

# CONCERNING THE WAY

February 23, 2010

## LESSON 92: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



### Chapter 5

Remember the last chapter ended by telling us about how the early church shared what they had with each other so that everyone had what they needed. It introduced us to Barnabas, who sold some land and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute among those who needed it. Now we see a couple that did the same thing, but there was a difference:

**Acts 5:1-2** Now a man named Ananias, together with Sapphira his wife, sold a piece of property. (2) He kept back for himself part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge; he brought only part of it and placed it at the apostles' feet.

This story is somewhat similar to the story of Achan in Joshua (Joshua 6:16-21, 24-25; 7:1, 10-26) at the battle of Jericho. He also held back something for himself something that had been promised to the Lord, lying to Joshua and the Lord. Some think the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. But He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's attributes never change. He has dealt with mankind in different ways in history, but you see all the same attributes of God in both the Old Testament and the New.

Here early in Acts we have an extreme example of God's judgment. Remember how in previous chapters we're told that the believers shared with each other so that no one would be in need. The more wealthy believers even sold land and gave the money to the apostles so it could be distributed to those who needed it. The very last verse of the last chapter mentioned that Barnabas did this.

So we have someone else who sold some land to give to the church. But something is wrong with the way this gift was handled:

**Acts 5:3-4** But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back for yourself part of the proceeds from the sale of the land? (4) Before it was sold, did it not belong to you? And when it was sold, was the money not at your disposal? How have you thought up this deed in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God!"

The Holy Spirit reveals to Peter that Ananias is not being honest about his gift. Is Peter rebuking Ananias because he didn't share all of the proceeds with the church? That's how this story has been misinterpreted by some. No, that's not it at all. It's because he tried to deceive the church and lie to God. They told the church that they had given it all. Peter was saying that he didn't have to give the money to the church, or even sell the land. No one had asked him to do this. It was the deception that was wrong. It was pride, wanting the praise of others in the church, and lying, in order to gain that prestige.

Are Ananias and Sapphira really saved? I think they are. God is disciplining believers here. When Peter asks, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit", this doesn't mean that Satan possessed them. The phrase means the same as the filling of the Holy Spirit. These people allowed Satan to control them. It just means they listened to Satan, he was working on them to lie, and try to

hide what they were doing. The way Peter questions him implies that maybe there was some unconfessed sin in his life that allowed Satan this opening. God's children, who have been freed from slavery to sin and to Satan, have the ability to choose whom they will allow to control them. When we choose to sin, we open the door to Satan.

A little thing you might miss that is important is the fact that Peter says lying to the Holy Spirit is the same thing as lying to God, which shows that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, God. The Spirit is not some impersonal force, but a person. You can't lie to an impersonal force.

**Acts 5:5-6** When Ananias heard these words he collapsed and died, and great fear gripped all who heard about it. (6) So the young men came, wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him.

So judgment for this sin is passed immediately and, like in the story of Achan, it is capital punishment. This is an example of the "sin that leads to death" (1 John 5:16). Why is this story in here? I believe it is to show us, here at the beginning of the church, that He doesn't want us to deceive each other, and He's making a very strong example to show us that no sin is ever really concealed from God. Numbers 32:23 says that your sin will find you out.

Here in the early church you have people who have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they have open hearts and are of one mind, and they are generous with each other. Then someone comes along that starts playing games, not just with other people but with God. This is a serious matter! God is saying NO! You shall not do this.

Do we have this kind of thing going on today? Of course, I'm sure it happens all the time. But you don't see God striking people dead because they've been dishonest with the church about how much they're giving. God made a statement here, and it's in the Bible to make a point. God's judgment was severe as an example to the rest of us, just as Achan was an example to Israel. Proverbs 6:16-19 tells us how God feels about deception and division.

But this was a different time, everyone in the church at the beginning was being filled with the Spirit and sharing with each other with no deception, and they were all of one mind. Did that last? No, it did not. Before long, sin came into the churches, false prophets came in, heresies were introduced. It is the way of things in history. Over time, every church, every denomination tends to slip further and further into apostasy. People, even spirit-filled Christians, cannot sustain that which is good. We'd like to believe otherwise, but history tells the tale. We have a tendency to drift away from the blessing, to forget what God has done for us.

So people were very fearful when they saw this happen to Ananias. Why were they fearful? Of course, it would have been a scary thing to see. But there also have been others there that were thinking about doing the same thing. See, this may have been kind of a competition among some of the wealthy people in the church. They may have been trying to gain status in the eyes of the apostles and other believers by how much they gave, and trying to convince people that they were giving more of what they had was part of the game. This certainly would have been a deterrent to those thinking about playing this game. It was not a game to God – they were giving for the wrong reasons.

**Acts 5:7-11** After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, but she did not know what had happened. (8) Peter said to her, "Tell me, were the two of you paid this amount for the land?" Sapphira said, "Yes, that much." (9) Peter then told her, "Why have you agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have

**buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out!" (10) At once she collapsed at his feet and died. So when the young men came in, they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. (11) Great fear gripped the whole church and all who heard about these things.**

Now Sapphira came in, not knowing that she had been a widow for the last three hours, and she tells the same lie. Peter wasn't trying to trap her, but to give her the opportunity to come clean and tell the truth. But she went along with her husband and experiences the same judgment. And Peter actually predicts her death. It's doubtful that Peter actually killed her, but he knew through the Holy Spirit that she would die right then and there. And word spread that this had happened, not only among the church, but among unbelievers outside the church as well. Verse 11 is also the first time we see the word "church", the Greek word *ekklesia*, used in the book of Acts. The word simply means an assembly of people.

"To test the Spirit of the Lord" is to see how much you can get away with before He judges; it means to assume He won't do anything, or see if He will do what He says in His Word, or to stretch Him to the limits of judgment (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7).

In the Torah, the death penalty was intended to be a deterrent to future acts of evil (Deuteronomy 21:21). It seems to have been effective for this community of believers, because they were understandably fearful of God's judgment, and God continued to move in a mighty way among them.

**Acts 5:12-13 Now many miraculous signs and wonders came about among the people through the hands of the apostles. By common consent they were all meeting together in Solomon's Portico. (13) None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high honor.**

Notice it was only the apostles doing the signs and wonders, not just any believer. It was God's authentication of their authority.

Here again we see where their meeting place was – that large public area around the temple with many columns and a roof, called Solomon's Portico. There were probably too many of them to meet in one person's home at this point, so many times they would have church in the temple complex. Solomon's Portico was a good place to gather for teaching of theology and to hear the latest news. It was covered, so it was cool in the summer and kept the rain off their heads in stormy weather.

"The rest" who didn't dare to join them, was probably just a general reference to the people who were not in the last bit interested in what the apostles were saying. The term is generally used in the Bible for the lost (Luke 8:10; also Romans 11:7; Ephesians 2:3; 1 Thessalonians. 4:13; 5:6). This group of believers, which by now was getting pretty large, was getting a reputation. Things were happening, God was working, and it was scaring anyone off who were unbelieving or hypocritical. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira was giving even outsiders the creeps!

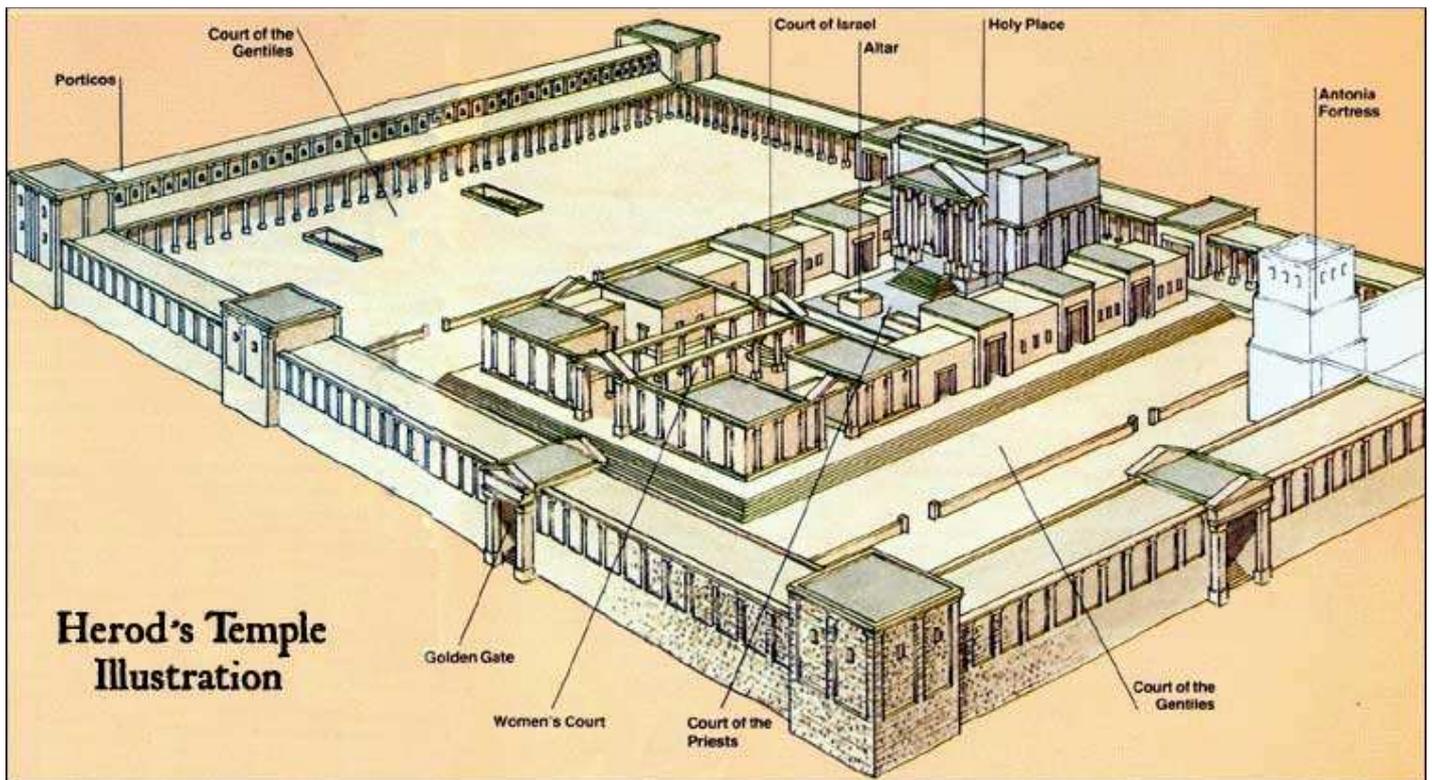
I've included some pictures on the next page of a scale model of Herod's Temple that show Solomon's Portico so you can get an idea of what it would have been like to meet around those pillars to listen to the apostles teach.



**Solomon's Portico**



**The Temple courtyard and Holy Place**



**Acts 5:14-16** More and more believers in the Lord were added to their number, crowds of both men and women. (15) Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets, and put them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow would fall on some of them. (16) A crowd of people from the towns around Jerusalem also came together, bringing the sick and those troubled by unclean spirits. They were all being healed.

Even though some were cautious about joining this group, many were being saved, “crowds” of both men and women. This was the purpose of the signs and wonders. It caused people to listen to their message about Jesus, and validated that the apostles were sent by God. It caused people to stop and ask themselves, “What is going on?” You couldn’t doubt that these were real healings, real miracles. This was causing thousands of Jews to realize that they had crucified the son of God.

In the ancient world many people believed that a person’s shadow could have magical healing powers. The people referred to in this verse were not necessarily Christians, but those who believed that Peter, as a leader of a new religion, had magical powers. The people imposed their superstitions upon this new faith.

Notice the word was spreading beyond Jerusalem to other towns. “Unclean spirits” are demons. Some of these people brought to the apostles did not have physical problems but were possessed by demons, and the apostles cast them out.

**Acts 5:17-18** Now the high priest rose up, and all those with him (that is, the religious party of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. (18) They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

Of course all of this activity didn’t escape the notice of the religious leaders, and they had all of the

apostles arrested and put in jail. This new “sect” was starting to really make them nervous. See the last lesson for a discussion of the Sadducees. In Acts, the term “jealousy” (zēlos) occurs only here and in Acts 13:45. It is a key term in Judaism for religiously motivated rage. It was a zeal motivated by a desire to maintain the purity of the faith.

Something similar to this actually happened in America in the 1890’s and early 1900’s. Dispensationalism was exploding around the country, and huge conferences were being held by men like John Darby, William Kelly, and C. H. Mackintosh teaching things like literal interpretation of the Bible, the distinction between Israel and the Church, Premillennialism, etc. And practically all the established church denominations were against them, because they were “fundamentalist.” They were teaching the fundamentals of the Bible. In the early 1900’s tens of thousands of people were attending conferences and summer camps, and hearing men like C. I. Scofield, L. S. Chafer and others speak.

Almost all the seminaries at the time had already gone liberal. They were amillennial, did not teach a literal coming kingdom or a literal 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ, and taught that the church had replaced Israel and large sections of the Bible should be interpreted allegorically. Dispensationalists were teaching the fundamentals of the Bible, getting a huge response, and the existing churches did not want that. So they were jealous of this movement, just like the Sadducees were jealous of this new group of followers of Jesus Christ.

**Acts 5:19-20** But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, (20) "Go and stand in the temple courts and proclaim to the people all the words of this life." (21) When they heard this, they entered the temple courts at daybreak and began teaching.

God was not about to have what He was doing among the people interrupted, so He set them free and the angel basically told them to keep on doing what they were doing. It was very effective. “This life” is the life that we have in Christ. The Lord expects His people to stand—that is, to take a stand, once and for all (Ephesians 6:13-14)—and to speak—to speak “all the words of this life”.

**Acts 5:21-23** Now when the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they summoned the Sanhedrin — that is, the whole high council of the Israelites — and sent to the jail to have the apostles brought before them. (22) But the officers who came for them did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, (23) "We found the jail locked securely and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

Notice the angel was nice enough to lock the doors of the jail again after he led the apostles out!

Here in the time of the early days of the church, we see miracle after miracle happening. Why? To convince the Jews that what happened with Jesus Christ was from God. This is what the Jews needed to believe, to turn them from the old Covenant to the New Covenant. The gospel was going first to the Jews. Gentiles are not in the picture yet.

**Acts 5:24-26** Now when the commander of the temple guard and the chief priests heard this report, they were greatly puzzled concerning it, wondering what this could be. (25) But someone came and reported to them, "Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts and teaching the people!" (26) Then the commander of

**the temple guard went with the officers and brought the apostles without the use of force (for they were afraid of being stoned by the people).**

You have to imagine the picture here, and enjoy the irony. It's pretty comical. The guards were carefully protecting locked empty jail cells (vv. 21-23). (2) The highest powers of Israel were gathered to judge prisoners they did not have. (3) While the leaders were freaking out about what had happened to the men who had been in their custody, they learn that they were preaching in the courts of the temple. The captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were completely at a loss to explain the locked but empty cells. It's like a Three Stooges comedy routine.

The apostles didn't run away and hide when they were set free by the angel, they went right back to doing what they were doing before, teaching the gospel to the people. I might point out here that the apostles were TEACHING. They weren't giving little sermonettes about life that made you feel good about yourself. On the other hand, they weren't stomping up and down and screaming that they were all going to hell, either. They were teaching theology about Jesus from the Old Testament. They were explaining, using the scriptures, who Jesus was and why He came. And notice that the people were listening, they wanted to hear what was being said. The police force that arrested the apostles was afraid of being attacked by the people.

**Acts 5:27-28** When they had brought them, they stood them before the council, and the high priest questioned them, (28) saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood on us!"

So here they are before the Sanhedrin again. The high priest still can't bring himself to say the name of Jesus, but everybody knows who "this name" is. You can see the council confirms that this teaching had spread throughout the whole city, and there were hundreds of thousands of people in the city at that time. And they were actually afraid for their lives, because they were worried that the people would blame them for the death of Christ and come after them.

**Acts 5:29-32** But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than people. (30) The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus, whom you seized and killed by hanging him on a tree. (31) God exalted him to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. (32) And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Peter just keeps on teaching, even though he's speaking to the leaders. It doesn't matter what people say to us, we have to do what God wants us to do. Our freedom of speech is being gradually taken away from us in this country, beginning with prayer being outlawed in school in the 1960's. Our government will probably continue to try and tell us what we can and cannot say. But we must obey God rather than people. However, we are to obey our governments unless it is a sin to do so (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

In verse 30 Peter tells them that Jesus is at God's right hand, which comes from Psalm 110. This is where Jesus is right now. The leaders would have been very familiar with that scripture, which was a popular and well known Messianic Psalm.

Verse 31 tells us again that Jesus came to save the Jews and give them forgiveness. What Peter says implies and reminds us again that Jesus will remain at the right hand of the Father until Israel repents. It's the same message John the Baptist and Jesus was preaching. Repent and the king will

come and establish the kingdom.

In keeping with the scriptural directive of establishing the truth of a matter by the mouths of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15), Peter presented himself, the other apostles, and the Holy Spirit as witnesses of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Notice the word “obey” in verse 32. This doesn’t mean that we must obey a set of laws or commands to get the Holy Spirit. It means belief that Jesus is the Messiah, believing the gospel. That’s why it’s important to understand the Jewish background and mindset to understand scripture. If you don’t, you can get some wrong interpretations from some verses. To the Jewish mind, the word “obey” is the same as “believe”.

Peter is telling the council that they cannot get in the way of what God is doing. And he’s implying that these leaders have disobeyed God, and you can imagine the response this is going to cause:

**Acts 5:33-34** Now when they heard this, they became furious and wanted to execute them. (34) But a Pharisee whose name was Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the council and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.

Gamaliel was a famous Jewish scholar and teacher mentioned here in Acts 5:34 and in Acts 22:3. He had a grandson of the same name and is referred to as "Gamaliel the Elder" to avoid confusion. He is quoted a number of times in the Mishnah, was given the highest possible title for Jewish teachers, *Rabba*, and was highly regarded in later rabbinic tradition. Saul of Tarsus was a student under him (Acts 22:3)

It is said in the Mishna—the commentary on the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament—that when Gamaliel died, “the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and sanctity died out also.” Pretty impressive eulogy!

## Pharisees

The Pharisees were the most culturally conservative of the Jewish religious parties. The word means “separated ones”, and that’s what they tried to do – live their lives separate from the Hellenistic culture and stay true to the Mosaic Law. It’s interesting that this is the group that was closest to the doctrines of Jesus and the apostles, much closer than the Saducees. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, the immortality of the soul, eternal reward and punishment, angels and demons, a balance of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, and they believed that all of the Hebrew scriptures (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings) was God’s revelation.

Where they went wrong is that they wanted so badly to perfectly obey the Mosaic Law and remain pure, that they developed a complex system of detailed laws that covered every aspect of life, going way beyond the intent of the original laws given by Moses. This system of practices and traditions, called in the Mishnah, “a fence around the Torah”, regulated every detail of their lives and they strictly adhered to it. The idea was that if they could concentrate on obeying these traditions, which were much stricter than the Mosaic Law, then they would never come close to actually breaking the Law.

Some groups in Christianity even today retain this kind of thinking, being very legalistic in their practices. They create man-made traditions that have to do with outward things we’re not supposed to do, building a fence around the laws of God to make sure they don’t break them. Like the Pharisees,

they miss the point. The Christian life is not about law-keeping, but a relationship with Jesus Christ and total dependence on what He has done for us. Holiness cannot be attained by our human effort of trying to adhere to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, but day by day relying on the holiness of Christ to gradually transform us into His likeness through the filling of the Holy Spirit.

During the three decades of Israel's history covered by the book of Acts, Pharisaic Judaism was the Judaism of the common people. The accepted religious norms were pretty much dictated by the Pharisees. They were very well respected and considered to be the examples for living a godly life. Of course, most Jews could never live up to those high standards, so there were never very many men who became Pharisees. Josephus estimates that there were no more than about six thousand in Israel at this time.

We think of the Pharisees as presented in the gospels as being all bad guys, but actually we see them both as allies and enemies of Jesus. Pharisees invited Jesus to be their guest at dinner parties (Luke 7:36, 11:37, 14:1) and they warned him about a plot against his life (Luke 13:31). They seemed to respect Jesus' knowledge of the scriptures and some of His teachings. But of course we remember that Jesus accused them harshly of hypocrisy (Luke 11:37-52). And we see Pharisees fervently opposing Jesus and conspiring against Him in Matthew 12:14, Mark 3:6, and John 11:57. But we know that some Pharisees, including Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Saul (Paul) came to believe in Jesus.

**Acts 5:35-37** Then he said to the council, "Men of Israel, pay close attention to what you are about to do to these men. (36) For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and nothing came of it. (37) After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census, and incited people to follow him in revolt. He too was killed, and all who followed him were scattered.

We don't know anything about this Theudas guy, but the other revolt (in a.d. 6) is described by the historian Josephus. The followers of this Judas became the "Zealots." Gamaliel is saying that, just like these two examples, the problem will eventually take care of itself, the movement will die out. We don't need to do anything about it. He was wrong about that, but then he says something very wise:

**Acts 5:38-40** So in this case I say to you, stay away from these men and leave them alone, because if this plan or this undertaking originates with people, it will come to nothing, (39) but if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them, or you may even be found fighting against God." He convinced them, (40) and they summoned the apostles and had them beaten. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them.

Gamaliel is using impeccable logic. He speaks the truth. If this "Jesus movement" wasn't from God, it would have fallen flat. But it didn't, it spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire and changed the course of the whole world. Some think Gamaliel may have eventually become a believer later on, but that's pure speculation.

Again, Gamaliel was a Pharisee, as was Saul of Tarsus, whose conversion will happen soon. The Pharisees had been all for the death of Christ. But it was the Sadducees who violently opposed the young church. The reason for this change was that the Pharisees believed in two orders of reality, the material and the spiritual. The Sadducees believed in only one order of reality, the material. All the

outstanding early Christians who we can identify as belonging to one party or the other were former Pharisees. The record does not tell of the conversion of a single Sadducee.

Of course, it was a greater leap of faith for a Sadducee. Basically all a Pharisee needed to do was accept Jesus as Messiah and give up their hypocritical system of law-keeping (not that it was easy for them – most did not repent). But a Sadducee had to change almost their entire world view, since they did not believe in a resurrection or in a spiritual realm at all.

The beating of the apostles would have been “40 lashes less one” (2 Corinthians 11:24, Deuteronomy 25:3). And this fulfills Mark 13:9, where Jesus says they will be beaten by the councils. The last time they appeared before the council, they were warned. This time they were beaten. The hostility increases as we go through the book.

The Mishnah gives the details of the procedures that were in place for the flogging of criminals. I'll spare you some of the graphic details, but first they would estimate the physical capacity of the man or woman to endure the punishment without dying or being permanently injured. If the criminal seemed fragile, they might reduce the number of lashes, depending on the mercy of the court, and the Sadducees, who were in control, were apparently pretty ruthless.

The criminal had both hands tied on either side of a pillar and his shirt torn off, so his chest and back were bare. He was then whipped 39 times or less with a triple strap of cowhide. Assuming the apostles were all young healthy men, they would have each received 13 lashes on the chest and 26 lashes on the back that day. This was the first time, but not the last, that the apostles would suffer for Jesus. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:24 that he experienced this beating five different times.

**Acts 5:41-42** So they left the council rejoicing because they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. (42) And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ.

What a witness! They were beaten, but they rejoiced because they had suffered dishonor like Jesus did. They thought it was a privilege, a blessing! Do you get that? To suffer for the name of Jesus is a blessing! There are brothers and sisters around the world that are experiencing this kind of blessing right now. It's possible that we may get the opportunity in this country in our lifetimes to experience that blessing. Are you ready for it? Do you have the faith to rejoice because of it?

Later, Peter encouraged Christians to “rejoice” when they would “participate” in sufferings on behalf of Christ:

**1 Peter 2:20-21** For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God. (21) For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps.

**1 Peter 3:14** But in fact, if you happen to suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. But do not be terrified of them or be shaken.

**1 Peter 4:13-14** But rejoice in the degree that you have shared in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice and be glad. (14) If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, who is the Spirit of God, rests on you.