



## Session Nineteen

### The Book of

### Acts, Pt.3

### Acts 5:12-8:4

The spread of the Gospel and growth of the early church encountered resistance of one sort or another almost from the very beginning. But mid-way through Chapter 5, where this week's reading begins, resistance becomes persecution and persecution becomes death. In the process, we gain a sobering understanding of what faithfulness to the Kingdom can mean. When Jesus counseled would-be followers to "count the cost" of discipleship, this was much of the reason why.

1) 5:12-16, at first reading, seems to be a passage of positive developments and great encouragement. The apostles were held in high esteem by the people, the numbers of their followers grew, and they were so effective at "signs and wonders" that people only needed to have an apostle's shadow fall on them to be healed. Ultimately, however, it is these very things that will result in the apostles' persecution, which the apostles themselves must've known was likely all along. The fact they lived faithfully, therefore, is testimony to their courage and commitment to their core values as followers of Jesus. Indeed, as Peter later says, "we must obey God rather than human authority."

- a. How deep is your commitment to your core values as a follower of Jesus? How do you know (how do you measure it)?
- b. If you were faced with having to choose between God and human authority, what would your choice be if you knew choosing God could result in imprisonment or worse?

2) The imprisoned apostles are divinely released from prison (5:19). What does this mean other than the fact they were no longer in jail?

3) The apostles are imprisoned for their public teaching yet, when they are miraculously freed from jail, they return to the Temple, in full view of the Sanhedrin, and begin teaching again. They are flogged for their teaching and sternly warned not to do it anymore, yet they continued to do so, day after day. Why?

4) Jesus warned that following him would result in suffering (go back, for example, and look at Luke 6:22-23) and the disciples' experience in these passages certainly illustrates Jesus was telling the truth. Further, not only did the disciples suffer—they did so willingly. We followers of Jesus today, no matter how committed we feel ourselves to be, typically avoid suffering of any kind, certainly suffering that would occur as a result of our discipleship. We want following Jesus to feel good, not painful. Jesus never advocated suffering for the sake of suffering, but what does it say about our discipleship that we've crafted it in such a way as to avoid suffering?

5) Following from question 4, consider that Peter, for example, does not seek suffering. He's not a masochist. But he doesn't avoid it, either, if it arises in the course of his work for the Kingdom. In the process, as one commentator puts it, Peter "models for all believers in every situation...the non-negotiable importance of serving the interests of God whatever the cost [or] occasion." What does your discipleship model?

6) 6:1-7 illustrates the ongoing challenge faced by all churches: balancing administrative responsibilities with, as Luke puts it, "serving the word." This speaks to the very heart of how we understand what it means to be church. Based upon all your reading the first 18 weeks of class, how do you think Jesus would counsel us to address this balance?

7) 6:8-8:3 is the story of Stephen, first martyr of the church, containing the longest continual speech in all of Acts.

- a. What do you think motivates the "Freedmen" to fabricate a trumped-up case against Stephen?
- b. If you read Stephen's speech carefully, you'll note that it lays-out the basis for all that happened to Jesus and the apostles to that point. As such, it is probably as good a synopsis of the Biblical/theological/historical foundations for Christianity as you can find. Given that this does articulate the basis for the faith in which we root our daily and eternal lives, could you provide such a synopsis yourself? The point here is not to feel incompetent (if, indeed, that's how you feel) but to address the bigger issue of why we choose to devote our lives to a story if we don't know it well enough to tell it. As someone once told me, "I may not know the story but I know Jesus." Is that really possible, do you think?

8) In 7:48, Stephen says, "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands."

Biblical scholar Robert Wall says of these words of Stephen: *"One of the most provocative themes of Stephen's biting criticism of official Israel's religious practices is the exaltation of a particular sacred place (the Temple in Jerusalem), a particular priesthood, and a particular protocol of purity as the medium of God's active presence among God's people. This theme continues for the rest of Acts... Can spiritual formation take place outside those practices and institutions the church (or Judaism) has established for this purpose?"*

As Christians, we claim that we are a people gathered together and marked out by our faith in a *person*—Jesus—and it is that person who sanctifies a place and/or a practice. It isn't a place or practice that sanctifies Jesus (or us). What implications does this have for how we understand what it means to be church?