

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

The Whole Message of This Life

Acts 5.17ff

6.12.16

But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy.¹⁸ They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said,²⁰ "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life."²¹ Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought.²² But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back,²³ saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside."²⁴ 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.²⁵ But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!"²⁶ Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).²⁷ When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them,²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders 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."²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."³⁰ "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross."³¹ "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins."³² "And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

³³ But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men."³⁶ "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing."³⁷ "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered."³⁸ "So in the present case, I 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;³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."⁴⁰ They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them.⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

We've been looking at this New Testament book called The Acts of the Apostles. It's the sequel to The Gospel According to Luke ("Luke Part 2"). And this carefully researched two-volume work continues the story of the Christian movement from after the resurrection up to St. Paul's arrival in Rome some 30 years later.

The Gospel According to Luke moves toward Jerusalem...and this second volume moves OUT from Jerusalem...but the early section (where WE are) is all about the Temple...IN Jerusalem.

The Temple was meant to be God's headquarters on planet earth but the leaders had lost sight of God... They continued all the ceremonies and holy days and morals and all the trappings of religion ...but the core was hollow. God had come to the building and they kicked Him OUT! And without God the Temple became about commerce, competition, power, exclusion and keeping the status quo.

In some sense...this whole section is meant to answer the question: who are God's representatives on planet earth NOW? Who ARE the real sons of the prophets and sons of the covenant (3.25) inherited from Abraham? Who speaks for God...now that Jesus Christ has lived, died and risen from the dead?

Today, we look at this miraculous rescue...and a trial that follows...and we see that despite their appearance and their apparent rawness, the Apostles of Jesus Christ are the real successors of Abraham...and the Prophets... The New Jerusalem has twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev 21.14) – This will not sit well with the leaders of the Temple...

So let's tune in: 1) Guardians of the Tradition 2) The Resurrection Pattern 3) The Message of Life

There's an old hymn called "A Charge to Keep I Have" (Wesley, 1780) and that's how these guys thought of themselves. They had a charge, a sacred trust, a holy obligation to fulfill...and they took that calling very seriously. The Sanhedrin and the priests and leaders and clergymen and religious scholars around the Temple were Guardians of the Tradition.

And I don't mean to belittle that...it was a calling from God. In our own day/age we don't have a very high view of tradition – but that's not a good thing. We live in South Florida...transient and hard to find a building over 75 years old. But tradition is important to the transmission of civilization...and it was important to GOD! Passing ON truth, history, values, to the next generations (e.g. see Psalm 78).

But tradition IS not God...and the leaders of the Temple had lost the heart/Spirit of God in their attempts to protect the tradition... IT CAN HAPPEN.

And they also...lost... an accurate self-understanding (these often go together – unawareness of God and unawareness of self). Truth is: it's hard to know yourself. Have you ever looked at yourself in one of those three-sided-mirrors in a dressing room...and you think, "Hmmm...is that what I look like?"

And IT'S NOT...I mean it's closer to what others see when they look at you ...but it's still not very accurate and EVEN what people see in you is NOT accurate – it's just hard to know ourselves for who/what we are! The leaders in the temple had lost a sense of God and had lost a sense of self.

But the Apostles are trying to defer to these leaders. They will call them in CH. 3 “YOU are sons of the Prophets and sons of the covenant...” i.e. YOU MEN are Guardians of the Tradition! Keepers of the Covenant...and YET when God came to the Temple in the Person of Jesus Christ...you didn't recognize Him... So, what's up with that?

Jesus Christ gave these apostles, these fishermen and regular guys...gave them the Keys to the Kingdom...and they find themselves in the wheelhouse of God's Ship... but they don't want to leave behind the Old Crew...the officers...the captains and admirals ...

And these apostles are really trying to honor them... “Please! Take the wheel! Sit in the chair and let's sail”... But the Old Crew...has no idea of how to drive the ship or where it's going... They do not know the heart of God and don't even know how to obey His orders... and they are ashamed and it makes them super angry and enraged (murderous!)

It's like they're saying to these greenhorn apostles, “Hey! You're the ones on trial here... NOT US!...v.28 “YOU intend to bring this man's blood upon us.”

Now let me take a step back here and just remind us what's happened (a little out of order):

The apostles Peter and John found an excluded man, lame since birth and left... unqualified outside the Temple and begging. They offered him a hand and in the name (authority) of Jesus Christ, the man leapt to his feet and was healed and instantly qualified to walk into the Temple.

Then Peter and John explained that Jesus Christ had raised from dead and HE HAD ALSO RAISED THIS MAN FROM HIS EXCLUDEDNESS AND HELPLESSNESS ... Then the leaders got mad and told Peter and John to stop talking about Jesus Christ and resurrection...but Peter and John couldn't stop talking about the Risen Man.

Then, the Old Crew in the Temple (the guardians of tradition who had failed to recognize God – it was like an episode of Undercover Boss!) – the priests and Sadducees and all the other leaders were BOILING! They'd been disgraced/disregarded! Their authority was challenged! And they threw Peter and John in some sort of lock-up area in the Temple precincts.

And then the next day they're going to have a real trial...time for warnings is OVER! These guys have to face our authority!!

BUT a supernatural being, an angel opened the gates of the prison and then reiterated to those apostles: YOU TOO have a charge to keep, a sacred trust to fulfill, "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." (20)

And they wasted NO TIME! They went at dawn when the Temple was reopening for the new day and began to teach – new dawn, new day, new life!

Then the leaders send the temple security guards to get those rabble fishermen troublemakers and bring them from the jail... into the courtroom/trial!

But the security guards return saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." (23)

And... THAT sounds like something we read in Luke Volume ONE... "And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing..."

It turns out that the Apostles have experienced a kind of resurrection of their own...complete with angels and perplexity (Acts 5.24) and as that lame man was raised and liberated, so now THEY are liberated from a "prison house locked quite securely"...

And when the Temple leaders are perplexed ("Where'd they GO?") THEN they get word, "YOUR prisoners are free and STANDING in the Temple teaching the people!... These Galilean fishermen are like termites! We can't get rid of 'em!"

And then they bring them in for the trial...but with no violence because the crowds like these Galilean fishermen and their little movement.

That's when the High Priest said, "we TOLD you NOT TO TEACH IN THIS NAME...you're filling Jerusalem with your teaching and you're trying to bring this Man's blood on us...WE'RE NOT ON TRIAL – YOU ARE!"

Then Peter answers in a kind of weird and wonderful way (which we'll look at in a moment) but notice for NOW that LIFE is on the move!

It reminds you of that ancient vision to Ezekiel when that prophet saw the drip of water flowing from the Temple...that turned into a trickle...and then into a little flow...a brook and finally a raging River of LIFE ...and everywhere that water flowed came ALIVE.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the Pebble in the pond and now resurrection life is reverberating OUTWARD... a lame man raised and liberated...two prisoners locked quite

securely...with guards at the door...might as well been a huge stone...AND NOW DEATH CAN NOT HOLD THEM...a resurrection pattern!

And at least one of the Old Crew (the Temple leaders) is a little freaked out ...“Uh guys...could I say a word? Have any of you considered that this MIGHT be the God who raises the dead? That God might be unleashing LIFE on the world?”

His name is Gamaliel ...not a Sadducee...but a leader of the other group, the Pharisees...who DID indeed believe in the resurrection. And he basically uses a little logic to suggest, “Uh...fellows...maybe we shouldn’t stone these fishermen ...and not just because the crowds might stone US...but ‘cause maybe we’re fighting against God (v. 40) ...” AND HE ENDS UP STATING THE TRUTH... “He who sits in the heavens laughs...” (Ps. 2 and 66.3)

Luke (BTW) may have gotten this report from Gamaliel’s student who MAY have been there that day, a man named Saul of Tarsus.

Peter’s defense (v. 30) is weird and wonderful because... it’s only one line of defense and THEN a whole lot of lines about the Gospel.

“You put us in a place where we had to choose: either to obey God or to obey YOU...So we obeyed God (you can’t blame us ...can YOU?) That’s the defense.

And then he tells these men, who have lost sight of God...guardians of God’s Tradition but strangers to God and God’s loving heart...Peter appeals to them to believe this story about Jesus Christ, the Good News. It’s one of the places where we see the Good News in Acts....and that’s important because the Good News, as we’ve said, IS one of the TWO MAIN CHARACTERS in this Book of Acts: The Gospel and the Holy Spirit are the main characters (Word/Spirit).

Here, the angel calls it, “The Whole Message of This LIFE” – It’s a message rooted in the Tradition. It was first preached in the very start of the Bible when God announced, “The Seed of the Woman will bruise the serpent’s head...but the serpent will bruise His heel...” It is the message these leaders should have recognized as it came (v. 30) from “The God of our fathers...” It’s what this God, OUR GOD accomplished, as He has always promised!

It’s a message that is at the same time horribly insulting and strikingly uplifting. This message told these super righteous men that they were actually sinners like everyone else...and though they were certain they WERE NOT SINNERS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE (because they were so moral and good and kept the Tradition), this message said, “Yeah! But God came right to YOUR DOOR, to His Own House and you disregarded Him, wanted only to get away from Him... “You put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree!”

The Law said, “Cursed is the man who hangs on a tree” (Deut. 21.23)...and that’s what YOU WANTED FOR GOD...to curse Him...to kill Him...shame Him.

BUT this message is NOT only horribly insulting (putting ALL people in the same category) it is also strikingly uplifting... “This Man, you cursed and killed... He is also the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (31)

Look, He is coming for YOU with GIFTS to be received!...this Risen God-Man... He is Prince and Savior...coming to grant you, gift you forgiveness and repentance...coming to liberate YOU from that part of you that you hate... like He liberated us from the jail and this lame man from his disqualifying ailment...He’s coming to give LIFE to the dead... WON’T YOU FACE YOUR NEED FOR FORGIVENESS AND RECEIVE THIS Prince and Savior, who grants repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins...”

But they can’t see themselves...they need the Holy Spirit...they need an eye-opening... YOU HAVE TO SEE that you’re guilty; you’re just like everyone else...broken...needy ...helpless...need LIFE!” (Do YOU see it? Do YOU see YOUR need?)

He can give you a new life... but they wouldn’t see...

So...instead of receiving LIFE, they give these fanatics a shameful, embarrassing beating and send them away with another order: “Don’t keep teaching this stuff!”

And they go away rejoicing (which was a big deal, because those beatings could be really brutal – even fatal!) and Peter/John count themselves “proud to be shamed...worthy to be worthless” (oxymoron v.41)

But they CAN’T keep silent... (bottom line) “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (42) The Main Character – the Good News – won’t go away...we need it everyday...and that becomes to us, a mandate, to say it everyday...hear it everyday: the whole message of this Life.