

Acts 5:17-32: When Life Is Critical, Do You Follow God's Advice or Man's?

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I. Introduction

We're often faced with difficult decisions. What's the first thing we consult when trouble comes? The first thing that usually drives our actions is our fears and frustrations. What's the next thing we consult now that we're in a panic? Our past experience? Our wisdom? Perhaps the advice of a friend, or a popular author or the daily talk show host we listen to? Think about the last time you were in trouble. At any time during that crisis, did you stop and ask God for advice?

II. Acts 5:17-32: When Life Gets Difficult, Whose Advice Do You Follow God's or Man's?

5:17-21, things are going great for the apostles, or so it seems. They're healing everybody and as a result, many are being added to the Lord. But in the midst of their tremendous evangelistic success, they're again arrested and thrown in jail by members of the Sanhedrin led by Annas, the high priest. Why? Because they are filled with jealousy. The apostles are drawing thousands away from the power of the Sanhedrin to Jesus and they're doing it in their own house, the temple. To add insult to injury the core of their evangelistic message is a personal affront to them: resurrection in Jesus' name. And here we have the second persecution of the Church. As dawn approaches the Lord sends an angel who sets them free and instructs them to go stand in the temple and "speak to the people all the words of this life." Upon hearing this, they enter the temple early in the morning and do exactly what the Lord said. Meanwhile, the entire Sanhedrin convenes (Sadducees and Pharisees) led once again by Annas the high priest. They then send for the apostles.

"All the words of this life" this is an interesting way to describe Christianity. What exactly does God mean by it? What did He want the apostles to tell the people which constitute "all the words of this life"? That Jesus died for their sins, that He was raised from the dead, that if they believed in Him they'd be saved from God's eternal wrath? Sure, but what else, what's the focus, life after death or resurrection life in Jesus' name right now? There's a life that Jesus is offering everyone in Israel (and you) and it starts right now: if you used to be a fisherman, you can now stand up to authorities capable of taking your life because the One who sent you is greater than them. He can heal the sick and tormented, turn strangers into family, turn the greedy into giving and caring people. Basically, Jesus will enable you to live life the way it was always meant to be lived, totally free, without fear and with a definite purpose.

5:22-26, the officers in charge of bringing the apostles from the prison come back with an astounding report. They went to the prison and found it entirely secure, there were even guards in front of the doors, but when they entered to bring the apostles out, there was no one there! Upon hearing this, the high priest, the captain of the temple (who's ultimately in charge of the temple prison), and other members of the Sanhedrin wonder what will come of this movement if it's not stopped. And as they contemplated this, someone else arrives with the news that the apostles they imprisoned are in the temple teaching the people!

This time the captain of the temple goes with the arresting party. And instead of roughing them up as they did before, they arrest them without violence. Why? Because they feared the people would stone them to death, since the people held the apostles in high esteem.

5:27-32, having arrested them, they bring them before the entire Sanhedrin and the high priest begins to state the charges against them. First, they were strictly warned previously (4:17-18) not to preach/teach the people “in this name”—once again, the Sanhedrin refuses to say Jesus’ name. Second, their teaching includes the accusation that the Sanhedrin is guilty of innocent blood, but not just any innocent blood, Messiah’s!

The apostles answer back led by Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” With this statement Peter and the others affirm the charges against them. They indeed continued to preach in Jesus’ name (which is exactly what Peter and John told the Sanhedrin they would do at the first trial, 4:19-20). That is, they will disobey the Sanhedrin before they will ever disobey God. And as for their second charge that they’ve been accusing the Sanhedrin of murdering Messiah, not only do they acknowledge this charge, they repeat it right then and there! And they do so with devastating force: they start by citing the God whose faith and temple the Sanhedrin claim to defend. That same God raised up Jesus, whom they murdered by hanging on a tree. This reveals the despicable way in which they killed Messiah. From a Jewish perspective death by hanging on a tree was a clear cut statement that the individual was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:13). And they did this to Messiah!

But in spite of the Sanhedrin’s attempts to curse Messiah, God exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Savior, the very One who is now offering repentance and forgiveness of sins to everyone in Israel. Peter closes with a stinging rebuke, “We are His witnesses to these things, and so also *is* the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” The Sanhedrin, not the apostles, are the ones disobeying God. They are obeying man rather than God and the apostles and the Holy Spirit are witness to their blatant disobedience and corruption! (as Jesus said they would be, John 15:26-27).

When trouble comes to your door, do you obey God or man? There are two philosophies at work in this world: Jesus’ and man’s (Colossians 2:8, 20-22—and the one behind man’s wisdom is Satan, Colossians 3:6, cf. Ephesians 2:1-2). In every area of life, politics, finances, health, relationships, work, etc., we have advice on how to approach it. And when life gets truly difficult, fear and panic set in which make it easier to follow the way of the world instead of God, especially when you only follow God a few hours on Sunday.

The apostles faced a life and death situation for a second time, but they didn’t budge. They kept following God because their Christianity was not a once or twice a week event. They lived with God every day, which is why they were able to see things crystal clearly. They learned how to walk with God from Jesus. He showed them how to look at the world through God’s eyes, how to be guided by Him and place their lives in His hands regardless of the consequences. Therefore, where others saw a threat to their life, they saw a chance to glorify God.

What do you see when you look at your troubles and where did you get your counsel? Where did you get that piece of advice you’re about to follow?

III. Conclusion

And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men."