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The Apostles are Persecuted

5: 17-42

31-33 AD

The events of Acts 3-8 transpire with mounting concern on the part of the Jews, and especially the Jewish authorities in Yerushalayim. The rising tension resulted in vigilante action taken against Stephen, and then an authorized effort under Rabbi Sha'ul to disrupt and destroy that new Messianic movement, involving persecution and even death of the believers. The persecution led various believers such as Philip to go to Samaria and bear witness of Yeshua.

The apostles are persecuted DIG: How do you account for the jealousy of the Sadducees? What did they accuse the apostles of in verse 28? Is this any different than what they had said in 4:2? How could they miss the impact of those miracles? What things in Peter's response (5:29-32) would arouse their fury? Why is Peter being so direct (4:1-12, 5:19-20)? Prior to Jesus, there were many Jewish zealots who led rebellions against Rome. What is Gamaliel's point in recalling such leaders? What was his motivation? Do you think Peter's statement in 5:29 and 4:19 may have influenced Gamaliel? Why did Gamaliel adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude? Flogging sometimes resulted in death (see the commentary on *The Life of Christ*, to see link click [Lr](#) - The Soldiers Mock Jesus). How do you think the apostles felt when given this sentence? What does the actual response of the apostles show about them in verses 41-42?

REFLECT: What is the ultimate authority in your life? When does this create problems for you? What can you do to overcome these problems? How do you think you would feel if you were sent to jail for what you believe? How would your family feel? What would this do for you? How does joy in suffering relate to your ultimate authority? How have you experienced God setting you free to honor Him more fully? How do you explain why YHVH sometimes delivers you out of hardships, but at other times He allows you to go through them? Who are some of the people that

have had the greatest influence on your life, and what do you most respect about them? Name one or two of the best pieces of godly advice you've ever received. What had God enabled you to do (or protected you from doing) as a result of knowing and applying this?

The conflict between the righteous Messianic community and **the Sanhedrin** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click [Ei - The Great Sanhedrin](#)**) steadily intensified. With the growing success of the righteous of the TaNaKh, there is a heightened response on the part of the Jewish authorities. At first, **the Council** only heard, warned and released **Peter** and **John** (see **Ar - Peter and John Stand before the Sanhedrin**), but now, **they** were ready to impose the **death** penalty (**5:33**), and were only thwarted in **their** bloodthirsty intentions by the sage advice of a **Pharisee (5:34-39)**. **The apostles** were again released, but this time **the Council** had **them flogged** before doing so (**5:40**). The conflict would become even stronger with the stoning of **Stephen (6:8 to 8:2)**, and the resulting persecution of **the Hellenistic Jews**, driving them out of **Yerushalayim (8:1)**.

The arrest: The second persecution of the Messianic community is once again initiated by **the Sadducees**. While **the Pharisees** led the opposition to **Yeshua** in the gospels, **the Sadducees** were the chief opponents of the early Messianic community.¹¹⁶ **Caiaphas** was appointed **high priest** by the Romans and acted as the president of **the Sanhedrin**, but **his** father-in-law **Annas** was the real power behind the scenes (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Li - Annas Questions Jesus**). **Caiaphas, the kohen gadol, rose up, and all those with him, and they were filled with religious zeal** (Greek: *zelos*). **Their** leadership was in a fragile state, religiously and politically, since there was also the danger that the turmoil created in **the City** would cause the Romans to take action. Compelled by the seriousness of the situation, **they grabbed [all] the apostles and put them in a public jail (5:17-18)**.



The imprisonment: But during the night an angel of Adonai opened the prison doors, and leading them out, saying: **Go, take a stand in the Temple and speak to the people the whole message about this Life (5:19-20).** Perhaps there is a bit of irony here because **the Sadducees** did not believe in **angels**. This is the first of several **angelic** interventions in the book of **Acts (8:26, 12:7-10 and 23)**. The message **the apostles** were to preach was the gospel that leads to **Life**, the **life** of the resurrected **Messiah (Philippians 2:16; First John 1:1-4)**, the very thing that **the Sadducees** denied. **They** were not only set free, **they** were set free with a purpose. **Now when the apostles heard that, they entered the Temple at daybreak**, when the crowds would be gathering to observe the morning sacrifice, **and began teaching (5:21a).** **The apostles** obviously were not concerned for **their** safety since **they** returned to the very spot where **they** had been arrested.¹¹⁷ At the same time that **Peter and the apostles** began preaching in Solomon's Colonnade, **the Sanhedrin** began to assemble.

Now the scene shifts to **the Council** chambers where **the Sanhedrin** had gathered for **its** morning session. The first item on **their** agenda was the interrogation of **the apostles**. **When Caiaphas, the kohen gadol and those with him arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin,** (Luke gives **the Sanhedrin** the full weight of **its** title here) **even the council of elders of Beni-Yisrael (5:21b).** At the time of Herod Agrippa most members of **the Sanhedrin** were **Sadducees**. Therefore, in suppressing the gospel, **the Sanhedrin** would use two **Sadducee** criteria. First, **the apostles** proclaimed the resurrection of **the Messiah**, which **the Sadducees** denied. And secondly, **they** proclaimed "another king," **the Kasher King, Yeshua (17:7)**, which, if true (compare **John 18:33-38**), would be politically subversive, as well as destructive of the cozy working relationship that **the Sadducees** had with the occupying Romans.¹¹⁸

They sent the Temple guard to the prison to have the prisoners brought in. But when they arrived, they did not find them in the prison. So, they hastily returned with the humiliating news, saying: We found the prison locked with maximum security and the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened up, we found no one inside (5:21c-23). The Council was at a loss for words.

Not surprisingly, **when the captain of the Temple guard and the ruling kohanim heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering where this would lead. But, finally, someone came and reported to them, “The men you put in prison are standing in the Temple and teaching the people!” Then the captain of the Temple guard, the *sagan*, decided he had better handle this matter personally. After all, he was second in rank to Caiaphas himself and ultimately responsible for order on the Temple grounds. An unusual circumstance like this had best not be left to lesser officials.¹¹⁹ So, he went off with the officers and brought back all the apostles - but not with force. By now the members of the Council were anxious to resort to the most drastic measures in dealing with the apostles since they feared they might be stoned because the apostles had such a good reputation among the people (5:24-26).** One should not miss the irony of this entire fiasco and should praise **God** who is greater than even the top ruling legislative body of government and had already planned protection for **His apostles.**



The interrogation: The scene shifts again, this time to the Royal Stoa, where **the Sanhedrin** met. This second appearance before **the Council** was drastically different from the first (see [Ar - Peter and John Stand before the Sanhedrin](#)). That one only involved two **apostles**. Here, **[all] the apostles stood before the Ruling Council. When they had brought them in, the apostles stood** (Greek: *estesan*) **before the Sanhedrin.** This was the usual procedure, the defendants

standing and **the judges** sitting. Then **Caiaphas, the kohen gadol**, began the interrogation by saying: **We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name** (still refusing to say **the name** of **Yeshua**) **and look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching (5:27-28a)**. This time, formal charges were made.

Not only had **the apostles filled Jerusalem with their teaching, Caiaphas** exclaimed, **“but you intend to bring on us the blood of this Man” (5:28b)!** This was a very serious charge. It was an expression for the charge of murder and demanded **the death** (Greek: *diacherizo* meaning *to put to death with one’s own hands*) of the guilty party. It was as if **Caiaphas** was saying, “You are trying to get **us** killed for being responsible for this **man’s death**.” Far from backing off, **Peter** intensified **his** accusation. **He** had previously said that **the Jewish authorities** were responsible for **Yeshua’s death (2:23-24 and 36, 3:13-15, 4:8-12, 7:51-53, 13:27-29, 23:6-9, 24:1 and verses 29ff)**. Now **he** insisted that **they** were as guilty as if **they** had **killed Him with their own hands**.¹²⁰

What **Jewish leadership** was denying, however, was exactly what **they** once claimed. **When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere** trying to free **Yeshua** from certain **death**, he declared to **the Jews**, **“I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility” (Matthew 27:24)!** In response, **all the people** (including **the Jewish leadership**) answered, **“Let His blood be on us and on our children” (Mattityahu 27:25)!** **Caiaphas** and the other **Sadducees** clearly understood the point. **Yeshua** was really **the Messiah** and **they** were guilty of shedding **His blood**. As the interrogation progressed suddenly the tables were turned, **the apostles** became **the judges** and **the Council** became the accused.¹²¹

The response: However, **Peter** was not trying to get **the Council** killed, but rather to get **them** saved. As with the first trial, **his** response was more of a witness than a defense. **Peter and the apostles** reminded **Caiaphas** and **the Sanhedrin** that they would continue preaching in **the name of Jesus**. **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:19-20)**. And **the Sanhedrin** should have realized that when **the apostles** were released the first time, **they** had no choice but to continue preaching in **the name of Yeshua**. Now **Peter** reminded **them**, **“We must obey God rather than men (5:29).”** It was a moral necessity to disobey the orders of **the Sanhedrin** because **their** orders violated an eternal principle. Believers are to **be in subjection to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7; First Peter 2:13-17)**, but when the civil government asks us to violate the clear teachings of Scripture, the obligation of

the believer is disobedience because we are responsible to a higher authority.

Peter and the apostles did not deny the charges, in fact, **they** go out of **their** way to affirm the charges against **them**. **The God of our fathers raised up Yeshua, whom you seized and had crucified.** So **Peter** charges **the Sanhedrin** with murdering **the Messiah**, and murdering **Him** in the worst way, **hanging on a tree**, literally the Greek word for *wood* (**Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:13**). But in contrast to murdering **Him**, **ADONAI** lifted **Him** up. Here **Peter** offered salvation to the very people who had **crucified Jesus; the apostles** use the opportunity provided in court to preach the gospel to **their** very **accusers** and **judges**.¹²² **This One God exalted at His right hand as the Author of life (3:15) and Savior, (Psalm 27:1; 26:1 LXX) to give repentance to Isra'el and removal of sins** (see the commentary on **Revelation Ev - The Basis for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**). **And we are witnesses of these events - as is the Ruach ha-Kodesh, whom God has given to those who obey Him** by faith (**5:30-32**). Those were harsh words for **the rulers of Isra'el**, and **they** responded accordingly.

There are only three possible responses to convicting preaching: violent hostility, tolerant indecision, or saving acceptance. This passage illustrates them all.

Violent hostility: **The Jewish leaders** were not the least bit interested in **Peter's** appeal. **Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart** (Greek: *dieprionto* meaning *sawn in two*) **and wanted to kill them (5:33)**. When **Peter** said these very same words to **the Jews** at Shavu'ot (see [An - Peter Speaks to the Shavu'ot Crowd](#)), the result was conviction. But here, the result was **rage**. **They** were so **enraged they wanted to kill them**, just like **they** had done with **Jesus**, without following **their** own set of rules (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Lh - The Laws of the Great Sanhedrin Regarding Trials](#)). But there was a problem. Disobedience to a command of **the Sanhedrin** did not demand **the death** penalty. **They** were turning into a mob, as we will see in the stoning of **Stephen** in **Chapter 7**. But where no one would intercede for **Stephen**; however, **the apostles** found some assistance from an unusual source.

Tolerant indecision: Therefore, **a certain Pharisee named Gamaliel, a premier teacher of Torah** (Greek: *nomos didaskalos*, meaning *an expert in Torah and who gave expert theological opinions and interpret Torah in accordance with the Oral Law*). It was these **Doctors of Torah** that **Yeshua** was interacting with when **He**

was twelve years old). In Jewish writings **he** is called **Rabban** (our master), which is a higher title than rabbi (my teacher). **He** was a disciple and grandson of rabbi Hillel, and at that time **Gamaliel** was the leader of the school of Hillel (more liberal), in opposition to the school of Shammai (more conservative). In the history of Judaism, only seven rabbis have had the title of **Rabban**, and **Gamaliel** was the first of these seven. **He** was **the teacher** of Sha'ul (**22:3**). Historically, as long as **he** was in charge there was a great deal of respect for **the Torah**, but things changed when **he** died. **The rabbis teach that since Rabban the elder died, there has been no more reverence for the Torah. Gamaliel**, who was **respected by all, stood up in the Sanhedrin** and took over the interrogation of **Peter. He** obviously commanded sufficient authority to **order the apostles out of the chamber for a little while (5:34)**, especially since the **Pharisees** were in the minority of **the Council**.

Then he addressed the Sanhedrin with the standard greeting: **Men of Isra'el**, then proceeded to make **his** case: **Be careful what you are about to do with these men** and don't take any rash actions. But what was **his** motive for intervening? **The Pharisees** were the main leaders in the opposition against **Messiah**, and while at this time the main opposition to **the apostles, the Pharisees** would only join them in their opposition to Stephen. But at this point, **the Pharisees**, led by **Gamaliel** were moving slower. Furthermore, **the Sadducees** instigated this action against **the apostles** primarily because **they** got mad about the preaching of the resurrection, which **the Pharisees** affirmed. Therefore, **the Pharisees**, although few in number, were not about to join **the Sadducees** because of an issue in which they already disagreed. Last but not least, **Gamaliel** was a **Pharisee** and was not about to let **the Sadducees** lead on this issue, nor was **he** going to follow their lead.

To make his point, **Gamaliel** cited two examples of messianic pretenders in recent **Jewish** history. **For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody; and a number of men, maybe four hundred, joined up with him. He was killed, and all who followed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this fellow, Judah the Galilean rose up in the days of the census of Caesar Augustus** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Aq - The Birth of Jesus](#)) **and got people to follow him. He also perished, and all who followed him were scattered (5:35-37)**. Within the first century, there were no fewer than ten messianic pretenders. These **Jewish** claimants gathered large numbers of followers with promises of physical redemption and deliverance.

Disappointment, sorrow, and sometimes, total destruction followed. Having given those two accounts for the reason to move cautiously, **Gamaliel** then gave **his** advice.

Outside of the New Covenant records we learn of Simon of East Jordan who crowned himself king. He burned the royal house in Jericho and the homes of the rich, before dying in combat. Another Messianic claimant, “the wonder working Bedouin,” promised the people liberty if they would follow him to the desert, but he too was slain.

One of the most prominent pretenders arose in 132 AD, with a mission to overthrow the Roman yoke and regain Israel’s sovereignty over the land lost to the Romans in 70 AD. The reasons for the revolt centered on the Roman edict outlawing circumcision, the construction of a new city on top of the ruins of Jerusalem called *Aelia Capitolina*, and the erection of the temple Jupiter on the Temple Mount.

Akiba, the foremost rabbinic leader of the day, dubbed Bar Kochba the Messiah. Bar Kochba means “son of a star” and some saw him prophetically in Numbers 24:17: “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will arise out of Israel.” However, his real name appeared to be Bar Kosiba, which means “son of a liar.” Bar Kochba was a physically strong man who became arrogant in his quest to overthrow the Roman yoke and regain the land. On the battlefield he reputedly prayed: “Please help our enemies. As for us we do not need any help.” He had some success for about three years; and there were even coins minted in two of those years which characterized the land as independent Israel. But Bar Kochba was ultimately defeated at Betar; he and as many as 580,000 Jews were slain by the Romans during the uprising. Many others were taken as slaves and marched to Rome. Rabbi Akiva was captured and held in prison for two years before being martyred. When asked why his facial countenance was so bright while walking to his inevitable fate, he said: “Why should I not rejoice. I am about to see the King.” With the Shema on his lips he passed away.

All these pretenders came to naught, and yet the bulk of the Jews missed the authentic **Messiah Yeshua**, who came preaching love and mercy, and sought to establish the Kingdom through spiritual and nonviolent measures. **His** apostles turned the world upside down through their witness. It took a Jewish learned rabbi, **Gamaliel**, the Paul’s mentor, who, concerning **Yeshua’s** apostles, said: **So now I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or undertaking is of men, it will come to an end like Theudas and Judah of Galilee; but if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them. You might**

even be found fighting against God (5:38-39). Gamaliel merely voiced a sound rabbinic principle, “Any assembling together that is for the sake of Heaven shall in the end be established, but any that is not for the sake of Heaven shall not in the end be established (M. Abot 4:11). Some have wondered how Luke could have known what was said within the Council walls. But there were those who became believers in their midst that day. Nicodemus (John 7:50-52, 19:38-42), Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57-60), and lest we not forget, Gamaliel’s star pupil Sha’ul of Tarsus (22:3) was either present on this occasion or heard a detailed account from Gamaliel himself about it later. Luke, then, could have gotten the information from Paul.¹²³

The Holy Spirit here is not making a theological statement of truth, but merely quoting what Gamaliel said at that time. It was merely his opinion, and it was a wrong opinion. There are religions that have endured, like Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christian Science, none of which are of God, but look how long they’ve lasted. Gamaliel was wrong and we shouldn’t follow his advice.

Yeshua made it clear that it is impossible to be neutral about Him and His message: **Whoever is not with Me is against Me, and whoever does not gather with Me scatters (Matthew 18:30)**. Moreover, the members of the Council knew the words of Elijah, “how long will you waver between two opinions” (First Kings 18:21)? There are times when being neutral means making a passive (and perhaps cowardly) decision to reject Messiah’s offer of eternal life (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer](#)). It is significant that the first group named among those who will be thrown into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (which is the second death) are the cowardly (Revelation 21:8).¹²⁴

However, the Great Sanhedrin agreed with Gamaliel’s advice to go slow and not kill the apostles like the Sadducees wanted to do. Then they called in the apostles and had them flogged (Deuteronomy 25:2-3). The sages reduced the number of lashes from forty to thirty-nine as a fence against exceeding forty by mistake, and instituted a physical examination to verify that the person would not die even from that number (Mak. 3:10-11).¹²⁵ Consequently, the flogging was no trivial matter. It was meant to be a serious lesson to offenders. This was the first time that the apostles suffered physically for their faith. It would not be the last. Not willing to take the radical step

of handing **the apostles** over to the Romans, **the Sanhedrin ordered them not to continue speaking in the name of Yeshua, and let them go (5:40)**. But whatever **flogging** or shameful treatment **the Great Sanhedrin** gave **them**, it did absolutely no good. **The apostles** didn't stop preaching for a moment (and neither should we)!

Saving acceptance: From **the apostles** perspective, the fact that **they** were being persecuted was proof that they were serving **God**. **So, they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were considered worthy to be dishonored on account of His Name (Matthew 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23)**. **For this reason God highly exalted Him the Name that is above every name, that at the name of Yeshua every knee should bow, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue profess that Yeshua that Messiah is Lord - to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11)**. **And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming Yeshua as the Messiah (5:41-42)**.

The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), spoke of this kind of **bold** heart, "Now, I charge every Christian here to be speaking **boldly** in **Christ's** name, according as you have the opportunity; and especially to take care of this tendency of our flesh to be afraid; which leads practically to get us off easily and to save ourselves from trouble. But do not fear - be brave for **Christ**. Live bravely for **Him** who died so lovingly for you."¹²⁶

Lord, Your Word says: Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up. If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it. But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him (First Corinthians 8:1-3). *May I not justify **Your** Word to learn things and accumulate insights, but rather to know **You** and increase my love for **You**. I want the full benefit of what **Your** Word can teach me. May nothing - may nothing - be wasted.*¹²⁷