

When the early church moved out with its aggressive and expansive mind-set, a collision with the forces of darkness was inevitable. Peter and John and the ex-cripple experienced it first when they were arraigned before the imposing Sanhedrin and warned not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Their resistance and resilience were also predictable.

“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. (4:19-20)

When Satan attacked the church from within with the deadly spiritual hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira, the church responding to God’s discipline, again rebounded with a resurgence of spiritual power, as recorded in Acts 5:12-16. We see the same phenomenon in Acts 5:17-42 as Luke records three consecutive waves of persecution – each succeeded by remarkable resiliency.

Being raised close to the Pacific Ocean in the Southern California taught me a few things about waves. I have fond memories from my high school and college years of leaving home on hot August days when the thermometer was flirting with 100 degrees at 10 a.m., picking up some friends, and after thirty minutes on Beach Boulevard standing on the burning white sand by lifeguard station #3 at Huntington Beach and gazing at a large green surf crowned with white foam set against a horizon rimmed by the purple peaks of Santa Catalina Island. Air temperature 80 degrees; water temperature 69 degrees. Big surf. Perfect. On days like that, there is only one thing to do – hit the water. But you have to know a few essentials.

First, if you are wading out and suddenly observe a huge breaker poised menacingly above you, raised so high against the sky that tiny fish are swimming calmly about in its aquarium-like crest, you had better dive right into it. Otherwise, you will be right back where you began-minus some skin and pride. However, if you perform properly, you will easily pop up on the other side. Buoyant and ready to move to deeper water. You do not have to be a great swimmer to get along in the surf. If you just take the time to learn a few simple techniques, you will soon be riding watery mountains, head and shoulders above, kicking in and out at will.

The ocean-surf metaphor applies beautifully to our study of the early church. The forces of evil tried to drown the new church with a flood of suppression, only to have it pop back up as alive and free as ever. Buoyant liberty in ministry rose above a hostile world. Acts 5 is helpful to all of us because though few of us will probably ever face such overt persecution as did the early church, none of us will ever entirely escape the world’s representation either, which is more deadly than the Pacific surf. God has a message for today’s church.

WAVE NUMBER ONE (vv.17-25)

The first of three deadly waves of persecution is described in verse 17-18:

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

After the judgement of Ananias and Sapphira, the church continued to minister in unusual power – often in public, beneath the great colonnade of Solomon’s Porch. In the midst of one of the

sessions the temple police suddenly closed in, taking all twelve apostles captive and tossing them in jail. The Sadducees did this because they “were filled with jealousy.” They were not trying to prevent heresy or protect the people or maintain God’s honor. They were simply jealous.

Jealousy is always an ugly word. Proverbs 6:34 says, “Jealousy arouses a husband’s fury.” It is by nature destructive. These Sadducee leaders were envious of the popularity of the apostles and were self-protective of their own prestige. “The crowd should be gathering around us, not them.” They were moved by the lowest and most contemptible motive. When their malevolence poured forth, the apostles found themselves in the city jail.

Though this would not be the last time the apostles would find themselves imprisoned, they were not at all like the prisoners the jailers had grown accustomed to. The apostles were calm, cool and collected. If what we see later in Philippi is any indication, there were songs in the night, with Peter perhaps singing bass. The Jerusalem city jail had never seen anything like this, nor had the guards witnessed anything like what was about to happen.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people the full message of this new life.” At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. (vv. 19-21a)

They were divinely delivered. Either God lulled the guards into sleep or the apostles were made temporarily invisible. Whatever happened, it must have been great fun to be out on the streets while the prison lay locked behind them. There is some divine humor here, too, because the Sadducees did not believe in angels. And yet here, right in their own city, were some close encounters of the spiritual kind.

Why the angelic intervention? God was teaching the Twelve that He can deliver His servants from the world’s oppression anytime he sees fit. He delivered in a similar way two other times in Acts – once with Peter (12:6-11) and once with Paul and Silas (16:26ff.), though in the latter case God did not want his apostles to escape but to stay in jail despite the doors being opened – perhaps an even greater witness.

In Acts 5 the angelic liberation was not only meant to free them, but to encourage them – and us! The apostles now knew that God could deliver them from the world’s clutches anytime, anywhere!

If church traditions are correct, Matthew knew the reality of an angelic presence when he suffered martyrdom by the sword. So did Mark when he died in Alexandria after being dragged through the streets of the city. Luke experienced the same when he was hanged on a large olive tree in Greece. It was John’s realization when he was scarred in a cauldron of boiling oil and lived his last days banished on an island. So it was with Peter as he was crucified upside-down in Rome, James as he was beheaded in Jerusalem, James the Less when he was thrown from a high pinnacle and beaten to death with a club, Philip when he was hanged, Bartholomew when he was scourged and beaten until he died, Andrew when he was bound to a cross and preached at the top of his voice to his persecutors until he perished, Thomas who was run through with a

lance, Jude who was killed by executioner's arrows, Matthias who was stoned and then beheaded in Rome. On and on it goes.

All of these died knowing that God can deliver his people anytime he wants. Scripture says that when waves of persecution or trial come, God can deliver us if he so wills. No matter how dark or oppressive the wave, he can rescue us.

Not only were the apostles divinely delivered- they were divinely commissioned. "Go stand in the temple courts, and tell the people of the full message of this new life" (v. 20). The language here suggests a command to exercise dogged steadfastness. They were to hold their ground, stand firm and deliver the entire message of new life in Christ. Those following the path of the apostles are to proclaim the liberating message of life even in the midst of persecution.

"Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the full message of this new life." In some Bible translations (including the RSV and NASB) "Life" is capitalized. The apostles were not only to speak about life, but Life-new life- "this new life"- a specific gift of grace from a loving God.

Jesus brings us life.

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believe in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

Jesus answered, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a man fully alive," and that is true. When we become alive in Christ, God is wonderfully glorified!

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1:4)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1-2)

Regardless of how hostile and oppressive our surroundings, no matter how philistine the workplace, how callous the students, how neurotic the neighbors, we are meant to share Christ by life and word.

The first big breaker had crashed upon the apostles, but they came through with buoyant liberation. With the first blush of daybreak they were back in the temple, on Solomon's Porch, giving out the goods. The Sanhedrin was just getting out of bed, but Christ's ambassadors were already hard at work.

At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin – the full assembly of the elders of Israel – and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, “we found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” (vv.21-25)

As Annas and his friends gathered in their chamber, Annas wore his most dignified and severe expression. Their gorgeous robes were arranged and the prisoners were sent for. Then the report came, and their dignity hit the road. They were bewildered and perplexed, shaking in their sandals. What next?

WAVE NUMBER TWO (vv.26-33)

The leaders collected themselves and prepared to pour another wave of suppression on the would be preachers.

At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they had them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” (vv.26-28)

In this bitter reproach, we get a glimpse into the pathology of oppressors. Though they think themselves might rulers, they are guilt ridden and afraid that someone or something will displace them. Fear is both the method and the reward or tyranny. In this instance the religious rulers blurted out that the apostles were “determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” The truth is, they were the ones who said, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:22-23) and “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” of Christ as well. Those leaders’ reproach was laced with the aroma of death because the apostles were showing contempt for the court’s earlier ruling. The Sadducees not had all the evidence they needed.

How did the apostles respond to this second wave of spiteful opposition? With incredible buoyancy!

Peter and the other apostles replied; “we must obey God rather than men! The God of our father raised Jesus from the dead -whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

What a magnificent liberation! They exalted Christ as “Prince and Savior.” They made no attempt to palliate their opponents’ guilt. They were fearless, walking in the footsteps of great

saints such as Daniel and his friends. Do you remember the answer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they stood before Nebuchadnezzar?

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it. And he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18)

The very flames of oppression burned their bonds so that they walked freely in the fires of persecution. St. Athanasius found this to be true as well. “Athanasius contra mundum – Athanasius against the world!” Martin Luther experienced this too. “Here I stand. God help me. I cannot do otherwise.”

How was this remarkable liberation and power gained? Obedience. Peter and the apostles began their answer by saying, “We must obey God rather than men!” (v.29) and concluded by saying, “We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (v.32). The witnessing power of the Holy Spirit is released through obedience to Christ, to the Word, to the inner voice of his guidance. Some good self-check questions are:

1. Am I living consistently in view of what I know about Christ?
2. Am I living a life that is in accord with what I am learning in the Scriptures?
3. Am I refusing to do what I know he wants?
4. Am I refusing to share my faith because of fear of rejection or appearing unintellectual or uncultured or any other reason?

We cannot experience the full power of the Holy Spirit if we are saying no to Him.

WAVE NUMBER THREE (vv. 34-42)

The apostles were not only enduring the tides of persecution- they were surfing! Look at the effect of their courage: “But when they [The Sanhedrin] heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them” (v.33). They were overcome by violent mental anguish and indignation.

Now came the final wave of suppression. Some think the Sanhedrin would have killed the apostles right on the spot if it were not for Gamaliel. I do not think so. They were too smart for that. But certainly the intervention of the venerable Gamaliel mitigated the extremity of the apostles punishment.

Much can be said about this man, but suffice it to say that he was among the best of the Pharisees and a man of moderation. HE was the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel and was so highly thought of that the Mishnah says of him, “Since Rabban Gamaliel the elder died there has been no more reverence for the law; and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.

But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (vv.34-39)

Evidently, because of Gamaliel's rational entreaty a compromise was reached and the apostles were let off easy- easy, that is, if we think thirty nine stripes is easy. His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. (v. 40)

One by one they were whipped until the flesh parted. And one by one they experienced supernatural joy.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. (vv. 41-42)

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness" (Matthew 5:10). We are not expected to be perfect or faultlessly consistent in our faith and walk, but we are expected to be joyful. We are also expected to persevere. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (v.42). Similarly, the final verse in Acts describes the Apostle Paul's unswerving courage; "Boldly without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31). The apostles were buoyant, resilient, liberated and victorious!

We flatter ourselves if we imagine we have known anything like the oppression they knew. But we also make a mistake if we think we are immune. We do face waves of opposition, though they are more subtle. Sometime we do not even know they have overwhelmed us. But the enemy knows and celebrates because we no longer speak and teach "the full message of this new life" (v. 20). When we are in such a state, the world does not see the glory of men and women fully alive. Our disobedience has cut us off from the power of the Holy Spirit. There is not joy, no buoyance.

At such time we need to be set free and know again the liberty God has given to his children. When we take our stand for him, speaking the message of life, obeying him rather than men, we will feel the waves, but we will also feel his pleasure.