

Acts 5:17-42 Teacher's Lesson The Great Escape

Introduction: Remember the film called *The Great Escape*, the seemingly impossible but true story of British POWs who, during world war two, escaped en masse from a German prison camp? Today we will see a seemingly impossible, a biblical *Great Escape*.¹

Review: Miracle healings were regularly being done among the people, so much so that the sick were brought in from towns all around Jerusalem. According to 5:16, the cure rate was 100%. They were “all” healed.

Where in Jerusalem were all these healings taking place (5:12b)? See 3:11. They mostly took place in Solomon's Portico, the same place Peter had healed the lame man.² This is significant because Solomon's Portico was the Sanhedrin's turf.

******In the game Monopoly there is a card entitled, “Get Out of Jail Free”. What “Get Out of Jail Free” card did the apostles have (5:17-21a)?** An angel of the Lord came in the night, opened the prison doors, and led them out. This reminds me of the old song, “I've got a river of Life flowing out of me; Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see; Opens prison doors sets the captives free. I've got a river of Life flowing out of me.”

Irony: The Sadducees did not believe in angels! In college I sold books door to door. A woman once said to me, “I don't believe in door to door salesmen.” I responded with a smile, “What do you think I am lady, a myth?” The supernatural stared the Sadducees in the face and they still did not believe.

Heavenly Man: Brother Yun was a Chinese house church leader who was arrested and placed in a maximum security prison. He felt that God told him to escape. On May 5, 1997 he miraculously walked past dozens of prison guards, through prison doors that were somehow left open, out of the prison, and into a waiting taxi. He said it was as if he was invisible to the guards.³

According to 5:17, why were the apostles arrested? The high priest and the Sadducees were filled with jealousy.

¹ Teacher's Note: Since this passage is so similar to what has happened previously, it might be good this time to zero in on the theological truths found in Peter's defense.

² This happened in Solomon's portico (3:11). The NIV has “colonnade”. According to the *New Bible Dictionary*, it was a covered porch or walkway along the eastern side of the Court of Gentiles in Herod's temple. It was on these porches that surrounded the temple that the scribes held their schools and the money changers had their stalls, 951. Josephus wrote that it had three isles with columns 27' high, 30' apart at the side isles and 45' apart in the center. In all there were 162 columns. It was covered with a cedar roof. It afforded ample room for countless people (Kistemaker, 127).

³ Personal notes taken from live testimony of Brother Yun when he spoke in Atlanta.

1. What reasons did the high priest have to be jealous (5:17)? See 4:1-3, 16-17. The miracles validated the message of the resurrection of Jesus. Thousands had already become believers and rest held the apostles in high esteem. All this made the high priest and Sadducees look really bad, for **1)** they were the ones who had killed Jesus and **2)** they were known for denying there would be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Also, the Greek word transliterated as “jealous” (5:17), *zélōs*, can also mean “religious zeal” directed at the apostles for opposing the beliefs of the Sadducees.⁴

2. The apostles were clearly guilty of civil disobedience (4:18-20). Based on 5:19-21a, how did God feel about their disobedience? God clearly approved of their actions: He sent the angel to release them and told them to go back and preach the Gospel in the temple, which they did.

Review: When is civil disobedience biblical? It is biblical when the government commands us to violate the commands of God.

In 5:20, how did the angel describe the message that the apostles were to speak? The angel described it as “the words of this Life”.

3. Why is the word “Life” (5:20) capitalized in the ESV? See *John 1:1-4, 10:10, 11:25-26*. It refers to Jesus!

ESV **John 10:10b** I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

ESV **John 11:25-26** . . . I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Application: When we speak to people about Jesus, we are offering them true, genuine, Life in the person of Jesus. We are to speak about Jesus no matter what!

Spurgeon: “. . . we are so gentle and quiet, we do not use strong language about other people’s opinions; but let them go to hell out of charity to them. We are not at all fanatical. We would not wish to save any sinner who does not particularly wish to be saved. Neither would we thrust our opinions upon them, though we know they are being lost for lack of the knowledge of Christ crucified. Do not driv[e] away your existence upon baser ends, but count the glory of Christ to be the only object worthy of your manhood’s strength, the spread of the truth the only pursuit worthy of your mental powers. Spend and be spent in your Master’s service.”⁵

******What effect did the apostles’ escape have on the ruling council⁶ (5:21b-26)?** They were “greatly perplexed” and “wondering” what it would come to, 5:24.

⁴ Marshall, 124.

⁵ Steven J Cole, “Lesson 15: Obeying God No Matter What (Acts 5:12-42)”, Bible.org. Accessed August 12, 2017

⁶ “Council” (5:21) is from *sunedrion*; *sun* = together and *hedraids* = together. The Sanhedrin was sort of a Jewish religious supreme court.

What details given in 5:23 made the escape especially perplexing? The prison doors were securely locked and the guards were standing at the doors.

4. What human explanation might the council have explored for the great escape (5:24)?

The council might have concluded that the apostles had sympathizers among the prison guard or even on the council itself.⁷

When the apostles were discovered teaching in the temple, why didn't the captain of the guard use force against them (5:26)? The apostles were held in such high esteem by the people that the authorities were afraid of being stoned.

5. Since the officials were afraid to use force, why do you suppose the apostles agreed to go along with them (5:26)? Perhaps it was in obedience to authority. They were not rebellious men. Their civil disobedience was only to those commands contrary to God's commands. After the release by the angel, they knew the council could do nothing to them except what God allowed.

*******What two complaints did the high priest have against the apostles (5:27-32)?** He complained that **1)** they were still preaching after having been commanded not to, and **2)** they intended to bring Jesus' blood on them.

6. It was no secret the council had maneuvered to put Jesus to death; why was the high priest complaining that the apostles intended to bring Jesus' blood upon them (5:28)?

The council presented Jesus' death as a lawful execution after due process. The apostles presented it as a murder. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is proof of his innocence and true identity (Messiah).

How did Peter respond to the criticism that they had preached despite having been told not to (5:29)? He said they must obey God rather than man. This is now the second time in Acts something like this has happened. Last time, when ordered to stop teaching about Jesus, Peter and John said:

ESV **Acts 4:19b-20** Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

Application: Obey God rather than man.

Examples: This same situation has often faced believers even since Peter said this. Governments frequently pass laws contrary to the commands of Christ. In an increasingly post-Christian West, believers will increasingly be forced to disobey the government. Sadly, corporations are now all too happy to jump on the anti-Christian band wagon as well, with devastating consequence for its believing employees. Be ready! Post-Christian Western governments have passed various laws that run contrary to biblical teaching. Do not preach

⁷ Bruce, 120.

the Gospel in public. It is illegal to teach against homosexuality because that is hate speech. It is hate speech to teach that Islam is a false religion. You must fight in the armed forces (women are now cleared to serve in combat roles; drafting them is the next step). You can't refuse services to others based on your own moral convictions (decorating cakes in celebration of homosexual weddings; renting rooms to unmarried couples). It is against the law to spank your children. You must pay for your employee's abortions. An adoption agency cannot discriminate against gay couples. It is illegal to host a home Bible study or house church. It is illegal to home school your children. You must donate to United Way even though some of the organizations it supports advocate abortion. You must pay dues to a labor union even though that union donates heavily to the Democratic Party. A church cannot promote specific political candidates, lest it lose its tax exempt status.

Ananias & Sapphira: Wives are to obey their husbands, but Sapphira should have disobeyed her husband when he came up with the idea of lying about how much they sold for the land. Obey God rather than man.

7. In 5:30-32, how did Peter answer the high priest's second complaint (5:28b)? Peter pointed again to the resurrection and flatly declared that it was the council who had killed Jesus, a man sent from God to be Israel's Leader and Savior, a man who could grant forgiveness of sins.

Application: Evangelism includes telling lost people about their sinfulness, confronting sinners with their sin.

8. What truths about Jesus did Peter bring out in 5:30-31? a) God raised Jesus from the dead. **b)** The council was guilty of killing Jesus. **c)** Jesus is exalted to God's right hand. **d)** Jesus is rightly to be viewed as Leader and Savior. Jesus has authority to grant **e)** repentance to Israel and **f)** forgiveness of sins.

a) Risen

The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the Gospel. Disprove Jesus' resurrection and the Gospel is meaningless and Christianity is dead. Conversely, the truth of the resurrection changes everything!

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:17 . . . if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

b) Hung on Tree

9. Why did Peter describe Jesus as being hung on a tree rather than a cross (5:30)? See *Deuteronomy 21:23*. Peter made reference to a well-known text from Mosaic Law that associated hanging on a cross with being cursed by God.

ESV Deuteronomy 21:22-23 . . . if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree . . . for a hanged man is cursed by God.

The council had declared that Jesus was cursed by God. However, his resurrection proved Jesus was really who He claimed to be (Messiah). The irony is that in dying on the cross, which was made from a tree, Jesus actually did become a curse for His people:

NIV 2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Word Study: “tree” (5:30) is from *xulon* (xylophone) and means wood, log, tree or club. It is different than the word for “cross” (*stauros*, “star”).

c) Right Hand

10. What is the significance of being at God’s right hand (5:31)? See *Matthew 26:63ff*. It is a position of honor and power. It also validates Jesus’ claims to be the Son of God.

ESV Matthew 26:63ff . . . the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the **right** hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy."

d) Leader & Savior

According to 5:31, God exalted Jesus to positions of Leader and Savior. We often speak of Jesus as Savior. In what sense is Jesus Leader? See *3:15*. Leader is from *archégos*, which means chief leader, predecessor, or even author.⁸ The NASB has “Prince”. Jesus is a prince to whom we owe our obedience. He is the author of our salvation (Heb 2:10).

ESV Acts 3:15 . . . you killed the Author (*archégos*) of life, whom God raised from the dead.

Application: It is a package deal. You can’t take Jesus as Savior without taking Him as your Price also.

e) Repentance to Israel

11. According to 5:31, what was the purpose of making Jesus Leader and Savior? It was in order “to” give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

Insight: Ultimately, repentance is a gift that God gives us, just as forgiveness is.

ESV 2 Timothy 2:25 . . . God may perhaps grant them repentance . . .

What does repentance mean (5:31)? The Greek is *metanoia* and refers to a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. It is a word closely related to faith, and helps us understand the type of faith that saves: a faith that leads to a changed life.

⁸ Thayer, #747.

ESV **James 2:17** . . . faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

ESV **James 2:26** . . . as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

For whom was this repentance initially designed (5:31)? *See Romans 1:16.* It was for the people of Israel. After first being offered to the Israelites, it was next taken to the Gentiles.

ESV **Romans 1:16** . . . the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

f) Forgiveness of Sins

What does it mean to be granted the forgiveness of sins (5:31)? “Forgiveness” is from *aphesis*, which could refer to a release from captivity or the cancellation of an obligation.⁹ Here it is the cancellation of the guilt of sin.

ESV **Colossians 1:13-14** He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

12. Peter said the apostles were witnesses to what happened (5:32). In what sense was the Holy Spirit also a witness (5:32)? One way the Holy Spirit was a witness was that He empowered the apostles to work testifying miracles. He also works internally in people’s lives:

ESV **John 16:8-9** And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me;

According to Peter, to whom does God give the Holy Spirit (5:32)? *See back to 2:38.* He was given to all who obey God. The implication, of course, is that the men of the council did not obey God.

Word Study: The point was made above that a saving faith is a faith that changes a person and produces good works. In 5:32, Peter said the Holy Spirit was given to those who “obey” God. “Obey” (5:32) in this case is from *peitharcho* a participle that fundamentally means “to persuade”. It can also mean “obey” in the sense that once you are persuaded of something you will act on it. Similarly, to have faith in something means you are persuaded that it is truthful.

What kept the council from killing the apostles (5:33-42)? They were saved from death due to the persuasive words of a wise teacher named Gamaliel.

⁹ BAGD, 125.

13. Why did Peter's words enrage them to the point of wanting to kill (5:33)? See 5:28b. The problem is that the apostles were indeed bringing Jesus' blood upon the council, 5:28b. The council was guilty of killing an innocent man who was actually God's own Messiah.

14. The high priest was a Sadducee (5:17). Gamaliel was a Pharisee (5:34). What was the difference? The Sadducees were a political party that controlled both the temple and the high priesthood. They saw themselves as conservative in their doctrine and accepted as authoritative only the five books of Moses. They denied a coming Messiah, angels, demons, immortality, and the general resurrection of the dead.¹⁰ In contrast, the Pharisees accepted the whole canon of Scripture and all these doctrines.

15. What is the essence of Gamaliel's argument (5:35-39)? He basically advised a wait and see approach.¹¹ He cautioned that they should be careful in opposing the apostles lest they find themselves opposing God (*theomachoi*; literally, God fighters). On the other hand, if Christianity were not of God, it would fizzle out and come to nothing now that its leader (Jesus) was dead.

ESV 2 Chronicles 13:12b O sons of Israel, do not fight against the LORD, the God of your fathers, for you cannot succeed.

16. Even though God used Gamaliel's argument to save the apostles' lives, was his argument sound (5:35-39)? In this particular instance, he was correct. However, many upstart false religious sects, rather than fizzle out, have instead grown like cancer: Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarianism, Scientology, the United Pentecostals, etc.

How did Luke know what Gamaliel had said to the council (5:35-39)? See Acts 22:3ff. Leaks are as old as mankind! It is possible that some council members later came to faith and make the speech public. Also, Paul studied under Gamaliel. Since this happened before Paul came to faith, Gamaliel may well have told Paul about it.

What punishment did the council inflict on the apostles (5:40)? They beat them and ordered them to stop preaching. These beatings typically consisted of forty lashes less one.¹²

Observation: It is interesting that the angel spared them from prison but did not stop the flogging. It has been most imprisoned Christians' experience that no angel came to let them out. Later in Acts, James was imprisoned and martyred. Paul was supernaturally let out of prison one time, but remained in prison other times.

17. How did the apostles respond to the beating and injunction (5:41)? See Matthew 5:11-12. They left rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer.

¹⁰ Kistemaker, 146.

¹¹ Johnson, 103.

¹² Marshall, 130.

ESV **Matthew 5:11-12** Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Application: *If you went out street preaching only to be arrested and roughed up by the police department, how would you respond?*

ESV **1 Peter 4:13-14** . . . rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Application: We too should rejoice when we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

What civil disobedience continued in 5:42? They apostles did not obey the command to stop preaching, but kept on doing so right there in the temple.

18. Why were the apostles not arrested again for the activities of 5:42? *See 5:26, 39.* The officials had already beaten the apostles. Taking Gamaliel's advice, there was not much more they could do to them except wait it out. Fear of the people was also a concern.

What message did the apostles teach and preach from house to house and in the temple (5:42)? They taught that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah).

So What?

19. What truths about Jesus were brought out in the passage? Jesus is Life, God raised Jesus from the dead, the council was guilty of murdering Jesus, Jesus is exalted to God's right hand, Jesus is rightly to be viewed as Leader and Savior, Jesus has authority to grant people repentance and forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit is bearing witness to who Jesus is (the Messiah).

20. What can we learn from the fact the council refused to believe in Jesus despite overwhelming evidence? *See Luke 16:31.* A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still. Some people will not believe no matter what evidence is presented. Sin has so harden their hearts that they respond irrationally.

ESV **Luke 16:31** . . . If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

Why are we not as bold as the apostles in telling others about Jesus?

"Am I a soldier of the cross, a Follower of the Lamb, And shall I fear to won his cause, Or blush to speak his name?"

— Isaac Watts

21. How should you respond when people abuse you because of your stand for Christ?

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.Com/NTRF.

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