

The Apostles Keep Preaching

Key Verse:
“Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.”

Matthew 10:17

Extra: What evidence can you find to support Peter’s claim given in verse 12?

Level 5 lesson 5

Read: Acts 4:1-31
Further Reading: Daniel 3

IMPRISONED

We finished last month’s lessons with the Apostle Peter preaching his wonderful sermons in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem. However, almost before he had finished preaching, the religious authorities took action to put a stop to the Apostles’ activities. They were angry that the people were being taught that Jesus had truly risen from the dead, and that there would one day be a resurrection to eternal life for all who repented and placed their faith in Jesus as Saviour. Already, over 5,000 people had responded to Peter’s call. The authorities thought the ‘Christian’ movement was getting out of hand and had to be stopped! So without warning, Peter and John were seized and thrown into prison overnight.

TRIED

In the morning they were brought before the National Council to answer for their alleged ‘crimes.’ This was the same religious Council that had condemned Jesus to death. Caiaphas, the Lord’s bitter enemy, was again one of those sitting in judgment on the two Apostles. Pointing to the crippled man who had been miraculously healed standing before them, the Rulers demanded, “By what power, or what name did you do this?”

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, replied fearlessly, “Know this, you and everyone else in Israel. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you completely healed.” In effect, Peter charged them with their crime and put them on trial! Again he gave evidence of God’s power, that “God raised Him [Jesus] from the dead,” and that “He healed the cripple”, for the man could not have been made whole if Jesus had not risen!

CHRIST VINDICATED

Peter continued by telling the religious rulers that ‘the stone’ (Jesus), which they had rejected, God had honoured. Then further, that Jesus of Nazareth was now their only hope of salvation.

“Salvation is found in no-one else,” declared Peter, “for there is no other name under Heaven, given to men, by which we must be saved.”

We too, need to acknowledge and always remember this: to reject Christ as Lord and Saviour is to choose eternal punishment for our sin in that terrible place called ‘the Lake of Fire,’ which God prepared for the devil and his angels. Friends, there is NO OTHER SAVIOUR! Don’t turn your back on the love of God and expect to receive His mercy in a future day. NOW is the day of His mercy and grace! Jesus died and rose again for YOUR salvation. Accept Him as Saviour today and put your trust in Him alone.

COURT’S VERDICT

The Council of religious leaders was dumbfounded by Peter’s fearless and clear response. They knew the two Apostles were uneducated men, so their only explanation was that they had been with Jesus. What a wonderful testimony! And the presence of the now healed ‘crippled man,’ was undeniable evidence which rendered them speechless.

Embarrassed, they ordered the Apostles out of the room. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked among themselves. “They have done an outstanding miracle; anyone can see that and we cannot deny it!” Finally, they decided to threaten them and warn them not to speak to anyone in the name of Jesus.

FORBIDDEN BUT SET FREE

Calling in the Apostles they told them their decision. “In future,” the rulers said, “you are forbidden to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus!” Peter and John weren’t the least bit intimidated by their words. “Judge for yourselves,” they said, “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!” With these brave words they refused to be silenced. They were determined to keep preaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. Humiliated, the Court could only repeat its threats and set the Apostles free. Joyfully, they re-joined the company of new believers and joined with them in fervent prayer to God, for help and strength in spreading the Gospel.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What happened to the Apostles while they were preaching?	.....
2. What did the court want to know?	.....
3. What do you think of Peter’s answer?	.....
4. Why is the Lord Jesus Christ our only Saviour?	.....
5. Why did Peter answer the way he did to the charge “not to teach in the name of Jesus”?	.....

My Name is Age

Found Out

Key Verse:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

1 John 1:8

Extra: Do some research on the importance of truthfulness.

Level 5 lesson 6

Read Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11

Further reading: Galatians 6:7-10

SOLEMN JUDGEMENT

Death is always a solemn thing, but when it happens suddenly it seems more so. In today’s lesson, a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira, apparently in good health, suddenly fall down dead! However, don’t think this was just a sad case of ‘ordinary’ heart failure. It was not! They were struck down by the hand of God because of their deliberate and wilful sin. So how had they sinned that God would judge them in such a way?

WILLING TO SHARE

In the early days of the New Testament church, the believers sold their possessions and shared their resources with each other. From this common fund, each person received what they needed. The rich didn’t have too much and the poor didn’t have too little. This was entirely voluntary, and it seems to have been a vital means for the infant ‘Church’ to survive persecution and grow in numbers at this early stage. It was certainly not compulsory; nor does it seem to be intended as a permanent system in the church, as it is not enforced later on.

For a time it was quite successful; those who were rich were prepared to fully co-operate, and the poor didn’t abuse the system by refusing to work or claiming more than a fair share. Among the rich believers, was a man named Joseph (4:36-37). This fine Christian man sold all his land and brought the full proceeds into this common fund, as a gift to the Lord. This was obviously a huge sacrifice on his part, and we can be sure, that Joseph earned much respect and admiration for his love and devotion to God.

A SINFUL PLAN

Ananias and Sapphira observed all this and sadly, a sinful, covetous desire for a similar respect and commendation began to fill their hearts. They were quite rich too. Quite soon they hatched a plan to achieve respect, without paying the price or making the required sacrifice! Maybe they were thinking, “We’ve got a property; let’s sell it and then take some of the proceeds to the Apostles, as though that is all we got for it. The Apostles won’t know any different and everyone will think we are fine, spiritual people, devoted to God and His Church.”

ACTING A LIE

So they sold their land and as agreed, kept a certain amount for themselves. Then Ananias went to Peter, handed over the balance, and gave the impression he had bought the entire proceeds of the sale as a gift to the Lord! He probably expected smiles and hugs of gratitude and commendation, as Joseph had received. What a cunning plan it had been!

Yes, it was cunning and deceitful, but he had not reckoned on dealing with God! Peter, with God-given knowledge, remained stone-faced as Ananias presented his gift. “How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?” he demanded. “You have not lied to men, but to God!” Peter reminded him there was no compulsion to give anything, since the land was his own and his to control. It would have been far better to not sell it, than to try and gain popularity and recognition by lies and deceit.

BEARING THE PUNISHMENT

At Peter’s words, Ananias instantly dropped dead! The young men picked him up and carried him away. Soon after this Sapphira arrived, not knowing what had happened to him. She too was no doubt expecting a warm welcome and smiles of gratitude. However, Peter’s greeting was to solemnly ask her the amount that she and Ananias had received for their property.

As agreed, she lied and said the same amount Ananias had stated. “How could you agree together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” asked Peter. Sternly he told her that Ananias was dead and that she would die too. Immediately she fell dead at Peter’s feet and was taken out to be buried!

Wow! What severe punishment you may think. Yes, but very necessary. The Holy Spirit had just recently come down from Heaven, God’s glorious work had commenced, and mighty progress had been made. Only one thing, sin, could spoil it. Having reared its ugly head, He dealt with it firmly, so that all might fear and serve with a real appreciation of the solemnity of the task and the Holiness of God. As a side note to this, Peter charged them with lying to the Holy Spirit (v3) and so lying “to God” (v4). This proves that the Holy Spirit is not an invisible force, but actually a divine Person. He is the third Person of the blessed Trinity.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?	.....
2. What solemn charge did Peter make to Ananias?	.....
3. What proves that their sin was deliberate?	.....
4. Why was their punishment so severe?	.....
5. How does this lesson prove that the Holy Spirit is God?	.....

Prison and Beatings

Key Verse:
“...If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

1 Peter 4:16

Extra: How would you behave if you were persecuted because you believe in God?

Level 5 lesson 7

Read Acts 5:12-42

Further reading: John 15:18-16:14

OPPOSITION PROMISED

Today, some Christians think that becoming a Christian will mean the end of all their earthly problems, but that is NOT what Jesus promised! Shortly before He went to the cross of Calvary, He warned the disciples that those who would follow Him should expect trouble and persecution (see John 15). However, Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit would guide and empower them. We can see how this happened as the Apostles continued to spread the Gospel, particularly through this amazing period of time as the Christian Church was being established.

After the sobering judgment of God on the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, the Apostles continued to preach in the new power of the now in-dwelling Holy Spirit. Listen to the results as we read in v12-16: “The Apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people.” “More and more men and women believed in the Lord.” “People brought their sick into the streets, so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them as he passed by.” “Crowds gathered, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.”

What a time of excitement and enthusiasm it must have been - the whole district stirred to the very depths! And what a marvellous testimony this was to the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead! If He were still in the grave, or his dead body hidden somewhere, all this would have been impossible. The Apostles, weak and disheartened as they were after their Master’s crucifixion, could have accomplished nothing and indeed would not have even attempted such things.

SUFFERING PERSECUTION

However, we do well to note that this tremendous blessing did not go un-noticed by the enemy! The devil doesn’t mind if you or your church is asleep, but when you start being active in preaching the Gospel then you can expect Satan’s opposition! And so it was that the Priests and Sadducees took action to crush the fledgling work, by arresting the Apostles and locking them up in prison under a heavy guard.

Thankfully, all the efforts of the enemy to keep the Lord in the tomb were futile, as were his efforts to keep the Apostles in prison! “The Angel of the Lord,” we read, “opened the doors of the jail, and brought the Apostles out.” He told them to go straight to the Temple and “Tell the people the full message of this new life.” Grateful for their freedom, the Apostles obeyed the angel’s instructions and again began preaching to the crowds.

Meanwhile, Caiaphas and his friends, unaware of what had happened, asked the prison officers to bring the Apostles to the Courthouse for trial. Upon entering the prison, they went and found the guards standing to attention outside the Apostles’ cell doors. However, we can imagine their surprise on opening the door to find the cell empty! How perplexed and foolish they must have felt. The officers could only report to Caiaphas and his friends that, “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no-one inside!”

At that moment, a messenger came to the Courthouse and told the Court that the wanted men were preaching in the Temple again! Rushing to the Temple, the officers re-arrested the Apostles and brought these inoffensive servants of Christ before the Council. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus!” said the High Priest angrily. “You are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood!” he concluded.

BEING COURAGEOUS

Peter’s answer was again complete vindication of their actions and at the same time an indictment on the behaviour of the so-called religious leaders, “We must obey God rather than men!” he replied boldly. Then addressing the Council, he once again charged them with the sin of murdering their Messiah, but re-affirmed the glorious truth that God had raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to Heaven to be a Prince and a Saviour for the benefit of Israel.

This terrible accusation cut the men of the Council to the heart. Fearing that the Apostles could not be suppressed, they determined to kill them. However, one of the leaders, Gamaliel, wisely counselled against this (v34-39). The Council finally agreed with Gamaliel, and after beating the Apostles and ordering them to be silent in the future, they let them go. Then the Apostles rejoiced in the privilege of suffering for the Lord, and went on preaching in obedience to God’s command.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did the success of the Apostles prove about Jesus?	.....
2. How did the Apostles obtain release from prison?	.....
3. What charge did the Council make against them?	.....
4. How did Peter answer their command to stop preaching?	.....
5. What effect did the beating have on the Apostles?	.....

Willing Workers

Key Verse:

“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”

Romans 12:13

Extra: How can we show kindness and hospitality to people these days?

Level 5 lesson 8

Read Acts 6

Further Reading: James 2:14-19

Meeting the needs of the early disciples from the common fund must have been very difficult, and increasingly so as their numbers multiplied. Problems soon began arising, so it’s not surprising to read in v1 that discontented murmuring caused the Apostles a lot of concern.

CARING FOR OTHERS

There were two classes of Jews in the new fellowship - Grecians and Hebrews. The Grecians began complaining that their widows were not receiving their proper portion of the daily distribution of food. Now we can be quite sure that the Apostles would be perfectly fair, but it appears that among these very young Christians, some of the Hebrew helpers had been showing partiality to their own class. This is a reminder that Christian behaviour doesn’t happen overnight! In any case, the twelve Apostles felt that dealing with these matters of practical concern was hindering their preaching. “It would not be right” they said, “for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.” They believed their first priority was to attend to the spiritual needs of the people.

CHOOSING THE WORKERS

Having stated this, the Apostles gave instructions to select seven suitable men who they could appoint over this task. These men were not to be novices - they needed to be men of some spiritual maturity, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. “We will turn this responsibility over to them,” said the Apostles, and “will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

So, the Apostles’ instructions were carried out. Seven suitable men were chosen and brought to the Apostles, who commended them officially to the work, by laying their hands on them and praying for them. Among the seven, we find Stephen and Philip who became very prominent preachers, as we will see later.

Having settled this important ‘housekeeping’ matter, it is good to see that “the Word of God spread!” Many more were saved, including a good number of priests, who went on to become earnest preachers of the Word of God.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Although Stephen was specially chosen to look after the daily affairs of the community, it is great to see that he found time to preach and to work miracles. Others besides the Apostles could also do spiritual work! Stephen’s fervent testimony caused a great stir and aroused much opposition, particularly from a group called the ‘Synagogue of the Libertines (or Freedmen).’ These men were very vocal in debating with Stephen, but “could not stand up against the wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke” (v10).

Unable to defeat Stephen in fair argument, these men resorted to foul means. Searching out some wicked, unethical men, they secretly persuaded them (bribed with money in other words) to tell deliberate lies about Stephen’s preaching, and to oppose him in every way - even with violence. So these men accused Stephen of speaking against Moses and blaspheming against God. This of course, made all the people mad and finally they seized hold of Stephen and brought him before the National Council (The Sanhedrin) for trial. However, this court was not a true, impartial Court. The men sitting in judgment were those who had bribed the men to lie about Stephen! They were clearly ‘out for his blood,’ and were obviously not too concerned about truth or justice!

And so it transpired that in the Court, the false witnesses made further outrageous charges, lying about Stephen’s conduct and speech and fanatically accusing him. So how did Stephen react to this vindictive, hateful barrage of lies? In the beautiful words of the last verse, we read, “All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel!” Truly the Lord was standing by him at this crucial time!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What were some of the new Christians murmuring about?	.....
2. What did the Apostles think their work should be?	.....
3. What does it mean to be full of faith and of the Holy Spirit?	.....
4. Of the 7 chosen men, who became great preachers?	.....
5. Why do you think the Sanhedrin wanted to kill Stephen?	.....

Please complete and return by post to

PSSM, 5/399 New North Road, Kingsland, Auckland 1021 or scan & email to info@biblediscovery.org.nz