

“APOSTLES’ PRISON BREAK.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

October 21, 2018, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Acts 5:17-32

Prayer: Holy Father, by your Holy Spirit speak to all our hearts the Words of Life, your truth, fresh manna, what will glorify you, magnify Jesus, exalt your Word and edify our eternal souls.

Introduction.

Last week Luke told us how the infant Christian church was flourishing, it was growing in numbers, people were coming to salvation, they were together in worship and prayer, gifts were being used to the glory of God, people were being generous, loving, caring, the apostles were preaching with great power and authority, God was doing miracles every day, Christ was being proclaimed and exalted. It was a glorious season of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

But. That’s how our text begins. ***But.*** Why does it seem like in the midst of good times there has to be a ***but?*** Such is life on this side of heaven, life where there is an enemy of all that is good.

Luke is an honest writer and an honest historian. He doesn’t just paint a rosy picture for his friend Theophilus. Luke’s history is filled with troubles, trials and prisons. In some ways the book of Acts reads like a police blotter of arrests, beatings, torture and harassment.

There is a price to be paid for bearing witness to Jesus Christ, the price is suffering. The servant is not above the master. Jesus suffered for doing good, so will His followers.

Everywhere the apostles and followers of Jesus went they stirred up trouble. Just their presence incited reactionary anger and protests from the ungodly.

There will be reactions in an increasingly hostile and ungodly culture. Those with bad consciences will always try to silence whatever or whoever pricks their conscience.

Luke isn't just writing to Theophilus, he is writing to 21st century American Christians, preparing us for the trials and storms ahead. Luke wants to show us how to navigate those waters.

Whether it's baking cakes or selling flowers, whether it's students wanting to host a Christian group on campus or sponsor a Christian speaker, whether it's Bibles in hotel rooms, whether it's churches wanting to worship in a country where there are hostile governments, whether it's Christians protesting killing babies or exercising their freedom of speech, whether it's Facebook and Twitter censoring Christians who post what Scripture teaches about certain ethical and moral issues, whether it's subtle digs or discrimination from co-workers, relatives or friends.

Jail birds in prison again because of jealousy.

This is the second wave of persecution to hit the young church at the hand of the party of the Sadducees, the ones in authority over both the political and spiritual life of Jerusalem.

They are filled with a jealous rage. How dare you apostles defy our authority. How dare you speak this name of a criminal we killed.

They were jealous to keep their power and authority, they would silence any opposing voice. They didn't care whether the apostles were right or speaking the truth or whether God was the one behind their success.

And they were jealous over doctrine. They didn't believe in the resurrection and they were exceedingly irritated the apostles were spreading this false doctrine concerning Christ all over the city and people were believing it. Worse yet they were doing signs and wonders to back up their teaching.

For the religious leaders in Jerusalem this was déjà vu all over again. For three years they endured Jesus. They envied his popularity and power, this authority and influence. People flocking to him, it galled them to see their enemy triumphing. Three years of pent up frustration and envy over Jesus came to a head at the crucifixion.

And now it was happening all over again with Jesus' apostles. Their rage turned to violence, first to imprison, then to desire to kill and finally to beat them and demand they be silent.

This is the price Christians will pay in the face of opposition and persecution. If you threaten another person's power or position or long held deception you will pay a price.

Proverbs 6:34 For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge.

Proverbs 27:4 Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

Let's pause here for a moment and look at this particularly ugly sin that hides in all our hearts. It rears its ugly head at surprising moments and catches us off guard. Someone is given more attention than us, someone gets a compliment, someone's kids are more well behaved, someone has more of something or better something, someone has success. Wealth seems very unfairly distributed. We are resentful of an advantage someone else has, better grades, looks, job, car, house, spouse, vacation, retirement, and resent that they have something we don't.

Jealousy is counting someone else's blessings rather than your own.
Jealousy is a lack of contentment with who you are and what you have.

I have battled this demon over the years of my ministry comparing myself to other pastors or my church to other churches.

I have met and known a lot of pastors over the years. Some of the ones who stand out to me as especially godly are those who could genuinely delight in another pastor's successes and achievements. I found myself being jealous of that trait, of being so secure and content with who God made me and what God had given me that what others have doesn't bother me.

How can we enjoy God's grace and goodness in another person's life without falling into the pit of jealousy?

These thoughts or feelings of insecurity and envy poison hearts and relationships and stunts spiritual growth and maturity.

Fight for freedom in this area. Confess it, repent of it, and turn it into an opportunity to see God and give Him glory.

Cultivate those graces that kill jealousy. *Love kills jealousy*. If you love another person, you will rejoice if God gives them something, even if he doesn't give it to you.

Faith kills jealousy. If you have faith in the sovereign grace of God to give something according to his own divine wisdom, then you will praise Him for the times and ways He gives to others and not question Him or resent His choices.

Contentment with who you are and what you have kills jealousy. Seeing grace in someone's life as cause for worship kills jealousy.

Where in your life do you feel jealousy? Name it and kill it before it kills you and your relationships with others and with God. Don't give Satan a foothold.

Jail break because of angels.

I wonder if Luke had a little fun writing this story. The council is all gathered in the great assembly hall, over a hundred very important men, like the House, the Senate and the Supreme Court. They send officers to the prison to get the prisoners, the guards are there, the chains are all on the doors, but when they open the doors the cell is empty. They check under the beds if there are beds, they look for tunnels. This is insane. How is this possible?

The Sadducees were like secular humanists, they didn't believe in angels, so this is a real head scratcher. It's like God is deliberately tweaking them, mocking them.

Don't miss what happens when the apostles get out of prison. They don't take it as a lesson to be more careful, or to shrink back and try to stay under the radar. They go back to doing what got them put in prison. They take the purpose of this miracle to be continue preaching the Gospel.

The enemy of the church and of our souls uses persecution to silence Christians or get them to deny Jesus. The apostles are faithful in their call, and they leave the results entirely in God's hands.

A lingering question, why are some released but not others in Acts?

If there really are angels and God has legions of angels to help us in our weakness and trials then why aren't they doing more for us?

We know this doesn't always happen. Sometimes God brings a miraculous deliverance and sometimes He doesn't. In the case of the apostles some are released, others languish in prison and some are killed. Peter is released this time but will eventually be martyred.

Why did God do this miracle this time but not other times?

Four reasons: To show His power to do so and to show His presence with them and to show His favor to encourage them to continue what they are doing and finally to expose the ungodly so they are without excuse for their behavior against those who clearly have God's favor.

God won't always deliver us from suffering or persecution or even death, but we have confidence whatever happens it's for His glory and He is with us and His purposes will prevail.

Don't be jealous of how God treats others or what God chooses to do for others. God gives power for living and power for dying, in both there is His grace. To live is Christ and to die is gain.

Testimony of the defendants, because we must obey God rather than men.

The trial begins with a declaration of the charges. They are in willful contempt of court, for they had been previously warned and ordered to not teach or preach in the name of Jesus. It was a capital offence to disobey an order from a chief high priest.

The high priest brings a second more curious charge, that of bringing the blood of Jesus on the Jewish leaders. Do they have guilty consciences, are they afraid of being punished for the wicked murder of an innocent man?

Peter's defense addresses both charges. **First**, why they continue to speak in Jesus' name when they had been ordered not to. And **second**, why they put the guilt for Jesus' death on them.

“You ordered us to not to speak about Christ, but God has called and commissioned us to speak for Christ. So we must obey God over you.”

Peter boldly shows why they must not be obeyed, they are enemies of God having killed the Christ and therefore have no more authority in the church of Christ.

If Christ had remained dead, the apostles would have no authority or power at all. They would have no standing and no reason to continue to preach. But God raised Him up by the power of His right hand.

Peter moves beyond his own defense to preaching the Gospel to the religious leaders, the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness in Christ for the salvation of souls.

In Peter's words is the explanation of the Gospel and the offer of salvation to the very ones who rejected and killed Jesus. This offer is freely given to all who will hear and respond.

You know that verse in the Bible that says be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you (I Peter 3:15). You should have short testimony in your hip pocket. You should be able to sum up the Gospel in a couple of minutes.

I spoke of this yesterday at Betty Weg's funeral. She had written in her Bible the funeral message should be the book of Romans. So I summed it up in six verses called the Roman Road to salvation.

Look at what Peter says. In three sentences he gives a wonderful summary of the Gospel to the entire Sanhedrin.

God raised Jesus from the dead, but not just so He could die again. No, He raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to God's own right hand in heaven as Savior. And God has given Jesus all authority to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to all who seek it.

The one they mocked and killed and buried is enthroned in heaven as the ruler of the world. He does for us what we most need and what no one else could do. And get this, Peter holds this Gospel out to the very ones who killed Jesus. And that includes you and me.

Civil disobedience.

To say we must obey God rather than man is radical obedience. This is one of the costs of being a Christian, that we have a higher authority and a higher standard and that we must be prepared to obey God and His Word rather than man no matter the cost.

What makes men and women willing to risk their jobs, risk their reputations, risk their careers, risk their lives? The power of the Holy Spirit in those who obey.

To be a Christian is to be counter cultural, out of sync with the culture, out of sync with modern man, out of sync with the prevailing winds of our times.

As John Stott once put it, “It is not possible to be faithful and popular simultaneously.” We need to be OK with being unpopular, with being on the outside.

We need to be prepared to live as a spiritual minority, living among a majority who think differently, and we need to prepare our children and grandchildren.

The church has always been and will always be at odds with the world. That there has been as long a peaceful co-existence in America is uncommon and only by grace. But that is coming to an end.

We will be increasingly seen as revolutionary. And when the church is absolutely different from the world, two things will happen. Some will hate it and try to kill it, and others will see the life and hope it offers and be drawn to it. The power of the first will never overcome the power of the second.

Implications and application.

Do you ever feel like evil is winning the bad, that the bad guys are winning? Does it seem like things are getting worse and worse? Or that this world is increasingly more and more hostile toward Christianity?

Is God there? Is God paying attention? Does God care? Do you feel like the church is small in the face of the onslaught of evil and sin and immorality?

God is not silent, not small, not powerless, not limited, not absent. Jesus never promised earthly or worldly victory and success. God wants us to have sure hope that nothing can silence the Word of God or the will of God. God is unstoppable.

If things seem bad, take heart and know that God can and will do in His power what is best and right and most conducive to His worldwide mission to spread the Gospel and glory of Jesus everywhere and cause all things to work for our good.

God is with us and for us. He is present and He cares. This text is meant to us courage and boldness and confidence. God can deliver His people anytime He wants and if He doesn't it is not a sign of powerlessness or weakness or lack of love, it's a sign He has a better plan.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.