

Acts 5:33-42: What Does It Mean to Suffer for Christ?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA November 6, 2016

I. Introduction

When we think of suffering for Christ, images of missionaries being persecuted in far-off places comes to mind. But is it possible to suffer for Christ in everyday life? What exactly does it mean to suffer for Christ? Do I need to lose life and limb or does something as simple as letting the other person win in an argument (in order to bring harmony to that relationship) count?

II. Acts 5:33-42: Have You Suffered for Your Faith Lately or Is This Only Reserved for Missionaries?

5:33, Peter and the rest of the apostles have just signed their death warrant. They have just accused the Sanhedrin of murdering God's Messiah—Jesus Christ—the very One whom God raised from the dead to be Israel's Prince and Savior, the One now offering all of Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. It is they not Peter and the apostles who have disobeyed God! What's the Sanhedrin's response to these accusations? They are furious and immediately plot to kill them. How is God going to save them?

5:34-39, God saves them through Israel's #1 Pharisee! Who were the Pharisees? They were the largest political party numbering about 6,000. They were very legalistic and strident about supporting God's Law and the Jewish traditions that were derived from it. However, they were often hypocrites (Matt 23:13-15, 23-29). They believed that God was only gracious to those who obeyed His Law and they thought that they were more righteous than anyone else. *Pharisee* means *Separatist*. During Jesus' lifetime, they were constantly trying to find a way to kill Him (Matthew 12:14; 22:15; Mark 3:6; 12:13).

As strident and legalistic as Pharisees were, one of them stands up and stops the Sanhedrin's plot to kill the apostles: Gamaliel. Who was he? During this time there were two great schools which interpreted the Mosaic Law; they were pioneered by famous teachers Shammai and Hillel. Rabbi Shammai was a hard-liner politically and religiously. In his mind you had to be zealous for the Law in every way possible and if you had to use violence/force, so be it. Rabbi Hillel on the other hand took a softer approach. He too agreed that God wanted Israel to keep His Law, but since keeping the Law is a matter of the heart, you don't force people. Gamaliel was a grandson of Hillel. Like his grandfather, Gamaliel was known for taking a more diplomatic and measured approach as we see him apply here before the Sanhedrin. Like his grandfather he also had a deep respect for the Law; he knew it inside and out. He was a man of great devotion and piety and thus was highly respect by everyone. His most famous pupil was a Pharisee named Saul, who later became the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel is so respected that he can bring a halt to the Sanhedrin's rage against the apostles, who've just accused them of murder, lacking God's Holy Spirit, and disobeying God.

So Gamaliel steps in, but notice what he says to the Sanhedrin, it's astounding what comes out of this Pharisee's mouth. Gamaliel basically says to the entire Sanhedrin, "Be careful what you do to these men. There has been others before them who've come and gone claiming to be God's messengers. They perished because their work was the work of men. However, if these apostles' work is the work of God, watch out! For then you will be fighting God Himself!"

This is amazing, not only because Gamaliel is a Pharisee—the party that was always opposing Jesus—but because he heard everything Peter said! What did Peter say? He basically said, “You murdered Messiah, the One who brought salvation to Israel, you murdered Him....and as for disobedience, it’s not us who are disobeying God, YOU ARE! You want proof? Did God give you His Holy Spirit? NO, He didn’t. You know why? He only gives it to those who obey Him!” And to all this, the leading Pharisee in all of Israel, respected by everyone, knows God’s Law backwards and forwards, says, “These guys may be right.” Say what?! And the Sanhedrin agrees with him!

5:40, though they agree with Gamaliel, their agreement goes only so far. They’re not about to admit that Jesus is God’s resurrected Messiah nor that they murdered Him. They’re walking a tightrope between keeping their power and stopping this new movement which the people love and is entirely under the banner of Jesus’ name. And since they can’t kill them on the spot, they do the next best thing: beat them severely and warn them not to speak in Jesus’ name again.

The beating the Sanhedrin gave the apostles would’ve been in accordance with Deuteronomy 25:1-3, which stated that the most lashes you could give someone was 40. You were not permitted to go beyond 40 lest you humiliate them. In order to prevent humiliation by accident (i.e., if the punisher lost count), the Rabbis taught that the punishment must be 40 lashes minus one (the apostle Paul suffered this five times, 2 Corinthians 11:24). The whip used to beat criminals was made of strips of leather. One third of the lashes were given on the individual’s chest and the other two thirds on their back. The scars from this marked the person as a criminal and were a disgrace.

5:41-42, what do the apostles do after they’re beaten and bloodied? They rejoice! They were glad that the Lord counted them worthy enough to suffer shame for His name! And what do they do next? They go out and do it again, i.e., they put themselves in harm’s way again! Every day they went to the Temple. Every day, with their humiliating wounds still fresh on their bodies, they went from house to house teaching and preaching that Jesus was the Christ, that He was the Prince and Savior who could give you life so transformative that even a severe beating couldn’t stop you!

What does it mean to suffer shame for Jesus’ name? If that were you, how would you react? Would you be glad that they beat you? Would you look at your suffering as a good thing or a scar that marked you with shame? And is suffering for Christ just for missionaries under persecution or can we suffer for our faith in everyday life? Suffering for Christ simply means that you are willing to go wherever Jesus leads you no matter the cost, whether it’s giving up your physical life or dying for the other person during an argument in order to bring them salvation. How did the apostles do it? They knew who they were; it wasn’t them by themselves facing the Sanhedrin. It was Jesus *in* them and if He told them to heal a bunch of people and bring the Sanhedrin’s wrath upon them, they did it without fear because Jesus was with them; His power enabled them every step of the way (Acts 1:1; 2:4; 4:8, 29-31; 5:12-16). Do you know who you are (is Jesus in you)? Paul did and look what he was able to endure (Galatians 2:20; 4:6; 2 Corinthians 11:21-27). Are you willing to suffer for Christ in your daily life.....a man struggles to suffer shame for Christ in his marriage.

III. Conclusion

And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.