

When It's Wrong To Play Safe

Series on Acts

The first part of Acts Chapter 5 highlights the danger of being an unbeliever amongst believers. Ananias and Sapphira were two people who were dishonest about the sale of some land. As a result, both of them were struck down dead. The second part of Acts 5, shows the danger of being a believer in the midst of unbelievers. It's an account of the persecution of believers who were imprisoned and beaten for preaching about Jesus. It's the forerunner to what is happening all over the world today, where believers are being beaten up, imprisoned, and in some cases killed, for preaching about Jesus. It's an account of Christians whose motto was "Jesus first, safety last". I find this story deeply challenging. I don't feel the need to draw great lessons from it, for the story itself challenges the way we live as Christians.

There are three points in this story where commonsense said "Keep a low profile. Don't make waves. Cool it. Breathe through your nose and keep your mouth shut. Play it safe". Here's the first.

1. The Warning From The Supreme Court.

In Chapter 4:18 we read this. **"Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."** It was a warning from the Supreme Court that if they taught or spoke any more about Jesus, they would be arrested. Now at that point the Apostles could have quietly left Jerusalem, gone back to Galilee, and gone fishing. But they didn't. Here's what they did.

"The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed". (Acts 5:12-16 NIV)

Despite being ordered not to do so, the Apostles went back to the temple, a place where lots of people gathered, and they preached and healed the sick. So many miracles were happening, and people were so convinced of the power of God, that people believed they would be healed even if Peter's shadow fell on them. No wonder the Jewish authorities reacted. Here were a bunch of ignorant Jewish fishermen drawing crowds much bigger than they were getting. And these men were doing things that demonstrated God was present. Miracles of healing were happening. The Apostles knew that this was going to get them into more trouble with the Jewish leaders. But they refused to play it safe.

2. The Escape from Prison.

The next part of the story borders on comedy. **"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. 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. 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 the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this." (Acts 5:17-24 NIV)**

The Jewish religious leaders are so full of jealousy that God was doing things through the Apostles and not through them, they had the Apostles locked in the jail, with guards standing by the doors. During the night an angel came and let them out. Now don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humour. Not only does the angel give them a "get out of jail free" card, but the doors are left locked and the guards are still in place in the morning. How do you unlock a prison door, lock it again, and get the prisoners past the guards without anyone noticing? God knows! But those disciples could have played it safe. They could have said, "If we walk out of this prison, we are going to be in more trouble. Perhaps we should just stay where we are". But when you play it safe, you never see what God wants to do.

Some of you have read the book called "The Heavenly Man". If you haven't, you should. It's the story of Brother Yun, a Chinese Pastor who from 1982 to 2002, was persecuted and tortured in China for preaching the gospel. Brother Yun spent seven of those 20 years in prison for his faith. Many times he was tortured to the point of death, yet refused to deny Christ. On one occasion, when locked in a maximum security prison, with his legs broken from a beating he had received by the prison guards, the Lord showed him in a vision how he was going to miraculously be released. It happened just as he had seen in the vision. His broken legs were instantly healed. He walked through three high security barriers, past 30 different guards, right out through the front doors of the prison. At each high security barrier, the doors opened for him, and the guards didn't see him.

There are times in our lives when God opens doors in front of us, and we have a choice. We can stay where we are and play it safe, or we can walk through the doors God is opening for us. When God opens a door for you and me, it always means leaving a place of safety, to walk into the unknown. But he gives us the choice. He says to us "You can stay where you are and play it safe. Or you can walk out of this prison you are in, and walk with me into a life of risky adventure. What will it be?"

3. The Second Arrest And Punishment.

When the Apostles were arrested the second time, the situation was very explosive. The Apostles are back at the Temple, teaching the people, and great crowds are gathering. People have heard that there have been healings. No doubt the story of how the Apostles have miraculously been released from prison is getting around. The crowd was getting very excited. It was a pretty dangerous situation for the authorities to step into. Luke records it like this; ***"Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made 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." (Acts 5:25-28 NIV)***

It would have been easy for the Apostles to use the support of the crowd to cover their escape. It would have been easy for them to have walked into court and apologised, and promised not to speak about Jesus any more. But these were people who were filled with the Spirit of God. Instead of calming things down, Peter pours more petrol on the fire. ***"Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers 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 Saviour 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.' When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death". (Acts 5:29-33 NIV)***

This situation was so explosive that there was a real possibility all of the apostles could have been killed. The NIV translation of the reaction of the Jewish leaders says that they were furious. That actually doesn't do the original Greek language justice. What it means in the original language is that they were 'sawn in two'. When was the last time you and I spoke about Jesus that got people so uptight they could be described as being 'sawn in two'? These powerful Jewish leaders were enraged. It was only the wisdom of Gamaliel that saved the day. **"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. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."** (Acts 5:40-41 NIV)

Having come so close to being killed, the Apostles received a flogging before they were let go. But let's not skip over this too lightly. The flogging they each received consisted of 39 lashes with a wooden rod on a bare back, which left the flesh raw, bruised and bleeding. Yet, after this treatment, they left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus. When was the last time you and I rejoiced because we have been counted worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus?

Just a few weeks ago, a church where I had been Pastor celebrated their 100th anniversary. When I went to that church, I read a little of their history. In 1911 they celebrated their first believers' baptism service. It was held in the harbour, near a popular picnic spot. Lots of sceptical people from the town came to watch. As the baptism was taking place, the spectators jeered, hurled abuse at the candidates and the Pastor, and then began throwing clods of earth and stones at those who were professing Christ. That was just 100 years ago.

In 1890 The mayor of the Eastborne in the UK decided he would do all he could to get rid of the Salvation Army, which had established a Corps in his town. He recruited a bunch of thugs called "The Skeleton Army" who followed the Salvation Army wherever they went, yelling abuse, beating drums, singing bawdy songs, throwing rotten eggs, rotten vegetables and fish heads at the Salvationists whenever they gathered to worship. The Mayor had a by-law passed by the council making it illegal for the Salvation Army to play their instruments or to preach in the streets. It wasn't long before some of the leaders of the Salvation Army were in court, charged with singing in the street. Not long after that, the Salvation Army bandmaster was fined and sentenced to seven days in prison for leading a procession in the street. A few weeks later, the Captain and more than 30 Salvation Army soldiers spent a month in prison for refusing to stop marching and playing their instruments in the streets. On the day they were released from prison, 2000 Salvation Army soldiers and officers from London and the south of England met them and paraded through the streets of Eastborne. They were met by a mob of 7000 men from the Skeleton Army, who attacked them and beat them. Even the police joined in and beat up the Salvationists. Lots of these Christian protestors were arrested. Many sustained serious injuries. Quite a few men and women were beaten and kicked until they were unconscious. It turned into a full scale riot. In other parts of England, where the Salvation Army marched for the right to preach the gospel in the streets, many others were beaten up and a few were killed. The Eastborne Salvationists were put on trial. Their trial became a big deal throughout the whole of England. But within a year of this time of persecution, Parliament had passed a law making it legal for Christians to hold open air meetings, and to preach the Word of God out in the streets. It was a victory for the gospel, but it came at a great cost.

The Apostles were flogged for proclaiming Jesus. Yet they rejoiced that they were considered worthy enough to suffer for Christ's sake. If we went through an ordeal like that, many of us would consider that we had done enough. We would think it would be time to back off a bit. Time to keep a low profile. But not these followers of Jesus. Luke finishes this part of the account with these words. **"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".** (Acts 5:42 NIV)

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