

Let us now notice the main thing in Stephen's speech. His main point is very clear. *Christianity is not something new; it is something very old.* The court before him claimed to be defending the old truths. They claimed to protect God's words from new errors coming in. God had appeared to Abraham. He had made promises which were passed on to Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes. These things were the corner-stone of Israel's life. They existed because of God's gracious choice. They continued because of the promises he had given. And now they demanded to know just what Christianity was, and what it taught.

Stephen's reply is the work of a master. He takes the ground completely from under their feet. By the time he has finished speaking, one thing will have become very clear. It was not Stephen who needs to defend himself. It was them. It was not Stephen who is perverting the old truths. It was them. Stephen made it plain that his beliefs about Abraham, and the promises, were perfectly sound. Jesus of Nazareth had not come to overturn the old revelations of God. He had come to fulfil them, and make them complete. The Messiah was the one whom every faithful patriarch and prophet looked for. No apology needed to be given for believing in him. The council needed to explain their own ways.

Abraham himself had had no temple. He had not owned more than a burial plot in the land. He had been told that it would be four hundred years before the land was given to them. And the temple would not be for some centuries beyond. One thing, then, was quite clear. The temple was not the final fulfillment of God's word. The land was not a permanent part of his plan. If it was, then surely Abraham would have had it in his own day. Could the greatest Israelite of all be less blessed than all the rest? Could the father of the faithful receive fewer things from God than his offspring? It was unthinkable. But this was what the council's thinking implied. One far greater than the temple had come. Jesus had come as the glory and dwelling place of God. He had come to give his people an inheritance far beyond mere plots of land. But they had rejected him. They clung on to the shadow, when the reality had arrived. Worse than that, they murdered the reality, and so lost any benefit of the shadow too.

Let us then note how Stephen thought, and do likewise. Christianity is not new. It is the fulfilment of promises that are very old. It did not spring out of nowhere. Jesus' death and resurrection were spoken of by God from the start. To trust these promises is to be on safe ground. It is those who follow the new ideas of every age who ought to apologise for what they do. The believer in Christ need not be ashamed.

Let us learn too to take little notice of buildings and outward things. The temple itself was blessed by God. It was his dwelling place. But even that must fade away when Christ had come. How much less is any building of any importance today! True religion does not consist in such things. True religion must be rooted in the heart, be inspired by the Spirit, obedient to God's word, focused upon Jesus Christ, and glorifying to God through a life of love. If we have this, then nothing more is required - no special buildings, and no special clothes. Let us make sure that our Christianity consists in inward truth, and not in mere outward show.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 4 (Chapter 5:12-7:8)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

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Acts 5:11-16

11 And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. 12 And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. 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, 15 so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. 16 Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

These words tell us a great deal. Satan has tried to attack the church from outside. Persecution has come. Satan has tried to spoil the church from the inside. Corruption has come. These verses tell us how the church was after this. We can read these words and be very encouraged. Let us take them to heart!

For a first thing, let us notice then that *God may turn evil into good*. It is certain that the Jewish leaders intended evil against the church. Its very existence was a rebuke to them. Its teachings caused them great offence. They had already moved to murder the church's Lord; but he had risen from the dead and ascended, and could not be touched any more. They had moved against the Lord's apostles. But they could find no way to harm them, because of the favour of the people. They had only succeeded in turning the church to prayer. They had only succeeded in causing new help to be obtained from heaven.

It is certain too that the devil hoped to do much damage when he led Ananias and Sapphira astray. Pride, ambition and deceit would greatly grieve the Holy Spirit. By spoiling the church from inside, he would sap away its true strength and life. The church would be like the world - full of greed and ungodly kinds of ambition. But this plan failed completely too. God caused the deceit to be exposed. And these words tell us the outcome. "Great fear" came upon all who heard about it. Great fear came upon the believers in the church. They had all now seen that the Holy One lives within the church. To deceive the church is sin against him. To bring personal greed into Christ's church is to fight against the Lord. It was not a small or insignificant thing to join the church. The Lord is jealous for his bride. He will take notice if she is defiled. But "great fear" did not only come upon the church. It came upon everyone who heard (v11). Those who were not truly converted did not dare to join them (v13). They might have been thinking that it would be good to join the church. Its leaders were in great favour amongst the people. It was a community of great love and joy. The rulers of Israel seemed powerless to touch it. Any poor amongst it had all their needs supplied. It had already attracted many thousands (4:4). Many friends and family might be part of it. Many unconverted people might have been tempted to join it. But now they were restrained. They saw that it was no small thing to join the church. It might be a matter of life and death. A great barrier was put up. Only those who truly believed now came in (v14). Satan had tried to corrupt the church. But God had intervened - and its purity was ensured. What a wonderful outcome this

6 But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 7 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve me in this place.' 8 Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.

This passage seems very strange to us. We can understand a man being on trial. We know that Stephen was charged with blasphemy. We know that blasphemy was a capital crime. He was accused regarding the temple, and the law. All this we can understand. But his reply seems very odd. He appears to say little about the things he is accused of. But this is something that should cause us to pause. When we do not understand why the Bible says something it does, there is an opportunity to learn. It was not Stephen's thinking that was strange. It is ours. We must adjust our minds to God's word. Let us then see these verses as an opportunity to learn. The more puzzling a difficulty seems at first, the greater reward there will be when we have resolved it!

Let us notice first of all *the respectful way in which Stephen spoke to the court*. These men were complete rogues. They had murdered their own Messiah. They had rejected the Son of God. Their time was limited. Their place and their nation would soon be destroyed. They had opposed the apostles of the Lord, troubled his church, and their end was nigh. All of this, Stephen knew - and more. But in his words there is not a hint of bitterness. There is no sign of ungodly anger, or sinful rage. There is no resentment, or grumbling, or hard words. It is true that his words will have a massive sting in the tail. But they were not words of personal complaint, but spoken as a prophet of God. As Stephen addressed the court, he called them "brethren and fathers". He named Abraham as belonging not only to him, but to them too. His words are clear, and without malice

We must learn a lesson from this. We must give honour to those who are in authority, whatever they may do. Even when they are involved in the most awful of crimes, we must recognise that they still rule. Their crimes must be opposed, and their plans against God must be clearly spoken against. Stephen did all this. But he recognised too that anarchy is not from God. When men speak only badly about their rules, they bring all authority into contempt. This is not God's way. Our rulers are sinners. But rulers still they are. Our taxes must be paid. Honour is due. Whoever despises the institution of authority, despises God (Romans 13:1-8).

We see too in Stephen's words that however badly a person treats us, we must continue to do them good. Angry, bitter talk is never from God. Malice is always the words of the devil. We are not forbidden to feel strongly. We are not commanded to not care over evil. But we must be very cautious. Often our zeal is not for the kingdom of God. It is merely our personal pride. It is not the way of Christ, who laid down his life for his enemies. It is the way of man, who slays and kills to have what he wants (James 4:1-3). This is not the influence of the Spirit of God. His ways are ways of kindness and love. Evil is to be overcome by good. We must increase our faith, and believe that God will see to the avenging of wrong (Romans 12:19-21). Hate must be met only with love.

hates us. It hated him first. The servant is not greater than his master. If they have called the owner of the house Beelzebub, how much more those within it? (Matthew 10:25). But if we share in his sufferings, we shall share in his glory. If we are faithful in life, he will own us in death. If the world rejects us, it is a sign that we do not belong to it, and shall not share its fate. We must fix our eyes upon Jesus. In life and in death, we must seek to please him.

Let us notice secondly how much religious zeal is false. Stephen's opponents were certainly religious men. They had come from great distances away to live in Jerusalem. They had built their own synagogue. They had a great deal of energy to dispute over religious things. They saw themselves as the great friends of Moses, and of God, and of the law. They showed a great concern for the honour of holy things. But for all this, they were unconverted, and wickedly opposing the truth of God. Their principles were corrupt. They had the name and form of the worship of the true God, but in their hearts they were murderers. They lied to advance their cause, and opposed the real church of God. They resisted the Holy Spirit, and persecuted one of the finest disciples of the Christ.

We should not be surprised to see that these things are still so. The heart of man has not changed. The darkness of his mind has not cleared up. There is plenty of religion in the world that has little to do with Christ. There are still many who are zealous for their own principles and ideas, but oppose the truth of God. We must not lose heart over these things. It has always been so. Let us instead make quite sure of our own position. We cannot be satisfied because we enjoy our religion. It is no proof of a good state of our souls that we are full of zeal. We may be regular at church, and read the Scriptures every day. We might be the first to jump in to defend some vital principle of God's word. Yet for all of this, we might be ignorant of Christ, and still heading to hell. Let us look carefully at what kind of religion we follow. Is it one with the Son of God right at the heart? Is it one which leads to growing love? Is it one which hates lies, and delights always in the truth? Is it one which never has to hide itself, because its ways are always pure? If our hearts were revealed right now before the world and before God, of what would we have to be ashamed? Let us not think that because we have some religion, therefore all is well. Cain came to sacrifice, as well as Abel. King Ahab inquired of the prophet of the Lord. Balaam spoke the very words of God. The son of perdition himself was an apostle of Christ! And yet for all this their souls ended up in hell. They have had many followers. Let us make sure that we are not amongst them.

Acts 7:1-8

1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' 4 Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, he moved him to this land in which you now dwell. 5 And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, he promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.

was! Satan meant to spoil it. Through God's intervention, it was kept all the more safe.

Let us then take heart. It may seem very hard to be a Christian. Satan may be trying all kinds of ways to discourage us, or tear us apart. But the Lord may turn all evil into good. He had a good purpose in allowing these things in the early church. He has a good purpose in allowing them now. The struggle may be long. It will be very hard. But let us not lose heart. If we rely upon the Lord, then our feared disasters will be turned to good. See how the Lord did it for these believers! The apostles had been dragged away like criminals from Solomon's porch (3:11). Now the church met their openly! (v11) The church had faced the threat of being split. Now they were together "with one accord" (v11). The church had looked like being brought into disrepute. Now they were highly esteemed (v13). The church had been severely threatened. Now nobody dared to touch them. Satan had sought to ruin the church. Now they grew very rapidly (v14). The evil one had sought to destroy the church's power. Now great works were being done (v12, 15-16). Let us not think that our troubles mean that the Lord can only at best bless us a little. The Lord is very great. Let us trust him for great things.

Let us notice in these verses *remarkable illustrations of the gospel's power to save*. Luke tells us that "many signs and wonders" were being done. Even the shadow of Peter had a miraculous effect (v15). People came from all the towns round about. And every one went away healed (v16).

Miracles in the Bible tell us many things. They had many causes and many purposes. But one of those is particularly important. The miracles were pictures of the gospel's power to save. Each one shines some new light on the work that Jesus does in a soul. Each one reveals something more about our greatest need, and what the Lord can do. We must never think that they were only done to impress those who saw. There is far more to them than that.

Luke calls the miracles "signs". They were done by the apostles (v12). One of their purposes was to draw attention. The apostles' were preaching the truth of God. Peter, John and the other 10 were declaring the way to be saved. And the risen Jesus was testifying with them, that their word was true. Through the miracles, he called their attention to the word. They were not done for their own sake. They were done to draw attention to the Lord. Miracles were not performed by every Christian. They were performed especially by those who were called to be public witnesses to the truths about Christ.

The number of those who were healed very great. A "multitude" came to benefit from it. The word spread beyond Jerusalem, and people came from the towns round about. It was now being seen that salvation is for all. Christ did not intend that the church should remain in one city. His purpose was for the good news to go to the ends of the earth. Whoever you are, there is power in the gospel that can save you too. However many were healed, yet the power never ran out. Every single one who came to be cured, went home healthy and well. Until the Lord returns, the gates of heaven will always be open. Every one who comes to him in faith will be saved. Though countless millions have tasted his grace, yet it will never run out. He has enough for the whole world.

The variety of those who were cured was very great. There were all kinds of diseases. Some were tormented by evil spirits. But whatever disease of body or soul they had, they went away healed. The power which was at work was likewise very great. The shadow of Peter alone was enough to cause a cure. The meaning of this is not hard to understand. Whatever we have done, Jesus is well able to save us. There is no case which is too hard for him. There is nobody who has sinned so much that they cannot be saved. There is no one who is in such chains that he cannot release them. Wherever there is a sinner, there is someone whom Jesus is well able to cure. There is no problem through a lack of his power. The only trouble is that we will not come to him.

Dear reader, think hard about this truth. Have you come to Jesus? He is willing to save completely. All your sins may be forgiven. New power to live for him can be received. The Holy Spirit is offered to you in the gospel. Have you come to him? His power is very great. There is no question about it. The only question is this one. Have you come? We must not rest until we know the answer to this question. Eternity hangs upon it. There is nothing more important in the whole world. Have you come to him?

Acts 5:17-21

17 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." 21 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.

There is a great deal to learn from these verses. They teach us much about God's ways. Let us see what we can glean from them.

Let us notice first of all *that the devil does not easily give up*. The leaders of Israel had already once attacked the church. They had already arrested Peter and John, and imprisoned them. They had given them severe threats too. They had tried to silence them already - but it had come to nothing. They had had to let them go; the word of God had been preached more and more. The persecution had failed. But that first failure did not deter them from trying again. It did not stop them from raising the stakes. This time it was not only Peter and John. Now, all the apostles were seized and put into jail.

Let us learn a lesson from this. We must not think that because we have overcome Satan once, that now he will give up. We must not imagine that he is an easy quitter. He knows human ways far too well for that. He knows how easily we become discouraged once our trials go on. He knows how we dream of ease and comfort, and give way to despair when we do not have it. He knows that perseverance will often achieve what the first effort did not.

What a wonderful name the name of Jesus must then be! And indeed it is. It is the name of the only Son of God. It is the name of the one whose blood atones for all sin. It is the name which the angels praise. It is the name of the glory of heaven. It is the name of the only Redeemer of lost men. Let us count it as a precious name. Let it be more to us every year that we live. Let it be one for which we are well pleased to suffer loss and shame.

Acts 6:8-15

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

These words give us another first. The first church has been born. The first persecution has taken place. The first attempts of Satan to corrupt the church have been exposed. The first deacons have been chosen. Now the first martyr will die for the faith. The first believer will seal his testimony with his blood. Let us learn from these verses how it came to be.

Let us notice first of all how like his master Stephen was. There is much in these verse to remind us of the last days of Christ. The Holy Spirit seems to be specially underlining this. Stephen was a man who did wonders and signs. He spoke with wisdom and by the Spirit. Those who opposed him could not disprove what he said. His words were persuasive. God testified with him. He could only be opposed through lies. Like his master, Stephen was opposed by false witnesses. His enemies would not stoop to make the charges themselves. Others spoke on their behalf. Like his master, Stephen was accused of speaking against the law, and the temple. Like his master, he was called to face the council, and appear before the high priest.

What absurd charges they were! It Jesus of Nazareth was dead, then it did not matter what Stephen said he would do. But if he was alive, then he was proved to be Lord. There was some shadow of truth in what they said. Jesus had spoken of the temple being destroyed. The New Covenant did change many of the former customs. But these things were not blasphemy, as Stephen's speech would show.

The lesson to be learnt is a simple one. If we are faithful to Jesus, then we must expect to share his fate. The world did not accept his witness, though it was true. They could not refute his words themselves, so they resorted to lies. We must not marvel if the world

prevailed.

Let us admire the wisdom of God. He does not have to intervene in a spectacular way. He can do what will only be seen by the eye of faith. The unbeliever will always have an explanation. But the one who knows the Lord will know that behind the scenes, there is more to be said. There is a God in heaven, who moves the hearts of men. There is a Lord of all, who is sovereign in all.

Let us see secondly here *the miserable condition of being undecided*. What a pathetic sight the council make! They have put the apostles in jail. Now they let them go. They had wanted to put them to death. Now they set them free. They agree that they should not fight against God. But they beat the apostles anyway. They heed Gamaliel's word to let them alone. Then they forbid them to preach Jesus any more. Was there ever a more sorry compromise than all this? Was Jesus alive or was he not? Was the gospel a devilish lie, or was it truth from God? Were the apostles spokesmen for the Christ, or liars out of hell? The council could not tell. Their decision made nothing clear at all.

If we know that the gospel is true, then let us live as *decided* Christians. Let us not waste our time "halting between two opinions". Let us not have one foot in the church, and the other in the world. If we are lukewarm, then Christ will spit us out of his mouth (Revelation 3:16). We will be useless for him. We will be miserable in ourselves. Compromise in following Christ brings us the worst of all worlds. We feel restrained from the sin our nature desires; yet we are too indifferent to serve Christ with all our hearts. The double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let him not think he will receive anything from God (James 1:7-8). If we love Jesus Christ, then let us love him fully. If we hate sin, then let us hate it totally. If we are looking for another world, then let us not settle down in this one. Either Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or nothing at all. He is Lord of all; let us live so.

Let us see finally in these verses *the preciousness of the name of Jesus*. The apostles had been treated like dirt. They were hauled in jail, having done nothing wrong. They were beaten, and refused their liberty to speak. But when they left the council, they were not sad! When they went their way, they did so with joy. They were happy, because it was all for Jesus' name.

It is not fun to be hated. There is nothing good on its own in mere pain. The apostles did not rejoice because they were mad. They rejoiced because it was all for their Saviour's sake. He had suffered for them, to take away their sin. Now they suffered for him, as a testimony to him. He had been shamed and condemned in their place; now they were shamed and condemned for drawing attention to him.

We must think rightly about hardship for Jesus' sake. It is not something to avoid. It is not something to merely endure. It is something that ought to make us glad. It is a proof that we are one of the sons of God. Jesus went to glory through suffering. And now we are going the same way. The world knows nothing of suffering for Christ. They suffer, it is true - but not for any lasting reward. But God's children do. Their sufferings are the mark of their faith - and promises of their faith's reward to come.

The Christian must not give up when the battle proves to be a long one. He must "gird up the loins of [his] mind" and be ready for it. He must expect that Satan will try, try and try again. He must be willing to withstand in the same way. The Christian race is not over in a minute. The Lord wishes to prove and refine us - usually through many years. His promises to us are not delivered in the first hour. We must patiently endure, and only then can we claim the prize.

We must never fall into the trap of thinking that the Christian struggle is meant to be easy. We must completely ignore those who tell us such things. The promise of a life of effortless victory and unbroken advance is a false one. It is "through much tribulation" that we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). There is a fight on. It is a fight to the death. The opposing side is extremely strong and powerful. Its leader is full of hatred against our faith. To overcome him is not the work of a day. Let us be convinced of this, and count the cost. Let us avoid being those who start out, but do not make it to the end.

Let us observe secondly *the mysterious and wise sovereignty of God*. The leaders of Israel had risen up before. They had imprisoned two of the apostles in the past. But God had not then intervened. Peter and John were left in the prison until the trial. God did not perform any outward miracle - but gave them boldness so that they might preach. But this time, it was not so. An angel appeared. The prison doors were miraculously opened. The apostles were brought out. A miracle was performed, and the guards did not know until much later on. God had a purpose, that the apostles should go out and preach.

We must not expect God's ways to always be the same. Because he intervenes in a special way at one time, does not mean he will in another. We cannot tie him down to anything that he has not particularly promised. It may be his will to be glorified by a remarkable rescue. It may be his will to be glorified by us staying faithful though we are slain. We can never tell in any one case, until it has worked out. Our duty is simply to bow before him, and honour him as God. He sees far further than we do. Every possible fact is known by him. He has far more wisdom than we do. His ways are beyond our understanding! So when rescue does not seem to come, let us bow before him, and trust that he does all things well. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a God who was able to deliver them from the king's furnace (Daniel 3:17). But even if he did not, yet they would refuse to serve Nebuchadnezzar's false gods (Daniel 3:18). They did not know if God would intervene. They did not know if he would be honoured through life or through death. But whichever way it was, they would cling on to him. Let us do likewise. Jesus Christ had to go to the cross, before being lifted up on high. Let us be ready to do the same.

Let us see finally that there is one thing in God's will which is very clear. *He always wishes the good news about his Son to be proclaimed*. When the angel released the apostles, they were given an instruction. They were not to do as they pleased. They were to go to the temple, and there to preach the way of life.

This must have seemed a very strange command! It was certainly a dangerous one. They had enraged the temple authorities twice already. It was for their preaching that they were in the jail in the first place. To return to the scene of the "crime" seemed foolish. It

seemed like a sure way to bring twice as much trouble down. But because of all this, God's will is made all the more clear. Our first priority is not to be our own comfort. We are not allowed to make our own ease the greatest thing. The spreading of the news about Jesus Christ must come first.

Of course it must! The Son of God gave up his very life for us. His death has saved his people from eternal hell. The price that he paid was very high. But he paid it, because it was the will of God.

Can we do less than give our all? Our all cannot begin to compare with what Jesus gave. We cannot like him leave the worship of the angels. We cannot humble ourselves though being God. We cannot offer up a sacrifice of infinite worth. The best we can do is nothing compared to this. But this does not excuse us from doing what we can. God has not given us a command to look after number one. He has given us a command to go, and tell people about the life which is in Christ. Let us see that we take note of God's will, and obey. There is nowhere safe in this world, except within the will of God. Let us be assured that angels are watching over us. And then let us go to the work.

Acts 5:22-32

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!" 24 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!" 26 Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. 27 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!" 29 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 Saviour, 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."

This is a most impressive scene. It is striking; it is humorous. It is also very informative. We will be poor Bible-readers if we cannot get something out of it!

Let us see first of all *a clear proof of the darkness and foolishness of the human heart.* The scene would be more amusing if it were not so tragic. Here are the leaders of Israel. And they are faced by the clearest of miracles. The prison was "securely shut". The guards were "standing outside", believing that the prisoners were quite safe. It happened in the "common prison" (v18), where any break-out would be most obvious. But as far as everybody knew, nothing had happened; all was quiet. And yet the prisoners were not

35 And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. 36 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. 38 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." 40 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.

This passage records a deeply interesting event in the life of the early church. It contains a great deal to marvel over. It contains many things to lead us to praise God. Let us approach it believing that the Holy Spirit has inspired it, and intends to bless it to us.

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them alone. Then they forbid them to preach Jesus any more. Was there ever a more sorry compromise than all this? Was Jesus alive or was he not? Was the gospel a devilish lie, or was it truth from God? Were the apostles spokesmen for the Christ, or liars out of hell? The council could not tell. Their decision made nothing clear at all.

If we know that the gospel is true, then let us live as *decided* Christians. Let us not waste our time "halting between two opinions". Let us not have one foot in the church, and the other in the world. If we are lukewarm, then Christ will spit us out of his mouth (Revelation 3:16). We will be useless for him. We will be miserable in ourselves. Compromise in following Christ brings us the worst of all worlds. We feel restrained from the sin our nature desires; yet we are too indifferent to serve Christ with all our hearts. The double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let him not think he will receive anything from God (James 1:7-8). If we love Jesus Christ, then let us love him fully. If we hate sin, then let us hate it totally. If we are looking for another world, then let us not settle down in this one. Either Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or nothing at all. He is Lord of all; let us live so.

Let us see finally in these verses *the preciousness of the name of Jesus*. The apostles had been treated like dirt. They were hauled in jail, having done nothing wrong. They were beaten, and refused their liberty to speak. But when they left the council, they were not sad! When they went their way, they did so with joy. They were happy, because it was all for Jesus' name.

It is not fun to be hated. There is nothing good on its own in mere pain. The apostles did not rejoice because they were mad. They rejoiced because it was all for their Saviour's sake. He had suffered for them, to take away their sin. Now they suffered for him, as a testimony to him. He had been shamed and condemned in their place; now they were shamed and condemned for drawing attention to him.

We must think rightly about hardship for Jesus' sake. It is not something to avoid. It is not something to merely endure. It is something that ought to make us glad. It is a proof that we are one of the sons of God. Jesus went to glory through suffering. And now we are going the same way. The world knows nothing of suffering for Christ. They suffer, it is true - but not for any lasting reward. But God's children do. Their sufferings are the mark of their faith - and promises of their faith's reward to come.

What a wonderful name the name of Jesus must then be! And indeed it is. It is the name of the only Son of God. It is the name of the one whose blood atones for all sin. It is the name which the angels praise. It is the name of the glory of heaven. It is the name of the only Redeemer of lost men. Let us count it as a precious name. Let it be more to us every year that we live. Let it be one for which we are well pleased to suffer loss and shame.

Acts 5:33-42

33 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.

there. Each one of the apostles had escaped, without one being found out. It was clearly an intervention of God. What was more, they were now in the temple - preaching openly. What boldness! Who could do this - without a supernatural cause?

And yet what did the leaders do? Did they close the court? Did they go and listen to the preaching themselves, to find out what message was confirmed by such signs? They did not. They sent the captain and the officers again, to haul the apostles back once more to the court.

The Bible does not contain a more striking case of spiritual blindness. These men had seen the miracles of Christ. They could verify that the tomb was now empty. They knew that many people claimed to have seen him alive again. Great miracles had been done in Jerusalem, and thousands had been converted. They had seen the cripple from the gate cured and standing before them. And now the apostles had escaped from jail, by another miracle. But did any of this have any effect on them? Did it change them? Not at all.

Here were men with a spiritual calling. They ought to have had more of the wisdom of God than anyone in the land. They had the highest privileges. They had the clearest light. They of all people ought to have embraced Jesus Christ. And yet how do we find them? As his most hardened, determined enemies. They murdered him; they would have murdered his apostles if they could. They were quite settled and decided. Nothing would move them. Whatever they heard, and whatever they saw - they would refuse to believe.

There is simply no explanation for this fact other than the one given in the Bible. Man's heart is desperately wicked, and corrupt above all things. He is spiritually dead, and cannot rise up and live. He is spiritually blind, and the sun at mid-day will not enlighten him. He is spiritually deaf, and cannot hear a word of spiritual truth, however clearly it may be spoken. Unless God intervenes and gives life; unless he receives a new heart, new eyes and new ears - he cannot believe or be saved.

Let us not be surprised if the most powerful preaching is not heard. Let us not be too disappointed if the most gracious testimony is refused. Let us not be downcast if the clearest word is misunderstood. And let us not be shocked if those who have had the highest privileges and ought to be the first to believe, seem to be the hardest to reach. It was so in the days of Christ. It will be so until he returns. Our duty is not to change our message because of these things. Our job is not to make the gospel less hard. What we are called to do is to pray. God shall bless his word in the day of his power. We cannot bring a soul to life. That is God's work. If he has done it for us, then he can do it for any. When he has shown us that we are weak, let us prove that he is strong. His arm is not shortened. He is still the God who is well able to save.

Reader, do not let yourself be fooled. If you have not trusted in Christ, do not be too quick to tell yourself that it is not your fault. When you have heard the gospel, do not say it is unclear. Do not tell yourself that you will come to him in just a little while. Your heart is far more wicked than you thought. You may well be fooling yourself. Like the priests of this chapter, your real reason may be secret pride. They could not admit that the fault was all theirs. If you have heard the gospel, you must trust the Lord.

Let us see secondly in these verses that *the gospel is about facts*. Peter did not preach mere ideas. He did not tell them about something which would "work for them". He told them about facts which applied to all. There was a real Jesus, who after dying was really alive. He is the Saviour appointed by God; he now rules over the whole world. The apostles were witnesses to these things; and the Holy Spirit is too.

This is something which we must hold on to. We live in a time when everyone is denying it. Religion, it is said, is something to keep to yourself. If you have beliefs, then they are for your life alone. Our values are personal, and must not intrude into public life. To contradict another person's beliefs is very bad form. It is to invade where you do not belong.

We must be quite sure that this way of thinking is completely opposite to that of the early church. That Jesus was alive was a fact for all. It is public truth number one. To be on the wrong side of this fact is to be on the road to ruin. To be on its right side is to have eternal peace. Peter did not tell the priests that they were entitled to their personal beliefs. He told them that the gospel was a fact, and they were in the wrong.

Peter's sermon was one of rebuke. The words the leaders needed to hear were hard. But even so, they were words which contained grace. Even to them, was mentioned the forgiveness of sins. Even to them, was offered the Holy Spirit. Even they were told, that Jesus is a Saviour.

Let us not think that any are too bad for Jesus Christ. Even those who killed him were offered life. And if they were offered life, then so are we. The question is not whether he is gracious enough to save us. The question is whether we will bow the knee to him. He calls us. Have we come? Let us see the greatness of his mercy and, whatever our sins, trust in him.

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Let us admire the wisdom of God. He does not have to intervene in a spectacular way. He can do what will only be seen by the eye of faith. The unbeliever will always have an explanation. But the one who knows the Lord will know that behind the scenes, there is more to be said. There is a God in heaven, who moves the hearts of men. There is a Lord of all, who is sovereign in all.

Let us see secondly here *the miserable condition of being undecided*. What a pathetic sight the council make! They have put the apostles in jail. Now they let them go. They had wanted to put them to death. Now they set them free. They agree that they should not fight against God. But they beat the apostles anyway. They heed Gamaliel's word to let