

Power and Weakness

Acts 5:12-26

When I first worked on this sermon earlier in the week, I settled on the title of “Opposition and Power,” emphasizing those two obvious things in this text—the opposition which the apostles encountered along with the power with which the Lord made himself known among them. I changed the title, however, to more rightly emphasize the nature of the opposition that the apostles faced. Because of the power of God himself at work in the apostolic ministry, what we see is not simply opposition, but opposition which is clearly demonstrated to be weakness. So with the simple words of my title, I want you to immediately grasp that the contrast to the power of God at work among the apostles is demonstrated not simply by opposition to the apostles but by the weakness of that opposition. So, power and weakness is what is before us. Beginning with power. And clearly,

I. THE POWER OF GOD IS ON DISPLAY.

And that rightly gets the emphasis in this text.

v.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.”

Don’t skip over those words quickly, for they are essential to understanding the unique function of the Apostles in setting the foundation of the church. “Many signs and wonders” refer to the miracles that we see throughout the book of Acts, and the significance of that is that those “signs and wonders” were a display of God’s power intended to identify the presence of apostolic authority, apostles being those men who had seen Jesus and, therefore, given responsibility to testify of what they had seen. And God gave his own attestation to the apostles with his display of supernatural power. Let me explain it with the

words of Hebrews 2, where the writer makes mention of the gospel with these words,

Heb. 2:3 “...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.”

So great a salvation! In other words, the gospel, the declaration of salvation, the doctrine of salvation, if you will. And we are urged and exhorted not to “neglect so great a salvation.” That salvation was first spoken the Lord, then, as I just read in Hebrews 2, “was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.” That is a definitive reference to the apostles, “those who heard him,” those who had been with Jesus. And then,

Hebrews 2:4 “God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”

Similarly, at the end of Mark’s gospel we read,

Mark 16:19 “So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.”

The miracles performed by the apostles “confirmed the word” of God which the Apostles spoke! God used those miracles to bear witness, to attest, to the truth of what the apostles taught. It is the same idea which we studied in,

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know.”

The point is that this display of supernatural power gives

appropriate testimony to the supernatural origin of the gospel which the apostles were proclaiming. And there is no doubt about the historical reality of that power, as we see,

A. The supernatural ability to heal disease.

v.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.”

To repeat myself, this supernatural ability was given to the apostles, to those first generation, earthly eyewitnesses of Jesus. This supernatural ability to heal is part of the apostolic foundation of the church, the apostolic testimony validating and attesting to the power of Jesus himself. And it is worth noting Jesus’ own connection between the ability to heal disease and the ability to forgive sin.

Mat. 9:1 “So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. 2 Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” 3 And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!” 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” —then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” 7 And he arose and departed to his house.”

There is a connection between physical and spiritual healing often in Scripture, emphasizing the realize that we are whole

beings, body and soul joined together. For example,

Ps. 103:1 “Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: 3 Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, 4 Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, 5 Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

Both body and soul are the objects of God’s work of redemption so that ultimately, at the last day, our bodies will be fully and completely perfected in glory as they are raised from the dead. But until that day, Jesus’ power given to the apostles to perform physical miracles, demonstrates his power to remove the guilt and condemnation of sin. Thus the apostolic miracles of healing give evidence and testimony of the spiritual power of God to forgive sin.

We see another aspect of the power of God here in Acts 5, which is,

B. The supernatural ability to alter physical circumstances.

Supernatural ability, that is, ability that transcends the natural world. Ability that supersedes the ordinary course of nature, supernatural. Look at,

v.19 “But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out...”

The Lord opened the prison doors. Do I believe in miracles? Do I believe that God himself can exert the physical strength and power required to open a prison door? Absolutely! And Luke certainly believed it as well when he wrote,

v.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!”

How did God do that? I can’t explain it by ordinary definitions of science or nature. But I can explain it this way, “God did it!” He can alter physical circumstances. He can raise a man dead in the grave for three days, whether you want to talk about Lazarus or Jesus himself. He can move a large stone away from the tomb where Jesus was buried. He can enable Jesus to walk on water, or to calm a storm. I believe in all of those things, because they demonstrate the supernatural power of God at work in this world which he created. And if you don’t believe in such supernatural power, then you don’t believe in God! Ultimately, it really is that simple. And if you don’t believe that God physically and literally removed the apostles from that common prison, then you have no ability to believe that God could or would grant to you the blessing of the forgiveness of your sins.

Now, something is obvious here, when God’s power is on display. There is opposition.

II. OPPOSITION TO THE POWER OF GOD IS ON DISPLAY.

v.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.”

We know from Scripture that the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, they rejected the idea of such power in the hands of God. And so they were offended by what they observed,

v.12 “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people.”

The high priest, along with the Sadducees, were offended that believers were bringing “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.” They were offended that believers were “bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed. And in that offense, we see...

A. The evil intent of human hearts.

We read in verse 17 that “they were filled with indignation.” Jealousy, as the ESV translates it. The word means zeal, and the root word has the idea of fire, burning with fire. The word is used in,

Heb. 9:26 “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.”

A fiery indignation! That gives you a sense of those who opposed the Apostles, the evil intent of their hearts, with definite reference to the fervency of their hateful opposition to the apostles. They weren’t just opponents, but enemies! Not just opponents, but wicked in their evil intent, burning with the zeal of fire in their desire to silence and destroy those bold and courageous apostles. And so we see the result of the evil intent of their hearts.

B. Violent injustice.

17b “...they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.”

They conspired together to inflict their harm as fully as they thought possible.

v.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.”

We’ve seen all of this opposition before, and I am reminded of that Psalm I quote so often in this context,

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

There is something else that stands out here, though, even in the midst of this opposition to the apostles. Luke makes sure that we realize just how pitiful these enemies of the Apostles really were, referring to what I am calling,

C. Helpless bewilderment.

Look at,

v.13 “Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.”

Now, I admit that verse is a bit difficult to interpret, but I believe the sense is this, that Luke refers to the other apostles other than Peter and John, and “none of the rest dared join them” refer to non-Christians, unbelievers. Those unbelievers did not dare to join the apostles and believers, likely referring their fear, and that fear was certainly understandable, remembering what we studied last week, with the sudden and immediate death of Ananias and Sapphira. The unbelievers saw that, and in their unbelief, in their ungodly fear, they weren’t about to get tangled up with the apostles. “None of the rest dared join them.” The people, in verse 13, refers I believe to the other Christians, who

rightly honored the apostles, even in the context of the death of Ananias and Sapphira.

So the opposition was violent, and evil. But still rather pathetic in their fear! Pitiful, actually, in their helpless bewilderment. We see that same response in,

v.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.”

Such a pathetic description from those who actually possessed power outwardly. “They wondered what the outcome would be,” verse 24. As the ESV puts it, “wondering what this would come to.” They had no idea what was actually going to happen. They certainly had no ability to be in control of the situation. They are actually trying to save face, not knowing what to do when it was reported to them that the prison doors were still shut securely but no one inside. So once the apostles were located, “standing in the temple and teaching the people,” they still were afraid of the crowds, those who esteemed the apostles highly, according to verse 13. So, verse 26, they “brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned.”

I want you to see this huge contrast. Those in power, those supposedly in control and in authority, were the ones in opposition to the apostles. But it is the apostles who have all the courage! Thus what stands out in contrast to the pathetic rulers of Jerusalem and of the Jews is,

III. THE BOLD AND COURAGEOUS FAITHFULNESS OF THE APOSTLES.

When God freed them from prison by his own supernatural power, he told them what they were to do.

v.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.”

They weren’t to leave, or escape. They weren’t to go home in order to stop causing trouble. They were to go right back out into the temple and preach the gospel. So what did they do?

v.21 “And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught.”

Bold and courageous faithfulness.

A. The willingness to be obedient despite opposition.

They would be arrested! I’ll read the whole of...

v.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.”

They were immediately sent to be arrested. The opposition was immediate and obvious. But that didn’t stop them one bit. “They entered the temple early in the morning and taught.” So we read,

v.25 And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.”

And then, in the bold declaration which will be our focus next week, we read,

v.29 “But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey

God rather than men.”

They submitted to the exercise of authority of the civil magistrate who had had them arrested. But when God released them from prison they went right back to the faithful declaration of the gospel. The willingness to be obedient despite opposition. And in their obedience, we see...

B. The faithfulness to proclaim the words of life.

That’s such a great way to describe the gospel, “the words of life.” That’s what they were told by the angel of the Lord to proclaim.

v.20 “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” 21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.”

They spoke “to the people all the words of this Life.” So let me do that this morning, speak and proclaim the words of life.

1 John 5:11 “And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

So the simple question is that, do you have the son? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you trust in Jesus for your own salvation? Do you believe in the name of the Son of God, Jesus, so that by faith, you might receive the gift and blessing of eternal life? There is no more important question that I could possibly ask. These are the words of life, that “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.”

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but

have everlasting life.”

John 3:36 “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Please hear those words, and realize that life, eternal life, is to be found only when you trust in Jesus, not in yourself, for your salvation. Life is only to be found when you accept and receive what Jesus has done, when he died upon the cross, as the atoning sacrifice for your sins.

For you and I, everyone, deserve the condemnation of death, the condemnation of hell.

Rom. 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Yet Jesus says to us,
John 14:6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

He also says,
John 11:25 “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Do you believe this? That is the question, the ultimate question. So listen, and hear, the faithful apostles, as they obeyed God rather than man, and continued to proclaim the words of life. And listen, and hear, as I proclaim those same words of life to you this morning.