

The Results of the First Persecution

And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. Acts 4:23-24

Reading about the arrest of Peter and John, their night in prison, and the trial before the same people who had crucified Jesus in the comfort of our home or here in the classroom cannot recreate the feelings of these men. Yet inspiration never took away free will (look at Jonah) and never offered extra courage (Paul said he was *"in weakness and fear, and in much trembling, 1Cor. 2:3*). It must have been a very terrible experience for them. They want to return to *"their own..."* and share the experiences so the others can commiserate with them. Since Luke does not give a noun to describe *"their own,"* it is up to the context to determine whether this is the other apostles or the entire church. It could be either, but there are several key indicators that might help us.

First, the personal pronouns *"their own,"* and *"they"* in 4:23-31 end at verse 31 and *"the multitude of those who believed"* is introduced in verse 32. Second, there is no indication that everyone at that time was filled with the Holy Spirit or that they were all speaking the word of God. Those whom Peter and John came to were *"their own"* and all these were filled with the Holy Spirit and preached with boldness. Third, it was only the apostles who were doing the signs and wonders (5:12), only the apostles who were arrested (5:17), only the apostles were accused *"you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine"* (Acts 5:28), and only the apostles who after being beaten and commanded not to preach *"they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ"* (Acts 5:42). For these reasons I think it is weighted more to it only being the 12 with perhaps a few others present. But can't say with absolute certainty.

Like all prayers, one is leading and the others are listening. But when all are concentrating on the words they *"raised their voice to God with one accord"* (Acts 4:24). It with a prayer of the many worded by one and joined together into one. God heard all their voices in that single prayer.

After *"hallowing"* God's name as Jesus had taught them (Mt 6:9), they immediately quoted the second Psalm, stamping it with inspiration and revealing how it was fulfilled.

who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ.' 27 'For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Acts 4:25-28

The prophecy concerned both Gentiles (nations) and Israel (people). Although the Jewish leadership initiated this event, The Holy Spirit focused on Pilate, Herod and the soldiers as the nations, but also includes all Israel (since they denied him before Pilate when he was determined to release him).

But with all their rage, rebellion and evil, they only did *"whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done."* God is so wise and powerful that he can even factor in the freewill of man and still get them to do exactly what He needs them to do. This brings us back to Peter's words in his first sermon.

The Determined Purpose and Foreknowledge of God

"Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; Acts 2:23

From the very beginning, God had made it clear that the one coming into the world would have to suffer. He told the Serpent while still in the Garden of Eden: *"you will bruise his heel"* (Gen 3:15). Through the prophets, it became more and more clear that there would be some great conflict.

In the days of David, more than a thousand years before it happened wrote the 2nd, 22nd, and 110th Psalms, God revealed exactly what would happen when it came time for Jesus to be crucified. In spite of all their attempts to fight against God's plan, the best they could do was *"do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done."*

As Paul preached about this same event, he made it clear that they were not forced to do it. They didn't even know about the prophecies. They were completely ignorant of the Scriptures they were fulfilling.

For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. 28 And though they

found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. 29 Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. Acts 13:27-29

This had to bring great comfort to all of them as it concerned them and was the cause of their own troubles. God was working out His plan and they knew no matter what the opposition sought to do in the end it would only work out exactly as God had planned.

They end their prayer with a plea not for safety or to be removed from the conflict, but for courage to keep doing what needed to be done and God's help to do it. God gave them exactly what they asked.

Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, 30 by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus. 31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. Acts 4:29-31

They had all things Common

Remember this “*multitude*” is a group of 5,000 men (and women and children) who were made up of Jews from “*every nation under heaven*” who had been converted to the Lord and were now members of the church. During these early days with only one congregation, no written Scripture, and no indication that the gifts of the Spirit were yet being bestowed through the laying on of the apostles hands, they all remained in Jerusalem. But many did not have the funds to remain so those who had willingly sacrificed so that those who had nothing could continue to stay and be taught.

For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. 27 It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. Rom. 15:26-27

We are now reading about these things as they happened. In order for the gospel to spread as quickly as possible to the Gentiles, God wanted all these people grounded and strengthened. So for that early period in the growth of the church, those in Jerusalem made great sacrifices:

Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. Acts 4:34-35

In order to grasp the magnitude of what they were doing and to pave the way for the abuse in the next chapter, we are introduced to Barnabas.

Barnabas

Joseph is a Levite from the Island of Cypress. His ability to exhort and build others up had so impressed the apostles that they have nicknamed him Barnabas (son of exhortation or encouragement). He had some land and sold it for the benefit of the church.

Ananias & Sapphira

Wanted the honor but did not want to pay the price. Entire view of their service to the Lord was skewed and they ignored Jesus words in the sermon on the Mount about good deeds motivated by the desire for the praise of men. It led them into sin and into death. They agreed to sell the land for as much as they could get. Then they would take some of the money to the apostles (pride) acting like it was all they had received (lying and hypocrisy) but keeping back some of the money (greed).

The larger issue: If they had lied to Peter and this had not been dealt with, it could have undermined the respect for the apostles inspiration. So as Achan, Ananias and Sapphira became the example of how sin should be dealt with in the church. Known sin must be dealt with.

First the husband, then the wife is given the opportunity to show repentance, but she too is punished.

The Result:

11 So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.... 13 Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. 14 And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, Acts 5:11, 13-14

The Second Arrest: All the Apostles

As Luke summarizes the next few weeks or months, he emphasizes two things. The number of the miracles that were being performed in Jerusalem through the apostles. The unity of the church in this work. The continued explosive growth of the church, and the beginning of multitudes from the outlying villages and towns bringing their sick and hearing the gospel.

The Jewish leaders had remained silent for all this time, but with the obvious results all around them, and the continued guilt of their own actions being preached daily, the decision is made to put a stop to it.

Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. 19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." Acts 5:17-20

Luke is clear and specific that it is the "Sadducees" who are the primary movers of these actions. Since they do not believe in the resurrection, it is much more troubling to their beliefs than the Pharisees.

God Granted a Sign

But God in mercy gave them a sign to warn them against this action. It is doubtful that most of them understood the import of this sign, but Gamaliel did and it changed the course of the trial. An angel was sent and not only released them from prison but commanded them to go back to the temple and continue preaching. This runs counter to natural inclination as most would flee after being released (as Peter was told to do after his release from Herod's prison (Acts 12:5-17)).

It is amusing to see how this unfolds. The Jewish leaders are secure in their thoughts that they are in complete control of the situation. Though the angel has released them and they are even then preaching in the temple, the leaders have called their counsel and commanded that the apostles be brought.

And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" Acts 5:21-23

The irony of this strikes us strongly as we read these words. These men never had any control. They were only doing "whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." They just didn't realize it yet (most of them never did, but Gamaliel did).

At this point, it begins to dawn on them that this is going to be hard to explain to the people. What answer will they give trying to explain their release. Even more, how to explain that after their release they nonchalantly return to the temple and continue preaching the same doctrines they had been arrested for showing no concern or fear.

Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. 25 So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Acts 5:24-25

All they can do is re-arrest them and bring them back to trial. Yet there is a changed demeanor in this arrest as they can see the attitude of the people toward their actions and realize their danger.

Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. Acts 5:26

The opening words of the Sanhedrin make it clear that the import of the sign had eluded them and they were determined to continue in their rebellion against God in spite of Scripture, miracles and God's clear sign that these men were innocent and should not be imprisoned. Their charge is filled with such hypocrisy that it is hard to fathom. Only a few months earlier they had stated the very thing they now charge the apostles with:

When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." 25 And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children." Mt. 27:24-25

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" Acts 5:27-28

Do not worry what you should speak

I often wonder if Peter's eyes along with the other apostles widened as Jesus' words were fulfilled:

But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak; for it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. Mt. 10:19-20

They did not know they were going to say these words. What do you think they was thinking as they came out of their mouths?

But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." Acts 5:29-32

God has no intention of allowing the apostles to back down at this time. In obedience to God they were preaching that these very men had murdered Jesus when they hung him on that tree. When everything was stripped away, they knew this was the truth. They had used false witnesses, had forced Pilate with threats to condemn him and when he washed his hands, they were willing to take Jesus blood on their own hands. In a few short sentences Peter gives the same points as the first sermon.

(1) God raised Jesus	(2) you murdered Jesus	
(3) God exalted Jesus to his right hand	(4) God gave repentance	
(5) God gave forgiveness	(6) We are witnesses.	(7) Holy Spirit witnesses.

Gamaliel's Advice

Their anger blinded them to the truth of these words and the cumulative affect of events that had transpired since Jesus crucifixion. The logic and power of their words, the notable miracles that were being performed, and the great sign of the apostles being released had greatly impressed Gamaliel.

When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. 34 Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. Acts 5:33-35

Gamaliel seeks a private counsel. He wants to make some pertinent points that make no sense at all unless Gamaliel is beginning to see the light. We are never told whether he obeyed the gospel or died in his sins, but it is clear from his actions and words here that he has come to doubt the wisdom of the course they have taken. He makes two arguments.

1. Twice in the recent past they had seen similar events that had taken their course and dissipated.

For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. 37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. Acts 5:36-37

2. If this plan is of men it will come to nothing, if of God you can't overthrow it.

And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; 39 but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it — lest you even be found to fight against God." Acts 5:38-39

They rest of the court agrees with him, but still feel the need to beat them and command them not to speak in the name of Jesus. The apostles had already told them they would obey God and not men. So the outcome was the same as before.

And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. Acts 5:40-42

The apostle have grown and matured. They feel only joy that they have been allowed to stand with Jesus in His sufferings. Then, every day, both publicly in the temple and privately in homes they continued to preach.

One can only wonder what Gamaliel's star pupil "Saul of Tarsus" thought about his advice.