

Acts 5 - John Karmelich

In this chapter, we are transitioning from a few stories about how the apostles boldly preached Jesus in spite of violent threats, to a story of a Christian couple literally dropping dead for lying to the church! I would like that to sink in for a second. I'm sure all of us have told lies, half-truths or omitted facts as to deceive someone. If a couple can be struck dead for that sin as it occurs at the start of this chapter, do we have to be nervous about what could happen to us if we fail to be a good witness for Jesus? Thank God for His grace!

So why aren't more Christians struck dead on the spot? If that were true, most of us wouldn't be around live long enough even to be a witness for Jesus. So why was this couple's story singled out here? It's a reminder that we're to take sin seriously! The reason this story is here isn't to say God expects us to be perfect all the time. It's a reminder that we're accountable for our behavior. Yes, that makes me nervous knowing that I could be made an example of as easily as this couple did. I realize situations exist where telling lies or half-truths may be necessary (e.g., to protect a spy we are secretly working with). All that I'm saying is this story's to remind us we're accountable to God for our behavior. Sin, especially if it is within the church can cost us! Consider this about that couple: the sin wasn't murder or stealing. It was "just" lying about the amount of a donation! Remember we are always on the clock for Jesus as we do go through our lives!

That event isn't the whole chapter, but in effect it "gets the ball rolling" that leads the rest of the events that we read about in this chapter. Speaking of which, let me summarize it in a few paragraphs then I'll get back to what all of this means to us.

As I implied the chapter opens with the story of a couple who has given their lives to Jesus. What that means is despite the fact they're about to drop dead on the spot for a sin, I'm still convinced they are in heaven even though they got made a public example out of. I could be wrong, but just my speculation. Anyway, the story is people were giving to help the church. Remember that this was Jewish Christians who were probably excommunicated by the religious leaders for accepting Jesus. Therefore people did volunteer to give to support these believers since they had nowhere else to go. Nobody was forcing the giving, so again it was all voluntary. A husband and wife decided to sell a property they owned and lie about the amount they gave. No one was forcing them to give and they could have simply said, here is part of what we got from the sale and no sin would have been committed.

Anyway the husband appeared first to Peter. Either he knew the truth or God somehow made it known he was lying about it. The guilty man literally dropped dead on the spot. Some people were called for the body's removal. About an hour later, the wife showed up and told the same lie. She dropped dead on the spot too! If one's trying to encourage church growth, events like this aren't helpful! This story's here to remind us that we're called to be a witness to Jesus, and we need to modify our behavior to live as that witness!

That incident lead to a story about people too nervous to join the disciples but still wanted some sort of healing miracle! If you just heard about that dead couple, you'd probably be nervous to be around all of those Christians! The text then describes miracles that occurred simply because Peter's shadow covered those who want to be healed. Peter's shadow had any special powers. It was just a method God used to draw new people to Jesus. Yes it's strange, but God often does strange things to draw people to Him!

Of all things that leads us back to the religious leaders who opposed the Christian movement. Let's be honest, there will always be those jealous of other's success. The Jewish religious leaders watched the number of Christians grow tremendously to what was probably around 20,000 of them in Jerusalem. It led the Jewish religious leaders to put Peter and "the gang" on trial again for preaching Jesus!

Peter spent the night in jail. During the night an angel somehow sprung him loose. We aren't told how. The angel just made it possible for him to leave with no one noticing. The angel told Peter to go preach Jesus early the next morning. So Peter was at the temple going at it at dawn! If an angel told us we got to "Go do this", what would we be doing as soon as possible?

Jesus told Peter in effect that he would die as a witness for Him. (See John 21:19). Therefore since he knew that was his future, Peter (guided by the Holy Spirit) saw every occasion where he got arrested as "Hey, it's opportunity to be a witness for Jesus. I got an audience curious about Jesus, and they have to listen to me preach!" So he used that opportunity to preach Jesus to the Jewish religious leaders. Peter even says they are guilty of killing Jesus. I hold the view like most Christians that Jesus freely gave up His life for my sins. The Jewish and Roman leaders were guilty of rejecting Him so it's being guilty of "second degree" murder, which is in effect about going along with the plan.

We then get some text about the Jewish leaders discussing what to do next. A prominent member gave a speech in effect saying, "Hey I can think of two other fairly recent stories about people who tried led a rebellion and nothing became of those incidents. I (that guy) say we should watch and see whether or not this Christian movement comes to anything". Since they decided to stand back and watch, it meant the disciples were free to go at that point. Yes I'm abbreviating the story, but remember you're reading my summary of the chapter here!

Let me expand a little about this prominent Jewish leader. His name was Gamaliel. He is known even to this day as one of the greatest Jewish teachers that ever lived. He was a Pharisee. The leaders of the Jewish council (high priest and his family) were Sadducees. They're a different sect from the Pharisees, and the Sadducees held the power! They cooperated with the Romans and profited by that relationship. The Pharisees were considered the teachers of the people. The Sadducees tolerated the Pharisees since they were popular with the locals. The council (70 members, think of it as the religious "senate"). I'm getting into all of this because God used Gamaliel in effect to save the disciples lives. Let's be honest, without Gamaliel's testimony the Sadducees could have decided to put the disciples to death! Another thing to realize is Paul (who'll we'll get introduced to in two chapters) was a student under Gamaliel.

In summary, we go from a big warning to modify our behavior to be a good witness to Jesus to a story of how the disciples were used by God to perform miracles to validate them as God's witnesses and it lead to them preaching the Gospel to the religious leaders of Israel. They got their lives spared as the council voted to spare them since they couldn't deny the miracles nor the great movement that is now occurring because the disciples were obeying what Jesus commanded them to do! That leads me to my lesson title: "What God expects of those He calls to serve Him".

That title implies both good and bad. The good is He gives us special gifts to be a witness for Him (the Holy Spirit gives us gifts we can use to glorify Him). It also means we need to modify our behavior not to earn His salvation, but because we're called to be a witness for Him. We can suffer for when we fail to be a witness for Him, but the eternal rewards far outweigh whatever suffering we endure in this life! So what does this mean practically? Do I quit my job, stand on the corner with a sandwich board that Jesus is coming back soon? For almost all of us, the answer is no. For most of us, it's about using our lives as a witness for Him. That's the underlying point of this chapter!

With that said, this lesson will cover some more background notes as well as go through Chapter 5 on a verse by verse basis. If you're new here, what you've read so far is about 15% of this study. To read the rest of it click on one of the other two links on this chapter. You're always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John