the time? I quoted Dr. Thomas Constable, former DTS professor who said something to the effect that if God did this same thing in our churches today, people would be dropping dead right and left! That is kind of scary to think about.

We concluded that Satan was alive and well in the early church. God was protecting that church at a very critical time in its life. Ananias and Sapphira were filled with evil intentions. As Peter said, they were filled with Satan. That's not what God wants from His people. He wants us to be holy

people. He wants us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning to the church, to us as believers, that if we don't deal with our sin, and God has certainly given us a way to do that, we could meet a similar fate. So then, we must be honest with God and others. We must deal with our sin. We must learn to trust Him, take Him at His word and be obedient to it. That's important.

So, what was the immediate impact of this rather bizarre event? How did it affect the life of the early church? We're told that "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). When we say "fear" it is not merely a reverence for God. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira certainly grabbed the attention of those in the church and it filled them with a fear, a holy awe of God. Now, did the church continue to grow or were people driven away by what happened? This is where we left off last time...

READ Acts 5:14

So, the church continued to grow – more than ever.

READ Acts 5:15-16

These verses set the stage for our lesson this morning as we pick up the narrative in verse 17...

READ Acts 5:17-18

What was the crime the apostles were arrested for? I just mentioned it. There is something that stirred up the Jewish religious leaders and filled them with jealousy. They were healing people! Can you imagine getting upset about something like that? They got upset at Jesus for healing too. But that's exactly what the scripture says they got arrested for. They were healing people. Well, how dare them?

John Phillips in his commentary makes this observation: "The Holy Spirit was giving the leaders of Israel the signs they always craved, and the response was fury. Truly the nation was ripe for judgment. Nor was this simply the high priest. This was the entire Sadducean leadership of the

Sanhedrin. Nor was it just personal spite. It was organized, deliberate opposition to the truth and grace of God.”

Satan had blinded these men and filled them with jealousy and hatred. They couldn't see the hand of the almighty LORD God of Israel at work right there in front of them in Jerusalem. Just like with Jesus, they couldn't see God at work. They were so blind!

Well, the apostles are sitting in prison when this happens...

READ Acts 5:19-20

God through His holy angel instructs the apostles to go out into the Temple courtyard and preach the Gospel. Do the apostles argue with the angel? No. You don't hear them push back saying, "Hey, we can't do that because we were told by the religious leaders not to preach in the name of Jesus." They don't do that, do they? No, they go out and start preaching as the next verses tell us.

READ Acts 5:21-24

The prison guards, the priests, everyone is perplexed by what has happened. It's a mystery. The guards are probably concerned about what's going to happen to them. Are they going to lose their jobs? They're all standing there outside the empty jail cell dumbfounded. "What's going on here?"

READ Acts 5:25-26

You see, they have to be careful how they treat the apostles who are local heroes to the people. They quietly usher them away without a whole lot of commotion and escort them before the Sanhedrin.

READ Acts 5:27-28

That's an interesting charge that the high priest is bringing against the apostles. But it is wrongly placed. It is NOT the apostles who are bringing Jesus's blood on them. Remember, Peter has been openly accusing the

Jewish leaders of being responsible for Jesus's death. And rightly so, for they were. So, this is their guilty conscience pushing back on that.

Before we go any further, to prove my point, I want us to flash back to the past to that scene that you are familiar with, Matthew Chapter 27. It is the scene where this mob is gathered in front of Pilate. And Pilate is asking the mob of people if they want him to release Jesus or Barabas. Do you remember that? Who did the people say they wanted released? They chose Barabas. Pilate said to them, to the mob instigated by the Jewish religious leaders, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And Pilate said, "Why? What evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So, when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves." That is when the crowd cried out, "His blood be on US and on our children!" (Matthew 27:22-25). Their own words.

So then, it is not the apostles who are bringing Jesus's blood on the Jewish religious leaders. The Jewish leadership brought it on themselves. THEY were the ones responsible for killing Jesus. They were the ones behind the crowd in that passage we just read.

At this point Peter, boldly speaking on behalf of his fellow apostles, presents their defense...

READ Acts 5:29-32

Well, how do you think the Sanhedrin responds to this? Do you think they respond well?

READ Acts 5:33

When confronted with the truth, guilty people will generally respond one of two ways. They will either confess and repent and own up to it; or they will get defensive and angry. The reaction by the Sanhedrin here,

though it is sad, is not at all surprising. But thankfully cooler heads prevail and a man named Gamaliel speaks up...

READ Acts 5:34

So, the Sanhedrin enters into closed session and meet privately to discuss what to do with the apostles.

READ Acts 5:35-36

Gamaliel gives an example that would have been familiar to his Jewish colleagues. We don't know much about this incident, but they knew about it. There was apparently this man, Theudus, who was some sort of revolutionary. He had stirred up this movement that was put down by the Romans and eventually, as Gamaliel says, "it came to nothing." Gamaliel continues...

READ Acts 5:37-39

Gamaliel's argument is an excellent one. It is one of common sense, something that was rare with the Jewish leaders. "If this movement by these men who are following the teachings of Jesus is of man, human origins, then, like the two examples I gave, it will eventually amount to nothing. But, if it is indeed of God, then there is nothing we can do about it and it won't do any good to fight against God!" Wise words! This guy is actually making sense. No wonder the listened to him.

By the way I want to mention something about Gamaliel. He had a famous student who sat under his tutelage. Perhaps you've heard of him – Saul of Tarsus. Gamaliel was the Apostle Paul's mentor when he was a young man. Interesting.

At this point they bring the apostles back into the Sanhedrin...

READ Acts 5:40

Were the apostles surprised by this treatment, getting beaten? No, not at all. In fact, Jesus had told them that this was going to happen to them. He said, "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog

you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:17-18). So, Jesus predicted this would happen. They can expect even more later as we go through the book of Acts. So, this doesn't really take them by surprise one bit.

READ Acts 5:41-42

Here we have the very first indication, in v 42, of the church beginning to move away from the Temple as its primary meeting place and going from house to house. You now will have a series of house churches beginning to develop. The reason for this is the growing tensions that are developing between mainstream Judaism and the church. The Jews, primarily its leadership, are starting to push back hard against the Christian movement. They will still meet some in the Temple, but more and more in houses.

In v 41 that statement "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]" – it echoes what Paul would later say in his letter to the Philippians (we know that Paul was persecuted quite a bit). He says, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). If you read Paul's writings you see that Paul actually considered it a privilege to be persecuted for the name of Jesus.

Later Peter penned these words in First Peter: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13). That is quite an incredible attitude that these men have over physical persecutions, sufferings.

Well, if the Jewish leaders thought that beating and threatening the apostles was going to force them to obey their order not to preach in the name of Jesus, they were dead wrong! As Peter told them earlier in v 29, "We must obey God rather than men."

You can see from these verses that the Christian movement continues strong despite this increasing threat of persecution. And that brings us to Chapter 6...

READ Acts 6:1-4

The primary mission of the church is what? Is it politics or social welfare? No, it is to spread the Good News. We are to carry out the Great Commission from our Lord; to teach and to preach the Gospel and to make disciples. No argument with that, right? However, with all that being said, we are also to be a compassionate and loving people. We must take care of the physical and emotional needs of people in the church and in our communities. That is an example our Lord set for us. He was very compassionate during His earthly ministry, wasn't He? This is also a connection that we have, as the New Testament church, to our Jewish roots. We talk about having Judeo-Christian values. In the Old Testament God instructed His people Israel to take care of the needy, especially widows and orphans. It is mentioned over and over again in the book of Deuteronomy. It is also mentioned in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah. This compassionate practice of taking care of people continued with the birth of the church. Here in this passage, we have a real-life example of a physical need that arises among the early believers – right in the middle of all this incredible church growth.

Let me explain to you what was happening. It may not be clear. There was apparently a language and cultural barrier that existed between the Hellenistic Jewish believers ("Hellenists") and Hebrew Jewish believers ("Hebrews"). The Hellenists spoke Greek. Most of them had relocated to Jerusalem from other places in the Roman Empire as a result of Empire-wide persecution. You will sometimes hear this mass migration of the Jews and Christians referred to as "The Dispersion." The Hebrews, on the other hand, spoke Aramaic and were primarily local to the region of Palestine – Galilee, Judea, Decapolis, and Perea. So, the Hellenists were complaining that their widows were being neglected. There is no indication that this was done on purpose or out of prejudice or spite. But it WAS a legitimate

concern that was being brought to the apostles' attention. The apostles have their hands full teaching and preaching. That is their primary job. So, to address this issue, they had the church select seven godly men to handle the problem. This was a practical matter and the solution that they propose makes a whole lot of sense.

By the way, this may seem like a trivial matter, but it is not. Satan, our adversary, would like nothing better than to distract us from our mission and to divide our fellowship. The solution that is put forth here by the apostles prevented that from happening. It kept the unity of the church and it kept them doing the main thing, which was preaching the Gospel. So, this is a very important decision.

READ Acts 6:5-7

Stephen will be the focal point of our lesson next time. Philip is the same Philip that becomes known later as Philip the Evangelist. He is the one who will lead the Ethiopian eunuch to follow Christ in Acts Chapter 18. This guy Nicolaus – it says that he is “a proselyte of Antioch.” He’s a Gentile believer. So that’s significant as we move forward in the book of Acts and we see that the Gentiles become more and more responsive to the Gospel. These seven men are commissioned to help with the administration of the church. Some claim that these are the first deacons, though that word “deacon” is not actually mentioned here.

Just one final comment about verse 7. It says, “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” Did you catch that? This is a reference to the Jewish priests. Some are beginning to come to Christ as a result of the apostles' witness. This must have infuriated the Jewish leadership. It's not only the Jewish people who are being converted to Christianity, but now their own priests are turning to Christ! We will get to Stephen next time.

There are six applications to take away from today's lesson:

- As Peter proclaimed, "We ought to obey God rather than men!" It will not even be a struggle for us. We know what we are going to do.
- It does a person NO good at all to fight against almighty God. The things that are of God and supported by Him will never fail.
- The primary purpose of the church is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a lost world. But that does not mean that we neglect those who have needs within our own church body. We have a responsibility to take care of them.
- Persecution is never pleasant, but it brings out the best in us and it produces a stronger and more resolute faith. See the book of Acts!
- We Christians can expect opposition from the world to our message. If you have not experienced that yet, you will.
- Deliverance may come (as it did when the angel released the apostles from their prison cell). However, we know from church history that more often deliverance does NOT come. In such cases we consider it an honor to suffer and, if called upon, to die for our Lord. After all HE suffered and died for US. And we will see this play out next week in the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.