

The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 4 (Chapter 4:23-5:32)

Grace Church Belper

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

Day 1 : Acts 4:23-31 – The Apostles' Response

Prayerfully read (above and): Psalm 2, 2 Kings 19:14-22

Understanding

These verses describe the apostles' response to the threats of the Jewish leaders. As this is the first official persecution of the church, their response is particularly important and we should read it carefully.

First we are told that Peter and John went to the company of believers (v23), and told them about it. Then (v24), the company of believers together took the matter to God (v24).

Their prayer focussed upon the *sovereignty* of God. The word translated “Lord” in verse 24 is “*despota*”, which means “absolute ruler”. Rising above the immediate hardship, they focussed upon God as the maker and ruler of everything (v24). They concentrated on God as the one who had revealed beforehand in his Word the things that would happen (v25). And they worshipped God as the one ruling absolutely in the events that were now taking place (v26-28).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is absolutely sovereign in everything – even unwelcome, unpleasant and apparently evil things. There is nothing that happens, unless he has decreed it (Ephesians 1:11, Daniel 4:35). In particular, God was sovereign in the events surrounding the death of his Son.
- Yet God is not the author of sin, or responsible for it.
- The most important part of the Christian response to persecution is *prayer*. As God is the ultimate authority in the universe, he is the most important one to bring our case to. Even so, our prayers are not then to be full of complaints and to make our hardship the main thing – the main thing is to bow before God as just and holy Lord of all.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Think of the last time you faced an important setback or sadness. How did you respond? How did your response measure up to the apostles' response? (See the points listed above). Why not memorise verse 24 ready for next time?
- How often do you meditate upon the fact of God's complete sovereignty? There are tell-tale signs in our lives that we are submissive to God's sovereignty – they are such things as moaning and grumbling. Think about these things, and resolve that you will resist being a complainer!

Day 2 : Acts 4:23-31 – Apostles' Response II

Prayerfully read: Job 1, Daniel 4

Understanding

In the apostles' response to their persecutions, they first thought about God's honour. They prayed because they were concerned about the kingdom of Jesus Christ – which was being resisted by his enemies (v25-27).

They did not take the threatenings to heart, personally. Because they were doing God's work, they saw them as being against God (v29) – and so they prayed that God would take notice of them. They did not pray to be taken away from the dangerous situation – but to be given boldness to persevere through it (v29). Their desire in the situation was not for an easy solution – but for the word to be made known, and for Jesus to be glorified (v29-30).

God heard their prayers. As a visible sign that he was at work in this first persecution, the room shook. But the miracle was not the main thing. The main thing was that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to “speak the word of God with boldness” (v31).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- It is not God's intention so spare believers from suffering (2 Timothy 3:12). His purpose is that through suffering, we should be purified, and give him glory. Suffering takes our eyes away from the temporary things of the present world, and from our own desires. Suffering sets our eyes upon the eternal things, and upon the glory and honour of God. Our age often thinks of suffering as the worst possible evil. The Christian position is instead that sin – the dishonouring of God's glory – is the worst possible evil.
- The most important thing in suffering is how we respond to it. The biblical response is to try to understand what kind of response is God-honouring. Have we sinned somewhere that we need to repent? Is some principle of God's truth at stake, for which we need courage to stand firm? Is there an opportunity for us to show the difference that knowing Jesus makes in our difficulties?
- The purpose of being filled with the Holy Spirit is for the spreading of God's word – whether through preaching, personal witness, or otherwise.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How does this challenge your attitude to hardship and difficulty? Does it help to put difficulties in a different light? How will you have to change?

Day 3 : Acts 4:32-37 – The Church Together

Prayerfully read: Matthew 5

Understanding

Barnabas (v36), will be someone who is named over 20 times in Acts, and in 3 other books in the New Testament. This is our first introduction to him, where we learn that he was a Levite, came from Cyprus, and sold some land, giving the money to the church. His real name was “Joses”, but the apostles called him “Barnabas”, which means “son of encouragement” - presumably because he was a great encourager!

This paragraph tells us about the love and generosity that existed within the church. It is the background for some shocking actions by Christians about to be described in chapter 5.

Some Christians have used these verses to argue that the first Christians gave up their private property to live together, and that we should also try communal living. However, the verses do not actually say that. They say that the Christians gave up their possessions as and when when there was need to be met – not automatically and immediately.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The Christian church is a family. Within it, love is the most important part of our behaviour towards each other. True love must be shown in practical ways – such as being quick to supply help to those who are in need. Otherwise, our profession of faith is useless (James 2:15-17).
- The preaching of Jesus Christ is the *cause* and *foundation* for the church (verse 33) – love is the practical *fruit* and *result*. These two things must not be mixed up! We love others because Jesus Christ has loved us. We love others because God has saved us. To put love first is to turn Christianity into just another “do the right thing” religion, rather than one based upon God's mercy and grace which saves us even though we don't deserve it.

Applying

- Are you part of the Christian family, through faith in Christ? If you are, then do you see other believers as family, to be loved and helped?
- Because we live in a very rich country, we do not often come across Christians in great need. However, in other countries, Christians are in very great need, and we can help them. The “Barnabas Fund” is one reliable Christian charity that can help you do this.

Day 4 : Acts 5:1-10 – Corruption in the church

Prayerfully read:

Understanding

Chapter 4 has told us about the first attack from outside the church. Satan tried to disturb the church through persecution. However, 4:32-37 showed us that it didn't work – the apostles continued to preach with power, and the church experienced great grace and love. Chapter 5 will tell us that Satan tried a new strategy – corrupting the church from inside. Ever since then, he has only ever tried variations on these attacks: persecution from outside, corruption from inside.

This corruption came through a couple called Ananias and Sapphira. Maybe they had seen how admired Barnabas and others were because of their generosity. They wanted to be admired too – but they didn't want to have to be so generous first! They decided to deceive the church.

Ananias and Sapphira's sin was not that they didn't give all the money for their land to the church. Their sin was that they lied, pretending that they had given all the money – when they hadn't. It was theirs to do with as they pleased (v4) – but they chose to lie.

Notice that Peter says that the Holy Spirit is God. In verse 3 he says they have lied “to the Holy Spirit”; in verse 4, he says that that was a lie “to God”.

Right at the beginning of the church, God shows how serious it is to mis-treat his church. He does not now always strike dead those who do these things – his judgment is often reserved for the last day. But he has warned us that he will judge, and seriously, to punish those who defile his church. This episode forms a pair with what happened at the beginning of the Old Testament temple, in Leviticus 10.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The Holy Spirit dwells within the church (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). What we do within the church is done to God. If we are unloving, deceitful or cold-hearted – whatever it is, it is done to God, who is the judge of all.
- Our giving must be done towards God – not because of others, which is hypocritical and condemned (Matthew 6:1-4).

Applying

- How do I treat the church? Make an honest evaluation – think of its meetings, and the people in it. What needs to change?

Day 5 : Acts 5:11-16 – Corruption

Prayerfully read: Acts 5:1-16

Understanding

These verses tell us what the result was after the Lord intervened to expose and judge Ananias and Sapphira's corruption. The church continued to grow and experience blessing. The Lord is building his church, and the very gates of hell cannot prevail against it (Matthew 18:18).

Seeing what happened to Ananias and Sapphira caused “great fear” to the church (v11). We often need to be reminded of God's jealousy for his purity and holiness, to keep us from offending. Verse 13 tells us that this also stopped others from joining the church – those who were not truly converted, and thought that joining the church would bring them some other benefit. But verse 14 tells us that true believers were still being added to the church – in great numbers! We do not have to bribe people to join the church – when the Lord is at work, they will join, even though they the Lord judging unfaithful believers with death!

The overall message of these verses is that the Lord continued to be with the church. His power continued to work through the apostles to do signs to draw attention to the gospel (v12, 15-16); believers continued to be added to them (v14); false believers were dissuaded from joining (v13); and the church walked in the fear of God (v11).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- What matters for a church is not whether she is rich or powerful. What matters is that its members are walking faithfully with the Lord, and that the Lord is with them. We must seek God's blessing and presence as the most important thing.
- There is a right kind of “fear” which Christians must have towards God. Not the fear of someone trembling before punishment (1 John 4:18), but the fear of a child who does not wish to grieve their father and incur his displeasure. See Proverbs 1:7, 1:29, 3:7, 9:10, Ecclesiastes 12:13.

Applying

- If you know the Lord, then are you walking faithfully with him? Do you really believe and live as if grieving the Lord will make you weak and ineffective in your Christian life? Are there things you need to put right with him?
- Do you know what it is to walk in “the fear of the Lord”?

Day 6 : Acts 5:17-26 – Persecution, again

Prayerfully read: Revelation 3:7-13, Acts 4:1-22

Understanding

Satan, having tried to damage the church through persecution once before, does not give up. In fact, his two strategies (of persecution from outside and corruption from inside) will both continue, alongside each other.

This persecution comes again from the high priest and the other Sadducees who were with him (v17). The apostles are put in prison. This time, though, it is not God's will for things just to continue in the ordinary way. He intervenes. An angel is sent to miraculously free the apostles – commanding them to go and preach. God makes it clear in a miraculous way that nothing will stop the preaching of the gospel. The apostles were so filled with boldness that, far from running away from those who had imprisoned them, they went into the most public building in the city (the temple), and began teaching again (v21).

Verse 26 tells us how well received the apostles were by the people – it was those coming to arrest them who were in fear. Yet despite the high priests and others seeing a great miracle, they did not stop and consider their ways. Pride caused them to press on with their persecution of the church.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Persecution is not only inevitable for the Christian church, but must be expected to be ongoing – both from new sources and also from the same ones again and again. We must be ready to resist opposition to the kingdom of Christ anew every new day, because Satan does not give up. See Hebrews 12:1-4.
- God is well able to miraculously deliver his people – if he thinks it is best. Our duty is to be faithful, whether he delivers us, or whether he doesn't – believing that he is able to do all he pleases, and always does what his infinite wisdom determines is best. See Daniel 3:16-18.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are there any areas in which you need to persevere against continuing opposition? Are you read for such battles in your mind? Do you become discouraged easily? What thoughts do you need to arm yourself with to be prepared? If you cannot think of any areas, then remember that not all opposition is obvious and outward – sometimes it is subtle and hidden.

Day 7 : Acts 5:27-32 – Before the Council

Prayerfully read: Daniel 3

Understanding

When the council heard of the miracle, they should have stopped. But instead, they press on. Remember that last time there were no real “charges” made against the apostles – they were just commanded to stop preaching. This time, the breaking of that command is made the charge. In verse 28 I think we hear the high priest's conscience speaking – of course, he *was* guilty for Jesus' death (Matthew 26:65-66) – but now, he wants to distance himself from it.

Peter's response is worth memorising (v29). When men's commandments and God's commandments clash, then God is to be obeyed, and man ignored. Peter also seizes the opportunity again to preach Jesus Christ – and to graciously offer forgiveness and the Holy Spirit to them if they will repent. We are to use every opportunity to speak about the gospel, and to offer free forgiveness even to those who treat us dreadfully.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is the source of all authority. He has given authority to the state. The state is a blessing – it is there to prevent anarchy, to restrain evil, and to promote righteousness. As such, it is to be obeyed and supported (Romans 13:1-8). However, God has given it no authority to require people to sin, or to forbid them to obey any of his other commandments. When the state (or any other authority) requires this, it is our duty to ignore it – graciously but firmly.
- The great commandment given to Christians is to bear witness to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to seek to do this on all appropriate occasions in which it is possible to do so in a God-honouring way. When we do so, we must not draw attention to ourselves, but to the great facts concerning Jesus, and urge those we speak with to repent, telling them that God will give them salvation as a free gift.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are you careful to listen to your conscience? When you find yourself being too defensive, or over-reacting – then it's a tell-tale sign that you need to stop and listen ! What is your conscience speaking about lately?
- Think of someone who you might see today or tomorrow that there could be opportunity to witness to. Pray and ask God to help you!