

FRIDAY 24 June 2022 "Eye Witness" (Acts 5:32-6:1)

Hello my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

I wonder if you've ever been an 'eyewitness' to something and your report of that event was important? Perhaps you've even had the experience of being called as an 'eyewitness' in a courtroom where your testimony was critical to the outcome of the trial? Yesterday I left you standing in a large courtroom where the fate of Peter, and the other apostles, was being determined by the religious leaders in Jerusalem about 2000 years ago.

When confronted and again challenged by these leaders that they had disregarded their order to NOT speak anymore in the name of Jesus, Peter responded: **"We must obey God rather than men!"** (Acts 5:29) Then Peter again accused these men of having sentenced Jesus to death, but God had raised Jesus to life and brought Him back to heaven where God had given Jesus the position of highest authority at His right hand. Then Peter had said: **"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."** (Acts 5:32)

Do you hear three claims in that one statement?

First, that Peter and the other apostles were EYE-WITNESSES of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and they absolutely refused to be silent about what they knew to be true!

Second, that the Holy Spirit of God was also an eyewitness.

And third that the Holy Spirit had been sent by God to Peter and these other apostles, because they obeyed God!

Luke uses one powerful statement to summarize the response in that courtroom that day: **"...the religious leaders were furious and wanted to put the apostles to death."** (Acts 5:32) But yesterday we saw one of the most respected of all the Pharisees stood up and calmed the situation with this statement: **"Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do with these men!"** (Acts 5:35) And then Gamaliel requested the apostles be removed from the courtroom so debate and decision could be reached.

With the disciples out and the door closed, respected Gamaliel continued by recounting past revolts and how they were put down by Roman soldiers. Roman authorities were totally intolerant of any dissension, anything that could be viewed as opposing the supreme authority of the Caesar. *These Sanhedrin leaders took very seriously their role in keeping Jerusalem calm and quiet.*

Their comfortable lives and their authority depended on Jerusalem being controlled. Gamaliel now summarized his cautious recommendation: ***"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 of God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourself fighting against God!"*** (Acts 5:39)

Oh my! What a profound statement. And it's true of all of us, isn't it my friends? Everything we say, everything we do, every attitude we have, is either something which rises up from deep within us, our sinful minds and hearts, and is therefore probably NOT honoring to God, and not helpful to what Jesus is trying to accomplish in our world ***OR what we say and do, and our attitudes is led by the Holy Spirit alive in us and therefore God honoring!*** And we must consider that for those things which are NOT God honoring, we must agree with Mr. Gamaliel, when we do or say those things, we are actually ***'fighting against God!'*** Ponder that a moment. ***How much of our time, our thoughts, our words, our attitudes, even our actions flow out of our sin nature and may actually be 'fighting against' what God is trying to accomplish IN you and THROUGH us in all the relationships we have?*** That's a staggering thought, isn't it?

The courtroom was divided. Some wanted these apostles killed, believing strongly that they were troublemakers. Others weren't so sure and wanted to let them go, hoping perhaps they'd cause a riot or something in Jerusalem and the Roman soldiers would take care of the problem. Others felt an obligation to God that at least they should be punished for what the leaders felt was deceiving the people about God and claiming that Jesus was the Son of God. Finally, they came to compromise, and the record says: ***"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."*** (Acts 5:40)

Now don't rush past that my friends. This was not an ordinary beating with a stick or belt or even a whip. A ***'flogging'*** was horrific if done with the 'cat of nine tails'. First, they would have been stripped to the waist, then their hands shackled to a post so they couldn't run. A nine-tail leather whip which had pieces of bone or nails in the leather that would tear flesh off the bone in the whipping was then brutally used to whip their backs! Jesus and Paul were both brutally flogged. A flogging was normally stopped by at 39 lashes, believing any more than that and the torn body may bleed to death if they continued. ***I doubt any of us can imagine the intense pain, the horrific gruesomeness of what these apostles experienced as they were punished because they spoke the hopeful truth of Jesus!***

The statement which follows this flogging is hard to believe, but Luke writes: ***"The apostles left the Sanhedrin REJOICING because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name!"*** Look at them, if you can. They are carrying their clothes as they stumble down the street, their backs shredded and bleeding profusely. Their pain is intense. ***They need help quickly.*** Their backs need to be wrapped to stop the bleeding... but what about infection?

There is no urgent care facility, no clean bandages, no antibiotics... and no pain medications. As quickly as they are able, they make their way to the place where their friends and other followers of Jesus can care for them. Tears are running down their faces... tears of pain mixed with tears of joy! Is that possible? *As they stumble down the street, they are encouraging each other that they, like Jesus, have been brutalized by angry men who do not want the hope of Jesus proclaimed in their city! And the Holy Spirit of God is giving them a boldness, a courage and contentment in their hearts that no one could explain!*

As they sat together that evening praying for each other and for God's healing hand upon them, one question kept coming from their friends who naturally were grieving for their pain. *"What will you do now? Might it be better for us to leave Jerusalem, return back to our homes in Galilee and let this Jesus movement continue on here in Jerusalem without us?"* It's the same question Christian around the world, especially in violent places, are facing today and every day? *What is the best way, the most God honoring way to respond to persecution, especially violent persecution?*

Amazingly Luke gives us this summary explanation of what these courageous, passionate friends of Jesus did: ***"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 Messiah!"*** (Acts 5:42) Now friends, we must ask... where does that courage, that boldness, that fearlessness come from? *What feeds, what nourishes this spiritual courage?* I think it's the depth and authenticity of the personal relationship these men had with Jesus! And the power of the Holy Spirit of God within them! And the result? What happened in those days as these men went back out to share Jesus with any who wanted to know...and yet their wounds were not yet healed? The record says: ***"In those days the number of disciples was increasing..."*** (Acts 6:1) That is the record of history. *Persecution breeds growth of the Jesus movement... in every generation, everywhere in the world!*

Now let's pause right here and reflect on this event and how it has been repeated so many times around the world right up to this moment. And I invite you to pray, my friends, for the persecuted church friends, as you listen to this powerful song... a great declaration of the power of the Name of Jesus!!

Today's Scripture is Acts 5:32-6:1.