

Exegetical Notes, Acts 5:17-42

“Persecution Begins”

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Acts 5:17-42

(Acts 1:8 promises that when the Holy Spirit fills the Church, those filled will be willing to die for their faith in Jesus if that is what God requires of them. The Book of Acts documents the events that followed Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit filled the Church. In Acts 5:12-16, the power of the disciples of Jesus to heal and perform miracles was demonstrated to the Jewish community.)

Verses 17-21a

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.²⁰ “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

- The high priests and their associates were jealous of the power which the disciples had and of their ability to persuade the people to believe in Jesus. Driven by their jealousy, they arrested some of the disciples and held them in jail to await trial.
- During the night, an angel unlocked the jail and set the disciples free instructing them to return to the Temple in the morning and to resume teaching there.
- The next day, as soon as it was light, the disciples returned to the Temple and began to teach.

Verses 21b-26

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles.²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So

they went back and reported,²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.”²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.”²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

- When the high priests arrived, they assembled the Sanhedrin, Israel’s highest court, and called for the disciples who had been arrested to be brought before the court.
- When the jailer went to the jail, he found it securely locked and the guards in place at the door, but the prisoners were not inside. This concerned the jailer for he was responsible for keeping the prisoners in the jail. Their escape would reflect badly on him and could cost him his job or even his life.
- As he was considering what to do, news was brought that the men who had been arrested were in the Temple courts teaching. So, the jailer was sent to bring them before the high court. But it was to be done quietly, without force so as not to alarm the people who were listening to the teaching.

Verses 27-32

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.²⁸ “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

- The Apostles were brought before the court, and the High Priest reminded them that they had been told not to preach or teach about Jesus. See Acts 4:18.

- Peter responded as he had before. See Acts 4:19-20. He said that they must preach and teach in Jesus' name because they were so commanded to do by God.

Verses 33-49

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ 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. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

⁴⁰ 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.

- Peter's reply to the High Priest was considered disrespectful by him and the other members of the court. So much so, that they wanted to execute Peter and those who were arrested with him.
- But Gamaliel, a respected member of the Sanhedrin and teacher, spoke against the idea. (See Acts 22:3. Gamaliel, was a teacher of the Apostle Paul.) He pointed out that there had been others who taught false doctrines in Israel. They had all seemed like threats, but they had fallen away in time. He suggested that this would also be the case with these teachers. He suggested that they give this new teaching time. If it was false, it would fall away, but if it was from God, no opposition would stop it.
- Giving ear to Gamaliel, the court again warned the disciples to stop teaching in Jesus' name and let them go.

Verses 41-42

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² 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 Messiah.

- The Apostles left the court filled with joy because they had been found worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake.
- They disregarded the instruction of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin and continued to preach and teach in the Temple courts every day.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Persecution Begins*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)