

No Middle Ground

Acts 5:26-42

We left off a couple of weeks ago in Acts chapter 5. Let's back up and set all things in context.

Acts 5

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.

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."

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. 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!"

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. ²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, ²⁸ saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"

²⁹ But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. ³¹ Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

³³ *When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.*

³⁴ *Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named **Gamaliel**, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people...,*

*“...a Pharisee named **Gamaliel**...”*

Gamaliel is a very interesting character... what he is about to say and do has brought about a lot of conjecture through the years and in the midst of our study here in Acts 5, I'd like to offer you a bit of my own and the reasoning behind it.

In the mid-late 1600's Dr. John Lightfoot, was an English churchman, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge and Master of St Catharine's College, Cambridge; as well as being a rabbinical scholar.¹ In his writings he confirms the belief and is in agreement with many other scholars that this **Gamaliel** was the very same as the teacher of the Apostle Paul we find in Acts 22:3 were Paul testifies –

*"I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of **Gamaliel**, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today."*

Historically, he was known among the Jews by the title of Rabban Gamaliel, the Elder, President of the Sanhedrin, and Master and Teacher of the Law. According to tradition and a multiple of Jewish writings this same **Gamaliel** was also the grandson of the famous **Hillel the Elder**, one of the most important figures in Jewish rabbinical history. **Rabbi Hillel** was associated with the development of both the Mishnah and the Talmud; and is still regarded in Judaism as both a sage and scholar. So you see, **Gamaliel** has quite the religious heritage.

Yet there is another added twist.

According to both Dr. Lightfoot and the 1966 journal article by Dr. Allan Cutler, Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia ²; this same **Gamaliel** was also the son of the **Simeon ben Hillel, the just and devout** man who at the time of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lightfoot

² Allan Cutler, *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan., 1966), pp. 29-35

the baby Jesus' dedication at the Temple in Jerusalem took the Savior in his arms and blessed Him, (Lu 2:25-26)^{3, 4}

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

If this is true, and we have no reason to suspect otherwise, here in Acts 5 **Gamaliel** is in a very difficult position:

- He has a place of honor and respect above all the rest of his countrymen – even among the other scholars and chief rabbis of his time;
- He has a heritage of power and influence that has been passed down from his grandfather;
- For years he has demonstrated himself as and been recognized as a Torah Scholar, an expert in the Law of Israel; and
- There is little doubt, but that he was a part of, if not the acting President of the Sanhedrin at the time of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.⁵

Now, with all he has seen, all that he has studied, all that has (*possibly*) been passed down by his father, even the reality of the miracles which have taken place over the last few days (from the healing of the lame man and the healing of multitudes there at Solomon's Porch on the Temple Mount area; to now the Apostles being miraculously freed from the common prison) – ***Gamaliel, the leader of Israel is in a difficult place.***

His heart could be in a position of being turned to the truth of the Gospel, even as Peter has had opportunity to share it with the whole Sanhedrin?

Or, perhaps the fear of the loss of his prestige and power will keep him from acknowledging the facts that were **so evident before him?**

I feel that what we see here is **a man that is torn** – torn from what his heart knows to be right, and what his flesh desires to hold on to. But isn't this the classic battle of all of humanity when it comes to surrendering our lives to the hand of God and the Lordship of Christ?

³ Albert Barnes, New Testament Commentary; Acts 5:34

⁴ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, Commentary on the Whole Bible; Acts 5:34

⁵ Schechter, Solomon; Bacher, Wilhelm. "Gamliel I". *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

Our **heart and spirit agrees** with the wooing work of the Holy Spirit of God and the Truth of the Gospel, yet our **flesh continually drags us back** into the **things of the world and our own desires**.

I don't know if you've noticed this or not, but surrender and obedience **is not a part of our natural, human nature**. Even the Apostle Paul shares with us the same internal battle – look with me at Romans 7.

Romans 7

¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ²⁰ Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ²¹ I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. ²² For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. ²³ But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. ²⁴ O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

But Paul also knew that the **only time that battle would be won is when we commit ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit**, surrendering our lives into His care and leading – look over in Romans 8.

Romans 8

*⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the **things of the flesh**, but those who live according to the Spirit, **the things of the Spirit**. ⁶ For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. ⁷ Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. ¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors- -not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ **For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.***

Gamaliel had a decision to make. But let's not lessen the fact of the difficulty of this decision. If he chooses one way, he honors God and gives credence to the cause and

truth of the Gospel – yet losses everything he counts as worthy and necessary in this life.

With a choice in the other direction, he rejects and shuts off the Truth that has been so evident before him, both in the fulfillment of the Scriptures and in the testimony of lives changed through the power of Jesus, as well as the probable words of his own father; that *the consolation of Israel* has come. Yet, in his rejection of the Truth he would be able to retain his temporary place of power and influence in the current world.

But what does this have to do with you and I today?

I believe it is very clear that even as we look at Gamaliel, we have to examine ourselves: are we trying to hold on to and seek comfort in this world by denying the eternal truth and surety of the next; or do we surrender to that eternal Truth of the hope found in the Gospel and let go of the things of this world..., **things we can't fully hold on to anyway?**

Are you fully able to say with the Apostle Paul –

⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3)

For Gamaliel, just like so many others, he's going to try to **play the middle ground**. He's going to try to skirt **the responsibility of making a firm decision...** but **Beloved, in matters of our spiritual lives and destiny, there is no middle ground!**

Let's look at the balance of verse 34 and continue on from there

*³⁴ (Gamaliel stood up) and commanded (the Guards) to put the apostles outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to (the balance of the Sanhedrin): "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. ³⁶ For some time ago **Theudas** rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. ³⁷ "After this man, **Judas** of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.*

So, in an effort to slow down the wrath of the Sanhedrin, **Gamaliel** brings back to their memory the names of two men who in the past had set themselves up as some sort of leaders. He doesn't say they claimed to be the Messiah, but that they simply drew people to follow them. In essence he was saying, *"Look, this Jesus they are speaking about is of **no more importance** than Theudas and Judas of Galilee. Leave these men alone, and their cause – Christianity, the Gospel and the Church will all die away and be scattered, becoming nothing."*

I think it's very interesting to note that history shows us that since Israel denied the message of the Gospel, it was actually all of Israel who *were scattered and came to nothing*. Because they rejected their salvation, **destruction was waiting at the door for them.**

But then **Gamaliel** speaks something that seemed to make sense, something that many have actually applauded. He appears to give **some sort of a prudent, simple answer to the situation –**

*³⁸ "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and **let them alone**; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God."*

This seems to the world's mind to be a very **logical** way of responding to the Gospel – *"Oh, we'll just wait and see how it all pans out."* Yet the Word of God makes it very clear, you are either on the Lord's side or you are against Him – **there is no middle ground**. We aren't given the pleasure of waiting around to see how it all works out and then choose... **by that time it will be too late.**

To not accept the Gospel, is to deny the grace and plan of God.

Folks, we never know when any of us might hear the Word of God coming to us declaring...

"Thou Fool! This night your soul will be required of you!" (Luke 12:20)

For He says: " Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2)

The fact is, **because** these men didn't embrace the message of the Cross and the hope found in the Gospel, they found themselves **at once** fighting against God and His plan. **There is no neutral position when it comes to eternal matters - there is no middle ground.** They cannot overthrow it, but neither can they ignore it and hope to go without punishment.

So, here was their plan...

*⁴⁰ And (the Council) agreed with (Gamaliel), and when they had called for the apostles **and beaten them**, they commanded that **they should not speak in the name of Jesus**, and let them go.*

Now, if you remember, they've tried that before and it didn't work. So, I would have to ask them this question, in the words of that great theologian of our times, Dr. Phil: "So, *how's that working out for you?*"

Well, let's look and see how it worked out...

*⁴¹ So they (the Apostles) departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.** ⁴² And daily **in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.***

They willingly laid it all down and God gave them great freedom to continue to proclaim Jesus as Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Warren Wiersbe sees the oddity and weirdness of the situation –

What a contrast between the Apostles and the members of the council. The council was educated, ordained, and approved, and yet they had no ministry of power. The Apostles were ordinary laymen, yet God's power was at work in their lives. The council was trying desperately to protect themselves and their dead traditions, while the Apostles were risking their lives to share the living Word of God. The dynamic church was enjoying the new; the dead council was defending the old.⁶

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, [The Bible Exposition Commentary](#), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 425.

Man to his own eternal demise tries to hold onto the temporary things of this world at the cost of losing life in Christ...

Matthew 16

²⁶ *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

And yet, Man is at his best when he reckons himself dead and allows Christ to live in and through him.

Galatians 2

²⁰ *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

To not choose for Christ is to choose against God and His eternal plan. **There is no middle ground!**