

THURSDAY 23 June 2022 "An Impasse!" (Acts 5:21-34)

Hello my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

When was the last time you watched as what was called an 'underdog' ended up victorious? Perhaps it was in a sporting event or an election or a small business competing against a giant conglomerate? Do you find yourself cheering for the 'underdog'? Remember the old story of young David and the giant Goliath? (1 Samuel 17)

Let's go back to Jerusalem and the story we are following there, about 2000 years ago, and today we'll see an underdog victory. Yesterday we watched in amazement as the disciple/apostles, who were telling the story of Jesus and teaching the people what Jesus had taught them, were all thrown into the public jail. But during the night God sent an angel who delivered them and instructed them to go into the Temple courts the next morning and resume their teaching about Jesus with even greater enthusiasm. And I left you yesterday as we watched them entering the Temple courts as instructed.

Now let's pick up the story in Acts 5:21 for when the high priest and religious leaders arrived for work that morning, they assumed a trial would take place and they would deal with these rabble rouser followers of Jesus once and for all and extinguish this city-wide enthusiasm which now had more than 5000 followers of Jesus! Look at them filing into their large courtroom which could not only accommodate all 70 of the highest-ranking leaders, the Sanhedrin, but many other lower rank but important religious officials, and of course the defendants, these close followers of Jesus who had been put into the public jail the evening before. *Finally settled into their seats, they sent for the Jesus followers, ready to decide and declare their fate.*

The guards were only gone a moment or two and suddenly rushed back into the courtroom with an astonished look on their face. They said: **"We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!"** (Acts 5:23) Look at those wise, learned, proud, pompous authorities with wrinkled brows, eyes wide, rubbing their foreheads and quickly turning to each other. That is preposterous! What could possibly have happened? What does it mean?

Suddenly someone else burst into the courtroom, unannounced and uninvited, and shocked them all with this statement: **"Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."** (Acts 5:25) All through the room an unsettled feeling began to grow deep in the souls of these wise scholars who knew their Old Testament and the history of Israel very well. Many times in the past God had intervened and defeated the giant while strengthening the underdog, as with David and Goliath, or Gideon and a few hundred men against a huge army. (Judges 7) *Could it be God was at work in this situation?*

Quickly the temple guards went and found the apostles teaching the people. Carefully, so as to not stir up the people who obviously were enthralled by Peter and the other apostles, the guards urged the apostles to come with them, and brought them to stand before the Sanhedrin, to give account. The high priest rose to his feet trying to control his confusion and his anger... **"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this Name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."** (Acts 5:28) The apostles looked at each other then back at the glaring religious leaders, several of whom are now standing as if to over emphasize their authority, their power in Jerusalem against these simple men from Galilee. My friends, have you ever been accused of doing something that you strongly felt was the right thing to do but there were people strongly opposed to what you did? *If you were heavily outnumbered, do you remember the frightening feeling that something really terrible was about to happen to you?*

Peter scanned the room from one side to the other, then he took a step forward toward the high priest who was standing pointing right at him. As Peter stepped forward, armed guards stepped up close. Peter took a deep breath, what was about to come out of his mouth may well determine his fate, and that of the others, for the rest of their lives! **"We must obey God rather than men!"** Peter paused, just long enough for those words to sink in, but not long enough for any response. Then he continued... **"The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead - whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross!"** Peter paused again, this time pointing from one end of the Sanhedrin leaders to the other. None of them were innocent, all of them shared in the guilt of Jesus' crucifixion! The guards took another step closer to Peter. Peter stared at them and took another deep breath and rose up standing as tall as he could... **"God exalted Jesus to His own right hand, as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel."** Peter paused again, letting this powerful truth sink into hard hearts and resistant minds.

The claim of these apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead was one thing and it certainly had caused a great uproar in Jerusalem, but now this claim that Jesus had returned to heaven and Almighty God had given to Jesus the exalted place of authority as Prince of heaven and Savior of the world, was for these religious leaders way over the top. This was blasphemy, it must be a lie, it could not be possible. But then Peter's claim that God was now willing to give all Israel the opportunity to repent and experience God's forgiveness for sin was beyond ridiculous, it was unthinkable. *It was so outlandish these men simply had to be silenced, by any means!* The intensity in this room just went up to dangerous levels. The religious leaders started shouting, waving their arms, shaking their fists at Peter and the apostles. The guards stood ready to take action. The unarmed apostles knew it was entirely possible they would not walk out of this room alive.

Now for a moment my 'walking with Jesus' friends around the world, I ask you to consider something. *Is this the same level of anger you have seen aimed at Christians around the world in our day?*

Remember the beheadings by ISIS a few years ago, or the burning down of churches in India and China recently? Or the arrest and imprisonment and torture of pastors and Christians in many countries of the world. Do you remember Jesus had promised this horrible reality when He said to His disciples, in the upper room only hours before going to the cross: **"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is you do not belong to this world, for I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted Me they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the One who sent me."** (John 15:18-21) *Do we understand that when the world REJECTS God or God's Truth, that it also rejects Jesus?* Do you see that happening, even with a passion, wherever you live in the world?

The noise had reached fever pitch in the courtroom when an old, wise, greatly respected Pharisee teacher stepped out from his seat and stood between the angry Sanhedrin leaders and these humble but courageous Jesus disciples. Gamaliel was his name. He raised his arm, and in great respect the room quieted, and angry men took their seats. What will this, perhaps the wisest man in Jerusalem, say in this delicate moment? **"Men of Israel, be careful what you do with these men!"** And then he ordered that Peter and the apostles be escorted out of the court room but kept carefully guarded while the Sanhedrin debated their fate. Look at them as they leave. I don't see any fear in them, do you? Their heads are held high, the eyes of some of them, like Peter, glaring back at those who seemed determined to stop what Jesus is doing in this city! *What will be discussed and decided while they are outside? What will be their fate?*

Let's pause right here my friends. Let's freeze this moment in time. Walk out with the disciples. What do you think they are feeling, what are they saying to each other? Who among them is fearful and who is courageous? Who wants to run, who wants to fight, and who wants to pray?

Then let's go inside and look at these angry religious men. What's going on in their hearts and minds? Why are they so fearful of what is happening in Jerusalem as more and more people turn to Jesus and turn away from their sin? *Spiritual revival is happening in Jerusalem and these men who've dedicated their lives to God and to leading God's people are vehemently opposed to it all. Why?* May I urge you to ponder these questions and we'll come right back here tomorrow to see what God did! Meanwhile, I ask you to take a close look into your heart and mind my friends, to see what God shows you is there?

Today's Scripture is Acts 5:21-34.