

5. As noted, Luke's account in 5:12-16 parallels the previous incident of the healing of the lame man. That healing and Peter's sermon interpreting it, coming as they did in sight of Israel's religious leaders, provoked their jealousy and anger and led them to have Peter and John arrested and interrogated. In the case of Peter's broader healing ministry, these rulers had likely spent weeks watching what was transpiring day after day in Solomon's portico. Each new day brought more people into the temple grounds, with all of them being healed. And more healings meant more and more amazed and vocal witnesses carrying the word far beyond the walls of Jerusalem. That, in turn, was securing an increasing influence and credibility for the apostles and their message of this new "way."

The Council had sternly warned Peter and John to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus of Nazareth; not only had they refused to heed that warning, their actions and continued proclamation were causing Israel's rulers to lose complete control of the situation. They had hoped to crush this movement before it gained any momentum; now, only several weeks later, it appeared that it was unstoppable. If the previous incident with the lame man had been cause for concern, the present developments were absolutely vexing. If they didn't gain the upper hand very soon, it would be too late; they would find their power and influence over the people stripped away. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and Israel's authorities determined to meet this increasing threat with a harsher response; expanding witness was about to encounter escalating opposition.

- a. This is evident first in the fact that the whole Sanhedrin, including all the elders and priestly representatives of Israel, convened to address the growing problem (5:21). Previously it had seemed adequate to call together only a handful of Sanhedrin members to interrogate Peter and John. Surely such an assembly was sufficient to intimidate and silence these two insignificant, powerless Galileans; there was no reason to concern the entire ruling body. Now things had escalated to the point that every member of the Sanhedrin needed to be involved.
- b. Secondly, though Peter continued to be the focal point of the apostolic witness in Jerusalem, the high priest and his Sadducee cohort had all of the apostles arrested and imprisoned (5:17-18). The Jews were no longer confident they could successfully deal with this problem with a limited, low-key response involving only a few of Jesus' disciples; it was now necessary to confront the whole group of individuals leading this challenge to their authority and teaching.
- c. The third thing that indicates heightened opposition is the fact that the Jews' jealousy and hatred had become inflamed to the point that they were prepared to execute the apostles (5:33). Previously they had only threatened Peter and John; now they were prepared to put an end to this movement by murdering its leaders.
- d. As well, the extent of the rulers' spiritual insensitivity virtually insured intensified hostility. In the preceding episode they had been confronted with the Spirit's witness to the apostles and their message when the healed beggar stood before them. That testimony proved insufficient to turn their hearts, but the present multitude of healings – healing even from Satan's power – had no greater success.

And if those expressions of the Spirit's presence and power weren't enough, the Sanhedrin now had to try to explain away the fact that the men they'd jailed the night before had somehow passed through locked prison doors and walked past posted guards without being noticed. Not only that, this second imprisonment clearly hadn't altered the apostles' resolve; far from viewing their emancipation as an opportunity to flee, these troublemakers were right back on the temple grounds continuing their proclamation and instruction (5:19-25).

6. Learning of the apostles' whereabouts, the assembled Council directed the temple guard to go and retrieve them, which they did with utmost discretion for fear of being stoned (5:26). The temple guard – and by implication the men of the Sanhedrin who dispatched them – were all too aware of the favor the apostles enjoyed with the people.

Peter and the other apostles were brought in and made to stand in front of the assembly, and the presiding high priest charged them with flagrantly violating the Council's previous order to cease preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus (5:27-28). Unflinching, Peter gave the same response as before, this time to the entire Sanhedrin: Whatever may be the desires and dictate of Israel's rulers, Jesus of Nazareth – speaking in the name of the God of Israel and by the power of His Spirit – had commanded them to testify of Him, not only in Jerusalem, but ultimately to the ends of the earth (5:29-32).

- a. Yahweh Himself – the One these men claimed to know and serve – was the first to testify of Jesus by raising Him from the dead and exalting Him to His right hand. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had borne irrefutable witness that this man is Israel's Messiah – the Prince and Savior sent by Him to fulfill the prophetic promise of repentance and forgiveness of sins for the sons of Israel.
  - b. And if God's testimony in Jesus' resurrection and ascension had somehow been lost upon Israel's leaders, His Spirit was continuing that witness. The Council had seen a man lame from birth miraculously healed in Jesus' name, and the Spirit's witness only increased in the ensuing weeks as multitudes were being delivered from physical and spiritual affliction. Beyond that, before their very eyes the Spirit had affirmed these followers of the Nazarene and confirmed their testimony as being divinely directed by supernaturally liberating them from prison and sending them right back to their teaching in the temple.
  - c. The Father and the Spirit had attested the Son; could those commissioned by the triune God to share in that witness do any less? So Peter's resolute reply: "*We must obey God rather than men*" (cf. 4:19-20).
7. The rulers of Israel found themselves in a dilemma: Their own status and reputation – not to mention their personal peace of mind – depended upon quelling this growing movement, but it was becoming apparent that they were not going to be able to silence these men who were bent on proclaiming Jesus and this new "way." They clearly were thoroughly convinced they were doing God's work under His commandment, and so would not be subject to the pressures of human authority and power.

The Father, Son, and Spirit had convinced the apostles of their calling and mission, but the divine will and hand should have been clearly evident to these rulers as well. God had not left Himself without ample witness; For weeks – perhaps months – He had been openly confirming the apostles and their message by mighty signs and wonders, and now He had demonstrated that even the greatest power of men – here epitomized in a secured lockdown, and very soon to find its superlative expression in sanctioned murder – erected no barrier whatsoever to the accomplishment of His purpose.

The Sanhedrin as a whole had managed to ignore the Lord's testimony, but it hadn't been lost on all of its members. After hearing Peter again refuse the Council's demand, seeing their rising indignation and perceiving where it was going to lead, the Pharisee Gamaliel sent the apostles from the room and voiced his own concerns and convictions to his fellow rulers. He urged them to recall similar situations in the past: This wasn't the first time a movement had formed in Israel around a charismatic and influential leader, and in each instance time and patience had seen the enthusiasm and energy dissipate and the movement finally dissolve. The same could be expected in this situation (5:34-38).

- If the apostles' activities and the movement they were leading were of human origin and design, the whole thing would eventually lose momentum and collapse upon itself. The Sanhedrin clearly believed this to be men's work and not God's, and therefore wisdom dictated that they cease their opposition – which would only add fuel to the fire – and allow things to run their course. Prudence demanded patience, and patience would prevail where active resistance could not.
- But if, on the other hand, what the apostles were insisting upon was actually true, opposing them and their message would be worse than futile; it would ultimately prove fatal. Israel's rulers would find themselves fighting against God Himself (5:39). Threats, chains and even murder were useless against the Most High and would only bring guilt and condemnation upon those attempting to oppose Him.

The assembly listened intently to Gamaliel and recognized that he was absolutely right. What he said made perfect sense, but other concerns would continue to hold sway. These men were so bound by their self-righteous unbelief and jealousy for the status quo that fear of God was entirely eclipsed by fear of personal loss. In the end, they could not bring themselves to fully yield to Gamaliel's counsel; they took his advice to the extent that they relented from putting the apostles to death, but they didn't release them without another stern warning and a flogging to reinforce it (5:40).

8. This was notably the first time Jesus' followers had suffered for His name's sake, and they recognized this turn of events as a joyful fulfillment of His word to them (5:41): Those who had hated and persecuted Him would regard and treat in the same way all who bear His likeness and gospel. Suffering in this way is not to be despised, because it, too, is a form of attestation: It testifies to the gospel truth of the new creation in Christ; Jesus' followers aren't persecuted because they adhere to a religion or a moral or social ethic, but because they share in His life and bear His fragrance (2 Corinthians 2:12-17, 4:1-7). And bearing His life, they cannot help but manifest Him in the world (5:42).