

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, we confess our sins to You, partly in sorrow because of our failures, and partly in thankfulness because of the privilege of our salvation obtained by Jesus. But You are a God who constantly offers forgiveness to those who turn to You, and we ask for this blessing. Renewed, may we face the challenges of living in this beautiful yet troubled world, and grow in maturity into people who demonstrate the godliness of holy living. Thank You for Your redeeming love, Lord God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

1. For yourself

What do you make of genetic research and its effect on the farming industry today, whether in modifying plants for maximum resistance and growth, or in breeding cattle and flocks (see Genesis 30)? Pray about these things and the effect they will have on our families

2. For your friends and family

Pray in thanksgiving for God's provision for your family. Praise God for the seasons by which seeds are sown and harvests are gathered, and by which sheep and cattle are reared

3. For the church and its work

Pray for churches in farming communities throughout the world, and their mission to those who work in agriculture and farming.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray that your country will properly legislate for the protection of farmers and their families, in a world dominated by short term financial gain.

Meditation

Lord God, challenge me to grow in spirit
Show me how salvation can move my soul

Colour my life with visions of Your glory
And use me to paint faith's vibrant pictures

Set my emotions free to bless and not curse
And liberate my feelings to love and be loved

Grant me the strength to be a challenge to evil
And protect my family from the wiles of the devil

Give me the courage to use all my intelligence
And open my mind to the glorious things of heaven

Lord God, test and prove me in life's hottest furnaces
And may I never shirk the disciplines of Your Wisdom

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 5:21-32

²¹ They entered the temple at daybreak, as they had been told, and continued their teaching. Then, when the High Priest and those with him arrived, they called the Sanhedrin together (the

full body of Israel's elders), and sent to bring them from the jail. ²² But when the attendants arrived, they did not find them there, so they returned and reported,

²³ 'We found the jail securely locked with the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.'

²⁴ Now when this was heard by the chief Temple official and the High Priests, they were puzzled by this and wondered what had happened. ²⁵ Then a man arrived and told them,

'Look, the men you imprisoned are standing in the Temple and teaching the people!'

²⁶ The chief Temple official then went with the attendants and fetched them, but without violence, because they were afraid of being stoned by the people. ²⁷ Having brought them, they made them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the High Priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying,

'Did we not give you strict orders to refrain from teaching in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are intent on bringing this man's blood on us!'

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles replied,

'We must obey God rather than men!

³⁰ Now, the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted Him at His right hand as Prince and Saviour, to bring about repentance in Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² We are witnesses to these things, as is the Holy Spirit, who has been given to those who obey him!'

Review

This is the story of what happened when the Temple authorities discovered that the apostles were not locked up in jail, but preaching the Gospel! It is a fascinating drama, and Luke's narrative and dialogue intertwine to keep our interest and draw us into imagining what it must have been like to be one of the first believers.

The scene is set at daybreak (5:21), and two radically different things are happening, unbeknown to each other. The apostles have been liberated from jail by the Holy Spirit and have returned to the Temple to preach and teach, and as we discovered yesterday, to also heal the people (5:12-21). Meanwhile, Israel's leaders thought they had stopped the apostles' activities by clapping them in jail (5:17-21), and were arranging a meeting of the Sanhedrin to consider what to do with them (5:21). We must surely allow ourselves a wry smile as we read what happened when the Temple attendants discovered that the apostles had escaped (5:22). They were in a difficult position, for in those days, those who guarded prisoners often did so at the cost of their lives, so we should not be surprised to read that a search party had been out looking for the escapees. Suddenly, a man arrived while the Sanhedrin discussed the situation, telling them that the apostles were back in the Temple, preaching, teaching and healing (5:25)!

This time, the chief Temple official went with his attendants to arrest the apostles once again to bring them to the Sanhedrin (5:26,27). Luke adds that the arrest was not violent, for the authorities themselves were afraid that violence might be used against them (5:26). The people were not likely to allow those responsible for healing their sick to be carted off to prison again! Yet the apostles went with the authorities passively, and found themselves before the Sanhedrin again, on the same charge of preaching in Jesus' name.

The High Priest then spoke with no small amount of anger. He had warned the apostles not to do this, and was incensed at two specific things; firstly, the spread of the Gospel throughout Jerusalem by means of the apostles teaching (5:28), and secondly, the accusation that they were responsible for the death of the Messiah. We must be careful not to misunderstand the second of these; the High Priest did not care about sending Jesus to His death, but he was truly disgusted at the accusation that he, and the Sanhedrin, had murdered God's Messiah. He was unable to equate Jesus with the Messiah, and this was his precise problem.

Luke has now set the scene for another of Peter's remarkable speeches. Everything we have read builds up to what Peter says next in verses 29 to 32, and the Holy Spirit has been working behind the scenes to create this situation. He has engineered a jailbreak, a meeting of the Sanhedrin, and the manoeuvring of the Temple guard to arrest the apostles, but now His work comes to fruition in Peter's remarkable speech. Straight away, Peter responds to the High Priest's terse accusations, with a forthright reply worthy of the most learned of scholars, he says,

'we must obey God rather than men!'

I have separated out this from the rest of what Peter says because it stands alone as a direct challenge to the authority of the High Priest. For a Jew, there was no higher authority than that of the High Priest. But Peter spoke with the voice of conscience characteristic of the great prophets of Israel. Just like Isaiah enraged before King Ahaz (Isaiah 7f.), or Jeremiah before the people of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29f.), Peter claimed he knew something about God they did not know. Even now, when the church becomes encrusted with its own authority, God sends prophets to remind it that He speaks to His servants directly, and not exclusively to those who have the honour of leadership.

But this is only the beginning. Peter goes on to repeat before the High Priest his intransigent assertion that Jesus was God's Messiah, no less, and had been killed on his own orders. How anyone might have the sheer bravado to stand and say this is remarkable; but if our eyes are on the human confrontation, then they may miss the spiritual treasures coming next. Peter declares that Jesus came to *'bring about repentance in Israel and forgiveness of sins'* (5:31). Each word is important; this is Jesus' message that if Israel repents and changes her ways, she can receive God's forgiveness, and the glorious Gospel that reveals God's intention to bring *'forgiveness of sins'*, without limit. He proclaims that God's heart is open to all, and the High Priest cannot abide it!

Without a doubt, this brief, second statement of Peter to the Sanhedrin is as powerful as the first (4:8-12), and is a good basis for a sermon. But above all, this passage points to the driving energy of the Holy Spirit behind everything that happens to those who go about the Lord's work. When we join the apostles and do this work ourselves, then we too will know the driving force of the Spirit moving within us and through the events in which we take part. The Holy Spirit is always at work!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- How effective was the preaching of the early Christians in Jerusalem?
- Exalting Jesus as Prince and Saviour (5:31)
- Repentance and forgiveness (5:31)
- Witnesses to the things of God, together with the Holy Spirit (5:32)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V28 'Did we not give you strict orders to refrain ...'

Other translations:

'we gave you strict orders not to teaching this name' (NIV)

'we strictly charged you not to teaching the same' (English Standard)

Every translation conveys an accurate sense of the Greek sentence, in which the High Priest challenges the disobedience of the apostles. The full strength of what is said here is best conveyed in a question which should be answered in the affirmative, just as it is in the Greek. So my translation retains the same form of question as found in the Greek text.

V31 'Prince and Saviour'

Other translations:

'Leader and Saviour' (NRSV)

'Prince and Saviour' (NIV)

The different translations are equally divided between the translations 'Prince and Saviour', and 'Leader and Saviour'. I prefer the translation 'Prince and Saviour' because I am not convinced that the word 'leader' adequately conveys the kind of authority implied in the Greek word 'archegon'. This word and its Hebrew equivalent are used frequently throughout the Bible when referring to a Prince, as someone who has the authority to begin action and lead it. In the first century A.D., people clearly would have had in mind one with royal authority like a 'Prince' rather than a 'leader' in general, and I think it is worth retaining this distinction in the translation.

How effective was the preaching of the early Christians in Jerusalem?

Exalting Jesus as Prince and Saviour (5:31)

Repentance and forgiveness (5:31)

Witnesses to the things of God, together with the Holy Spirit (5:32)

Discipleship

Application

Apart from the main theme of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the most significant part of this passage is surely the last four verses, in which Peter responds to the High Priest with a remarkable statement of faith. Peter's first sentence is a remarkable call for God's people to place God above all things, and he explains why. God has sent Jesus to be the Saviour of the world (5:31), and those who have been saved have a primary responsibility to be witnesses to Him.

So when we consider today what it means to place God above all things, we should remember these words of Peter. We praise our Lord above all things because He is the one who has sent Jesus to save us from our sins and restore our relationship with Him; our faith is rooted in God and not the human imagination or intellect. Moreover, nothing is more important in the whole of our lives, and everything that happens to us is best interpreted in the light of our salvation. This faith that we hold is also a historic faith, and we stand united on the fact that what Jesus has done for us is true for all people of all time. Now it can be difficult to know exactly what we must do to put God first in our lives, and there are no simple rules. What Peter says here, however, is a great encouragement to every single person who has faith. By trusting God and the truth of everything he knew about Jesus, Peter was able to withstand against the powers of his day. The same may be true of us, wherever we are and whatever we do.

Questions for groups

1. Within your group, discuss what it would be like to be imprisoned in your country. Discuss what you think it might have been like in Israel in the first century A.D. How powerful a threat is prison?
2. Look through the text, and discuss the role of the Holy Spirit. How many miracles are referred to or implied within our reading today?
3. How important are repentance and forgiveness of sins to the life of your church today? Should they have a higher profile or lower profile?

Discipleship challenges

- *Do you know what it is like to stand accused, especially of your faith? Take time to think clearly about how you might respond if you had to take a stand for your faith against a hostile authority. Do you feel that you have a sense of the work of God's Holy Spirit in your own life and that is adequate for such a challenge?*
- *Pray for all those, especially in other countries, who are forcibly prevented from preaching the Gospel, despite their wish to do so. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work in power in this world to break down barriers of the Gospel.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have done great and powerful things in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we have known about them, and sometimes we have known little of them. Open our eyes now see the glory of Your work in our midst, so that we may be led on a path of righteousness and salvation, until we meet You in heaven. Thanks be to God; AMEN
