

Prayers

Opening prayer

Dear Jesus come near with Your love;
Come with Your support and Your power.
Come with Your empathy and Your wisdom,
Come with Your helpfulness and Your strength,
Come with Your compassion and Your discernment,
Dear Jesus, may Your presence bear fruit in my life today
Halleluiah!

Prayer Suggestions

These suggestions are made to assist your prayers, and may be coloured by a general theme:

Theme for the week: CULTURE

1. For yourself

Pray in repentance, bring before the Lord those things you know you do wrong, and seek the Lord's forgiveness. Bring these things in honest of heart from day to day, and see what the Lord requires of you.

2. For your friends and family

Some of your family and friends get on well and some do not. Pray about this and about some of the reasons why this is so; differences of temperament and social culture, differences over religion and faith, beliefs etc.

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church will grow in its ability to speak the same message of God's gracious, saving love to each new generation. Pray that the church will understand how much it must change if it is to fulfil its mission.

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

Pray for your country and for the many different groups of people, racial and religious, who are a part of it.

Meditation

Simplify my life, O Lord;

Remove the jumbled messages of the evil all around me,
And fill my heart with graciousness and loving-kindness.

Transform my life, O Lord;

Remove the guilt ridden memories of conflicts in the past,
And wipe them out by patient help and divine counsel.

Focus my life, O Lord;

Remove the clumsy waywardness that entangles my soul,
And settle my hands, my eyes, my heart, on being faithful.

Direct my life, O Lord;

Remove the cruel bondages, which addict my heart to me,
And let me fall into Your arms of love, forever free to be.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 5:33-42

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to do away with them, ³⁴ but a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed them:

‘Fellow Israelites, think carefully about what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared claiming to be someone important, and about four hundred men joined him, but he was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and nothing came of it. ³⁷ After him, Judas of Galilee appeared at the time of the census and led a group of dissenters; but he too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

³⁸ So, in this case, I advise you to leave these men alone and let them go! For if this plan or activity is of earthly origin, it will fail, ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to do away with these men, you will only find yourselves fighting against God.’

So they took his advice; ⁴⁰ they then summoned the apostles, had them flogged, and ordered them not to speak in Jesus’ name, and released them.

⁴¹ The apostles then left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been considered worthy of being disgraced for His Name. ⁴² And they continued to teach and preach the Good News that Jesus is the Christ every day, in the temple and in their homes.

Review

Amazingly, when the disciples face the Sanhedrin and a possible sentence of death, God works through a wise man to set them free. But the consequences are even greater, for they win the legal right to proclaim the Gospel with freedom!

The apostles were standing before the Sanhedrin for the second time, but this time they were angry. Having once told them not to teach and preach in Jesus’ name (4:21f.), the council members were now faced with a direct affront to their authority. Peter and John and the other apostles had ignored the Sanhedrin’s command to stop teaching and preaching, and they had gone straight back to the Temple to continue their work (5:12-16)! From a human point of view, we can understand why the council members might be angry, for this plain disregard of the supreme authority of Israel was an outrage. But the apostles now presented a powerful case, and the Sanhedrin could not simply ignore it (5:29-32). The apostles claimed they were doing God’s work, and Peter played the only intellectual and spiritual card that could trump the authority of the Sanhedrin with his insistence, ‘we must obey God rather than men ...’ (5:29).

To most of the Sanhedrin, the apostle’s words and actions were an outrage. Where they had been lenient before, cautious of the consequences of being too harsh (4:22), the council members were now ready to call for the death penalty (5:33). They had persuaded the Roman authorities to crucify a man once before (Jesus) because the peace of the state was threatened (Luke 23:1f.), and if the sentence they had passed set a precedent, then they saw no reason why it should not apply to Jesus’ followers (5:33).

However, one man had picked up the intellectual force of what Peter had just said, and he called the Sanhedrin to order and proposed they confer in private. He was able to do this was because he was more than an ordinary Sanhedrin member, he was the famous rabbi named Gamaliel whose teachings had inspired generations of Judeans. His voice, previously silent in Scripture, now called the Sanhedrin to order, and with the directness of an incisive and scholarly mind, he drew the meeting back to focus on the matter before them. By so doing, he quashed the call of more emotional Sanhedrin members for the death penalty.

Everyone who reads this passage can understand what Gamaliel said, and why he said it. On the one hand it is a masterpiece of legal advice for a governing council in a difficult situation, and on the other hand it represents what must surely be the only proper and unprejudiced Jewish response to the Gospel of salvation. To this day, if Jews were to take this, the best legal and spiritual advice available to them, then they should accept that after two thousand years of evidence, that God is at work through His people the church, and Jesus is indeed their Messiah. How wonderful it would be if Jewish people could accept this advice from a master of their own law!

But who is this 'Gamaliel', and why should anyone pay attention to him? Gamaliel is written about in a variety of Judean texts dating from the first century, and he was the grandson of the great Jewish teacher Hillel, who has had a great influence on Judaism. Some think that he held the position of President of the Sanhedrin, in which he acted like a 'chairman', but with no authority greater than the High Priest. This would certainly account for his ability to call the council to order and convene it in private session (5:34). There is one other mention of Gamaliel in Scripture, which is where Paul recounts his personal experiences to a crowd in Jerusalem, after being arrested there (Acts 22:3). He declares that he has an impeccable Jewish pedigree, having been trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel. Catholic tradition suggests that Gamaliel became a Christian, but kept his faith private so that he could exercise a defence of the faith from within Judaism, but there is no easy way to verify this. We could get carried away with this, but in our passage, the little we know is enough for us to appreciate Gamaliel's genuine intellectual and spiritual strength. Whatever this man thought of Jesus, he was able to see through the prejudices of his fellow Sanhedrin members, and perhaps his own, to appreciate the spiritual logic of God's work in the world.

No wonder that the apostles left the Sanhedrin exhilarated! Not only had they escaped a possible death sentence, the highest authority in the land after the High Priest had given them not just personal freedom, but permission to teach and preach about Jesus without prejudice, throughout Judaism! Naturally, this is exactly what the apostles proceeded to do!

This is a fascinating twist in the tale of the church in the first century AD. We might have thought that the apostles would have had more difficulty with the authorities than this. They may have had all manner of personal apprehensions about what was happening, but their trust in God was sufficient. God was able to work through them to great effect, and church grew rapidly. But as we will shortly discover, the threat of death was never far away, and those who were bent on killing Christians soon found a way to do it. Our next passage begins the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The rebellion of Theudas
- The dissent of Judas

Notes on the translation of the passage

V36 '... claiming to be someone important'

Other translations:

'... claiming to be somebody' (NIV)

'... he claimed to be someone important' (New Jerusalem)

The Greek expression here reads like this: '*... made himself to be something*', and this is a colloquial way of saying that he claimed to be a leader, or made himself out to be important. Any number of phrases could translate this well, but I like the phrase '... claiming to be someone important', because this seems to me to be a good way of retaining the idea of someone being 'self-appointed', which is there in the original.

It is possible that this Theudas was someone who claimed to be the Messiah? It could be that the phrase Gamaliel used was a polite way of speaking about one who claimed to be the Messiah, but without referring to the Messiah directly. The whole of Gamaliel's case was built on the assumption that people put themselves forward as God's Messiah, but only one of these could be the true thing, and God would make that known.

V37 'led a group of dissenters'

Other translations:

'led a band of people in revolt' (NIV)

'got people to follow him' (NRSV)

The differences you will find in the various Bible versions are accounted for by the Greek word used here 'aphistamai', which normally means 'lead away', but in this instance has the more extreme sense of leading people in revolt, or as I have put it, dissent.

V38 'this plan or activity is of earthly origin'

Other translations:

'if their purpose or activity is of human origin' (NIV)

'if this plan or undertaking is of human origin' (NRSV)

The main difference between my translation and the available Bible versions is this; they translate *'human origins'*, and I translate *'earthly origins'*. The Greek is simple, *'if this plan or work is of men ...'* but this is not easy for us to translate because of our problems today with the use of the term *'men'*, and the fact that we mostly avoid using the male gender to refer to all people. However, I feel that it is better in this case to speak of something that is earthly rather than of God. This generalisation helps us think about what Gamaliel says as a comparison between what is done on earth and what is of heavenly consequence.

The rebellion of Theudas

Not much is known in history about this rebellion by Theudas, but the historian Josephus writes about him. He informs us that he was a magician, and he led a large company of people, promising that at a word of command, he would divide the river Jordan enabling people to walk through it and symbolically enter God's new Promised Land. This tempted a number of people and his following may indeed have been about four hundred, as reported here by Gamaliel. He does not come across as someone who might exaggerate a report!

Theudas was put down by a contingent of Roman cavalry, whose head, as Josephus reports, was brought subsequently to Jerusalem. It was usual for the Romans to parade a trophy such as this to dissuade people from following the example of the one who met such an end. But four hundred men is a large number of followers, and the whole affair was obviously fresh in the minds of the authorities. Theudas was one of a number of people who incited the Jewish people to rebellion against the Romans in the first half of the first century AD, and it is against such people that Jesus told his disciples not to be led astray by *'false Messiahs'* (Matthew 24:24).

The dissent of Judas

Judas of Galilee seems to be yet another of these rebellious Jewish leaders, but it is interesting that Luke reports him as dissenting from the census (5:37). It is possible that this was the census mentioned by Luke when Jesus was born. This, too, is verified by the historian Josephus, who calls him a Galilean, as Gamaliel does. Judas seems to have obtained a religious opinion from a rabbi that the census of 6AD ordered by Quirinius, was wrong, because the purpose of it was to tax people. He claimed that God alone was Israel's King and that taxes should not be paid to anyone else. Armed with this ruling, he proclaimed a religious rebellion, but this was swiftly put down.

There is some debate whether the Judas and Theudas mentioned by Luke are the same Judas and Theudas written about by Josephus, and the debate is focussed on Josephus' claim that Theudas was active 40 years *'before'* Judas, not after him. Scholars are divided on the subject, but it is remarkable that these two are recorded in both the official Jewish record of the day (by Josephus) and by the Bible. Together, they represent the seething hostility of Jewish people towards the Roman Empire.

Discipleship

Application

Being ready to listen to what God says to us, as spoken by others

The remarkable thing about this part of the record of Acts is that God's people get good advice from one who is an opponent of the faith. We do not know whether Gamaliel later became a Christian, though Catholic tradition says he does, but we cannot assume that he gave this advice in a sympathetic way. He was giving good advice from a Jewish perspective, possibly hoping that the Jesus movement would soon disappear. Now it is common even in the Old Testament for God to speak to His people through people outside of the covenant; for example, the Jewish people had to learn from the Babylonians that God was punishing them for their sins, the message at the heart of the prophecy of Jeremiah. It follows that we will sometimes have to accept that God is speaking to us from outside the walls of the church, and from outside the world of faith and prophecy. It is uncomfortable but Biblically true.

Once we have accepted this fact and the evidence of it throughout the Bible, we should have our eyes and ears attuned to what is happening in the world in case God is speaking to us through it. On the one hand, as in the Old Testament, we should recall that if as God's people we sin, then God will judge us often by those outside the church. On the other hand, He will sometimes speak to us important and prophetic words (as

here in this passage) through people who do not know that they are being used by God for this task, and especially at critical times (as here in this passage). There is no way of knowing what He will say and when, it is only up to us to be ready for everything He will do to guide us in our journey of faith.

Being ready to wait to see what God is doing

Gamaliel's advice implies that we must sometimes be ready to wait to see what God is doing before making judgement. We can be very quick and judgemental in our appraisal of what is godly and what is not, but if we believe that God has His hand on history, then time will indeed tell if His will is being done. This is similar to receiving what Jesus Himself said; '*you will know them by their fruits ...*' (Matt 7:16). For of course, you cannot discern the quality of a fruit unless you are willing to wait for it to ripen!

Questions for groups

1. Study Gamaliel's speech carefully. How important is his conclusion?
2. Can you think of similar or equivalent circumstances in the world today in which Gamaliel's advice is appropriate, even though it is two thousand years old?
3. What would liberate the Christian church today to do its task without hindrance? Pray that such things might happen.

Discipleship challenges

- *Look back over your recent life and consider whether you have been harsh in your judgement of others. It may have been right to speak out, but ask yourself whether there were any other ways in which you might have borne witness to the Lord in a more gracious manner.*
- *What has been said to you that has been memorable and live-changing? Write down the words and phrases that have changed your life and been a blessing in your Christian walk.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, may we always be ready to be gracious in hearing what other people have to say, and like Gamaliel, may we have only words of wisdom that point towards Your gracious love and compassion. May we always seek to do what is right and pleasing to You, or Lord and Maker, because You have seen the future and You know all things. AMEN
