

INTRODUCTION

Last time we looked at the opening 13 verses in this chapter and noticed the persecution that the apostles faced and how they coped with it. Now as we continue to look at this chapter we need to continue looking at how the apostles faced this persecution. I want you to notice:

1. THEY OBEYED GOD AT ALL COSTS (vs. 14-22)

The unexpected boldness of Peter and John and the fact that the crippled man was healed and was standing there with them put the Sanhedrin in an impossible position. How could they possibly respond to Peter and John's robust defence that Jesus was the Messiah and that they were responsible for rejecting Him. Peter's claim that he and John were leading people to God not away from him was simply unanswerable.

The evidence contradicted the claims of this Sanhedrin court that Peter and John were God's enemies. So having ordered Peter and John to withdraw from the Sanhedrin court they conferred with one another in order to decide what they should do with them. The question as to what they were to do was not an easy one to answer. Peter and John had broken no laws and had been able to defend their message from the Old Testament Scriptures. To punish them would be risky because it was clear that a miracle had clearly taken place, good to the crippled man had been done.

Everyone in Jerusalem knew what had happened so there was no way they could hide this miracle or pretend it did not happen. The Sanhedrin was reliving their worst nightmare. They were responsible for executing Jesus because he claimed to be the Messiah and now his followers were going around telling everyone that the one they executed is alive because he has been raised from the dead.

Not only that; but now Jesus' followers had performed a miracle to authenticate their claim that they spoke for God. However the Sanhedrin needed to take some sort of action to stop this teaching about Jesus and his resurrection from spreading among the people. They wanted to nip it in the bud before it spread to an extent that would, clearly, show them up as false teachers.

They had to find a way to stop these apostles from telling people that they had executed their Messiah.

So they decided to try and intimidate the apostles into silence by warning them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus (v 17). Interesting the early church had to be threatened into keeping quiet about Jesus whereas today many Christians have to be commanded to speak for Him. This is a very important event in the history of the church.

If the apostles had given into this threat then the history of the church would have been radically different. In many ways everything hanged on their willingness to obey God at all costs, even if that meant losing their lives.

Peter and John did not give into their threats, they refused to obey this Jewish court for they appealed to a higher court and they asked a very important question (v 19). Their question was simple which court is higher, which one must be obeyed? Peter's question was a clever one and faced this Jewish court with a dilemma. They did not want Peter and John to continue proclaiming the truth of Jesus but could they tell these men to obey them rather than God?

Now the lesson we learn here is that we must always obey God at all times and at all costs even when that leads us into a conflict with human masters and human laws. Now let me be clear here. It is a clear biblical principle that believers are to obey their government. Peter in fact taught such a thing (1 Peter 2:13-17) and so did Paul (Romans 13:1-7).

However what we learn from how Peter and John handled this situation is that there are limits placed on our obedience to earthly laws. We should gladly obey earthly laws if doing so does not mean disobeying God.

But when God's commands conflict with the commands of men then man must be disobeyed and God must be obeyed.

It's the same in our homes and at work. We must submit to the proper authorities in those places. But once we are asked to do something that will lead us into clear disobedience of God then we must draw a line and be willing to pay the consequences.

Now although Peter and John refused to obey the Sanhedrin they nevertheless treated them with respect. They did not argue with them or pretend to submit and then go and disobey. Instead they carefully and respectfully explained that they could not stop speaking about Jesus for they cannot do anything else but speak about what they have seen and heard (v 20).

They were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death and especially his resurrection. It is interesting in passing that the Sanhedrin never tried to argue that Jesus did not rise from the dead or go and produce his dead body I am sure if they could off they would have done so. But of course they couldn't for Jesus was raised from the dead.

The Sanhedrin were cornered they had run out of options so after further threats they let them go for they could find no legitimate basis on which to punish them (v 21). However it was not their commitment to justice that made them release Peter and John but fear. They feared the reaction of the people who were praising God because of what had happened to the crippled man through Peter and John (v 21).

God honours those who honour Him. Therefore my dear friends when we are faced with a dilemma between obeying man and obeying God. Then remember that God's laws always take precedence over man made laws and although at the minute that conflict might not be intense.

I think I am right in predicting that if this Government continue with their basis against Christianity then the conflict between human laws and God's laws will increase. At such times remember God honours those who honour Him.

2. BE COMMITTED TO FELLOWSHIP & PRAYER (v 23-28)

The first thing that Peter and John did after being released was to go to their own people and report to the Chief Priests and the elders where they told their story. No doubt they received comfort and support and encouragement.

Now there can no doubt that persecution leads to greater fellowship for through persecution we begin to realise that all true believers are on the same side something that we do not always appreciate when everything is going along smoothly. Persecuted believers will naturally draw nearer to one another for mutual support and encouragement. Perhaps one reason for the disunity in today's church is the lack of external pressure and its also one reason why false unity is being promoted within our nation.

Should the church in Britain suddenly face serious persecution then you can be sure that the false ecumenical movement in our nation would disappear and the true church would see a unity and a fellowship that we currently lack.

But not only does persecution lead to richer fellowship it also leads to prayer and thanksgiving (vs. 24-28). The believers did not go and hide when they heard of Peter and John's boldness before the Sanhedrin but they were moved to pray and to acknowledge God's sovereign control in the whole situation.

Faced with the persecution of men the church took comfort from the fact that their God was in absolute control, that he was sovereign in the midst of this persecution. All the suffering that they faced was part of God's will for them. He after all is the creator of everything therefore he is in complete control of all events within life.

Confidence in the absolute rule and power of God is something that will sustain us throughout all the trials and difficulties of life. Everything that happens to us good and bad is under the control of our God; it is all part of his ultimate good purposes for his church and for us as individual Christians within his church.

They also took comfort from the fact that such opposition had been predicted in the Old Testament through the mouth of David (vs. 25-26 cf. Psalm 2:1-2). The Psalm predicts the hostility of the world against God and especially against God's Messiah Jesus Christ. But of course by extension because the church is united to Christ and is on the Lord's side then the world will be hostile to the church.

What is happening to Peter and John is not unexpected it was predicted and therefore the church takes great comfort in the knowledge that just as their Lord suffered for them then they will suffer for His sake. Just as the world is hostile against God then it will be hostile towards his church.

But once again let us not forget persecution and hostility of the church is not outside God's purposes and will. Even the death of Jesus was a fulfilment of God's will and purpose (vs. 27-28) therefore these believers are able with great confidence to lay the present situation before the Lord and seek His face for even greater boldness (vs. 29-30). These believers are not intimidated by the threats of the Sanhedrin for they ask the Lord to grant them greater boldness (v 29) and to continue to work through signs and wonders to bring glory to His name (v 30).

They did not ask God stop the persecution but simply to consider their threats. Lord you know what is best in this situation, consider what they are doing but what is important is not their own well being and health but that they might be enabled to speak God's word with great boldness (v 29). That as His servants they might be allowed to continue to make known the name of Christ.

God graciously answered their prayer (v 31) for they were filled with the Spirit and the Spirit's presence was manifested physically with a shaking of the place where they were praying. The result of the people being filled with the Spirit was that they spoke the word of God with great boldness. Being filled with the Spirit is being brought totally under the control of the Spirit and leads to speaking the gospel to others with boldness.

Perhaps one reason why we as individuals or collectively as a church fail to speak for Jesus rests with the fact that we lack this filling with the Spirit. We are so keen to go our own way to do our own thing that we fail to submit to God. Therefore although we have the Holy Spirit we do not know his power and influence as we should and would if only we submitted to Him and to His way in everything.

The church has successfully faced its initial trial of opposition. Instead of succumbing to the temptation to compromise the gospel it became even bolder in its proclamation. It also made the early church grow stronger and that is a recurring theme throughout church history. Opposition and persecution only makes the church stronger and bolder.

Therefore although we should never pray for persecution we should realise that when it comes it is actually for the ultimate good of the church for God uses it to bring about his purposes for the good of His church and ultimately for His glory.

Amen