

If you are a child of God and there is some part of your circumstances which is tearing you, if you are living in the heavenly places you will thank God for the tearing things; if you are not in the heavenly places you cry to God over and over again--"O Lord, remove this thing from me. If only I could live in golden streets and be surrounded with angels, and have the Spirit of God consciously indwelling me all the time and have everything wonderfully sweet, then I think I might be a Christian." That is not being a Christian.

Those are the comments of Oswald Chambers. ... And those are concepts that our passages of study will be for the next couple of weeks in the Book of Acts. This morning we come to the SECOND persecution of the church... which is recorded in Acts 5:12-42.

God used persecution to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. ... Until now there have only been arrests along with threats. But today... we will see the persecution intensify with beatings.

Our passage has two main divisions; 1) the power of the apostles, and 2) the persecution of the apostles. ... We will first look at their power - how God established credibility for His special representatives. God demonstrates in the eyes of all... that these men have a special authority to speak God's truth. ... A lot of people become convinced... the Jewish leaders become jealous... and this led to the second part of our study today – “the persecution of the apostles.” ... So let's begin with the circumstances that led to the persecution.

Acts 5:12-16

In order to establish the church... God gave supernatural powers to the apostles... especially to Peter... who we continuously see as the

spokesman for the 12 apostles. ... Something else that we continuously see... is that this power was given to the apostles – **NOT** to the believers in general. It would be a mistake to ignore what Dr. Luke writes in this book and assume all the believers engaged in the miraculous. Every time we see signs and wonders... Luke shows us that they were performed by the apostles... (such as the passage we looked at last week concerning Ananias and Sapphira... and before that... the lame man in the Temple.)

In verse 12 here... please notice what it says... the signs and wonders were regularly done “*by the hands of the apostles.*”

Acts 2:43 (ESV)

And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

INOW - There are one or two examples given in Scripture... where a special representative of an apostle (who had been appointed by an apostle through the laying on of hands)... where they performed a special miracle... But Scripture does not show us that the early church believers in general had this gift.

In this history of how the church got started... no one could deny that God was at work in a new way among His ancient people. God used these signs and wonders done by the apostles to authenticate their message... But there was also a different reason for these signs and wonders. It was to purify the infant church. Look at verse 13.

Acts 5:13

What had just happened... two verses earlier...? A particular wonder was just described in detail. Ananias and Sapphira had just fallen over dead...

because they tried to steal some fame and attention... by faking their commitment to Christ. We are being told by verse 13 that the rest of the **insincere**... those who would fake their commitment... didn't dare join them.

What had happened to Ananias and Sapphira had given the Jewish community "the creeps," and many were keeping their distance and thinking twice before associating themselves with the church. Nevertheless, the general population thought highly of the church, and although they were hesitant to join, the church still experienced amazing growth.

Acts 5:14

As the Holy Spirit launched the church... He established the authority of the apostles... and He purified the collection of those who were joining the church.

Let me give two quotes... one from Warren Wiersbe... and the second from J Vernon McGee... and then I will tell you my own perspective about signs and wonders in the church today... before moving on... to the Persecution of the Apostles.

WIERSBE - *Just as there were special judgments at the beginning of a new era, so there were also special miracles. We find no miracles performed in Genesis, but at the beginning of the age of Law, Moses performed great signs and wonders. Elijah and Elisha were miracle workers at the beginning of the great era of the Prophets, and Jesus and the Apostles performed signs and wonders when the Gospel Age was inaugurated. Each time God opened a new door, He called man's attention to it. It was His way of saying, "Follow these leaders, because I have sent them."*

This certainly does not mean that God is limited and can no longer perform miracles for His people! But it does mean that the need for confirming miracles has passed away. We now have the completed

Word of God and we test teachers by their message, not by miracles (1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-6). And we must keep in mind that Satan is a counterfeiter and well able to deceive the unwary.

McGee - *May I compare this to modern faith healing? Modern faith healers never heal all the people who come to them. Have you ever noticed that? The apostles had sign gifts, friend. No one in the church since then has had those gifts. People were healed, every one of them. They emptied the hospitals. This was the power of the early church.*

We must remember that at that time there was no written New Testament. The church is built on Jesus Christ -- He is the Cornerstone -- and the apostles were witnesses to Christ. The sign gifts were given to them to demonstrate the fact that they spoke with God's authority. Today we have a written New Testament as our authority.

Here is how I weigh-in on this controversy: I do not believe in a God Who is limited and can no longer perform miracles today. He can! But what I observe from Scripture... is this: the reason the Apostles did them – no longer exists. The need for miracles to confirm the truth that the church declares today... has passed away. We test the authenticity of a message in this age by the Word of God – not by miracles. Bottom line: ... Does God do miracles among us today...? He can! (And He probably does!) But I do not believe that they are **NORMATIVE** – because we have the completed Word of God as our authenticator.

For the start-up of the church... God used the Power of the Apostles. And He used the Persecution of the Apostles. We see this next.

Acts 5:17-42

NOTICE: The apostles experienced power to do miracles... great boldness in preaching... and God's presence in their lives - yet they were **not** free

from hatred and persecution. ...They were arrested... put in jail... beaten... and slandered by community leaders. ... Faith in God does not make troubles disappear. Serious students of the Bible know that obeying God often results in pain and suffering. ...However... they also recognize that being persecuted for Christ has a deeper kind of blessing.

The Sadducees arrested them... because they "*were filled with jealousy.*" They were not trying to prevent heresy... or protect the people... or maintain God's honor. ... They were simply jealous. ... These Sadducee leaders were envious of the popularity of the apostles and were self-protective of their own prestige. "*The crowd should be gathering around us, not them.*" They were moved by the lowest and most contemptible motive. When their malevolence poured forth, the apostles found themselves in the city jail.

Acts 5:19-20

They were divinely delivered. ... Either God lulled the guards into sleep or the apostles were made temporarily invisible. ... Whatever happened... by what we do read... it is hard to miss God's sense of humor here. ... And one of the funniest elements is that the Sadducees did not believe in angels. ... And yet here... right in their own city... God sends one to mess with them!

(BUT HERE IS SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT. DON'T MISS THIS...)
Why DID God arrange this angelic intervention? ... The answer ... I think is one of the choice morsels of our passage...

God was teaching the Twelve that He can deliver His servants from the world's oppression anytime He sees fit. ... And this is a valuable lesson for you and I to learn as well... We can boldly obey Him... if we get this! ...God

delivered in a similar way two other times in Acts — once with Peter (Acts 12:6-11)... and once with Paul and Silas in the Philippian Jail (Acts 16:26ff)...

I believe that in today's passage... this angelic intervention was not only meant to free them... but to embolden them — and us! ...The apostles now knew that God could deliver them from the world's clutches anytime, anywhere! Theirs... and our only concern needs to be obedience!

Each of the apostles were eventually martyred... (All of them but John... who lived out his life in exile on a lonely island.) All of these died knowing that God can deliver His people anytime He wants. ... They must have taken their cue from the three friends of Daniel... who stood up to Nebuchadnezzar before being thrown into the fiery furnace... “*Our God can rescue us... but even if He chooses not to – we will serve Him!*” Scripture says that when waves of persecution or trial come... God can deliver us *if He so wills*. ... No matter how dark or oppressive our suffering is... He can rescue us. ... Believe it! But our call is to obey Him – and to leave it all in the hands of God.

This is exactly what we see the Apostles do here. They obeyed what the angel told them to do and went back to the Temple to preach some more.

Acts 5:22-24

We are all tempted to smile... maybe even laugh... as we imagine the scene of what we just read. This is reminiscent of a Keystone Cops comedy. ... But here is the point: Luke portrays the powerlessness of the

authorities to stop the church from moving forward. (And let me tell you... The world's authorities today are just as powerless!)

Through some other embarrassing moments that show just how little the persecutors were in control... they find the apostles and round them up. This time they bring them in with a gentler manner. They were afraid of the crowd.

Peter and the others do not hold back one bit. They boldly declare the truth to those who had killed Jesus a few weeks prior. ... Now... I don't want to frivolously make light of this entire scene... but I picture the High Priest stumbling in verse 28... He cannot say the name of Jesus...? "*This name...*" "*This man...*" In fact, the High Priest even feigns his own innocence by accusing the apostles of intending to bring "*this man's blood upon us...*" But just weeks earlier... the Sadducee-induced crowd yelled to Pilate: "*His blood be on us and on our children!*" (Matt. 27:25).

Israel's leaders become enraged at the boldness of the apostles who say that they have a higher authority that they must follow – rather than these National/Spiritual leaders.

This is an eternal principle! ... The apostles were under a higher authority – and so are we! (LISTEN) – We are to obey God AND men whenever possible. The Bible tells us to obey those who are in authority over us. But if our human authority commands us to do something that Scripture CLEARLY forbids – we must always choose to go with the higher authority – God. And here is the second part to this equation that often gets overlooked. ... Just like these apostles – we must submit to the consequences of our disobedience. ... When the apostles were rounded

up again... and later when they get beaten... we do not see them complain and breath vile threats at their persecutors. They do not retaliate.

If we ever want to imitate the apostles and defy a human authority – because it contradicts our Biblical conviction – we must imitate the apostles all the way... not just the first part... saying: “*It is better for me to obey God rather than you...*” ... If we suffer consequences for it – we need to suffer them joyfully – without threats of retaliation and vengeance.

Just about the time the Sadducees were about to rise up and murder the apostles... Gamaliel intervenes. He cites two recent rebellions that fizzled out... and then he concluded with this...

Acts 5:38-39

Many people have taken Gamaliel’s words and made them into divine truth. However... this was Gamaliel’s personal opinion... and is not Biblically true. Many things that are NOT of God have indeed prospered. Many cults and false religions thrive today – but that does not mean they are endorsed by God as true. Mark Twain once said: “*A lie runs around the world while truth is still putting on her shoes.*” ... In the end, God's truth will be victorious; but meanwhile, Satan can be very strong and influence multitudes of people.

Apparent success is no test of truth, in spite of what the pragmatists say. False cults often grow faster than God's church. ... No matter how you look at it, Gamaliel's "wisdom" was foolish. ... But God used Gamaliel’s foolishness because He was not finished yet... with the apostles.

The next action by the court was perverse. The members of the Sanhedrin had “*agreed*” to do as Gamaliel said. But beating the disciples and

commanding them to not preach in the name of Jesus was not refraining from the apostles nor letting time be the judge of their work as Gamaliel had said to do. Their actions were not guided by their own rules and regulations - but by their hatred of Jesus and His followers.

Acts 5:41-42

You and I are not expected to be perfect or faultlessly consistent in our faith and walk... but we are expected to be joyful. ... We are also expected to persevere.

Have you ever thought of persecution as a blessing... as something worth rejoicing about? ... I once read Richard Wurmbrand (the founder of the Voice of the Martyrs) describe this kind of joy. When he was in a Romanian prison, for being a pastor, his tormentors ripped chunks of flesh out of him, and he had the scars to prove it. He was sentenced to solitary confinement, and for weeks or even months on end no one would speak to him in his tiny cell. Amazingly, during all of that there were times when he was overcome with joy. He would actually stand up in his weakened state and dance around his cell, confident that the angels were dancing with him.

Who could ever be joyful like that... in the midst of such suffering...? ... I wonder if I could... But you know what...? I am beginning to realize that it is the take-home truth of this passage – that can enable any believer (like you and I.) So here it is... Here is our take home truth. It starts as we ask an important question:

Who's in charge? It is the God Who empowers and leads His church to carry out his mission - in spite of opposition.