

The Impossibility of Stopping God

October 7, 2018

Acts 5:33-42

To refresh your memories, we are studying the book of Acts, currently in chapter 5. The apostles have been dragged before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish authorities, their equivalent of a combination of Congress and the Supreme Court for a second time. The apostles have been accused of ignoring the Sanhedrin's order to cease and desist from teaching about this Jesus of Nazareth. Further, they have continued to blame the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus, as if these leaders have Jesus' blood on their hands.

In response to their accusations, Peter declares that they are preaching in the name of Jesus and reiterates the charge that the Jewish leaders were responsible for the death of Jesus. So, he doubles down. As I suggested at the end of last week's message, what should be the expected outcome when you defy the highest leaders of your land? If they truly were guilty of having Jesus put to death, how would they probably respond to you when you blame them for it? I suspect the expected result would be that this same group would have you too put to death, or at least have you put away in prison for a long, long time. So, that is the scenario we have before us at the end of Acts 5. We pick up the text at this point and hear how things turned out. Follow along as I read Acts 5:33-42. READ

Main point: Christianity's survival demonstrates the unstoppable hand of God.

Gamaliel was right. If Christianity had been based on a hoax, it would have died naturally. These Jewish authorities would not have had to take specific action to kill it. But, if Christianity was in fact from God, then you would not be able to stop it either. Or said another way, if it was from man, it will naturally die, but if it is from God, nothing or no one could defeat it. The fact that Christianity survived and grown has shown that it was from the hand of God.

Now, allow me to pause for a moment. I suspect some of you are a bit ahead of me right now. From the perspective I just articulated, how do you explain Islam, or Mormonism, or other religions or cultic groups? Haven't they survived? Does this show they are from God? Fair point. I readily acknowledge that some, indeed many faiths have survived even though they are not from God. And yet, I also embrace Gamaliel's philosophy that God is ultimately in charge. If He wants to destroy a faith,

He can do it. If I try to step into His shoes and destroy it for Him, I have taken over His role. So, the fact that a wrong world faith survives is not necessarily proof that it is from God. But it is also true that God being God could shut down any world faith at any time, even immediately. In other words, we don't need to do God's work for Him. In the terminology of one of the parables we studied not too long ago, He might just be allowing some weeds to grow among the wheat, intending to wait until harvest to pull them out. The sense here is that God is in control. You cannot stop Him, you must not put yourself into the position of feeling the need to do His work for Him.

So, as we study this text, I ask you to pause from other things and focus on the fact that we, here, meeting in this building in the year 2018, are a continuation of the exact scenario laid out before us in the text. We are a part of this same movement of God. (2 parts, speech and actions)

I. Wise counsel: don't put yourself in the position of taking a stand against God. vv. 33-39

I trust you can see the predicament of these Jewish leaders. Here they are, leaders of the Jewish people, defenders of the Jewish faith. But from their midst comes one man, a thorn in their side, who claimed to be one of them, yet opposed them at every turn, making them the target of much of His teaching, setting Himself up as the true authority on all things of their faith. So they put this rebel, Jesus of Nazareth, to death. There, end of Jesus, end of problem, end of story. Right?

But now, His followers are rising up, preaching the same message, gaining followers, demonstrating power, enjoying the favor of THEIR people! What should they do? In answer to this question, you have two groups of these leaders. The established power, the old guard if you will, was the Sadducees. As we read back in v.17, they were filled with jealousy. Indeed, as we read here, after Peter gave his speech, they were willing to have the apostles killed. "Nip this thing in the bud," we might say.

But along comes a wise man, Gamaliel, a Pharisee, a respected by all Pharisee, from a family line of respected leaders among the Jewish people. In this case, the Pharisees, led by Gamaliel, offered a moderated response. He was not so enraged from jealousy that he ceased to think rationally. Here we have his thinking on how to deal with this latest threat to the Jewish faith in the form of the sect of Jesus of Nazareth.

v.33- When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. 34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by

all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

You can picture the scene. They were angry before the proceedings began, but after Peter's speech they were beside themselves with rage. So, a wise man among them orders that the prisoners be escorted out of the room. They needed to have a private conversation, a conference about how to proceed. Again, I urge you not to turn your focus off this text and onto what has happened in Washington again this week. Yes, I know the same sort of thing played out over the Kavanaugh nomination, but don't go there. Keep your sanity!

Here you have a closed door session of just the members of the Sanhedrin. Cooler heads needed to prevail.

35 Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. 36 Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. 37 After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

Gamaliel recounts some recent history to them. He cites two uprisings among the Jewish people. There is some confusion over those cited here, since historians also mention uprisings by men of those names at this time, but in a different order. This has led some to conclude that Luke was not accurate or relying on inaccurate sources. But the truth is that there were many uprisings during this period of time, and there could have been more than one person of the same name.

Regardless, his point is that such uprisings are not unique. Indeed, two recent ones occurred. In each one, the ring leader was killed and the movement died out quickly, naturally. They came to nothing. If you kill the leader, the followers will scatter and lose any power they had. It was not necessary to kill all of the followers. When their leader has died, they will lose their motivation to continue the cause. In other words, you don't have to kill a dead horse.

As you can see, this is not a noble perspective, a godly perspective. It is a practical, pragmatic perspective. But this is not the end of his reasoning, and it is in

this second part that we see the great nuggets of truth. Here, he says perhaps more than he even knew.

38 Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. 39 But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

His counsel is to just ignore these men. Don't obsess over them. Just let them run their course. If you just ignore them, they will go away. BUT... and this is the important part, if it turns out they happen to be led by God, motivated by God, empowered by God, you will NOT be able to stop them. The God of Israel cannot be stopped.

Once more, we must remember that we are talking about the same God by both groups. In other words, this empowerment by God is not some foreign god or false god. It is their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, the God of Scripture. Isn't it interesting that Gamaliel points to the unstoppable power of their God? In a shocking development, he allows that their God MIGHT be behind all of this. He doesn't think so, but he allows that it might be true. And if that is the case, no one, not even they would be able to stop Him. It would be futile to think you could stop something that God was doing.

So, either way, just stop. If this movement is from man, it will cease by itself. If it is from God, you will not be able to stop it. In either case, just leave it alone. Before we go further, I pause to give you a head's up. They let them go, but later they can stand no more, and so they put one of the leaders, Steven, to death. And sure enough, the people scatter. But did it lead to the death of the movement? Not at all! It caused the message to spread everywhere, even to the uttermost parts of the earth. So the thinking of Gamaliel didn't actually work out as predicted. But that is for another sermon later this fall.

For now, what do we think about Gamaliel's counsel? Sound? Not bad. It would have been better if it had dwelt on the question of truth, evidence, Scriptural corroboration. It doesn't address the core issue of whether Jesus is the Christ or not. They didn't huddle to pore over the Scriptures to see if these things were true. No, it

was a pragmatic approach: if it is from men, it will die after the leader has been killed. If it is from God, you will not be able to stop it no matter how hard you try. That is reasoned pragmatism. Not bad, but not good either. It sounds like a political approach, not a wise approach.

But I believe it is recorded here for us because of the second alternative he provides. If this movement is from God, no one will be able to stop it. The God of Scripture CANNOT be stopped. Oh yes, many have tried. Oh yes, they all thought they were going to succeed. But history shows that God's side will always win! If you find yourself fighting against God, QUIT FIGHTING! Lay down your arms.

Here, truer words have never been spoken. He said more than he probably knew. He spoke words that not only did the Sanhedrin need to hear, but all of the world's powers need to hear. Indeed, these are words that we need to hear. I have pictured in my mind Psalm 2, where the world's forces are arrayed against God and His Anointed, His Messiah. They are determined they will defeat God. And the response from God in heavenlies is a belly laugh. It is a joke. It is a ridiculous endeavor. No puny, man-led rebellion can defeat Almighty God. That is crazy talk.

Can you see why even we need to hear this? Too often, we are on both sides, either thinking we must do God's work for Him, or actually fighting against Him. And the lesson here is that if God is in it, He will win. If He is against it, He is in charge of seeing it fail, not us. Therefore, what we need to focus on is standing with Him, noticing what He is doing and joining Him. In this case, that would be siding with the apostles rather than the authorities, being willing to suffer or die at the hands of evil men if necessary. Or, in the words of Henry Blackaby, we need to find out what God is doing and join Him!

II. Standing up for God led to persecution, which led to rejoicing. vv. 40-42

This is the part that stretches our thinking. As Americans steeped in issues of fairness, we cringe at this text. These apostles did nothing wrong, indeed stood strong for the truth. And yet, evil men had them flogged, perhaps giving them 39 lashes. So, these leaders left beaten and threatened yet again. So, did they leave feeling defeated? Not at all. They left rejoicing that they had been found worthy of suffering for their Savior. Are you kidding? That is how they responded to being whipped? Yes.

40 His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

I am astounded by this outcome. The assembly was persuaded by the leader of the Pharisee party. Pragmatism ruled the day. The prisoners were released...but not before they were flogged and warned one more time to quit teaching in the name of Jesus! That is so unfair. They were not guilty, but they were whipped. This shows that the solution was for expediency reasons. They were not convinced of guilt or innocence. For reasons of pragmatism, they let them go, but not before letting them know that they would have killed them if they could have. Their hatred toward them did not cease. Their desire for revenge was still intact. The threats were still in force. There was still a line in the sand. But for reasons they could not avoid, they had to let them go, and so they did.

41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

Did you notice the reason for their joy? Were they rejoicing because they had been set free? No, they were rejoicing because they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace on account of the name of Jesus. I don't know about you, but I can hardly imagine such a perspective. Can you? They were unfairly arrested, unfairly charged, unfairly beaten, and yet they rejoice because God saw fit to bless them with suffering for His cause. Perhaps more than anything else could, this shows us their perspective, a perspective that makes our heads spin. How could they come away from that experience with such rejoicing? How devoted to the cause and to Jesus must they have been? Remember, they had been witnesses when the same thing happened to Jesus. They saw Him being whipped, spit upon, unjustly accused, tried, and put to death. And now they have experienced it for themselves. And they come away rejoicing. Amazing!

42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

So, did they stop teaching in the name of Jesus? Not for a second. The impression left here is that they taught everywhere, every day. They taught large groups, small groups, public groups, private groups. They taught any and all who would listen. They did not stop at all! And their teaching boldly lifted up the name of Jesus, particularly that He was the long promised Jewish Messiah. The promises of God declared through all of the prophets had come to pass: God had sent His anointed One, His Messiah, His Christ! His name is Jesus.

Can you see how this is not an attack on the Jewish faith? Indeed, it was a fulfillment of the Jewish faith. It was not a threat to the Jewish authorities, it was an answer to the prayers of so many for so long. They were not Jewish rebels, but witnesses to the greatest revelation of God to and through His people. Theirs was not a message of rebellion, but a message of good news. Just like Jesus, they ought to have been welcomed by the Jews with open arms, and they were by masses of the masses. But the leaders were not so accepting. They were filled with jealousy, rage. They were intent on putting this perceived rebellion down. This day was just not yet that day. If only they could stop this movement called the Church of Jesus Christ. But what if it was a movement of God?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will stand with God rather than against Him.

- 2) We will not try to do God's work for Him.

- 3) We will remind ourselves that no one or nothing can stop our God.

- 4) When persecuted, we will not complain about the unfairness of it, but rejoice that God has found us worthy to suffer for His Name.