

The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 5 (Chapter 5:33-7:29)

Grace Church Belper

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

Day 1 : Acts 5:33-42 – Preserved From Death

Prayerfully read (above and): Acts 22, Proverbs 21:1

Understanding

Gamaliel was a highly respected leader amongst the Pharisees (v34). He was grandson of Hillel, one of the most famous Pharisees of all. He was the apostle Paul's teacher as a Pharisee (Acts 22:3) – and Paul was a Pharisee with the absolute highest credentials (Philippians 3:4-6).

The Pharisees themselves were the rival party to the Sadducees. The Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, affirmed the reality of the soul, life after death, and the resurrection. They accepted the whole Old Testament as the word of God. Whereas the Sadducees' problem was unbelief, the Pharisees' tendency was to add to God's word – a mistake just as fatal (Revelation 22:18-19). The Pharisees were the minority in the council, but had more support among the people at large, so their voice was very influential.

The two revolts which Gamaliel mentions were in BC 4 and AD 6.

Gamaliel's advice was for a compromising policy. If Christianity was true, it was wrong to oppose it; if it was wrong, it would come to nothing. This was not necessarily sound advice – many unrighteous movements have prospered for long periods. Gamaliel's advice didn't prevent the apostles from receiving a beating (verse 40). Maybe Gamaliel was one of those who didn't believe, but yet sensed that it was dangerous to oppose the church (2:43), and his advice was his attempt to deal with this contradiction. Whatever his motivation was, the point is that God used this confused advice to spare the apostles from death, when the council was enraged (v33).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turns it where ever he pleases.” (Proverbs 22:1). God is able to deliver his people using all kinds of means. He does not have to always send an angel (5:19); he can also use unbelievers even in a confused way to prevent wrong from being done. God is absolutely sovereign!

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

- Have you ever had a “lucky escape”? What does this passage have to teach us about such things? Don't talk about “luck” - talk about a sovereign God!
- We must pray for our rulers (1 Tim. 2:1-4), that God will lead and restrain them. Do you? How can you make this a part of your prayers?

Day 2 : Acts 5:33-42 – Going Forth Rejoicing

Prayerfully read: Matthew 5:1-16, James 1:1-12

Understanding

Yesterday we saw that the council heard the advice of Gamaliel, and Luke tells us that they “agreed” (v40). What they did, though, was a compromise – they neither let the apostles go as innocent men, nor did they carry out their intention to kill them (v33). Instead, they beat them. Of course, if there was the possibility that the apostles were from God, then beating them would also be extremely displeasing to him. The council neither did what it wanted to, nor what it should have done – but the apostles went free.

Verse 41 tells us what the response of the apostles was to their persecution and beating. They rejoiced! The reason they rejoiced was not because they enjoyed pain, but because they had been “counted worthy to suffer for his name”. Their master had suffered for them (for their salvation) – even to the death of the cross. Now, they were sharing in the same experience – suffering for him (for his honour and glory). This was not a privilege any of the council had enjoyed – it was given to them alone. “His name” transformed their sufferings from a cause of shame and pain to a cause of rejoicing.

Because their sufferings resulted in joy (not discouragement), they did nothing to stop them from preaching continually, and everywhere (verse 42). They saw their sufferings as a privilege, and as a result preached even more fervently – because the fear and terror of what the rulers could do to them was being taken away.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The church should expect to suffer, because its master suffered. As the world hated him, so it will hate those who represent him (John 15:18-21).
- The key to suffering is not to try to avoid it, but to respond rightly to it. Opposition because of Jesus Christ is a sign that we are truly converted. It is a privilege, that he does not give to all (Philippians 1:29).

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

- Do you understand why the apostles responded with joy? This is key!
- Do you try to avoid difficulty, embarrassment or opposition because of Christ? What would be a better response? Ask the Lord to help you – and ask him to help Christians in countries with widespread persecution.

Day 3 : Acts 6:1-7 – The First Deacons

Prayerfully read: 1 Timothy 3

Understanding

Remember that at this point, the church is entirely made up of Jews. No Gentile will join the church until Acts 10 – all those present at Pentecost were Jews (2:5). But, the Jews in the church had different backgrounds. Some were “Grecians”, or “Hellenists”; the others were “Hebrews”.

The Hebrews were native Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hellenists had adopted Greek culture, and used the Greek language. Religiously, they were the same; but there were cultural differences.

From this passage, we learn that the church had a daily distribution of food for widows. There was no welfare state to provide for the poor – provision came only from generous people. The church at this time was vast – over 5,000 men alone in 4:4, but since then “multitudes” more had believed (5:14). The apostles were still taking responsibility for the food distribution, but had not been able to keep up with the growing size of the task, and it was the Grecian widows who were being neglected, leading to tensions within the church. However, this problem became an opportunity, in God's sovereign over-ruling – out of it began the separate role of the deacon. The work of charity was very important – but the work of preaching was far more important, and steps had to be taken to preserve its priority.

This passage also introduces us to two men who will appear later in Acts – Stephen the first martyr, and Philip the evangelist.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- There are two (and only two) official/public roles in the New Testament church. One is of the “pastor”, also called an “elder” (Titus 1:5-6); the other is the “deacon”. The pastor's responsibility is to devote himself to preaching God's word (both publicly and privately); the deacon's responsibility is to see to all matters which might otherwise distract the pastor from this responsibility, especially worthy practical matters of provision and love towards needy members of the church. Both roles are only open to men of a high standard of Christian maturity (v3).

Applying

- Do I rightly understand what the work and priorities of a Christian minister are? Is the word of God central above everything for me too?

Day 4 : Acts 6:7-15 – The First Martyr!

Prayerfully read: Matthew 26:47-68, Revelation 17.

Understanding

The apostles' decision to appoint deacons was a very wise one. Christ had commissioned them to preach the word – therefore they must make sure that nothing prevented them. Verse 7 tells us that the result was that the word spread, and that the number of believers “multiplied greatly”. A great many of the ordinary priests were converted. Most would have been Sadducees, like their rulers; but now they knew that there was a resurrection and life after death – because Jesus was resurrected!

As well as the temple, synagogues were also a part of life. In these, the Scriptures were read and explained, and prayers were offered. It is believed that synagogues began when the Jews went into exile in Babylon far away from the temple – but continued after they came back. Jesus and Paul both attended and taught in synagogues (Luke 4:16, Acts 9:20). This particular synagogue seems to have been mostly attended by ex-slaves (v9).

Stephen preached Christ with great power and wisdom in the synagogue – but this time, the unbelievers' hearts were not convicted. Instead, they opposed him. Because he easily overcame their arguments, they became angry and plotted to get rid of him. The charge they came up with was very similar to that which was invented against Jesus – that of blasphemy against the temple and against the law of Moses. A trial was called, and false witnesses produced. The trial is, of course, to be held before the council – the same council that is already bent on a policy of ungodly persecution of the church.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is sovereign in salvation. There may be the same preaching – filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and full of irresistible demonstrations of Christ's glory – but one time it may be God's purpose to convert thousands, but on another to convert nobody. We must bow before him.
- Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44), and inducing men to lying is a favourite strategy by which he seeks to resist the church.

Applying

- Stephen used his opening in the synagogue to make known Christ. What openings do you have? How can you use them better? Is there any way you are grieving the Spirit so that your witness is not so marked?

Day 5 : Acts 7:1-8 – Stephen's Defence

Prayerfully read: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 17

Understanding

The “high priest” is presumably Caiaphas (see notes on Acts 4:6 – week 3).

Acts 7 contains Stephen's defence speech, after which he will become the first martyr of the Christian church. In it, he makes a tour of Israel's history. At first, this seems an odd thing to do when he is on trial for blasphemy. But remember that the charges are blasphemy concerning the temple, and concerning Israel's revered law-giver and prophet, Moses. Stephen's re-telling of the Old Testament history is crucial. By doing so, he will demonstrate that it is the council, and not him, who are opposing God over these matters. He is walking faithfully in the footsteps of those who went before him – who were also rejected and persecuted by the nation, just as Jesus had now been. Stephen shows that the temple was not a permanent or essential part of God's covenant with Israel, and that Israel had a consistent pattern of rejecting God's chosen servants and of being unfaithful to God's covenant. Stephen will turn the tables, and put the high priest and rest of the council on trial. His bold, God-honouring witness will enrage them and provoke them to his murder.

Stephen begins with Abraham. He makes it clear that he was completely orthodox in his reading of the Old Testament. He also points out that faithful Abraham – the father of the nation – never possessed any land within Israel. This strongly suggests that a physical land and physical temple cannot be the end goal of God's purpose – otherwise Abraham was left out! Rather than giving Abraham the land immediately, he caused his descendants to be slaves for 400 years, so that God might gloriously rescue them. This points to our greater, more glorious rescue from Satan.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- God's people first began to be gathered as a separate and distinct people with *Abraham*. The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in the church. Thus, Abraham is an extremely important person in the Bible.

Applying

- Stephen knew his Bible and its history. Do you? Could you give such an account? Do you know what are the main features and high points, and how to interpret the ebbing and flowing of the times, and how it leads to Christ? If you do not already, a good start is to stick a bookmark in your Old Testament, and read it through – and then do it again!

Day 6 : Acts 7:8-16 – Stephen's Defence (2)

Prayerfully read: Genesis 50

Understanding

Stephen for the first time highlights an Old Testament theme that he will highlight several times. Joseph, though favoured by God, was rejected by his brothers. The tribes of Israel rejected the one who was to be their saviour (from the famine). They hated him and tried to kill him – but God was with him, and lifted him up to a place of great honour. When he came to a position where he had power of life or death over them, he showed them mercy. In fulfilment of God's word to Abraham, the family of Israel (Jacob) came down into Egypt – far away from the land, and with no temple in sight! Jacob, like his ancestors, was buried in the land, having been brought back in a coffin from Egypt. This was a way of testifying to his faith in the promises, and that he would benefit from them, even though he would die. This was another way in which Stephen drew attention to the fact that the ceremonies of Moses were not intended by God to be permanently essential – Jacob knew nothing of them!

Doctrines (Teachings)

- Everybody who has ever been saved, is saved by faith in Jesus Christ. We who live after his life and death are saved by looking back to him, his work on the cross and his resurrection. Those who lived before him were saved by looking forwards, relying on the promises of God concerning a coming Messiah who would deal with their sins and reconcile them to God. For the Old Testament patriarchs, their knowledge of how this salvation would be achieved would be sketchy. Nevertheless, they had God's promises concerning it, and they believed them, and in so doing obtained the promised forgiveness (Romans 4). Nobody was ever saved through faithful obedience to laws, ceremonies, or churches – even those which come from God! (Romans 3:28).
- God is always carrying on his purposes. Some of them are very long range, and beyond our understanding – but they are being carried out!

Applying

- Do I have faith in Jesus Christ? Is the rock on which I am resting my soul for the day of judgment, his saving work at Calvary? Are the promises concerning him my daily comfort and rejoicing? In both life and death, is it my desire to know Christ, and to be found in him (Philippians 3:8-11)?

Day 7 : Acts 7:17-29 – Stephen's Defence (3)

Prayerfully read: Exodus 2

Understanding

Stephen now moves on from the time of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) to the time of Moses. Again, he shows that far from speaking blasphemy, he fully held the orthodox beliefs about Israel and its history.

Stephen pointed out that God's people came through a time of oppression and suffering. The ungodly persecuted God's chosen ones – just as they were now doing as the council opposed the apostles and Christian leaders!

God raised up a deliverer – Moses. But the Israelites rejected him, not understanding or recognising who he was (v25). Here, again, Stephen is drawing attention to Israel's track record. The council, who claimed to be so zealous for the honour of Moses, ought to remember that their predecessors had rejected him – just as they were now rejecting Jesus. God had again raised up a great deliverer – in fact, the greatest deliverer. But again, the people of God were not understanding what God was doing, and were fighting against it. Because of this, they had to face another 40 years slavery, before Moses was sent to them again. It is interesting (though obviously not something Stephen could have been saying!) to notice that 40 years after Christ was crucified by the Jews, he returned to them again – but not this time to release them from their slavery in sin (as they had completely rejected that) – but to judge and destroy the unbelieving nation (in AD 70).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The nation of Israel were, in general, a disobedient and unbelieving people. There was a remnant within the nation who believed – but only a remnant (Romans 9:27-31). A theocracy, with God's own law and presence, yet cannot bring about the obedience and faithfulness which God requires. Only the work of God within the *heart* from the inside can do this. The church is God's new people, born again, renewed inside.

Applying

- Am I rejecting God's work by rejecting Jesus? Do I seek to excuse myself just because many other people – including the powerful and famous – do the same? This is no good excuse!
- Do I realise that it is *grace* that I need? Every outward blessing and help may end up being useless, without grace. Are there areas in life where I am trying to overcome sin through rules instead of reliance on Jesus?