

Acts 5:17-42

Introduction

In Acts chapter 4 we saw the beginning of the conflict between the leadership of the Old Covenant Israel (at least 71 of the wealthiest, most highly educated, and most influential and powerful men in Judaism [the Sanhedrin]) and the leadership of the New Covenant, eschatological Israel (twelve *comparatively* poor, “uneducated,” and socially inferior men [the apostles]). We see that the nature of this conflict is unique because it’s full of redemptive-historical significance. This is what explains why Luke includes the record of this conflict in volume 2 of his history. He has a theological, redemptive-historical agenda—not a moralistic, contemporary life-lesson agenda. But as we’ve seen over and over again, this theology—this record of the fulfillment of redemptive history—is inherently and powerfully transformational. It has everything to do with our everyday lives as those who are now members ourselves of this eschatological, New Covenant Israel. When we read Acts always in the light of this theological, redemptive-historical agenda, then we can see the true Gospel applications (which Luke also intended) without turning them into moralisms.

If, in Acts 4, we saw the beginning of the conflict between the leadership of the Old Covenant Israel and the leadership of the eschatological, New Covenant Israel, here in chapter five, we see the escalation and intensification of that conflict. In chapter 3, after the healing of the lame man, Peter (along with John) was preaching to the people in Solomon’s Portico (at the temple; 3:11-12). In chapter 4, we read:

- Acts 4:1–2 — Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly agitated because they were teaching the people [being both uneducated and unauthorized] and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead [thus threatening the power and privilege they enjoyed as a result of the relative stability of their relationship with Rome].”

“They laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day” when the Sanhedrin would be in session (4:3). We remember the outcome of that first examination. Peter and John (and the rest of the apostles) were commanded not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (4:18) and then threatened with punishment if they disobeyed (4:19-21). And now what have we just read in verses 12-14?

- Acts 5:12–14 — Now through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people, and they [the believers] were all with one accord *in Solomon’s Portico* (at the temple). Now none of the rest dared to associate with them; but the people were holding them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, multitudes of men and women...

We’re not at all surprised, then, when we read in verses 17-18:

I. Acts 5:17–18 — But the high priest rose up [*anistemi*] and those with him (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled [*pimplemi*] with jealousy. And they laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

There’s an ominous note to that expression, “But the high priest rose up [*anistemi*] and those with him...” The point, of course, is not that they literally “stood up” on their feet after lying down or being seated, but rather that they have a plan of action that they intend to pursue. This plan and agenda, we know, is to stamp out this upstart movement that’s gaining so many followers. Luke says that they were “filled [*pimplemi*] with jealousy” (cf. 13:45; 11:25; 19:28). They were envious of the apostle’s “success.” But we’ve seen throughout the first few chapters that the apostles weren’t proclaiming their own name or their own authority, but only the name and the authority of Jesus as the Messiah—the Christ. It was impossible, therefore, that the apostles could be filled with jealousy because they were filled with the Holy Spirit—the Spirit who testifies to Christ. On the other hand, it was impossible for the Sanhedrin to be filled with the Holy Spirit so long as they were filled with jealousy—so long as they were jealous for their own advancement and the protection of their own self-interests. The contrast couldn’t be greater. In Acts chapter 2, we read:

- Acts 2:4 — And [the disciples] were all filled [*pimplemi*] with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues [“speaking of the mighty deeds of God” in and through the Messiah, Jesus; 2:11]...

In Acts chapter 4:

- Acts 4:8–12 — Then Peter, filled [*pimplemi*] with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people... let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene... by this name this man stands here before you in good health.”

Later in the same chapter:

- Acts 4:31 — ...they were all filled [*pimplemi*] with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God [the word concerning salvation through Jesus the Messiah] with confidence.

In the larger context of Acts, we’ll see deacons being appointed in the assembly who are “full [*pleres*] of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:3); we’ll see Stephen, “a man full [*pleres*] of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5; cf. 6:8; 7:55); we’ll see Barnabas, a man “full [*pleres*] of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24); and we’ll see the disciples “continually filled [*pleroo*] with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:52; cf. 2:28). What—or who—is it that we are “filled” with? What is the guiding and controlling and motivating principle and influence in our daily lives? Is it a spirit of jealousy rooted in pride and self-centeredness, or is it the Holy Spirit—is it the Spirit of Christ—whose fruit is faith and joy and that “wisdom from above [which] is first pure, then peaceable, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits” (Jm. 4:17)? Here in Acts, we’re meant to see this stark contrast between the leadership of the old Israel filled with jealousy and zealous for their own advancement and the protection of their own self-interests, and the leadership of the eschatological New Covenant Israel filled with the Holy Spirit—the Spirit who testifies to the

glory of Jesus sent from God and that seeks only the interests of His kingdom and the advancement of His name (cf. Jn. 5:44).

“[T]he high priest rose up and those with him (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. And they laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.” In chapter four, we’re told that “they laid hands on them and put them in jail.” Here, Luke emphasizes that they put them in a *public* jail—or we could translate: “they put them in jail *publicly*” (cf. Acts 16:37; 18:28; 20:20). Luke’s point in either case is that the leadership of the Old Covenant Israel is intent now on making a public statement. What better way to prove that this fledgling movement is not of God than to show that its leaders are guilty of civil and religious disobedience? Their plan and strategy, then, in this public jailing of the apostles is not only to stop them from speaking to the people in the name of Jesus, but also to publicly discredit them before the people. But if this is their counsel and if these are their thoughts, we know that God is the one who “nullifies the counsel of the nations... [and] frustrates the thoughts of the peoples” (Ps. 33:10). We go on to read in verses 19-21:

II. Acts 5:19–21a — But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, and bringing them out [*exago*], he said, “Go, stand [*histemi*] and speak to the people in the temple all the words of this Life.” Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach.

We must not see this “jail break” as a random miracle in isolation from its immediate literary and theological context as well as from the larger redemptive-historical context. The high priest and those with him have had the apostles publicly jailed in order to make a public statement—in order to publicly discredit and delegitimize the followers of Jesus, and so also Jesus Himself, as the fulfillment of redemptive history. We could say that what’s at stake at this specific redemptive-historical moment is the establishment and future of the infant church—of this brand-new, eschatological assembly. So what does God do?

If the high priest and those with him “**rose up**” (*anistemi*) and **publicly** jailed the apostles in order to discredit and silence them, God’s answer is to send His angel to release the apostles secretly “during the night,” and then commission them to “**stand** [*histemi*] and speak to the people **in the temple [publicly]** all the words of this Life.” The ones whom the Jewish council arrested and jailed are the ones God has released. The ones whom the Jewish council “commanded... not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18) are the ones God has commanded to speak. While the Jewish council would delegitimize the disciples of Jesus as the redemptive-historical fulfillment of the “true” Israel, God commands the apostles not just to speak to the people all the words of this Life, but to “speak to the people in the temple all the words of this life.” By commanding the apostles to stand and speak at the temple, God is saying that the message the apostles proclaim is, in fact, the redemptive-historical fulfillment of all that the temple stood for. The “words of this Life” are the fulfillment of that spiritual and eternal life that the temple itself always represented (cf. Peterson). In every way, then, we see that the leadership of the “old” Israel is fighting against God; and so we see also that their fight against God cannot succeed. It’s this reality that Luke highlights in the rest of the chapter with a certain “comic” irony:

III. Acts 5:21b — Now when the high priest and those with him came, they called the Sanhedrin together, even all the Council of the sons of Israel, and sent to the jailhouse for them to be brought [*ago*].

Remember how after their first arrest the apostles prayed to the Lord, quoting from Psalm chapter 2:

- Acts 4:25–26 (Ps. 2:1-2) — “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise *vain things*? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.”

If the apostles didn’t actually recite the rest of the chapter, they would have assumed its context. Only two verses later in Psalm 2, the psalmist writes:

- Psalm 2:4 — He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord mocks them.

We can easily imagine that laughter and mockery here. Here’s the august gathering of the Sanhedrin—as Luke puts it, “even *all* the Council of the sons of Israel”—acting confidently as if they’re in control, as if they’re deciding things and calling the shots. But we know already what they still don’t know. While they’re sending a summons to the jailhouse for the apostles to be brought (*ago*) to stand (*histemi*; v. 27) before them, we know that God has already sent His angel to the jailhouse and brought the apostles out (*exago*) so that they might “stand” (*histemi*) in the temple and continue speaking to the people (5:19-20). God has preempted them and now they can only look rather foolish to us who know what happened during the night. Indeed, that’s the point. He who sits in the heavens is laughing. The Lord is mocking them. Not for the sake of “having a good time” at someone else’s expense (like would be the case with us), but for the sake of His own glory revealed in the salvation that He has accomplished in Christ—the salvation that this Jewish Council would try to destroy by fighting against God. It’s with this divine laughter and mockery in mind that we continue to read in verses 22-26:

IV. Acts 5:22–24 — But the officers who came did not find them in the prison, and they returned and reported back, saying, “We found the jailhouse locked quite securely [with all (*en pas*) security] and the guards standing at the doors, but we opened it and found no one inside.” Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.

The irony of the situation is obvious. We expect the Sanhedrin, “even all the Council of the sons of Israel,” to be the ones in control and calling the shots. And yet here they are “greatly perplexed” and, again, looking rather foolish. And again, that’s the point. Other translations say that they were “at a loss” (NIV), “baffled” (HCSB), “greatly puzzled” (NET). One lexicon says that the Greek word (*diaporeo*) means “to be thoroughly perplexed... to not know what to do, to be very confused.” And all the while, He who sits in the heavens is laughing. The Lord is mocking them. We continue to read in verse 25:

V. Acts 5:25 — But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

That the high priest and those with him had arrested and jailed the apostles was well known since they had done so publicly specifically in order to make a public statement. But now that public statement is backfiring. Whoever it was that brought word to the Sanhedrin, whether intentionally or unintentionally his words are filled with irony. “The men whom you [publicly] put in prison—they’re standing in the temple [publicly] and teaching the people!” The way this messenger words his report highlights the impotency and helplessness of the Jewish Council. Not only are they unable to keep the apostles in jail, they’re also unable to keep them from teaching the people. But in the context of Acts, we also hear the words of this messenger highlighting the fact that the Sanhedrin is actually fighting against God. In Acts chapter two, Peter said:

- Acts 2:23–24 — [T]his Man... **you** nailed to a cross by the hands of lawless men and put Him to death. But **God** raised Him up again...

In Acts chapter three, Peter says again:

- Acts 3:14–15 — [Y]ou... put to death the Author of life, whom **God** raised from the dead...

And then again in chapter four:

- Acts 4:10 — [L]et it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom **you** crucified, whom **God** raised from the dead...

Later on in our passage this morning, Peter and the apostles will say:

- Acts 5:30 — The **God** of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom **you** put to death by hanging Him on a tree.

So when this unnamed messenger begins his report with these words, “The men whom **you** put in prison,” we who know what happened during the night can finish his report with these words: “The men whom **you** put in prison, **God** has brought out of prison.” Remember what the angel of the Lord said to the apostles, ““Go, **stand [histemi]** and speak to **the people [ho laos] in the temple [en ho hieron]** the whole message of this Life.’ Upon hearing this, they entered **into the temple [eis ho hieron]** about daybreak and began to **teach [didasko]**.” And now the report brought back to the Sanhedrin replicates exactly the command that the apostles were given by God and Luke’s description of their obedience to that command—“The men whom **you** put in prison are **standing [histemi] in the temple [en ho hieron]** and **teaching [didasko] the people [ho laos]!**” In the report of the unnamed messenger, we see the impotency and helplessness of the Sanhedrin. We see that the Sanhedrin is actually fighting against God. We see that He who sits in the heavens is laughing. The Lord is mocking them.

VI. Acts 5:26 — Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).

The “comic” irony is dripping now. The captain of the guard and his officers—of all people—are afraid. The fact, then, that they proceed to bring the apostles “without violence” indicates that it’s really the apostles who are choosing to go with them of their own free will. Whatever the public statement that the Sanhedrin wanted to make, it’s now been completely neutralized and even turned back on its head. Here they are “arresting” the same men for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. And for what? For healing people and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name? Even if the people don’t believe the apostles, they don’t see them as religious criminals (cf. Bock). If the first arrest might have been a warning to the people, this second arrest in as many days leaves the captain of the guard himself in an awkward position. He might have wanted to have the apostles stoned, but now he’s afraid of being stoned himself. And all the while, He who sits in the heavens is laughing. The Lord is mocking them.

VII. Acts 5:27–28 — And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Sanhedrin. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly commanded you not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

The apostles are never questioned as to how they came to be in the temple that morning and not in the jail. They’re only questioned as to, one, why they disregarded the command of the Council and, two, how dare they intend to bring “this man’s” blood upon them (as if this was innocent blood). And still, there’s irony. The high priest’s words amount, first, to an admission that the Sanhedrin has so far been totally ineffective in stopping the spread of the apostles’ teaching (“you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching”). His words amount, secondly, to an ironic admission of guilt (“you... intend to bring this man’s blood upon us [and so far we’ve been unable to stop you]”). Finally, his words amount to an invitation for the apostles to do the very thing they’ve been commanded not to do—to speak in the name of Jesus.

VIII. Acts 5:29–32 — But Peter and the apostles answered and said, “We must **obey** God rather than men. The God of our fathers [the God who promised a coming Messiah to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] raised up Jesus, whom YOU put to death by hanging Him on a tree [as one suffering God’s curse; cf. Acts 10:39; 13:29; Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24]. This One GOD exalted to His right hand as a Leader and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God gave to those who **obey** Him [cf. Acts 2:38-29].”

It’s not ultimately the apostles who are standing trial before the Sanhedrin, is it? It’s the Sanhedrin that’s standing trial before God (cf. 4:5-12). And yet in the midst of this trial with its formal charge of fighting *against* God, there’s also the declaration that God has *used* even their fighting against Him to accomplish the salvation of Israel (cf. 2:23; 3:17-18; 4:27-28)—to raise up and exalt to His right hand a Leader and a Savior who will grant repentance to Israel (to the very ones who put Jesus to death by hanging Him on a tree), and forgiveness of sins (even the forgiveness of that sin of nailing Jesus to the cross). It is, in short, vain and futile to fight against God (cf. 2 Chron. 13:12). And it’s in this light, then, that we hear the apostles’ opening

confession: “We must obey God rather than men.” “We *must*” because it’s only to those who obey Him that God has given the Holy Spirit who, by His powerful working in and through the apostles and in and through the assembly (cf. Peterson), testifies to Jesus as the true fulfillment of redemptive history. We must *obey* God rather than men because to *fight against* God is not only futile, it’s self-destructive and suicidal. The Psalm that the apostles quoted earlier ends with these words:

- **Psalm 2:12** — Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him [which is also to say, ‘How blessed are all who obey Him’ (cf. Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17)]!

We must obey God rather than men because it’s to all those who obey Him that God has granted that eschatological gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

“We must obey God rather than men.” So often, we hear these words only as a prooftext for civil disobedience, when what we ought to hear first and foremost and above all else is a powerful—and a beautiful—confession of faith. Indeed, this is a confession that ought to be on our lips every single day of our lives.

IX. Acts 5:33 — But when they [the Jewish high council] heard this, they became furious and intended to kill them.

Only hours earlier, God had sent His angel to release the men whom they had publicly jailed. Now they intend to kill the men whom God released. The apostles have confessed in humility and faith that they must obey God rather than men, no matter what men may do to them. The Sanhedrin—now in a fury—has chosen, instead, the path of fighting against God. “He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord mocks them.” We go on to read in verse 34:

X. Acts 5:34 — But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.

The Pharisees, though they were the “minority party” on the Sanhedrin, were more popular with the people than were the wealthy and aristocratic Sadducees, and we know that the common people still held the apostles in high esteem (5:13), even if most of them weren’t believing their message. Gamaliel, perhaps the most prominent Pharisee on the Jewish high council and one who enjoyed the respect of all the people, is still concerned about popular opinion. Contrast this with Gamaliel’s most famous student, Saul of Tarsus (22:3; or Paul), who later will ravage the church, dragging off men and women and delivering them into prison (Acts 8:1-3). If Gamaliel is concerned about his own reputation with the people, he may also enjoy leveraging his influence and authority against the Sadducees. He did, after all, have more in common theologically with the apostles than did the Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the body. We see the “politics” at play. Now we listen to what Gamaliel says:

XI. Acts 5:35–39 — And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up [prior to AD 6], claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who were following him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census [AD 6] and drew away people after him. He too perished, and all those who were following him were scattered. So in the present case, I also say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; **but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or you may even be found fighting against God.**”

Here’s the final and the ultimate irony: that Gamaliel—himself a prominent member of the Sanhedrin—should warn his colleagues about the signs of fighting against God when already those signs have found fulfillment—“in the growing Christian community, in... signs and wonders, in [the apostles’ inexplicable] escape from jail just the night before” (Polhill). According to Gamaliel’s own advice, then, already the Council should know that they’re fighting against God (Polhill). And so, Gamaliel becomes, in the hand of God, God’s own unwitting mouthpiece (cf. Jn. 11:47-53). This plan and action *is* of God, therefore the Jewish high council will not be able to overthrow them. God *has* now exalted Jesus to His own right hand as a Leader and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. God *has* now given the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him. Jesus, the Messiah, *is* now building his New Covenant assembly, and even the gates of Hades will not overpower it (Mat. 16:18). In the words of Isaiah, the prophet:

- Isaiah 8:10 — Devise counsel, but it will be thwarted; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

Therefore, we’re emboldened to confess humbly and joyfully with the apostles: “We must obey God rather than men.”

- Psalms 33:10–12 — Yahweh nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the thoughts of the peoples. The counsel of Yahweh stands forever, the thoughts of His heart from generation to generation. Blessed is the nation [now the New Covenant Israel] whose God is Yahweh, the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance.

We must obey God rather than men! Returning to Acts, and the conclusion of the story:

XII. Acts 5:40–42 — So they were persuaded by [Gamaliel] [not to kill the apostles]. And after calling the apostles in and beating them [probably with the forty lashes less one; Deut. 25:3; 2 Cor. 11:24], they commanded them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. **So they went on their way from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for the Name.** And every day, in the temple and from house to house, **they *did not* cease teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.**

If “[God] is for [us]... what can man do to [us]?” the psalmist asks (Ps. 118:6). In the case of the apostles, the Sanhedrin could beat them, inflicting pain and suffering. Later in Acts, many Christians will be dragged off and delivered into prison (8:3). Stephen and James will both be

killed (7:57-60; 12:1-2). Paul will suffer in numerous ways (14:19; 16:19-24; 24:27; cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-25) and ultimately be martyred (2 Tim. 4:6). But even “in all these things,” says Paul, “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:35-37)—even through Him who sits in the heavens and laughs, mocking all those who would fight against Him and against His saving purposes, devising vain things.

- Romans 8:31–32 — If God is for us, who is against us? He who indeed did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?

And so we confess with rejoicing even in the midst of suffering: “We must obey God rather than men.” Indeed, our entire life must always be one of obeying God and the gospel of our Lord Jesus (cf. 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17) rather than men.